



Submission to the Senate Committee on
Community Affairs Inquiry into the
accessibility and quality of mental health
services in rural and remote Australia

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AN AUSTRALIA THAT VALUES AND SUPPORTS ALL CARERS

P: 1300 227 377 W: www.carerswa.asn.au E: policy@carerswa.asn.au

ABOUT CARERS WA

Carers WA is the peak body representing the needs and interests of carers in Western Australia and is part of a national network of Carers Associations. Carers provide unpaid care and support to family members and friends who have disability, mental illness, a chronic condition, terminal illness, an alcohol or other drug issue or who are frail aged. The person they care for may be a parent, partner, sibling, child, relative, friend or neighbour. Illness and disability are non-discriminatory and the caring role can be borne by any individual at any given time, regardless of socioeconomic status, age or location. Caring is a significant form of unpaid work in the community and is integral to the maintenance of our aged, disability, health, mental health, and palliative care systems. A report undertaken by Deloitte, Access Economics, 'The economic value of unpaid care in Australia in 2015', determined the replacement value of the care undertaken by carers in Australia to cost \$60.3 billion per annum.

Some important facts about carers include:

- There are 2.7 million unpaid carers in Australia. More than 856,000 carers are primary carers.
- There are more than 320,000 family and friends in a caring role in Western Australia or approximately 1 in 8 in the community.

ENQUIRIES

Felicity Mitchell

Policy and Engagement Officer

Carers WA

182 Lord Street

PERTH WA 6000

Phone: 1300 227 377

Email: felicity.mitchell@carerswa.asn.au

Introduction

Carers WA appreciates the opportunity make a submission to the Senate Committee on Community Affairs Inquiry into the accessibility and quality of mental health services in rural and remote Australia. This submission was informed by a survey conducted in partnership with Helping Minds and Consumer of Mental Health WA (CoMHWa). Thank you to those who took the time to complete the survey as well as the many agencies and staff members who assisted in obtaining responses.

The survey was completed by 235 people, 71% of whom identified as carers. The survey was completed online and in hard copy. Respondents were located across all major regional areas of Western Australia.

Carers in Rural and Remote Western Australia

An estimated 61,000 people in WA reported providing ongoing care for a family member or friend with whom they co-resided and who needed assistance due to a 'mental or behavioural disorder'. However, due to restrictions in the way the data is collected and social stigma around mental ill health, this is likely to be an undercount¹. The number of mental health carers in regional areas is difficult to estimate. Carers themselves are more likely than the general population to experience disability or mental ill health so they may be both giving and receiving care.²

a. the nature and underlying causes of rural and remote Australians accessing mental health services at a much lower rate;

65% of respondents identified the lack of timely services available locally as the reason for lower use of mental health services. One carer commented that there is a "lack of suitable providers/staff. Unable to contact over-worked support staff. Caseloads are too high to give quality support."

From your point of view, why do people in rural and remote Australian use mental health services less than city people?	Responses
Services aren't available locally	63.98% 151

¹ Pirkis, J., Burgess, P., Hardy, J., Harris, M. and Slade, T. 2010. 'Who cares? A profile of people who care for relatives with a mental disorder'. Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry, no. 44, pp. 929-937.

² Carers WA, "Caring in Focus; Caring for a family member or friend with mental health issues", January 2017, <https://www.carerswa.asn.au/publications/caring-in-focus/>

Services aren't available when needed, e.g.: weekends or evenings	65.25%	154
People aren't comfortable speaking to someone in a service who they might know socially in town	63.14%	149
People don't feel safe using this service because it's not confidential	16.53%	39
Travel costs are too high to get to the service	41.53%	98
People prefer to deal with things on their own or talk to other people they know, not services	30.08%	71
There's a lack of choice in services	53.39%	126
People can't take time off work or leave their family alone while they travel to the service	40.25%	95
People don't have transport to get to services	41.53%	98
	Answered	236

b. the higher rate of suicide in rural and remote Australia;

Both lack of support (70%) and lack of opportunities (72%) were the top reasons stated for the higher rate of suicide in regional areas.

There's a higher rate of suicide among people in rural and remote Australia. What do you think are the reasons this happens?	Responses	
People can't get the support that they need from mental health services	70.21%	165
Life is harder for people outside of the city	30.64%	72
There is a lot of sadness in rural and remote communities	32.34%	76
People don't have the same opportunities in rural and remote communities	71.91%	169
Young people don't have enough older people around to help them	20.43%	48
	Answered	235

c. The nature of the mental health workforce

An overwhelming majority of respondents noted the most important characteristic of a good mental health worker is that they allow the person time to explain what is important to them.

What makes a good mental health worker?	Responses	
They speak the same language as the person using the service	62.55%	147
They know the person's family and community	27.23%	64
They don't talk about confidential matters to other people	77.02%	181
They give the person time to explain what's important to them	88.09%	207
They have professional qualifications	53.62%	126
Unsure	2.13%	5
Please add other comments	39.27%	86
	Answered	235

d. the challenges of delivering mental health services in the regions;

Both difficulties in keeping staff and distances travelled were noted as key challenges.

What challenges are mental health services facing in the regions	Responses	
Difficulties in keeping staff	68.26%	157
Costs of living and cost of housing for staff	44.78%	103
Distance that people have to travel	58.70%	135
No privacy for people who live in the same town	41.74%	96
Staff are under time pressures	53.04%	122
Other challenges?	38.70%	89
	Answered	230

e. attitudes towards mental health services;

Attitude towards mental health services varied considerably. Quality of staff and privacy were key considerations for people in considering using a mental health service. One carer said, "I feel really mixed. I would want to use mental health services (for myself or family) If I

felt that they were going to be cared about as an individual. And I'm not sure people are. People are fobbed off, moved on, referred through.” Another carer wrote “Have witnessed miscommunications between service providers and consumers, Consumers not feeling heard & carers not having a full understanding of consumers’ treatment plan.”

What are your feelings towards mental health services?	Responses	
I wouldn't use a mental health service even if I was really upset or sad	6.01%	14
I would want a family member or friend to use a mental health service if I was worried about them	75.97%	177
I would use a mental health service if I thought the staff were good	63.95%	149
I would use a mental health service if it was private and no one else knew	49.79%	116
People I know didn't get any better after going to a mental health service	17.17%	40
People I know got a lot of help from the mental health service	34.76%	81
Other (please specify)	23.61%	55
	Answered	233

f. opportunities that technology presents for improved service delivery.

In the comments section in this question people noted that they were open to use of technologies but that nothing replaces face to face interactions and these are particularly important in the mental health area.

Can technology improve access to mental health services and help prevent suicides?	Responses	
Video link or Skype at home	57.59%	129
Video link or Skype from a community health service	52.68%	118
SMS service	43.27%	98
Live online chat eg via facebook or website or messenger	54.02%	121
Emails	33.48%	75
Please tick if you have an internet service at home	60.27%	135
Any other ideas or suggestions?	37.50%	82
	Answered	224

Recommendations

Carers WA recommends:

- Greater investment in equality of services for regional areas including continuation of services for people who are not eligible for the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), low cost counselling and psychology services and out-of-hours and crisis support.
- Greater mental health sector commitment to identifying, supporting and referring carers of mental health consumers in regional areas.
- An extension of transport assistance schemes to assist people with the cost of travel to access suitable services.
- Greater education in the community of the need for carer recognition and support within new consumer directed services such as the NDIS and the Commonwealth Home Support Program (CHSP).
- Thoughtful introduction of technology solutions to mental health service delivery - this should be balanced with the necessity for face to face services.