

**Submission  
No 2**

# **PREVENTION OF YOUTH SUICIDE IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

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Hello,

I am writing this submission primarily to express serious concerns I have with the terms of reference that the state government has assigned to this inquiry. Specifically, that the government downplays it's own role in the effort to reduce suicides.

Generally speaking, the terms of reference suggest that the government's attitude is to "pass the buck" on this matter to others, such as suicide prevention groups (e.g. BeyondBlue, Lifeline, ect.) and the various therapists that make up the mental health system. It seems inclined to portray it's role largely as a bankroller and resource provider for these services and perhaps, in only the loosest sense, an administrator/coordinator.

The problem with the terms of reference is that they indicate that the state government doesn't really want to deal with the suicidal citizen. It wants go-betweens - therapists, anti-suicide campaigners, phone services - to deal with the suicidal citizen, with an understanding that it will foot the bill for a portion of the costs involved.

If the state government is genuine about reducing suicides, it must stop acting like a background player in the lives of it's most unfortunate citizens.

While the state government hardly wields absolute power in terms of deciding what life in NSW looks like, it is a force of great influence and it's policies, laws, actions and inactions have a significant bearing on whether life in NSW is desirable or undesirable. Every decision the government makes and every problem it ignores is relevant to youth suicide. Even if an issue doesn't currently effect a young person, if it is *likely to effect them in the foreseeable future*, it will still be a significant factor in their decision to prolong or end their life. Why stick around for tomorrow if tomorrow's going to be dark and dismal?

One of the greatest failings of the various Australian governments, including the NSW state government, is that they neglect quality of life. They implement repressive law after repressive law, herd their citizens around and cower to various heartless groups with their own selfish agendas. When they make these momentous decisions, rarely, if ever, do they seriously consider whether their actions will make life more worthwhile for their citizens, or less.

Let me be clear; while governments will often discuss whether or not their decisions will have a *financial* cost or benefit to their citizens, it almost never considers whether those decisions make the lives of their citizens less desirable, as opposed to less affordable. If the state government truly has an interest in lowering suicides, it needs to acknowledge the fact that often the main issue for citizens isn't "cost of living", it's about life not being worth buying.

The major policy failures of both the present government, and those that have come before it, are numerous and widespread. I won't address them in detail here. Though I will state that my previous efforts to address several of them with various governments have all been ignored.

In the interest of remaining brief, I will simply say that the whole government needs to commit to making life in NSW a worthwhile pursuit. It needs to examine what existing laws and policies limit the prospects of young people and their ability to attain the essential elements of a worthwhile life. It needs to examine the policies that shape the operation of it's many public services and take note of whether these services can be rearranged to make

life more worthwhile, while continuing to perform their official duties. It needs to examine it's "big picture" vision for the direction of our society - the predicted daily life of the "average" NSW citizen of the future - and considerately examine whether this life is not only financially secure, but also worth enduring. It needs to take an interest in identifying cultural issues that make life less desirable for some or many NSW citizens, and it needs to be more prepared to extend meaningful assistance to those who are ill-affected by such issues. It needs a broad, but effective system that will provide assistance to people suffering problems that are making their lives unbearable - especially in cases where such assistance would ordinarily be provided freely by friends or family, but the person in question has none.

And it needs to develop a compassionate, non-judgemental, strategy for assisting social outliers and outcasts: people whose natural character is incompatible with the culture or environment they are born in to. I am not suggesting that the government ought to 'adopt' these people as such, but more that it should be committed to insuring that they are united with their true home and community.

But beyond these brief outline suggestions, let me say that it is most important that the government listen to the suicidal people themselves. Identify the key problems directly from the horse's mouth. Find out why these people have decided that life in NSW is less desirable than the peace of the grave, decide what capacity the government has to change those elements and then take action to remedy the problems.

Item "e" of your terms of reference aside, the government's interest in communicating with it's 'boots on the ground' therapists seems to be dreadfully limited. The government broadcasts it's anti-suicide laws, guidelines & procedures, while the therapists may report back on large-scale successes/failures of these protocols or what resources they are in greater need of to be able to implement them.

There needs to be a far greater degree of communication, primarily coming from the therapist end and flowing to the government end. While respecting above all else the sanctity of doctor-patient privilege, the government needs to be interested in learning from therapists why it's citizens want to die, so that it can amend it's policies with a focus on making life in NSW as desirable as possible.

Let me close this submission by stating a crucial truth that I suspect has long eluded the policymakers who manage this issue and that I also suspect, sadly, will continue to elude them:

The suicide rate in NSW is not an education issue, nor is it an economic issue - it is a human issue.

The government seems to be in the habit of gauging the adequacy of NSW solely in terms of marketable goods and education. If their citizens have jobs through which to generate an income, have adequate access to food, water, electricity, gas, have been educated, have adequate access to emergency services and healthcare to maintain them 'in working order', then, supposedly, there is no problem.

Human beings are not so conveniently shallow. We have higher needs which the government chooses to ignore, such as love (both romantic and plutonic), laughter, friendship, community, sense of accomplishment, sense of honor, fun, hope, spiritual fulfilment, just to name a few. No forward-thinking plans for the future of our state, or country, take any of these essential needs in to account. No present day governmental deliberations pays any heed

to how policy creep makes the state a more and more toxic environment for these essentials with every passing year.

For example, we are often presented with the vision of Australia's economic future, where the days of a single, lifelong job has been replaced with a 'versatile' economy where people bounce around many different jobs through their working life. The theory being that, as there is still a constant paycheck throughout that life, the new standard must be just as good as the old one.

What this sunny forecast of the future fails to acknowledge is the effects of breaking apart what would've been a lifelong close mateship between lifelong coworkers in yester year, and turning it in to a couple of guys who work together for a couple years, then become little more than names on each other's Christmas card list ones their 'versatile' career paths split in separate directions. It fails to acknowledge the effect of people not having a **home** (even if they have a *residence*, perhaps one that they are even the legal owner of), as their constant bouncing around the country following the work has left them unable to form a deep connection with any particular town or neighborhood. It fails to acknowledge the effect on our societal concept of loyalty, when we spend such little time in a company, when neither of us have a proper opportunity to earn one another's respect and trust. It fails to acknowledge the effect on marriages, on the difficulties that will only grow as the career paths in two-career households become ever more diverse. It fails to acknowledge the effect of living in a society built upon a standard of inconsistency: of people having nothing familiar and reliable to lean on in dark times, because all the major elements of their life have only been around since last year. It fails to acknowledge the toxic effect it will have on the concept of caring for others, when we become used to other human beings being nameless faces that are shipped in to our environment in an instant and shipped out almost as quickly. It fails to acknowledge the suffering that these kinds of consequences will cause, when somebody finds themselves in need and discovers that nobody (or very few people) cares about others anymore.

It only contents itself that all simulations of this new future indicate the citizen shall be well paid, financially speaking, for their many different manners of work. But if the government is sincere about raising people's interest in living, this can't be it's only measure for gauging the adequacy of it's society.

It's no secret that if our water or food supply were aloud to dwindle away to nothing, a great many people would die. In the same way, if our sources of happiness are aloud to dwindle away, a great many people will have **no reason** to continue living! Many people are already feeling the effects of this kind of drought and many have died as a result, hence this inquiry.

I am not suggesting that the government's 'versatile economy' blueprint for the future is the primary cause of suicides in NSW; far from it. But it does highlight the government's obliviousness to the humanity of it's citizens. If we are to reduce suicides, this humanity must be acknowledged, and it's needs must be carefully tended to - not as an afterthought, or as a vote grabber to clinch those few extra swing seats, but as a core element of government policy.

Subcontracting more therapists to handle the suicide epidemic and dosing more people with mind-altering drugs may indeed reduce the amount of suicides. But I would predict that any such improvement will only be temporary, unless broader improvements are made to quality of life in this state.

When the government sends out therapists to deal with suicidal people, they are essentially sending them out to “sell” an extended lifespan in NSW to people who clearly have no interest in buying in to it. It’s no secret that a shrewd salesman can sell a piece of rubbish to even a reasonably savvy customer. But the lower the quality of the product in this scenario, the less effective those salesmens’ sales pitches will be at suckering in customers.

That is essentially the nature of NSW’s suicide crisis. It’s not the customers that are defective; it’s the product. Thousands of savvy citizens a year simply take stock of the big picture before them and decide that life in NSW simply isn’t worth buying in to. If we don’t want to lose any more customers, we have to take stock of what’s wrong with life in this state and fix it.

I feel that it cheapens the issue, the suffering involved, and more paradoxically, the lives that we are claiming we want to preserve, to blame our suicide epidemic on defects within the suicidal people themselves. It might be trendy to characterize them all as impulsive, reckless “mentally ill” people who mindlessly rush in to a major decision like suicide, or to blame that decision on crossed wires or errant chemicals in their brain. But portraying their plight this way is inaccurate and unjust.

Suicidal people are not devoid of the capability to reason well.

I strongly urge the government to adopt a strategy for youth suicide in NSW (and indeed, **all** suicide in NSW), that seeks first and foremost to fix the quality of life in NSW, rather than subcontracting therapists and other services to coerce people in to senselessly enduring that poor quality of life.

We should aim for a future where nobody needs to be lectured that they are better off being alive in NSW than dead, because life is of such reliably enriching quality, it sells itself.

It is a mammoth challenge, make no mistake. It will be difficult, complex and likely costly. But it will also be the most rewarding and admirable endeavor any government has embarked upon in living memory.

Thank you for reading. I hope you take this submission in to serious consideration as you develop your strategies for dealing with this issue, and I hope to hear numerous other public calls from you for future input from suicidal NSW citizens, on the most dire quality of life issues that need attention in this state.

Reach out to the people living in hell. Listen to them. Help them, please.

Kind Regards,

Chris Hamill  
NSW Citizen and Voter

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