

PREVENTION OF YOUTH SUICIDE IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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Submission by Lithgow City Council to the Inquiry into current approaches at preventing youth suicide in NSW

Lithgow City Council welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry and commends the NSW Parliament for establishing an inquiry into this serious and widespread issue.

Lithgow Mental Health Summit

The Lithgow community has been deeply affected in recent times by the tragic suicides of a growing number of local people, and young people in particular. Community concerns were so great that a number of local people approached Lithgow City Council in late 2016 seeking its help in addressing the situation.

Council, in partnership with other agencies and individuals, then held a Mental Health Summit in December 2016 facilitated by local GP John Dearin and Head of School of Medicine, University of Notre Dame and with a panel of experts in the field of mental health and suicide prevention and people living with mental illness in some way.

The summit provided an important opportunity for the community to raise its concerns about living with or being affected by mental illness and suicide, and enabled the community, in partnership with local services, to identify local needs and future strategies to address these issues.

This then led to the establishment of the Mayor's Mental Health Taskforce, which seeks to better understand and address mental health and suicide in the community.

Suicide

Actual numbers of suicide are difficult to quantify, however, Council and local agencies have been advised of a recent significant spike in suicides by young men in particular. This situation has been of such concern that local initiatives including a "Mates Walk and Talk" program and "Out of the Shadows" walks have been undertaken.

Our community is deeply affected by the rising levels of suicide but unsure of how to best respond. This is a matter for government to show leadership, offer help, resources and funding.

Self-Harm

Lithgow LGA has high rates of self-harm. NSW Health statistics on *Intentional self-harm: Hospitalisations* shows that women in Lithgow intentionally self-harm at a rate of over 300 per 100,000 population, more than double the NSW rate. This rate has been climbing rapidly in recent years. Lithgow men intentionally self-harm at a rate of over 150 per 100,000 population, which is 50% higher than the NSW rate.

This is a serious problem that points to elevated rates of suicide risk.

Service Access

A recurring theme being raised with Council has been the difficulties people face in accessing and navigating the service network. People in crisis do not necessarily know what services are available, where and how.

Services can be complex and not available at the times people need them, especially for acute services. A number of so-called "Lithgow" services are in reality outreached from a service hub elsewhere, with limited opening hours and capacity. There is often a marked difference therefore between the official network of services and what people find on the ground, especially in a crisis. The level of services that people in larger centres take for granted are just not available here. So people either travel or go without, sometimes with devastating consequences.

There is no Headspace service providing early intervention mental health services for young people in Lithgow, with the nearest located in Bathurst (45 minutes by car) and Penrith (1.5 hours by car). Neither of these is readily accessible to young people.

Other local services are under-funded and under-resourced.

A further concern is that Lithgow Hospital has no dedicated mental health beds. In the event that someone from Lithgow needs care, they may be forced to transfer to another hospital, in an unfamiliar region – all of this can be very distressing. In addition, there is often limited support provided to people after they leave hospitals – and there should be greater support to transition people back to local GPs or other local community services.

Stigma

There is still a lot of stigma and lack of awareness in the community around mental health issues. In order to reach out to community, support and resources are needed for local community campaigns and school programs.

Special Groups

- Young LGBTI people are not adequately supported, in particular in regional areas. Existing systems often either do not properly acknowledge the situations of these young people, or lacks understanding of their unique circumstances. This group also faces additional stigma and discrimination issues. Young people need to feel safe in their schools, for example with "LGBTI-friendly" promotion being provided through schools.
- Many young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people face a large range of challenges, including systemic discrimination. Young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people need to be equitably supported to access services, as well as supported to access connection to culture, which is shown to be a protective factor against suicidality.
- Young men are particularly at risk. We need to dispel myths around their lack of help-seeking behaviours, and instead support programs that find ways to listen to them and provide services that will adequately support their needs.

School Programs

The education system can play a big part in suicide prevention by addressing stigma, considering the needs of marginalised young people and developing peer support programs. Mental health and suicide prevention should be included in school curriculums and become part of the conversation with young people about their development.

The Get Growing Program is a mental health wellness pilot running at Lithgow High School. Programs such as this need support and ongoing funding.

Community Hub

The University of Notre Dame Rural Clinical School in Lithgow has proposed the establishment of a Community Hub in Lithgow due to the considerable shortage of mental health services in the area.

This is an important strategic initiative to help reduce suicide and self-harm through the creation of a "safe space" for young people to connect in a welcoming environment.

The University is also willing to provide epidemiological support for the project. The University takes the responsibility of being part of the local community very seriously in its commitment to social engagement and nurture.

Initiatives such as this require government support and funding.

Opportunities

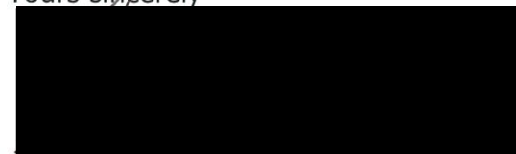
There is a strong connection between economic opportunity and access to training, jobs, apprenticeships on the one hand and social and mental well-being on the other. Economic changes and structural changes in the workforce are impacting everywhere, but no-where more so than in regional areas. The current downturn in the mining industry and the uncertain future of these industries is having a profound effect on this community and its hopes for the future.

Young people need to have an expectation of a job and a belief in a positive future.

Finally, Lithgow City Council is committed to working in partnership with other agencies in building community resilience and response to the current crisis in mental health services and levels of suicide. Council cannot do this, however, without the dedicated and ongoing commitment of the State Government.

Council further believes that the NSW Parliamentary Inquiry would benefit from a first-hand look at what is happening in regional areas and therefore invites the Inquiry to hold a hearing in Lithgow.

Yours sincerely



Stephen Lesslie
MAYOR