

**THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE No. 2
RECOMMENDATIONS RELATING TO CROSS-JURISDICTIONAL HEALTH
REFORM AND GOVERNMENT CONSULTATION WITH REMOTE, RURAL AND
REGIONAL COMMUNITIES**

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Date Received: 22 April 2025

Briefing Note: *Sharing Research Findings on the Effective Recruitment, Retention, and Well-being of NGO Rural Mental Health Staff*

Attention: Dr Joe McGirr, MP; Dr Amanda Cohn, MLA.

Date: 15/04/2025

Subject: Disseminating strategies promoting recruitment, retention and well-being of rural mental health staff

From: Charles Sturt University research team - Dr Monica Short
[REDACTED] Dr Emma Rush [REDACTED] Dr Nicola Ivory, Dr Ella Dixon, CEO Sarah Ansell

Issue: A shortage of rural mental health workers and the inability to recruit, retain and sustain them in a safe, fulfilling work environment.

Research Purpose: Identify and disseminate proven strategies that genuinely address the problem

Expected outcomes: Issue awareness, strategy implementation, supportive policy change

Executive Summary

Thank you for the opportunity to share this research widely. Implementing successful recruitment and retention solutions such as those identified in this research makes it possible to grow the NGO rural mental health workforce by improving organisational culture and ensuring the well-being of mental health workers. The ideas identified in this research are transferable to other settings, so the next steps are to: (i) generate opportunities and resources to share the findings and (ii) nurture the growth of a satisfied and thriving workforce.

Background Information

The issue is: that in NSW (and other states), there is a shortage of rural mental health workers, and the workforce is unstable. Retention and promotion of staff well-being across both state and community-managed mental health service providers is crucial to addressing the mental health staffing shortfall (Mental Health Commission of NSW, 2022). Currently, **one-quarter** of the total mental health workforce in NSW works at a community-managed organisation (Mental Health Coordinating Council, 2023). Yet to date, research into recruitment and retention has concentrated on state providers, and there has been little systematic investigation into why NGO rural mental health staff stay in their profession or workplace.

Responding to this need and gap, during 2024-2025, our research team undertook qualitative research with **NGO mental health staff in the Murrumbidgee and Southern LHD areas**, to explore **what strategies they had experienced as working to promote recruitment, retention and well-being in rural mental health NGOs**. This research was funded by NSW Health through The Peregrine Centre as part of the Rural Mental Health Partnership Grant. Our partners are: Anglicare NSW South, NSW West and ACT, 54 Reasons, Roundsquared and Standby Support.

In this Multidisciplinary Co-designed Research, we:

- (i) built the capacity and wellbeing of participating staff through professional development workshops, ethnography and inquiries;
- (ii) identified contextual factors affecting the implementation of effective workplace strategies for recruitment, retention and wellbeing more broadly;
- (iii) explored through autobiographical-ethnography and co-operative inquiry research methods, the recruitment, retention and wellbeing of staff in these rural LHD areas.

This project was needed because failure to intervene in this space effectively is increasingly being recognised as a prominent cause of poor health outcomes for rural communities. More systematic research is urgently needed.

The **significance, impact and benefit** of our research are recognised by our pilot participants and external stakeholders, who have requested the upscaling (expansion) of our research into additional contexts. Currently, we are looking to disseminate our preliminary findings and for resources to upscale the project. Why? Importantly, many of the emerging strategies identified from our pilot are under-explored in the literature and need to be further engaged within many organisational initiatives.

Key Recommendations are:

- Explore opportunities to advocate for policy changes or funding mechanisms that could support the well-being and professional development of NGO mental health workers.
- Support the sharing of identified strategies resulting in the successful recruitment, retention and well-being of staff, including sharing fact sheets, reports and publications that are currently being developed. We look forward to your input into the research and your ideas on how to upscale the project.
- Engage opportunities and resources so feedback and insights from the research findings can be shared, particularly around the uniqueness of the NGO mental health sector in terms of culture and values. Also, opportunities to share those solutions that are transferable with government services.
- Influence policy and funding bodies to include a line item for staff wellbeing in their EOI's funding templates. This will help reverse the trend of erasing staff wellbeing funding in many grant bids. This is occurring so proposals or bids for contracts are seen as financially competitive, but it risks further undermining staff retention.

We look forward to future opportunities to share all of our findings with you.

References

Mental Health Coordinating Council. (2023). Mental Health Workforce Profile: Community-Managed Organisations mental health workforce report 2023, NSW. Retrieved from https://mhcc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Mental-Health-Workforce-Profile_2023_WEB.pdf

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Collaboration for the recruitment, retention and wellbeing of rural mental health workers in NGOs

Meeting with Dr Joe McGirr, MP, 3 April 2025

We would like to acknowledge the Wiradjuri people of Australia who are the traditional owners and custodians of the lands in the Murrumbidgee Local Health Area, and all First Nations people of the lands we are working on today.

Research funded
by NSW Health
through The
Peregrine Centre
as part of the Rural
Mental Health
Partnership Grant

Overview of today's meeting

- **Introductions** (Joe and research team, facilitated by Monica) - 5 minutes
- **Purpose of meeting & research results** (Emma) - 10 minutes
- **How government can help** (Monica & Sarah) - 5 minutes
- **Response/advice/ideas** (Joe) - 5 minutes
- **Outcomes of meeting including further follow up** (Joe and research team) - 5 minutes

Photograph of a cockatoo over Murrumbidgee River in flood, Wagga Wagga, Wiradjuri Country (2022) by Dr Emma Rush. Used with permission.



Introductions



Dr Monica Short



Dr Emma Rush

Photo courtesy of the Wagga Daily Advertiser, photographer Ash Smith.



Dr Nicola Ivory



Dr Ella Dixon



Sarah Ansell



Michelle Bonner

Partner NGOs

**Anglicare NSW
South, NSW West,
and ACT**

54 Reasons

Roundsquared

Standby Support

Purpose of meeting

Our research is an in-depth qualitative exploration of frontline NGO mental health workers' **experiences of successful strategies for recruitment, retention and wellbeing** in a highly complex and problematic environment.

Explicit solutions focus
we asked workers ...

What strategies have
you seen work for
recruitment? (retention,
wellbeing)

We need **your help** to:

1. **promote** these strategies
2. **minimise barriers/enable expansion** of these strategies

Some research results: Recruitment

- (Pre-recruitment) **Be active and visible in the community**
- **Prioritise relationality** and take a whole of person – whole of organisation approach to recruitment.
- Can you **be flexible** with job requirements relative to team capacities? (realistic recruitment goals required for regions)
- **Prioritise candidate 'fit'** (values, attitudes, beliefs) with NGO

25%
of NSW
mental health
workforce are
employed in
community-
managed
organisations
(Mental Health
Coordinating Council,
2023)

Some research results: Retention

Treat staff as valuable team members – **establish supportive relationships** and provide:

- good working conditions including induction support
- opportunities for career growth and **progression**
- **clinical supervision** and time to engage with it
- **flexibility** in the role for work/life balance

25%

Some research results: Wellbeing

Build a **supportive workplace culture** and team spirit:

- Consistently **create opportunities for staff connection** (e.g. shared staff lunches, casual meetings/drop-in sessions, keep-in-touch Zoom meetings...)
- **Regular check-ins** (e.g. morning clinical handover, 30 minute full-team meeting twice a week)
- Management **role modeling** self-care

Actively support staff wellbeing, e.g. an hour each Wednesday
"to participate in a wellbeing activity such as mindfulness painting, yoga, meditation, whatever the team would like to do either as a group or individually"

25%

How government can help workers in mental health

1. Promote existing strategies in your networks:

- share our industry fact sheets with relevant stakeholders
- in your work with relevant stakeholders, emphasise need for positive language, human-centredness, protective legislation, incentives, collaborations and dialogue (multistakeholder collaborations) at the local level

2. Minimise barriers to strategies:

- competition among service providers;
- funding constraints – can government subsidise any of these strategies/provide additional funding etc. (to reduce inequities within the system (public/private/NGOs/ smaller/larger etc.)

25%

Quick win:

Asking government funding bodies to include a compulsory line item in their funding templates for PD and wellbeing.

A photograph of a sunset with orange and yellow clouds and silhouettes of trees.

Moving forward...

- **Response/advice/ideas** (Joe) - *5 minutes*
- **Outcomes of meeting including further follow up** - *5 minutes*

Thank you, Joe, for making the time to collaborate with us!

Recruiting NGO rural mental health workers: What is working?



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Being active and visible in the community



How?

Community engagement activities can become recruitment opportunities or strategies. NGO's strengths are their community connections and networks and people are more likely to be attracted to jobs in organisations that they know and trust

Recruitment opportunities:

- Outreach activities
- Special events
- Volunteering
- Co-design consultations
- Career events
- Promotion materials
- Network meetings

How do we know it works?



"Things we look to do are to support events like children's Christmas parties where we volunteer on the day. It helps promote our services and spread joy. We make sure we are out in the community - we do walks against violence. Mindful Mondays - teaching about mindfulness. These events help the community be more aware of us and our services... More recently we've had people come to us as prospective employees citing some of these community outreach activities as how they heard about Centacare" (Natasha, Centacare South West NSW)

This fact sheet is one of a series of resources being developed from "The Need for Effective Recruitment, Retention, and Well-being of Non-government Organisation Rural Mental Health Staff" research project, funded by NSW Health through The Peregrine Centre Rural Mental Health Partnership Grant.

For information about the project please email Dr Ella Dixon [redacted] or Dr Monica Short [redacted] or Dr Emma Rush [redacted]

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Retaining NGO rural mental health workers: What is working?



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Building trust, managing risk



How?

Effective management involves trusting staff and making people feel appreciated and valued. Risk needs to be carefully unpacked and managed to avoid burnout. Balancing confidentiality and transparency builds trust in the workforce.

Suggested strategies:

- Trust is not micromanaging
- Safety planning can minimise the potential for vicarious trauma
- Distributing responsibility for high-risk clients increases collaboration, decreases risk, and protects staff wellbeing
- Transparency surrounding funding builds trust in workers

What are staff telling us?



"We ensure our employees get their supervision and group supervision. This year we employed a clinical practice lead, a person on the ground every day that people can go to for more clinical questions." (Natasha, Centacare, South West NSW).

"Risk is distributed amongst the team rather than held by one person. No one person can call a client high risk without discussion with the team. The risk assessment is also collaborative amongst the team. No one person owns the responsibility of that decision either" (Jo, Wagga Women's Health Centre).

"I'm a big believer in transparency - as a staff member, it's good to know what is happening and allows you to feel like a valued staff member" (Glenn, Healthy Communities Foundation, Bega).

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How to support NGO rural mental health workers' wellbeing



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Building a supportive workplace culture



How?

Managers can create a supportive workplace culture by proactively nourishing and embedding practices of care into their organisation. Regular check-ins and team meetings create connections and combat isolation. Investing in staff wellbeing promotes a supportive workplace culture.

Suggested strategies:

- Hold regular team meetings
- Role model self care
- Accept and support unwellness
- Allow working from home
- Fund wellbeing programs
- Actively use wellbeing plans
- Consistent supervision is key to identifying needs and issues

What are staff telling us?



"Managers can role model self care by taking lunch breaks, setting boundaries, not contacting staff after-hours on work related matters" (Jemma, Standby Support After Suicide, Bega Valley).

"We employ a counsellor who sits in the office on a Friday. People don't have to go. They can book in and no one know about it. Costs taken by workplace" (Krystal, Roundsquared, Moruya).

Peer workers taught us how to treat mental health plans seriously to make sure our workforce remains healthy" (Deidre, Grand Pacific Health).

"Build a culture of support. If the culture isn't there underpinning it, then wellbeing plans become a waste of time" (Chantal, 54 Reasons, Wagga Wagga).

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