

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

Organisation: Little Wings

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 **LITTLE WINGS** 

YOUR
JOURNEY
IS OUR
MISSION



WE KNOW IT'S THE
LITTLE THINGS
THAT MAKE A
GIGANTIC




ABOUT LITTLE WINGS

Little Wings is a not-for-profit organisation that provides free, professional, safe flight and ground transport services for seriously ill children in rural and regional NSW, ACT and QLD.

We strive to ease the journey and help sick children access specialised medical services and treatments that are only available in major cities or towns. We do everything we can to support families by easing the financial burden, emotional strain and travel fatigue that they experience due to the long-distance travel associated with receiving vital medical treatment.

Little Wings supports children with any chronic or serious injury or illness that requires ongoing medical treatments, treatments that are only accessible in major cities. In NSW, Little Wings works with the Sydney Children's Hospital Network, John Hunter Children's Hospital, Royal Far West and various private specialist's medical service.

Little Wings has been operating in NSW for 13 years. We own our fleet of 5 aircraft (operating out of Bankstown, Cessnock and Archerfield Airports). We are a 90% volunteer-led organisation; this includes  of our pilots and drivers.

Little Wings exists to ease the journey for families caring for a seriously ill child, re-balancing the healthcare inequities of NSW.


OUR PROGRAMS

MEDICAL WINGS



MEDICAL WINGS was established in 2020, providing FREE air and ground transport for medical specialists from major cities, transporting them to regional locations to deliver essential remote clinics. These clinics are delivered in partnership with regional hospitals, where possible, otherwise in Aboriginal Medical Centres, schools and regional surgeries.

These clinics are essential for several reasons:

- As highlighted in the recent Parliamentary recommendations relating to the delivery of specific health services and specialist care, "**regional health is reaching crisis levels**", with waiting lists between 18 months and 6 years to see medical specialists such as a paediatrician. The MEDICAL WINGS model works to relieve a lot of these pressures, flying specialists in and out, offering a sustainable model, attractive to the specialists and addressing regional needs.
- Each clinic can see as many as 25 patients in a day, **promptly addressing waiting lists, providing diagnosis, early intervention, and referral** to city-based care as required.
- MEDICAL WINGS clinics have a  attendance rate, as we work closely with families and service providers to transport families, confirm information, assist with documentation and in providing local, familiar spaces of cultural safety.
- Clinic specialists ONLY charge MEDICARE, NO GAP. Ensuring ALL children are seen and no child is left behind. This is very important as many children experience a delayed diagnosis, skip appointments or are not medically compliant due to the barriers that exist for regional families (i.e. associated costs, travel, poor literacy, cultural trauma).

Medical Wings currently supports 6,000 families in FY24 across regional and remote NSW, and benefits families, communities and the health system through increasing opportunities for treatment through:

- Increased access to services and increased utilisation,
- Improving family wellbeing through decreased travel and reducing anxiety related to health access and treatment,
- Alleviating economic burden through decreased travel costs, allowing parents and carers to stay within communities to continue working, and
- Strengthening the healthcare system through building capacity within the health workforce and reducing inappropriate use of paediatric hospital beds in rural and remote NSW.

OUR PROGRAMS

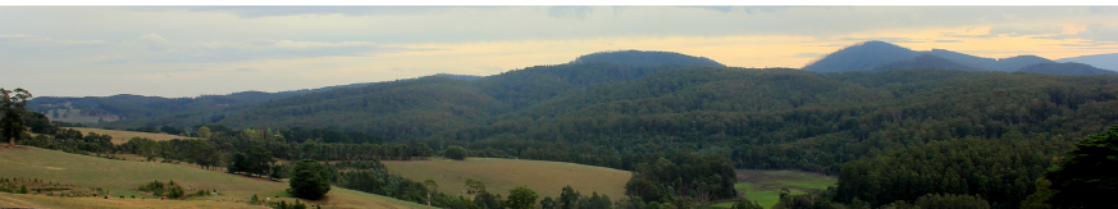
HOSPITAL FLIGHTS PROGRAM

The Hospital Flights Program transports seriously ill or injured children from regional NSW into major cities to access lifesaving medical treatment on a regular and routine basis. This is a non-crisis driven service, instead, working with families to ensure consistent medical access to achieve the best possible health outcomes, re-balancing the healthcare inequities that exist in regional NSW.

- Little Wings is a completely FREE service for children travelling for healthcare.
- The average period of time children require the Little Wings service is 18-months, however, some children have utilised the service for over a decade and continue to access due to their medical needs and ongoing access barriers.
- The program assists ALL children residing more than a 3-hour drive from their treating hospital, with any serious medical condition or injury; however, 53% have some form of childhood cancer.
- Family members are also able to join the ill/injured child and guardian (to a total of 5 passengers), this is particularly important for single-parents; if breastfeeding or unable to seek care for healthy siblings; and to keep families together during very challenging times or periods of heightened stress (i.e. surgeries, newly diagnosed, infants, end of life).

The economic benefit of Little Wings is estimated at \$974,000 each year, based on the number of families being supported annually in 2019 (105 families). This means that on average, Little Wings provided benefits of an estimated \$9,200 per annum to each family for each year that they receive support. When considering costs, the Little Wings return on investment is at least 1.5x².

With Little Wings a 90% volunteer led organisation, the economic impact is significant and can not be matched by alternative commercial or government offerings. Giving further incentive for NGO's and Government to collaborate and work together on solutions that are otherwise impossible from a financial perspective .



MISSIONS & IMPACT

MEASURING OUR IMPACT

TOTAL NUMBER OF DESTINATIONS FLOWN TO IN NSW | 55

ANNUAL COST OF HOSPITAL FLIGHTS MISSIONS FOR THE FY24 | \$3,026,182

ANNUAL COST OF MEDICAL WINGS MISSIONS FOR THE FY24 | \$513,879

NUMBER OF CHILDREN ASSISTED IN FY24 | 8000

The shortfall in paediatric services is a growing gap across NSW Health, one that is deeply impacting the development of children in the present moment, but further, with great concern across the lifespan in terms of education, employment, health literacy, and social function. All of which carry great cost to the individual, families and the wider community if not promptly addressed.

Little Wings provides a suitable and sustainable option via our MEDICAL WINGS program to address paediatricians shortages. With 100% attendance rates, delivered in culturally safe, familiar and accessible locations in regional, rural and remote locations.

Little Wings have delivered this program for 5 years, we have seen the reach and success, and year on year growth; what does not grow is funding. The NGO sector lives in a constant pull between operation and funding, distracting from their core work and ability to deliver and really make a difference in their area of expertise because of funding fluctuations.

Whilst government funding limitations exist, the collaborations between government and the not-for-profit sector needs to be more open, with regular communication and mapping of intersection, gaps and solutions. Many solutions currently exist and are powerful, proven models, but with little awareness, collaboration and without sustainable funding (be it partial or full funding) service delivery and continuity care is in a constant state of limbo... healthcare provisions repeatedly withdrawn from communities all too often, leaving families feeling unseen, devalued and disengaged as the next service offering 'rolls into town'.

NSW requires improved service mapping, greater collaboration and interaction between government and NGO's, and reoccurring funding models that allow stability to improve healthcare but also lifelong health literacy.

MEDICAL WINGS | MISSIONS & IMPACT

SECTION 1.101 | WAITING LISTS

We agree with the findings that regional NSW is battling waiting lists of 18-months to 6 years, we have experienced firsthand these heartbreaking stories time-and-time again as parents desperately reach out for support.

Routine and consistent clinic delivery addresses these issues, Little Wings established a new clinic in Warren, NSW in February 2025 with a waiting list of 48 children, majority with high behavioural and physical needs. In 3 short months, 17 of these children have commenced their consultations and treatment.

Whilst recruitment of local healthcare specialists across regional NSW is the ultimate goal, one that we support, the reality is that this has not been achievable for a long time. The fly in/out model, when done with consistency, where families can rely on the service, is meaningful for community but also sustainable and attractive to the specialist.

SECTION 1.100 | DEVELOPMENT AND MENTAL HEALTH REFERRALS | REJECTED

With the local health districts at capacity, and waiting lists at an all-time high. Children referred for behavioural or mental health assessment are declined. This means they are **not placed on a waiting list** but rather **rejected** - *"leaving families with limited options and mounting barriers to healthcare."*

The Little Wings service, via our two key programs, reduces the pressures, bridging the gap between tertiary and city-based care options and local clinics; the two programs work hand-in-hand.

30% of the children assisted via the Little Wings programs identify as indigenous. These already marginalised groups need solutions that respond in particular ways to the needs of their community. At Little Wings this has included:

- Clinics delivered in partnership with local Aboriginal Medical Services;
- Elder engagement in clinic implementation;
- All aboriginal specialist clinics working exclusively with indigenous children and their families to provide wraparound care/intervention.

Small NGO's are often agile and can respond to community needs with purpose and in a timely manner. However, with limited resources, they are often excluded from roundtable discussions which results in limitation for lobbying for movement support.