



**Mental Health
Carers NSW**

Portfolio Committee No.2 - Health
C/o Dr Amanda Cohn, MLC
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000
Via email: PortfolioCommittee2@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Dear Dr Cohn,

RE: Supplementary evidence for the inquiry into equity, accessibility and appropriate delivery of outpatient and community mental health care in New South Wales

I am writing to the Committee to provide additional evidence around the evolving conversation of police responses to mental health crises following the hearing on 22 September. Mental Health Carers NSW (MHCN) has also responded to the supplementary questions provided by the Committee. However, I felt it imperative to address this issue in full in this letter for the Committee's deliberation.

MHCN joins Being - Mental Health Consumers Ltd. (Being) in calling for an urgent review and reform of procedures for mental health emergency response in NSW.

Following the hearing on 22 September, more individuals, organisations, and news outlets have engaged with the topic of police responses to mental health crises, and more information is becoming available to inform the current discussion.

MHCN recently published a media release describing mental health carers' fear of police violence in response to mental health crises, and hesitation or unwillingness to contact the police in times of crisis due to this fear.

At hearings of the Parliamentary Inquiry on both September 22 and October 16, the Committee heard from staff at community managed organisations who provide mental health care to people from LGBTIQ+ and First Nations communities. These witnesses told the Committee that they advise consumers against calling the police for fear of an inappropriate response, and will, via phone advise them to reduce the risk of escalation by police by placing down anything the consumer is holding, as it may be misread by police to be a weapon.

These stories all reflect a shockingly common fear among our community that is driving community members to demand appropriate responses to mental health crisis in NSW.

At the October 16 hearing of the Parliamentary Inquiry, Dr Brendan Flynn, Executive Director of the Ministry of Health's Mental Health Branch, spoke on the topic of police involvement in emergency response to mental health crises and the Police Ambulance Clinical Emergency Response (PACER) Program. Currently the NSW Government is trialling the PACER program in many areas. Dr Flynn briefly outlined the basic escalation pathway of the PACER model, telling the Committee that "police can activate the mental health clinician as a secondary response."

MHCN Mental Health Carers NSW Inc.

Funded by the NSW Ministry of Health

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Being and MHCN do not support any Police-first models of care for people in mental health crisis. Dr Flynn confirmed that the Ministry of Health is considering alternatives to the PACER model and reviewing emergency response models from other jurisdictions. However, the Ministry is not yet considering and has not yet reviewed or visited jurisdictions where health staff provide the first response to mental health crises.

MHCN is calling on the Committee to recommend the development and trial of a health-first emergency response to mental health crisis model and program which would assure first responders are trained to de-escalate emergencies wherever possible before contacting additional emergency response officers, such as police. MHCN are dedicated to working with the NSW Government and all associated agencies to develop the most appropriate model that is informed by principles of safety, dignity, and inclusion of people with lived experience of mental ill health, and those who love and care for them.

Yours Sincerely,
Jonathan Harms

CEO, Mental Health Carers NSW

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