INQUIRY INTO EQUITY, ACCESSIBILITY AND APPROPRIATE DELIVERY OF OUTPATIENT AND COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH CARE IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Thadam

Date Received: 5 September 2023

Dear Dr Amanda Cohn

I am writing to express my deep concern and to advocate for increased attention and resources devoted to addressing mental health challenges within multicultural communities, with a particular focus on the Tamil Australian population. My name is Poonkulali Govintharajah, psychologist, PhD candidate and President of not for profit group Thadam. Our group is focussed on using a community led approach to highlighting the needs and understanding of mental health of the Sri lankan Tamil community. While the concerns/issues of multi cultural mental health services are not soley that of the Tamil community we are working towards the creation of a hub that utilises a stronger cultural lens in order to gain a wider acceptance and understanding of mental health. In October of 2023 Thadam has been invited to speak at Parliament house at the invitation of Leader of the Victorian Greens Dr Samantha Ratnam, who in turn has contributed to the work Thadam is doing in the field of mental health. You will find some of our supporting documentation is focussed on areas around the world where Tamils have migrated to, and the mental health issues they have faced. While there is much study on recent migrant arrivals, there is little data on the Australian tamil community that looks at the longer established migrants, which is also the focus of my PhD.

Australia is celebrated for its rich cultural diversity, with communities from around the world calling this nation their home. While our multiculturalism is a source of strength and pride, it also comes with unique challenges, including those related to mental health.

1. Cultural Sensitivity and Inclusivity:

Tamil Australians, like many multicultural communities, often face cultural and linguistic barriers when accessing mental health services. To effectively address their needs, services must be culturally sensitive and inclusive. Culturally competent mental health support can help reduce stigma and improve outcomes.

2. Mental Health Disparities:

Research consistently shows that mental health disparities exist within multicultural communities. Factors such as discrimination, acculturation stress, intergenerational trauma, and intergenerational conflicts can contribute to higher rates of mental health issues. Addressing these disparities is crucial for building a mentally healthy society.

3. The Role of Community:

Community organizations play a pivotal role in supporting mental health initiatives. Collaborations between government agencies, community groups, and mental health service providers can create a network of support that reaches and benefits Tamil Australians and other multicultural communities. Whilst there are many organisations that are Government funded with programs that are designed to attract members of the CALD community, our observations reflect evidence based research undertaken in Victoria highlighting the need for organisations to work together instead of working in silos. Also ethnic/minority community led organisations play a pivotal role in normalising mental health issues as they are aware of barriers and ways to reach the community in respectful and culturally appropriate ways.

4. Unique Challenges for Tamil Australians:

Tamil Australians, in particular, have their own set of challenges, including the trauma associated with migration, displacement, and conflict in their country of origin. Understanding and addressing these unique challenges is essential for providing effective mental health care. There is a huge focus on recent arrivals, of asylum seekers and refugees, however the arrivals of the long established, those arrived in the 80's through skilled migrant pathways and Special Humanitarian Programme (SHP) has received limited to nil attention in the mental health space as this cohort is viewed as successful. The limited acknowledgment has led to intergenerational trauma and other mental health issues impacting this cohort and their children, the following generation.

5. Benefits to Society:

Investing in mental health support for multicultural communities, including Tamil Australians, is not just a matter of social justice; it also makes economic sense. Improved mental health leads to increased productivity, reduced healthcare costs, and a stronger, more cohesive society.

Recommendations:

a. Increased Funding: We urge the government to allocate additional funding to mental health programs and services specifically tailored to multicultural communities, including culturally competent mental health practitioners.

b. Cultural Competency Training: Require mental health professionals to undergo cultural competency training to better serve the diverse needs of multicultural clients, that is more than generic training. For example stronger utilization of ethnic mental health practitioners with the ability to communicate in their own language.

c. Research and Data Collection: Support research initiatives that investigate mental health disparities within multicultural communities, enabling data-driven policies and interventions. The need for culturally aligned research experts to help set up and evaluate data of programmes.

d. Community Outreach: Invest in outreach programs to engage multicultural communities, raise awareness, and destigmatize mental health issues that is community led

e. Collaborative Partnerships: Encourage partnerships between government agencies, community organizations, and academic institutions to develop and implement effective mental health programs, and to have research experts implement frameworks.

In conclusion, recognizing the importance of mental health in multicultural communities, especially among Tamil Australians, is a critical step towards fostering a more inclusive, resilient, and healthier society. By addressing the unique challenges faced by these communities, we can work together to build a brighter future for all Australians.

I appreciate your attention to this pressing issue and look forward to seeing the government take proactive steps to prioritize mental health support for multicultural communities.