

Submission
No 74

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

Organisation: Youth Action
Date Received: 6 September 2023



Equity, accessibility and appropriate
delivery of outpatient and
community mental health care in
New South Wales | September 2023



Youth Action Submission to the Legislative Council Portfolio Committee No 2

Acknowledgment of Country

Youth Action acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia. We understand that sovereignty was never ceded and recognise their continuing connection to lands, languages, waters, and cultures.

Our office is located upon the land of the Gadigal people. We recognise their traditional and ongoing Custodianship, and pay our respects to Elders past and present.



About Youth Action

Youth Action is the peak organisation representing young people and the services that support them in NSW. We work towards a society where all NSW young people are supported, engaged, valued, and have their rights realised. We represent over 150 Member organisations and regularly engage with young people and youth workers from all over the state, as we have for over 30 years.

We give a particular focus to young people who are regional, First Nations, LGBTIQ+, with disability, from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, including migrants and refugees, and doing it tough. We use a rights-based lens to focus on programs, policy and advocacy that achieve meaningful outcomes, embed strengths-based approaches, and are informed by data and evidence. We are an ally to the self-determination of First Nations communities, are led by the expertise of young people and the Sector, and work to be a trust-worthy partner and collaborator.

Youth Action
262 Liverpool Street,
Darlinghurst 2010 NSW
(02) 8354 3700
info@youthaction.org.au
ABN 17 209 492 539
www.youthaction.org.au

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Table of contents

Introduction.....	5
Key recommendations.....	6
Access to early intervention and non-clinical prevention programs specifically designed for young people	6
Access to crisis support	7
Access to outpatient treatment.....	8
Provision of information and promotion of services.....	8
Access to youth specific programs and culturally safe youth mental health services	8
Access to mental health support for young people in contact with the justice system	9
Access to early intervention and non-clinical prevention programs specifically designed for young people.....	11
Access to crisis support	12
Access to outpatient treatment.....	15
Provision of information and promotion of services.....	19
Access to youth specific programs and culturally safe youth mental health services	20
Case study: access to mental health support for young people in contact with the justice system	23
Conclusion	25

Introduction

Youth Action welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into the equity, accessibility and appropriate delivery of outpatient care in New South Wales. This submission is grounded in the voices and lived experiences of young people across New South Wales who we have heard from through our consultations.

The past three years have been tough for young people in NSW, with the pandemic, fires and floods and ongoing intergenerational inequity. The combination of these events has seen young people fall further behind. These events have caused increased poverty and housing insecurity, homelessness, disengagement from education and an increase in mental health issues. During our consultations, young people and the youth sector spoke at length about the difficulties they are experiencing accessing mental health support across the full spectrum of treatment from early intervention programs through to crisis and ongoing clinical support.

It is important for future solutions to take into account the lived experiences of young people and the myriad of possible solutions that they have identified. The young people that we have consulted with have identified a range of solutions ranging from improving suicide awareness in their communities, to ensuring health staff are trained in trauma-informed care to be able to make mental health services accessible to all.

Key recommendations

Over the past 12 months we have heard from over 3000 young people across NSW through 76 consultations and over 2000 youth sector representatives across 69 occasions. Young people have spoken to us extensively about mental health and the challenges they have faced in accessing appropriate supports. We have produced the following reports and submissions with findings and recommendations from these consultations:

- [FAMS Joint Youth Justice Report](#)
- [Youth Action Key Recommendations Report](#)
- [Submission to the Senate Select Committee Inquiry on Cost of Living](#)
- [Youth Employment Reports](#)
- [COVID Recovery Report](#)

These reports contain a diverse range of recommendations aimed at supporting improved outcomes for young people in NSW across the full spectrum of their life experiences. Our key recommendations are drawn from these as well as the specific mental health consultations that we have undertaken with young people in 2023:

Access to early intervention and non-clinical prevention programs specifically designed for young people

1. Investment in capacity of youth services through \$15 million funding increase to provide non-clinical prevention and early intervention mental health support programs including provision of funding for additional staff to meet increased demand as well as provision of a diverse range of early intervention programs that can act as soft-entry points for accessing mental health support including outreach, drop-in, peer support, arts and

recreation, and youth development models. There is need for 75 sites across NSW including 30 in regional areas.

2. Increased investment in the capacity of the Youth Arts Sector to provide services and programs to improve the wellbeing of young people in NSW.
3. Investment of \$5 million in the capacity of youth sector to respond to young people tackling mental health challenges through the rollout of skills based, early intervention training such as mental health first aid or accidental counsellor training to the youth sector and identified youth peer support roles. As the youth sector serves as a soft-entry point for many young people requiring mental health support, equipping youth workers with these skills will enable more young people to access support earlier, while also easing pressure on crisis support services.

Access to crisis support

4. Significant investment in existing youth mental health crisis support services so that those services can meet demand. Young people must be able to access timely support in emergency situations so as not to be put at risk.
5. Mental health first aid training, accidental counsellor training, suicide prevention and awareness training and other relevant evidence-based skills trainings are made freely available to all police, young people, and people who work with young people – including teachers, sports coaches, and tutors, etc. This kind of free crisis support education for young people and people who work with young people is designed to supplement investment in early intervention, so that young people need crisis support less frequently, but are still able to access effective and useful help in an emergency.

Access to outpatient treatment

6. Increase investment in the provision of free mental health services to reduce waiting lists and improve young people's access to critical treatment.
7. Explore options for increasing the provision of fully bulk-billed mental health appointments under Medicare for all young people up to the age of 24, especially for those with no income or on a low income.
8. Increase investment in mental health services and supports for young people in regional NSW both through in person and telehealth options.

Provision of information and promotion of services

9. Improve the provision of education and information for young people about Medicare, the costs of accessing the health system, and privacy and healthcare rights. This could be made available to young people directly through education institutions or youth programs as well as being available within medical services.
10. Increase awareness of the mental supports available to young people through schools, youth centres, outreach programs and any other programs in contact with young people. Make information widely available and accessible to young people from all socially excluded groups.

Access to youth specific programs and culturally safe youth mental health services

11. Ensure First Nations young people, young people from culturally diverse communities, LGBTQIA+ young people, regional young people, young

people with disability, and those doing it tough are included in the design of specific approaches to address the unique barriers they face in accessing mental health services and supports. These barriers include stigma, cost, geographic remoteness, social isolation, and cultural understandings on mental health.

12. Increase young people's access to specialist youth health experts through increased investment in youth specific training for general practitioners and designated youth health professionals with a particular focus on access for socially excluded groups of young people (regional, First Nations, culturally diverse communities, young people with disability, young people doing it tough, and LGBTQIA+ young people).
13. Mandatory training on best practice when working with young people is to be provided for all health professionals that work with young people requiring mental health support. This training should emphasise cultural safety and trauma informed care.
14. Young people have expressed their support for youth-friendly spaces with health professionals specialising in supporting young people. We recommend the provision of support for services to build a youth-friendly environment and invests in staff specializing in youth engagement.

Access to mental health support for young people in contact with the justice system

15. Increased resourcing for whole-of-community programs that include young people, particularly in regional and Aboriginal communities, to help strengthen capacity to tackle systemic conditions such as poverty, substance use, mental health difficulties, family violence, and intergenerational trauma to support children and young people and

prevent them from entering the justice system.

16. Investigate how to ensure consistency in the provision of clinical mental health care through a young person's contact with the justice system.

Access to early intervention and non-clinical prevention programs specifically designed for young people

Youth services have spoken to us about the importance of early intervention through non-clinical support offered by youth programs and activities. Youth workers regularly expressed their frustration as they feel the significant wellbeing benefits of the deep relational work undertaken by the youth sector is poorly resourced. The diverse nature of this support means many young people connected to youth services “grow up” in these programs, first connecting when they are pre-teens and staying engaged until they reach adulthood. This long term, ongoing, wholistic support provided through individual case management, crisis and material assistance, drop-in, outreach, arts and recreation, peer support, and youth development initiatives all act as soft entry points to connect young people to non-clinical assistance and help support the wellbeing of those with more complex mental health issues until they can access clinic intervention.

Recommendations

- Investment in capacity of youth services through \$15 million funding increase to provide non-clinical prevention and early intervention mental health support programs including provision of funding for additional staff to meet increased demand as well as provision of a diverse range of early intervention programs that can act as soft-entry points for accessing

mental health support including outreach, drop-in, peer support, arts and recreation, and youth development models. There is need for 75 sites across NSW including 30 in regional areas.

- Increased investment in the capacity of the Youth Arts Sector to provide services and programs to improve the wellbeing of young people in NSW.
- Investment of \$5 million in the capacity of youth sector to respond to young people tackling mental health challenges through the rollout of skills based, early intervention training such as mental health first aid or accidental counsellor training to the youth sector and identified youth peer support roles. As the youth sector serves as a soft-entry point for many young people requiring mental health support, equipping youth workers with these skills will enable more young people to access support earlier, while also easing pressure on crisis support services.

Access to crisis support

In our consultations with young people about their access to mental health supports, many spoke about their inability to access effective, time-sensitive crisis support. Young people shared experiences where they were unable to access timely support when in crisis, despite reaching out to services.

Many young people told us they were familiar with and had used over the phone crisis supports. However, the young people we spoke to had difficulty accessing phone or text-based support due to long hold or slow response times. One young person gave an example of waiting over an hour to hear back from a crisis text service, while another young person told us they were on hold for six hours when they called the suicide hotline.

One young person told us that they will often have to repeat the details of the crisis to several different people on the phone to the crisis line, elevating their distress. Some young people spoke about their fears about speaking with a crisis line, one expressed concern about their family or emergency services being contacted. They felt more information about what might happen as a result of a discussion would be useful.

Youth workers and young people across NSW told us that in many areas when a young person is experiencing a mental health crisis, especially after hours, the only response available is from police or ambulance. They spoke about the additional distress this causes as they report feeling like having a mental health issue means they will get in trouble.

They expressed that police, other emergency responders and healthcare workers need to be well trained in youth mental health approaches to reduce the likelihood of situations escalating whilst supporting young people to receive medical assistance.

“Police always show up and treat you badly.”

“One of the times I was having a psychotic episode, the police were feeding into it.”

- Young people, Warakirri College Fairfield Campus, Youth Justice Throughcare Consultations 2022

Youth workers we spoke to also identified that suicide is becoming an increasing issue in their communities and have noted that services and supports connected to young people including youth services, schools, healthcare and emergency services like police and ambulance are not trained in suicide prevention or response. Young people and youth workers have

expressed a desire to see more resourcing dedicated to suicide responses within their local communities.

“There is an increasing number of suicides in the community, we would like to see workers and community members receive more suicide awareness training to support young people.”

- Youth worker, Miyay Birray Moree, Youth Justice Throughcare Consultations 2022

Young people explained that suicides within their community have become more prevalent since the pandemic which has had a significant impact on them and their young peers.

“Everyone’s been through their own trauma or loss ... everyone can only take so much.”

“Everyone in our community wants to put a stop to it but no one knows where to start.”

- Young people, Maari Ma Health Aboriginal Corporation Broken Hill, Youth Justice Throughcare Consultations 2022

Youth workers have identified that establishing a more proactive approach to preventing and addressing suicide is crucial, especially when there are limited health professionals available. There is a desire to train community members, including young people, to be able to have supportive conversations with young people, so that those needing urgent support can access it easily.

“We have the people, just need to get them training.”

- Youth worker, Wilcannia Safe House, Youth Justice Throughcare Consultations 2022

Compulsory provision of trainings such as mental health first aid, accidental counsellor training, suicide prevention and awareness training and other

relevant evidence-based trainings would be beneficial for first responders such as police and ambulance, teachers, youth workers and community members. This training should also be made available to young people and their supporters in the community.

Recommendations

- Significant investment in existing youth mental health crisis support services so that those services can meet demand. Young people must be able to access timely support in emergency situations so as not to be put at risk.
- Mental health first aid training, accidental counsellor training, suicide prevention and awareness training and other relevant evidence-based skills trainings are made freely available to all police, young people, and people who work with young people – including teachers, sports coaches, and tutors, etc. This kind of free crisis support education for young people and people who work with young people is designed to supplement investment in early intervention, so that young people need crisis support less frequently, but are still able to access effective and useful help in an emergency.

Access to outpatient treatment

During our consultations and through our Ask for Health project, young people and the youth sector spoke at length about the difficulties they are experiencing accessing mental health support across the full spectrum of treatment. In particular, young people spoke about the difficulty of accessing outpatient care in the form of treatment by a counsellor, psychologist or

psychiatrist.

In particular, the cost of private mental health treatment was unaffordable for many young people. One issue we have heard a great deal about in recent consultations is the limited access to bulk billed medical services. Both young people and the youth sector across NSW feel this is at crisis point. Young people and the youth sector would like to see greater exploration of the possibility of extending access to bulk-billed appointments at a local GP, mental health, and other health services for young people under the age of 24, especially those with no income or on low incomes.

"Mental health (treatment) being completely covered under Medicare would be amazing."

- Young person, Katoomba, Youth Action consultations.

Many young people felt that psychologists were unaffordable and shared their experiences of facing difficulty when looking for a free or bulkbilling service, to the extent that out-of-pocket expenses prevent many young people from accessing mental health treatment. They appreciated the subsidised visits that can be accessed using GP referred mental health plan. However, a number of young people spoke about living with long term, chronic mental health issues that required more appointments than currently provided within a care plan.

In addition, cost barriers encouraged young people and their families to limit their engagement with mental health services and deal with issues in as few appointments as possible.

"In some rural and urban areas, health services are quite expensive, which usually put youth off from finding help for their issue. Finding ways for youth to afford and access vital health services will really help some areas that

struggle in these times."

"There are GPs in most suburbs but they are expensive."

"You may not have the financial means to pay for the service or the transportation to get there."

- Young people in consultation for Youth Action's submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs with respect to the provision of general practitioner and related primary health services to outer metropolitan, rural and regional Australians in 2021.

A consequence of the lack of bulk billing is the increased demand for free mental health services. Young people have spoken to us about difficulties with long waitlists for clinical mental health support. Some waitlists were months long while other services had closed their books. Young people in regional areas reported experiencing limited access to mental health support.

"We have quite a few services available to them [young people] already, but it's the waiting times between having the problem and accessing help for it"

- Young Person, Katoomba, Youth Action consultations.

"Headspace have long waiting lists ... during lockdown there was literally no one to talk to."

- Young person Orange, Youth Action consultations.

"I believe young people find it difficult to access high quality, low-cost or free health care services, particularly mental health services. Often access to these mental health care services in NSW is limited to those who can afford it either through private health insurance, or out of pocket payments. Without access to these services, the mental health of young people is suffering".

- Youth worker in consultation for Youth Action's submission to the Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs with respect to the provision of general practitioner and related primary health services to outer metropolitan, rural and regional Australians in 2021.

Young people in regional and rural areas do not have the same level of access to GPs and psychiatrists for prescriptions and reviews of medication. For example, a youth worker in Moree explained that accessing medications and mental health support from doctors is challenging in their community because doctors only visit town occasionally.

“Getting on the right medication is a problem for young people as there are only 1-2 Drs that provide prescriptions and they only come into town a couple of times a month.”

– Youth worker, Moree, Youth Justice Throughcare Consultations, 2022.

Telehealth has been beneficial for young people in need of access to healthcare not immediately available, especially in regional and rural areas where GPs and specialists such as psychiatrists might not be permanently available in the community. It is especially important in those regional areas where it is not possible to fund youth services or youth specific health programs. Despite the obvious benefits of Telehealth for many young people, some young people have expressed that they would prefer in person support for mental health.

“Telehealth doesn’t work for everyone. I barely like talking about my problems anyway, let alone over the phone.”

– Young person, Warakirri College Fairfield Campus, Youth Justice Throughcare Consultations 2022.

Recommendations:

- Increase investment in the provision of free mental health services to reduce waiting lists and improve young people’s access to critical treatment.
- Explore options for increasing the provision of fully bulk-billed mental

health appointments under Medicare for all young people up to the age of 24, especially for those with no income or on a low income.

- Increase investment in mental health services and supports for young people in regional NSW both through in person and telehealth options.

Provision of information and promotion of services

A number of young people have expressed that they would not know what to do or where to go if they or a friend needed support for their mental health. Young people feel that schools present a good opportunity for promotion about mental health services and supports and would like to see more information provided to students. Young people we spoke to said that while there are quality resources and services available, many of their peers do not know about them.

"I believe the most prominent health issue for young people is mental health... there are many amazing resources out there but if young people don't know what they are this is a huge problem."

"From what I have experienced and conversations I have had with friends and people in my community, mental health is currently crucial... especially recently ... I have noticed an increased number of young people who are experiencing various mental health issues such as anxiety, but it does not feel as if there are enough effective resources and services that are available or that people are aware of."

- Young people, Health Literacy Advisory Council EOI 2021

Young people without adult support within their families also struggled and had to rely on other adults such as youth workers, to help them access reliable health information and support.

“Young people in the regions don’t have access to youth specific health services.”

– Young person, Kiama, Youth Action consultations.

Recommendations:

- Improve the provision of education and information for young people about Medicare, the costs of accessing the health system, and privacy and healthcare rights. This could be made available to young people directly through education institutions or youth programs as well as being available within medical services.
- Increase awareness of the supports available to young people through schools, youth centres, outreach programs and any other programs in contact with young people. Make information widely available and accessible to young people from all socially excluded groups.

Access to youth specific programs and culturally safe youth mental health services

Young people have identified a need for youth friendly mental health services as well as access to practitioners who have been trained specifically to work with young people. In the context of mental health, the young people we consulted felt that mental health services needed to have a better understanding of the contexts and environments that young people live in and how these are different to adults.

“Places like GPs, hospitals, and outreach services, such as community mental

health services, are often not designed to serve the specific and unique needs of young people (and young people of 'diverse' backgrounds). Young people have a whole host of health needs (both mental and physical) yet face differing needs from adults due to factors like a lack of financial security to pay for services."

- Young person, Health Literacy Advisory Council EOI, 2021

As identified by the young person above, many of the available services for young people are not tailored to their unique needs and thus can't accommodate for factors like a lack of financial means to pay for services. For this reason, access to youth specific services that are free or low cost are important for young people doing it tough, but also for any young person seeking to access support independently from their parents or carers.

"I need to be able to access] mental health support without my parents."

- Young person, Mountains Youth Services Team, Springwood, 2023

"While it is a serious problem that affects all of youth across the board, it is evident that some groups like immigrant and refugee populations, and indigenous and rural youth in particular are more disproportionately affected, and it is necessary to tackle both the issue of mental health as well as these disproportions".

- Young person, Health Literacy Advisory Council EOI, 2021

We heard from young people seeking culturally safe care and they felt appropriate support was even harder to access. There is limited availability of appropriate youth-friendly, culturally safe youth health services for young people in regional areas, First Nations young people, those from culturally diverse communities, LGBTQIA+ young people, or those with disability.

Young people want access to support from people that understand them. One young person that we spoke to in the Blue Mountains expressed that being an

LGBTQIA+ young person with autism meant that they needed unique support for their mental health. They identified that they needed people around them who understood mental health, autism and what it means to be a LGBTQIA+ young person.

Young people support the increased provision of training and resources to health care professionals working with young people, to ensure that young people can access support from people that understand them and can provide tailored, culturally safe care. Additionally, young people want to be able contribute their lived experience to the design of service delivery, so it is reflective of the diversity of young people's needs.

Recommendations:

- Ensure First Nations young people, young people from culturally diverse communities, LGBTQIA+ young people, regional young people, young people with disability, and those doing it tough are included in the design of specific approaches to address the unique barriers they face in accessing mental health services and supports. These barriers include stigma, cost, geographic remoteness, social isolation, and cultural understandings on mental health.
- Increase young people's access to specialist youth health experts through increased investment in youth specific training for general practitioners and designated youth health professionals with a particular focus on access for socially excluded groups of young people (regional, First Nations, culturally diverse communities, young people with disability, young people doing it tough, and LGBTQIA+ young people).
- Mandatory training on best practice when working with young people is

to be provided for all health professionals that work with young people requiring mental health support. This training should emphasise cultural safety and trauma informed care.

- Young people have expressed their support for youth-friendly spaces with health professionals specialising in supporting young people. We recommend the provision of support for services to build a youth-friendly environment and invests in staff specializing in youth engagement.

Case study: access to mental health support for young people in contact with the justice system

Our consultations with young people in contact with the law, justice, and child protection systems and the services who support them highlighted the complexity of issues such as mental health, family and domestic violence, housing insecurity, loss of income, disengagement from education and experiences of trauma. For this specific group of young people, access to non-clinical supports and wrap around services as well as consistent clinical treatment is very important, but often hard to access and maintain access.

Connection with services or mental health supports is often disrupted when a young person enters custody, despite being crucial before, during and after a young person's stay in custody. This can have a significant impact on the young person's well-being and can be detrimental to their health when medication is involved.

"There is also an issue when young people go into custody, as often their

medication gets changed but then when they get out again they don't have a new script and have to wait to get an appointment with a Doctor so have periods of time without medication."

– Youth worker, Moree, Youth Justice Throughcare consultations 2022

Youth Action supports targeted and tailored mental health support for young people in contact with the justice system, from wrap around supports provided by the youth sector and clinical interventions that stay with the young person when they re-enter the community.

Recommendations:

- Increased resourcing for whole-of-community programs that include young people, particularly in regional and Aboriginal communities, to help strengthen capacity to tackle systemic conditions such poverty, substance use, mental health difficulties, family violence, and intergenerational trauma to support children and young people and prevent them from entering the justice system.
- Investigate how to ensure consistency in the provision of clinical mental health care through a young person's contact with the justice system.

Conclusion

Equity and accessibility in the context of mental health care for young people in NSW means that young people in NSW have access to affordable, time-sensitive support that is made available to them in their local community. The supporters of young people such as teachers, parents and carers, first responders and youth workers should be equipped to confidently assist the young people in their life to access this support.

Youth Action would like to stress that support for young people's mental health often begins within the youth sector, where long term, ongoing, wholistic support provided through individual case management, crisis and material assistance, drop-in, outreach, arts and recreation, peer support, and youth development initiatives all act as soft entry points to connect young people to non-clinical assistance and help support the wellbeing of those with more complex mental health issues until they can access clinic intervention. Funding and support for the youth sector to continue doing the work they do in this area is essential.

Youth Action hopes that this inquiry can lead to expanded access to the spectrum of necessary mental health supports for young people in NSW from prevention and early intervention, through to crisis support and outpatient care. Improving equity of access to mental health care for young people also extends to ensuring efficient provision of information so that young people know how to find support, including those young people requiring culturally safe care. Youth Action is happy to provide further information to the Portfolio Committee upon request.