

Submission
No 86

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

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By Cooper Smeaton

Dear Chair, Deputy Chair & Members,

My name is Cooper Smeaton I am a 24-year-old Watjarri man living in the eastern suburbs of Sydney. I currently work as a long-Haul Flight Attendant with Qantas. I write my submission to you today to give a relevant and first-hand experience with police attendance at a mental illness related incident and my constructional opinion on this as an educated member of the NSW Community. I would like to reference the support of NSW Greens Member for Newtown Jenny Leong who informed me of this committee and credit her on her amazing and continued work in bettering the NSW community.

I was 19 and my mother and I were living in Newcastle NSW when were both assaulted by my mother's brother who had an extreme outburst of violent behaviour resulting in medical treatment for my mother and I for broken bones and abrasions. I remember the police attending and no ambulance that could have been of great support for my uncle. I look back thinking now how crucial it would have been to have had the support of the "Police, Ambulance, Clinical, Early, Response (PACER) "

I have set out below an essay formatted submission piece for your perusal and would be happy to speak in person if required at a committee hearing.

Overcoming Challenges: An Analysis of the New South Wales Police's Response to Mental Health Incidents.

Over the course of recent years, an escalating number of occurrences involving the presence of New South Wales Police officers at instances where individuals are grappling with mental health crises have come to public attention. The convoluted nature of these situations has ignited vigorous debates and fragmented opinions regarding the involvement of police in tackling mental health concerns.

While detractors argue that police interference frequently leads to unnecessary use of force or wrongful apprehensions, advocates maintain that their participation is indispensable in ensuring the safety and well-being not only of those experiencing a crisis but also for those around them. These polarizing viewpoints underscore the necessity for a more profound comprehension of this multifaceted matter. The underlying backdrop discloses a disconcerting pattern—New South Wales law enforcement is often summoned to address emergencies pertaining to mental health due to inadequate resources within existing mental healthcare systems. This reliance on police intervention reflects broad challenges confronted by societies globally, wherein strained mental health services struggle to offer sufficient support.

Consequently, police officers find themselves thrust into roles extending beyond their conventional purview, functioning as initial responders when specialized training may be lacking. Unravelling this subject will bring illumination to the intricacies encompassing New South Wales police attendance at incidents involving mental health: scrutinizing censures towards their involvement alongside elucidations emphasizing its indispensability under specific circumstances. By delving into these divergent perspectives, we can glean invaluable insights into potential reforms or alternative solutions aimed at enhancing outcomes for individuals undergoing crises while upholding community safety—a task necessitating collaboration between law enforcement agencies and healthcare providers alike.

In summary, comprehending the complexities surrounding New South Wales law enforcement's response to incidents related to mental health necessitates meticulous analysis of diverging viewpoints concerning their role within society's response system. This essay endeavours to explore such nuances by evaluating condemnations as well as justifications for their intervention while contemplating possibilities for more effective approaches going forward.

The New South Wales Police have recently implemented specialized training programs for officers to effectively deal with mental health-related incidents. The aim of the program is to provide police personnel with valuable skills necessary to handle such situations appropriately.

Although it is common for police forces around the world, including New South Wales, to conduct one-day mental health training courses for their officers, these courses often fail to take into account the complexities that arise when an officer's task involves disarming a mentally disordered person. As reported by the World Socialist Web Site, in a heartbreaking incident that occurred in 2017, Australian police killed a young mentally ill woman seconds after arriving at the scene because they were not adequately trained on how best to approach and communicate with her (World Socialist Web Site). This tragedy highlights the need for more comprehensive training programs tailored towards ensuring effective communication between law enforcement officials and individuals who are mentally unwell. By equipping officers with proper communication skills during high-stress situations involving individuals experiencing mental crises or episodes, we can hope that similar tragedies will be avoided in future and better outcomes achieved overall.

The implementation of Mental Health Intervention Teams (MHITs) has emerged as a widely embraced strategy to tackle the issue of mental health in our society. These teams comprise skilled medical professionals and law enforcement officers who collaborate to provide immediate assistance to individuals struggling with mental illness. Recent studies indicate that MHITs have had a significant impact on reducing the number of mentally ill individuals detained by the police. According to LECC Law Enforcement Conduct Commission (2023), "MHITs have effectively decreased the apprehension of mentally ill individuals by law enforcement." It is crucial that we continue recognizing and endorsing these initiatives, as they not only aid those facing mental health challenges but also contribute to establishing safer and more empathetic communities.

By delivering proper care and attention to those experiencing a crisis, we can prevent unjustified arrests or injuries resulting from untrained personnel attempting to handle situations beyond their capabilities. The incorporation of MHITs should be seen as an indispensable element in any comprehensive plan concerning public safety, as it promotes both individual well-being and societal advancement through informed decision-making processes rooted in evidence-based interventions such as MHITs.

The alliance between law enforcement and mental health services has exhibited its ability to produce better outcomes for individuals experiencing mental health crises. This strategy acts as a response to unfavourable opinions surrounding how the police handle individuals with mental illness (PWMI) in specific situations, which have prompted calls for change and increased scrutiny. As Morgan (2021) asserts, collaborative programs involving trained clinicians working alongside the police are becoming more prevalent. These initiatives aim to deliver targeted and effective responses that prioritize de-escalation rather than confrontation.

By offering an alternative path for those facing crisis, they divert individuals from potentially harmful encounters with law enforcement alone. Nevertheless, it is vital to recognize that successful collaboration necessitates ongoing communication and training among all parties involved. According to Boscarato et al., (2014), "The manner in which people with mental illness are supported in a crisis is crucial to their recovery" this is crucial when striving to enhance outcomes for those undergoing mental health crises.

By fostering opportunities for interdisciplinary education and building mutual understanding among professionals in these respective fields, we may witness even greater success moving forward. In conclusion, while implementing collaborative approaches between police officers and mental health services on a large scale does present challenges, research suggests that these efforts can produce positive results if executed effectively. It requires dedication from all stakeholders involved but ultimately holds the potential for improved outcomes not only for individuals grappling with mental health emergencies but also for society at large by reducing unnecessary arrests or hospitalizations resulting from such incidents (Bradbury et al., 2017; Brennan et al., 2016).

In conclusion, the New South Wales Police Force has made remarkable strides in managing situations involving individuals with mental health disorders. Their dedication and openness to collaborating with mental healthcare providers have enabled them to deliver more compassionate and effective responses that prioritize the safety and well-being of those experiencing a crisis. But there is still a big journey ahead for the NSWPF to be a sound responder to mental illness incidents. The implementation of various training programs is needed to ensure the attendance of the NSWPF for the safety of all is resulting in de-escalation instead of escalation. Moreover, the establishment of partnerships between law enforcement agencies and mental health service providers needs to be seen by all officers within the NSWPF as

a holistic and positive approach. There is still a major issue within the NSWPF of police command suicides that is a front-page issue for this agency because of the "old boy" culture of "keep your problems to yourself" without these improvements, there will still be an extensive amount of work left to be done. It is crucial that we shift our focus towards prevention rather than solely responding reactively: by investing resources into community-based initiatives targeted at early intervention for at-risk individuals, we can effectively reduce the frequency of crises requiring immediate intervention. Additionally, it is imperative to allocate sufficient funds towards addressing systemic issues such as inadequate financing for public healthcare services, which exacerbates this predicament for example the ramping of ambulances for hours. Essentially, while undoubtedly encountering obstacles on our path toward comprehensively addressing this issue; let us recognize that progress has already been achieved through collaboration among diverse stakeholders including law enforcement officials and dedicated medical professionals tirelessly working behind-the-scenes each day without receiving due recognition or rewards - all united under one common objective: providing vital support where it is most needed during critical moments.

In finalising this submission, I say let us persistently push forward collectively toward a brighter future where no one goes unsupported during times of turmoil.