

Submission to The Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System

Prepared September 2019, with input from Council Members, by Elisabeth Newman, NCWV President.

On behalf of the National Council of Women of Victoria (NCWV), I applaud the Andrews' Government calling for a Royal Commission to report on the state of Mental Health within the State of Victoria. I thank the Commission for giving NCWV the opportunity to make a submission at this late date. NCWV is an NGO representing some 30 like-minded NGOs and a similar number of Individual members whose purposes are to:

1. provide a non-party political, non-sectarian, not-for-profit, umbrella organisation with broadly humanitarian and educational objectives, empowering women and girls and raising awareness of gender equality;
2. act as a voice on issues and concerns of women and girls at a State level;
3. develop policies and responses on behalf of women and girls on a State-wide basis;
4. maintain and strengthen the Association's relationship with all members;
5. link with women in Australia and the International Council of Women (ICW-CIF) through the National Council of Women of Australia and contribute to the implementation of their plans of action and policies.

With these purposes in mind, NCWV acknowledges good mental health is essential for good general wellbeing of the community. It is concerned about the general well-being of people, particularly women and girls; it was not until 2011 that the importance of good mental health was fully recognised globally and firmly placed on the agenda of the United Nations and its agencies. An ICW-CIF Representative to the UN was one of those advocating for such recognition. It is pleasing to see the importance of mental health being recognised, but sadly the general care of those suffering from mental illness requires review and the need for the stigma to be removed. This came through in an MSO film clip/documentary, "A dangerous son", made in the US by producer Liz Garbus for Firecracker, shown by QANTAS in September 2019. With a grandson on the Autism spectrum I, the author of this submission could relate to much of the documentary.

Main issues of concern to NCWV

- Mental illness is not treated/recognised in the same way as a physical illness; e.g., if a child has cancer, sympathy and support is given to the family, but not so if a family member is diagnosed with a mental illness particularly if that illness is associated with abuse of narcotic drugs.
- Care of the vulnerable/disadvantaged, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, LGBTI persons, refugees and women suffering violence.
- Education of the general public to overcome stigma and treat those with mental illness with the same compassion and support as those with a physical illness is required. The use of short skits shown, e.g. on TV, is a powerful way to get a message across.
- Recognition about causes: This ought to be an essential part in the training of medical students. Many people develop a mental illness in the same way as a physical illness, however many causes leading to severe stress and anxiety, depression, sense of worthlessness and other such forms of mental instability are preventable; these include bullying, cyber bullying, discrimination and violence against women, pressure to succeed. If left unrecognised, untreated sufferers may go on to commit suicide.

- Prevention and early intervention are essential elements. General practitioners need to be well trained to pick up early symptoms of mental illness, e.g. depression. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for early signs of depression to be missed in women and in the elderly.
- Poverty, homelessness and inadequate housing have marked effects on mental well-being. A review, followed by action, of affordable public housing is required.
- Quality care of children and youth is an urgent priority for the prevention of mental illness. NCWV is particularly concerned by out of home care for children coming from dysfunctional families. Such care is more often than not lacking continuity, with little to no support given to the child or carer. Such children usually perform badly at school; they become disruptive ending up on the wrong side of the law and becoming “troubled youth”. These young people, by way of their very existence tend to become mentally unstable. If shown compassion and given the necessary support, they can become responsible citizens. NCWV held two successful informative forums on the subject; viz. “Troubled Youth”, May 2017 and “Families: Protecting Children”, May 2018.
- Improved residential care for those requiring close supervision. Good hostel care for those who cannot quite manage on their own out in the community with the availability of 24hr assistance should be available. A 24hr/7days per week emergency hot line and availability of services are essential in rural as well as urban areas.
- The Government needs to listen to those suffering a mental illness, and to their carers, to their needs and how to improve care.
- Adequate funding of services, whether they be direct or supportive, is required so all suffering from a mental illness can receive the appropriate care; not barely half. Barriers, such as geographical boundaries, preventing those suffering mental health issues, need to be addressed urgently. NCWV is pleased to see the Government is funding services for Victorians with severe personality disorders in partnership with Spectrum, an existing service. But what will happen in 4 year’s time when funding ends? If evaluation proves the initiative to be successful, will there be provision for the service to continue? Short lived programmes, whilst admirable, do little for the long-term care of those with a mental illness. Ongoing long-term care is essential for recovery and for prevention of relapses.
- Data collection as well as evaluation of services is a must.

It is a human right for all, regardless of socio-economic and ethnic background, age, gender and demographic location to receive high quality treatment and support to overcome poor mental health.

National Council of Women of Victoria thanks the Commission into Mental Health in Victoria for the opportunity to make the above comments. The Council would be pleased to provide further detail if required. It considers this Commission to be very important.
