

14 December 2016

Australian Government Department of Health
National.Mental.Health.Plan@health.gov.au

Open letter from Wellways Australia re: the draft Fifth National Mental Health Plan

Who is Wellways?

Wellways Australia, incorporating Australian HealthCall Group, is a member-based, not-for-profit organisation that works with individuals and families whose lives are affected by mental illness and psychosocial disability. Wellways was established in 1978 by families who wanted to improve the services and information available to people affected by mental illness. Today Wellways is a leading national mental health and disability support organisation with services located across Queensland, Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania. Our services span mental health, disability and community care, and currently reach more than 7,900 people each year.

Why is Wellways writing this open letter?

The families that founded Wellways had a vision that people affected by mental health issues could be understood, accepted and have the opportunity to make a good life in the community. Today, too many are still missing out on the chance for a good life, with people affected by mental illness experiencing high levels of housing instability, unemployment, poverty, isolation and exclusion, poor access to support services and chronic physical illness. The draft Fifth National Mental Health Plan (the Plan) is a powerful opportunity to change this picture by providing a strong vision for our future and courageous goals to guide our work.

Wellways' feedback on the Plan is informed by wider consultation with Wellways advocacy members and consumers and carers.

Wellways' response to the vision and values of the Plan

Wellways supports the Plan's aim to provide a vision for ongoing systemic reform, and we applaud the values of recovery, equity and co-production that underpin the Plan. However, we encourage the government to consider:

- **A more hopeful vision.** While the impact of illness and impairment is rightly a strong focus in the Plan, Wellways believes that we should set our sights on achieving community inclusion. For example, while the Plan recognises that stigma is a critical issue, a focus on reducing discriminatory practice within the health workforce could be extended to creating inclusive and welcoming communities outside of health settings.
- **Clearer targets.** The Plan effectively identifies a number of critical issues, but many actions are vague. For example, the Plan names the issue of high suicide rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, but focuses on improving services and data while falling short of calling for measurable reductions.
- **Stronger alignment with the values of recovery, equity and co-production.** For example, the Plan uses 'co-production' interchangeably with less powerful words such as 'engagement' and 'consultation'. We believe that a commitment to true co-production calls for this to be clearly described, evidenced and measured at national, regional and organisational levels.

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Gaps that must be addressed in the Plan

QLD | ACT | NSW | VIC | TAS

1) Maintain services for those who fall through the cracks

Wellways supports the direction as set out in the Plan towards integration of services and a stepped care model of support. We are concerned that the Plan does not make a clear commitment to individuals and families who struggle to access services and miss out on the support they need. Wellways is particularly concerned about the defunding of programs such as Partners in Recovery, which provides essential support to people and families with complex needs who have disengaged from mental health supports.

The Plan must also include provision for community based and recovery-orientated mental health supports for individuals and families who are not eligible for the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

2) A stronger commitment to lived experience expertise and the peer workforce

Wellways supports the Plan's acknowledgment of the 'transformative value of bringing together the expertise of people with a lived experience alongside service expertise to enable meaningful and active collaboration for people to change their recovery, leading to better outcomes'. We also recognise the Plan includes reporting on the proportion of peer workers within the mental health workforce as a proposed national indicator. We recommend that the Plan make a stronger commitment to the provision of peer based services within each of the priority areas. Research has shown that peer support is effective in the areas of suicide prevention, stigma and discrimination reduction and addressing physical health needs. To ensure peer based services (both consumer and carer) are a fundamental part of the mental health service system, adequate funding and coordination is required to support the ongoing development and role of the peer workforce.

3) Community inclusion: Community inclusion is a human rights and health issue which must be considered a key priority of the Plan. [*Well Together: a blueprint for community inclusion*](#) sets out the economic and moral imperatives of reforming the mental health and disability sector to ensure community inclusion for people with a lived experience and their families is a reality. Wellways recommends a stronger emphasis on community inclusion throughout the Plan based on the principles set out in *Well Together*.

4) Trauma-informed care: A significant proportion of people with lived experience of mental health issues and their families have experienced trauma. Any responsive and effective service system must be trauma-informed, and we recommend that the Plan address how trauma informed care will be built into a Safety and Quality Framework.

5) Families, friends and carers: Families, friends and carers are integral to mental health recovery – and also have support needs in their own right. The Plan does not clearly articulate or commit to how families, friends and carers will be included and supported within the mental health service system.

6) Housing: Housing is of central concern to mental health consumers and carers and has been repeatedly raised as an issue by our advocacy members. Housing status should be considered a national indicator in the same way employment is recognised as a central part of having a meaningful and contributing life.

7) Self-determination: A meaningful application of self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be reflected within the Plan. A commitment to self-determination involves more than 'collaboration', and 'partnership' – it means individuals, kinship groups and communities can bring real power and resources to improve social and emotional wellbeing.

Needs for clearer targets within national indicators

Wellways acknowledges the proposed national indicators in the Plan are an important step forward. In order to meaningfully measure progress, we strongly recommend that these national indicators be more clearly linked to the aims and actions of the Plan.

We further recommend that the final national indicators:

- align with an aspirational long term vision and reflect the underpinning values
- set clear targets
- are derived from current research and lived experience expertise
- are measurable, reportable and indicate progress across key areas of reform
- drive ongoing improvement and reform of services
- support a more targeted, evidence-based direction of funds

The Plan states that it must build on previous vital reforms, and that other systemic issues must now be addressed. Wellways acknowledges the importance of addressing wider systemic issues but is concerned that the current draft plan does not adequately build from previous recommendations of the National Mental Health Commission's report: [Contributing lives, thriving communities – report of the National Review of Mental Health Programmes and Services](#). We encourage the Government to consider the recommendations of this report to:

- invest in community-based services and primary health services
- invest in workforce development
- set a target to reduce suicides and suicide attempts by 50% in the next decade

A commitment to ongoing consultation

Beyond national indicators, Wellways strongly believes that measuring progress according to the Plan must involve ongoing consultation and feedback from consumers and carers. This should not be limited to the experience of any one service, but the system as a whole.

Wellways encourages further community feedback

Wellways hopes that this open letter encourages further community feedback from our members, networks of consumers and carers and the broader community to the Fifth National Mental Health Plan. For more information about this open letter, please contact advocacy@wellways.org



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