Mental Health Carers NSW

Mental Health Carers NSW Responds to ABC's Four Corners Story on the NSW Mental Health Crisis

Mental Health Carers NSW ('MHCN'), the peak body for families and carers of people who experience mental health concerns in New South Wales, welcomes ABC's recent Four Corners documentary, 'Emergency: The Long Wait for Help', in drawing attention to the gaps in our public mental health system. However, MHCN would have preferred an approach which amplified the voice of the consumers of mental health services and their families and carers in expressing their needs. MHCN cautions against stigmatising consumers by portraying them as dangerous. Nor should we leap to conclusions about the solutions required by the mental health system as these must be co-designed with the people who need to use them and their families and carers to be truly humane and effective.

MHCN has been working through the NSW Mental Health Alliance with partners like BEING, the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, ('RANZCP') and the Mental Health Coordinating Council ('MHCC') among others; and with the Minister for Mental Health, the Hon. Rose Jackson, to better understand the gaps in the current system to identify priorities for investment to close these gaps.

It may be tempting to leap to conclusions about the remedy and to demand more 'beds' in acute hospitals as a solution to the demand for acute care, but this is not the way to deal with this problem. Currently our mental health system focuses on short term crisis care. But if you only provide crisis care, you will have a lot of crises. The heavy lifting of mental health recovery is done when people are well enough to focus on exploring new ways of coping and learning different strategies *that work for them*. This kind of support is delivered by community therapy and rehabilitation services, but NSW provides the lowest funding for community mental health services in Australia per capita.

The only way to manage the demand for Emergency Department ('ED') services is to properly invest in community mental health services that can help people avoid crisis and cut demand for the ED. Otherwise ED presentations can become a revolving door, placing huge pressure on both ED staff, the person experiencing mental distress and their families. Families and carers want services that help their family members recover from major mental health concerns and to thrive in the community, rather than just helping them jump from crisis to crisis.

The problems with our mental health system are long standing, but MHCN is confident that its work with the Mental Health Alliance and Minister Jackson will help NSW Health move beyond the current psychiatry crisis and implement the investments in community services

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that are needed to build the missing middle for the people of NSW, preferably with Australian Government support through the Mental Health Bilateral Agreements and foundational supports starting to be developed.

While MHCN welcomes the attention brought to this serious issue by the Four Corners and acknowledges the lived experience of those who shared their stories in the documentary, we urge caution in the media around using language that could incite stigma and fear of people with mental health concerns, exacerbating their trauma and isolation.

Four Corners raised the issue of people unable to access adequate care as being a potential risk to others, with reference to the Bondi Junction attack. MHCN acknowledges that this is a problem, but linking this to the Bondi incident was sensationalist and could increase stigma and divert attention from the biggest risks, which are always to the person experiencing mental health issues themselves.

The Bondi Junction attack was a terrible event that has had significant impact on many communities. However, people who experience mental health concerns are far more likely to be the victims of violence, rather than perpetrators.

Fifteen people experiencing a mental health crisis were shot dead by NSW Police in the 12 months leading up to the Bondi Junction attack in April 2024. This demonstrates exactly who in our community is most at risk from the failings of our mental health system and the human rights imperative for change.

Families and carers should be confident that calling for assistance will improve their safety and that of the person they care for, rather than having to calculate the risks if Police attend due to a lack of available mental health services able to respond. However, making non-Police mental health responders available consistently is also very challenging for government and mental health services.

MHCN will continue to work with NSW Health, NSW Police, and other agencies to develop sustainable solutions to these complex problems.

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