



**Mental Health
Carers NSW**



NEWS FROM THE NETWORK

MHCN 2025 Highlights

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Acknowledgement of Country

MHCN acknowledges the traditional custodians of the lands where we work and live. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging and acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that contribute to the development of NSW mental health services, resources and MHCN's future work.

Recognition of Lived Experience

We would like to recognise those with lived experience of mental health conditions in Australia. We acknowledge that we can only provide quality care through valuing, respecting and drawing upon the lived experience and expert knowledge of consumers, their families, carers and friends, staff and local communities. We acknowledge their contribution to the development of MHCN's projects, policies, training and resources.

CEO REPORT 2025



2025 has been a year of contrasts for Mental Health Carers NSW (MHCN). It was a year of achievement and growth, with the successful delivery of existing programs and the commencement of new funded projects.

It was also a year marked by sadness following the passing of our President, Jenny Learmont, and by growing uncertainty for mental health carers due to significant changes across the mental health and disability sectors. The ongoing psychiatrist workforce crisis in NSW made accessing care increasingly difficult, while changes to the NDIS reduced both eligibility and support for people with psychosocial disability. Proposed “Foundational Supports” for those outside the NDIS remain some time away from meeting the needs of many Australians.

Throughout this challenging period, MHCN has continued its core systemic advocacy role. By consulting directly with mental health carers, we have ensured their experiences inform our advocacy to government and key decision-makers. Our Policy and Advocacy Team and Disability Advocacy Futures Program Team have worked closely with partners including BEING, the Mental Health Coordinating Council, RANZCP and WayAhead through the NSW Mental Health Alliance.

MHCN has also met regularly with the Minister’s office to monitor and respond to the impacts of the psychiatrist crisis.

Our engagement with families and carers has continued through regular Mental Health Carer Connection Meetings, the Carers of Forensic and Correctional Patients Network, and numerous consultations for NSW Health and the NSW Mental Health Commission. Strengthened consultation processes have supported more meaningful discussions and outcomes. Across the organisation, progress has continued through new Communities of Practice, expanded peer facilitation, updated training delivered via an on-demand platform, enhanced communications, and improved organisational systems through accreditation.

MHCN thanks its members, staff, volunteers and partners for their continued support and looks ahead to 2026 with a strong commitment to advocating for the supports families and carers deserve.

Jonathan Harms
Chief Executive Officer



STAFF HIGHLIGHTS 2025

"In 2025, we also strengthened engagement with diverse carers by establishing a new project consulting with culturally and linguistically diverse young people affected by mental health challenges, along with their families and carers."



Prasheela Karan

Senior Policy Officer & Team Coordinator

This year, I convened meetings of the Carers of Forensic and Carer Patients Network (CFCPN) in collaboration with Colleen Kosowicz, MHCN Carer Peer Support Officer, and Armie Farooqui, MHCN Policy Engagement Officer. A particularly positive outcome of this work was the co-design of a dedicated webpage resource to support new carers navigating the forensic and justice mental health systems.

In 2025, we also strengthened engagement with diverse carers by establishing a new project consulting with culturally and linguistically diverse young people affected by mental health challenges, along with their families and carers. This project aims to develop practical resources to support clinicians in providing culturally sensitive family and carer engagement.

Alongside this, I advocated for more flexible and longer-term respite options for carers with diverse needs at a Parliamentary Committee Hearing into the prevalence, causes, and impacts of loneliness in NSW. I also contributed to a discussion paper on directly funding carers through flexible respite services, developed in collaboration with the Mental Health Carer Connection group. I greatly value my work with carers and my colleagues at MHCN, and I look forward to continuing our advocacy efforts in 2026.



STAFF HIGHLIGHTS 2025

"In August, we partnered with Mental Health Carers Australia to launch an Advocacy Community of Practice – a pilot program designed for unpaid mental health families, carers and kin and those with dual lived experience."



Jade Curran

Stakeholder Engagement Manager

At the beginning of 2025, the Capacity Development/Stakeholder Engagement Team (CDT/SET) introduced an ongoing Training Review Index to guide a comprehensive update of MHCN's 8 training modules, improving improve both content and design. To improve the On Demand learning experience, we subscribed to Articulate 360, which has allowed us to build interactive, self-paced modules with a modern user experience. We're now working towards launching the updated modules in early 2026! In May, we were also delighted to welcome new Peer Trainers, Melissa and Madeleine, whose contributions have been invaluable to CDT/SET projects.

In August, we partnered with Mental Health Carers Australia to launch an Advocacy Community of Practice – a pilot program designed for unpaid mental health families, carers and kin and those with dual lived experience. Structured around MHCA's capability framework, participants explored key systemic advocacy topics including strategic storytelling, planning for policy influence, crafting advocacy statements and more. EOI submissions will open for the next round of CoP sessions in January 2026. Keep an eye on our social media channels for further information.

Overall, I'm incredibly proud of what our teams have achieved and I'm very grateful to everyone who contributed to making this year a success!

STAFF HIGHLIGHTS 2025

"Looking ahead to 2026, I'm excited to further develop the Mental Health Carer Peer Worker Community of Practice, launch an exciting new carer podcast, and hopefully host another large in-person event mid-year."



Laura Knight

Organisational Development Coordinator

I hope everyone has a restful holiday season. As a mental health carer myself, I know how stressful this time of year can be and especially when caring responsibilities are added into the mix. For many carers, it doesn't always feel like much of a holiday at all, and sometimes you find yourself needing a holiday from the holiday.

2025 has been a significant year. Much of my work focused on implementing the recommendations from our 2024 accreditation. We also completed our mid-placement assessment with QIP in early December to review our progress, which we successfully passed. Looking ahead to 2026, I'm excited to continue this work, further develop the Mental Health Carer Peer Worker Community of Practice, launch an exciting new carer podcast, and hopefully host another large in-person event mid-year.

This year, we also lost our President, Jenny Learmont, who passed away in May. I had known Jenny for around ten years, since I first began at MHCN. From the very beginning, she made me feel welcome. Her warmth, energy, and generosity of spirit brought so much life to MHCN. Jenny was someone I deeply admired and respected, both professionally and personally, and she will be greatly missed.



STAFF HIGHLIGHTS 2025

"We welcomed guest speakers from the Community Restorative Centre to a CFCPN meeting, where they shared information about the supports available to families and carers of people involved in the justice system or transitioning back into the community."



Armie Farooqui

Policy Engagement Officer

I am proud to have contributed to several key initiatives that strengthened the voice of mental health carers across NSW as part of the Policy and Advocacy Team. We organised multiple focus group consultations with carers on behalf of the NSW Ministry of Health, including projects to improve service delivery in Older Persons' Community Mental Health Services and to better understand carers' experiences within inpatient Mental Health Rehabilitation Services. We also co-designed a new webpage resource with members of the Carers of Forensic and Corrections Patients Network (CFCPN) to support families navigating the forensic and justice mental health systems, and facilitated a consultation with the Law Enforcement Conduct Commission to capture carers' experiences of police interactions during mental health callouts.

In addition, we welcomed guest speakers from the Community Restorative Centre to a CFCPN meeting, where they shared information about the supports available to families and carers of people involved in the justice system or transitioning back into the community. We also completed an analysis of Carer Connection Helpline data, which highlighted the ongoing need for services that provide both emotional support and practical assistance as carers navigate a complex and fragmented mental health system.



STAFF HIGHLIGHTS 2025

"I am so grateful to the MHCCM members for sharing their lived experience and advocacy updates throughout 2025.

This has been fundamental to my professional growth by shaping how I engage with policy issues."



Ellie Christen

Policy Engagement Officer

In my second year at MHCN, I've come to appreciate that progress can be slow, but each milestone matters and helps build the optimism and momentum needed for sustained advocacy. During Yarn meetings held with First Nations stakeholders in 2024, the age of criminal responsibility was highlighted as a critical element to improve long term mental health outcomes in First Nations communities.

Additionally, I am so grateful to the MHCCM members for sharing their lived experience and advocacy updates throughout 2025. This has been fundamental to my professional growth by shaping how I engage with policy issues.

In January the DAFP team released a joint statement with BEING, endorsing the #RaiseTheAge nationwide campaign to raise the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to at least 14 years of age. Our statement addressed the interconnection between mental health and youth incarceration, Australia's place globally, systemic racism and closing the gap in First Nations health outcomes.

The campaign has helped lift the age from 12 to 14 in the ACT. NSW remains behind, though the Government has published the Doli Incapax review, which the Attorney General says will be considered.



STAFF HIGHLIGHTS 2025

"I am looking forward to another fruitful year at MHCN, collaborating with and supporting the various teams and my colleagues who have become more like friends to me now."



Alex Brown

Administration Coordinator

2025 has been a year of consistent momentum for the BOSS team and me personally, as I have supported Laura Knight throughout the process of retaining Accreditation, as well as worked on various ongoing projects throughout the year, from an audit of employee files and migration of HR processes to Employment Hero (our new HRIS) to ensuring that 'Business as Usual' and that the smooth operation of the MHCN office occurred.

My highlights for the year were organising a successful Annual General Meeting (AGM), coordinating and compiling the Annual Report, and attending the Youth Mental Health first Aid course facilitated over two days by our very own Carer Trainer Madeleine Fabian.

Another particularly joyful aspect of my role is notifying eligible carers of the Eunice Lonergan Bequest that they have been awarded the grant. I am looking forward to another fruitful year at MHCN, collaborating with and supporting the various teams and my colleagues who have become more like friends to me now.



STAFF HIGHLIGHTS 2025

"Through our carers' network meetings, we've supported carers who previously struggled to navigate the health system, and our monthly support group has helped build confidence, knowledge, and most importantly reassurance that they are not alone."



Colleen Kosowicz

Carer Peer Participation Officer

This year has brought many significant achievements, it's hard to know where to start. Working alongside Prasheela and Armie has been a genuine pleasure. Through our carers' network meetings, we've supported carers who previously struggled to navigate the health system, and our monthly support group has helped build confidence, knowledge, and most importantly reassurance that they are not alone.

Together, we developed a carer-friendly information webpage that is clear, accessible, and easy to use. We also welcomed a range of guest speakers to our network meetings, each offering valuable insights and comfort to those who attended.

I am incredibly proud of what we've accomplished as a team. The dedication, compassion, and commitment shown by everyone involved has made a real difference in the lives of carers. I look forward to continuing this work in the year ahead, strengthening our foundations and further expanding the support we offer.



Melissa Goldman

Peer Facilitator

I joined the MHCN Team as a Carer Peer Trainer in May and have been made to feel extremely welcome by all. After observing Senior Peer Facilitator, Anne Stedman, during several training sessions, a highlight for me was co-facilitating the Healthy Boundaries training module with Anne in October. I have also assisted in the review and updating of all training modules and am currently working on moving the self-paced modules onto the new e-learning platform, Articulate. I am also excited to be assisting with the newly formed Mental Health Carer Peer Worker Community of Practice.

STAFF HIGHLIGHTS 2025



Madeleine Fabian

Peer Facilitator

I began working one day per week with the Stakeholder Engagement and Capacity Development Team in June 2025. Since then, I have updated the MHCAN membership spreadsheet to improve accuracy and accessibility, supported Jade and Melissa in completing Stage 1 of the training module review, and assisted Jade with the upcoming podcast project and the coordination of training activities. I am looking forward to delivering training later this year. Having been connected to MHCN for many years as a project partner and Board member, it has been a pleasure to return in a new capacity and be welcomed by the team.

ADVOCACY CORNER:

POLICY AND ADVOCACY TEAM

This year, the Policy and Advocacy Team has continued to work alongside carers to ensure their needs and experiences are represented and heard.

Highlighted below are some of our major projects from 2025:

1. Law Enforcement Conduct Commission (LECC) Consultation

Facilitated a consultation with LECC to gather carers' insights on police interactions during mental health callouts, highlighting ongoing concerns about communication, safety, and trauma-informed responses.

2. Older Person Mental Health (OPMH) Community Mental Health Services Consultation

Organised a consultation for carers of older persons, which revealed systemic challenges in accessing timely community mental health support and navigating fragmented service pathways.

3. Family Focused Recovery Consultation

Conducted a focus group to explore carers' experiences of family-inclusive practices in mental health services, where participants emphasised gaps in engagement and the need for clearer, more consistent support for families.

ADVOCACY CORNER:

POLICY AND ADVOCACY TEAM

4. Forensic Patients with a Disability Reform Consultation

Facilitated a consultation on reforms for forensic patients with cognitive impairment, where carers highlighted inconsistent definitions about “cognitive impairment”, existing stigma in the community, fragmented services, and major gaps in culturally informed supports.

5. Mental Health Inpatient Rehabilitation Services Consultation

Hosted a consultation on Mental Health Inpatient Rehabilitation Services, where carers shared diverse experiences and highlighted confusion around what “rehabilitation” means, as well as significant gaps in access, consistency, and communication across services.

6. Family Focused Recovery Framework (FFRF) Review and Exclusion of Grandparents and Siblings

Provided input to highlight the exclusion of grandparents and siblings in the review of the FFRF, noting that they often play critical caring roles yet struggle for recognition and inclusion.

ADVOCACY CORNER:

CARER ENGAGEMENT

Through our convenorship of the **Mental Health Carer Connection Network (MHCCM)** and **Carers of Forensic and Corrections Patients Network (CFCPN)** monthly meetings, we collect evidence on the experiences of mental health caring and jointly advocate for systemic reform. Our goal is to ensure carers and people experiencing mental ill health and distress get timely access to holistic, safe, fair and adequately funded services.

Terms of Reference (ToR)

In 2025 the MHCN team worked with MHCCM members in establishing a Terms of Reference and clear meeting objectives to deliver purposeful outcomes. Through the development of a ToR, it was decided that future meetings will include a mix of information sharing and connection through guest speakers and discussions, capacity development and advocacy opportunities. Both the DAFP and PAT teams have increased engagement and carer participation through the MHCCM.

Thriving Kids Parliamentary Inquiry

In September 2025, Policy Engagement Officer Ellie Christen developed a pilot 'Carer Advocate Interest and Experience Matrix.' With the consent of MHCCM members, their interests, experience and skills were recorded to create a resource for identifying carers for paid participation and advocacy opportunities. Using the matrix, the DAFP team engaged a carer with relevant lived experience to inform MHCN's submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into the Thriving Kids Program. This approach proved valuable for incorporating lived experience into reactive policy work, particularly given the tight submission deadline.

ADVOCACY CORNER:

CARER ENGAGEMENT

The Carers of Forensic and Corrections Patients Network

This year, PAT convened 10 meetings with the Carers of Forensic and Corrections Network (CFCPN). This network is an important way for MHCN to engage and advocate with carers supporting a loved one with experience in the justice health system. In the past year, MHCN and the group have advocated for adequate carer supports and carer engagement in police responses to mental health crises.

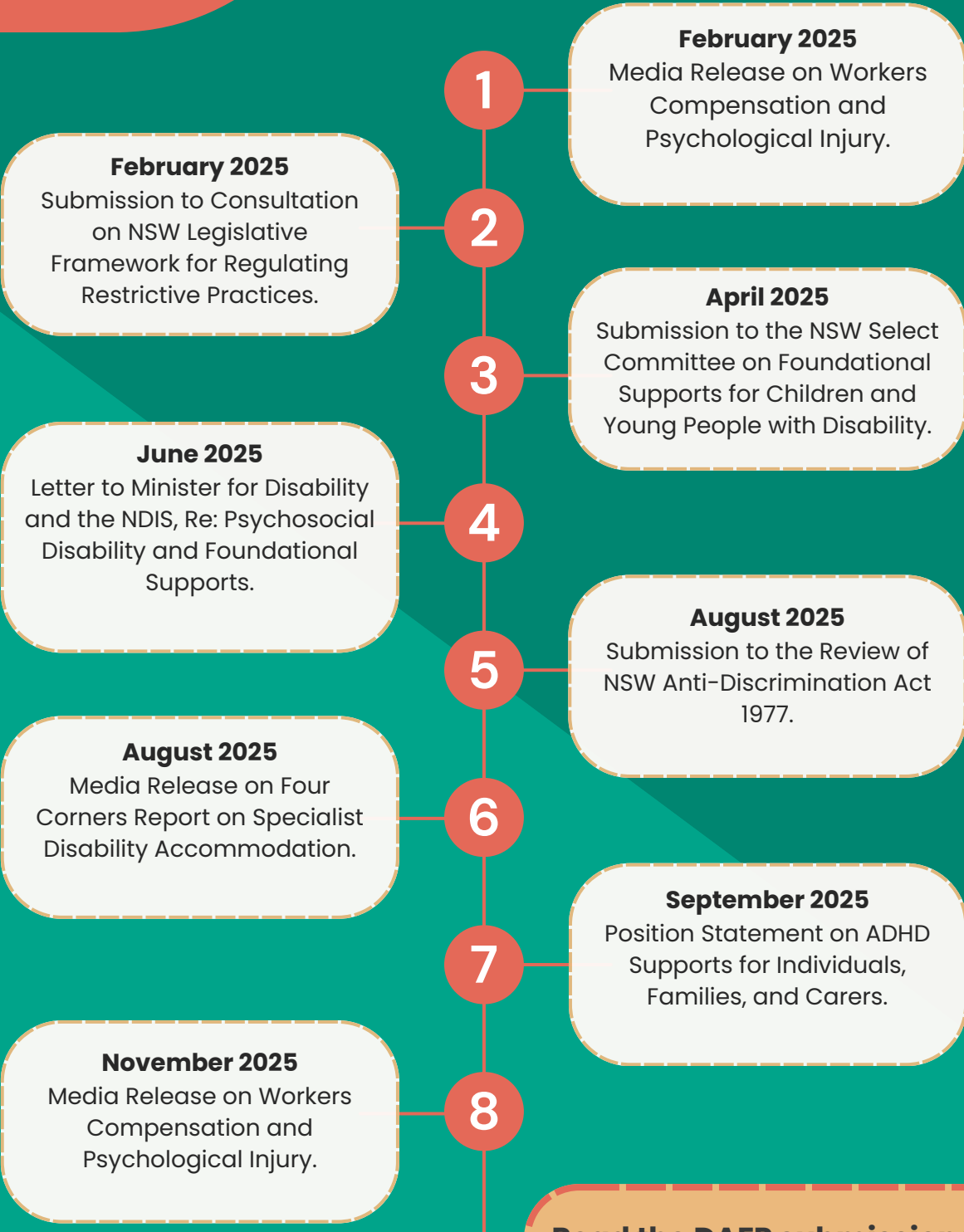
The group also created an online resource for new carers, titled **'Caring for a Person with Mental Health Challenges in a Correctional Facility or Forensic Hospital.'** Developed with lived experience insights from Carer Peer Participation Officer, Colleen Kosowicz, and a committee of carers, the webpage brings together practical information and key services.

The resource was launched at a MHCCN meeting, where Policy Engagement Officer, Armie Farooqui, and participating carers, presented the webpage and hosted a Q&A session. The presentation was well received, with MHCCN members expressing strong interest in contributing to similar initiatives that support the wellbeing of mental health carers.

[Click here to access the webpage](#)

ADVOCACY CORNER:

DISABILITY AND ADVOCACY FUTURE PROGRAM TEAM SUBMISSIONS



[Read the DAFP submissions here](#)

MHCN MOMENTS 2025



MHCN Board Members at this year's Annual General Meeting



Jonathan presenting at a Carers Week Event



Jonathan, Armie, Oscar and Jade at the Wellness Walk 2025



Ellie, Prasheela, Armie at the Multicultural Community Engagement Conference

MHCN MOMENTS 2025



Ellie and Armie at a Stride training workshop



HMHA Lived Experience Committee wins TheMHS award



Armie, Prasheela and Ellie



Laura and Anne

MHCN MOMENTS 2025



Ellie and Prasheela at a Multicultural Disability Advocacy Australia event



Jonathan speaking at the MHCN AGM



Co-design session for the Mental Health Carer Peer Worker CoP



Maddie delivering Youth Mental Health First Aid training

MHCN MOMENTS 2025



Armie presenting at a SES LHD Carer Event



Jade, Jonathan and Ellie at the Central Coast LHD Carers Week Event



Armie at the TheMHS Annual Mental Health Services Forum



MHCN staff at the Wayahead Mental Health Matters Awards 2025

REMEMBERING JENNY LEARMONT

On behalf of MHCN, I would like to pay tribute to our previous President, Jenny Learmont, a tireless advocate for mental health carers and consumers, who passed away on 3 May 2025.

Jenny had been a member of Mental Health Carers NSW (MHCN)'s Board since 2012 and President since 2019 but had a long career in mental health and other community advocacy before that. Notably, in 2005, Jenny was a founding member and later chair of the NSW Consumers Advisory Committee, which evolved into BEING, the peak body for mental health consumers and our key partner organisation.

However, Jenny's advocacy journey began during the AIDS crisis, where she led a research team into the long-term non-progression of HIV in a cohort of blood transfusion recipients at the NSW Red Cross Blood Transfusion Service, becoming an Honorary Associate of the Centre for Virus Research at the Westmead Millennium Institute.

Jenny next turned her focus to mental health after one of her family faced mental health challenges, leading her to establish the Anxiety Disorders Alliance (ADA) in 1990, a committee of volunteers from the NSW Mental Health Association (now Wayahead).

In 1996, Jenny was honoured as a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) and she was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Medicine degree by the University of NSW. In 2006,



Jenny expanded ADA, founding the Anxiety Disorders Association NSW Inc. (ADAN), where she served as president from 2006 to 2015. There are now 30 Wayahead support groups for anxiety disorders across NSW.

More recently, Jenny received the 'Julie Leitch Leadership Through Lived Experience Award' at the 2024 Mental Health Matters Awards, and received a Lifetime Membership at the 50th Anniversary Celebration for Mental Health Carers NSW, hosted at Parliament House in November 2024. Jenny also served as a long-term member of the Mental Health Review Tribunal and had only recently stepped down in early 2025.

On a more personal note, working with Jenny on MHCN's Board, I found her to be determined but gracious, a champion of the disadvantaged and marginalised, but at the same time every inch the Grande Dame, full of regal empathy.

Jenny was deeply committed to advancing the work of mental health reform and to amplifying the voice of lived experience, of both consumers and carers, and to these voices being raised together to call for a better, safer, more humane, accepting, empowering and above all accessible mental health system for families and carers to be able to entrust their loved ones to.

She leaves us before that great task is accomplished, but not before advancing it in great strides. For example, she was able just last year to speak in Canberra at the launch of the first national peak body for families and carers of people with mental health issues in the world, when Mental Health Carers Australia was formally announced by minister Emma McBride (photo below).

Jenny's style and grace have served us well and helped navigate many treacherous waters. In a sector as unsettled and unsettling as mental health and carers rights, she had no enemies, despite her many years of activism, and that in itself is a remarkable achievement.

We bid Jenny a bittersweet farewell. We will miss her staunch but fond determination. Now she belongs to the ages.



Jonathan Harms, CEO



SERVICE SPOTLIGHT



Dialogue Room is a service built on Open Dialogue principles and values.
This globally recognised approach is built on a simple, non-negotiable principle:
Nothing about you, without you.

How was the Dialogue Room developed?

Until now, Open Dialogue has been difficult to access in Australia. Dialogue Room was created to address that gap, and make network meetings available and accessible.

We recognised that traditional mental health systems can feel fragmented, impersonal and one-sided. We wanted to change that. At Dialogue Room, we believe that the most profound insights come from the wisdom held within families, not just clinical experts. We created this space to ensure that conversations about mental health happen collaboratively, so no one is left carrying distress alone.

This is a space grounded in safety and trust, where everyone can speak openly, feel heard, and make sense of things together – without fear, without hierarchies, and without the pressure to arrive at solutions.

How does the Dialogue Room differ from traditional approaches to mental health care?

The Open Dialogue Network Meeting is a core component of the Dialogue Room's approach, and is designed to feel profoundly different from traditional approaches. We move away from the 'expert-led' model towards openness, connection and shared understanding.

The Traditional Way	The Dialogue Room Way
Professionals are the experts; they tell you what's wrong and what needs fixing.	You and your network are the experts. We facilitate the process; you lead and we walk alongside.
Family and other loved ones are excluded and their perspectives are not heard.	Your social network is invited. The people important to you are part of the dialogue.
Focus is placed on symptoms, diagnoses, and treatment plans.	Focus is on connection and what matters most to you and your loved ones.
Professionals are trained to maintain clinical distance and neutrality.	We show up as humans, with empathy, curiosity and genuine care.
Conversations are private, notes are hidden, decisions are made behind closed doors.	We work with radical transparency. No hidden agendas, no closed doors, and no assumptions.
The process feels rushed and impersonal.	We slow down and listen. We create space for safety, trust, and understanding.

SERVICE SPOTLIGHT



Who do you provide support to and is the service for all ages?

We currently support anyone experiencing emotional or mental health struggles who is seeking a collaborative approach to understand and navigate those challenges. We also support families who want to strengthen relationships or have difficult conversations in a supportive environment.

The service is adaptable to people of all ages, whether children, adolescents, or older adults. You do not need a mental health diagnosis to use the service.

Can you describe how an Open Dialogue Network Meeting runs?

Network Meetings bring together the person experiencing distress and the people they choose to involve (family, friends, or trusted supporters) for open conversation. These meetings are intentionally structured to give everyone space to speak.

- **Logistics:** All meetings are held via secure telehealth, last approximately 90 minutes, and are facilitated by two Open Dialogue practitioners.
- **A slower, thoughtful pace:** It is normal for the conversation to move slowly. Pauses and silences are intentional, giving everyone time to think and reflect.
- **Guiding, not directing:** The practitioners help keep the conversation flowing, but they do not "fix," advise, or direct the process. Their role is to ensure every voice is heard in a supportive environment.
- **Reflections over instructions:** Instead of giving instructions, practitioners occasionally offer brief reflections on what they have heard. These reflections happen openly in front of the network, helping to highlight patterns or new perspectives without imposing a solution.

- **Shared decision-making:** There are no hidden notes or decisions made behind closed doors. All planning and next steps are decided together in the meeting.

How does the Dialogue Room benefit the carers of individuals with mental illness?

The Dialogue Room benefits carers by restoring their voice and connection within the support process, which involves:

- **Inclusion, not exclusion:** Carers are actively invited to be part of the dialogue, rather than being shut out.
- **Shared responsibility:** By bringing the whole network together, the weight of responsibility is no longer held by just one person. Solutions emerge from the collective conversation.
- **Emotional relief:** Families often describe relief at being part of the conversation. Being heard reduces isolation and frustration.
- **Better communication:** Research shows that Open Dialogue can improve communication and understanding, and reduce tension within families.



SERVICE SPOTLIGHT



How can people find out if the Open Dialogue approach is right for them?

We offer a free 15-minute introductory call for you to ask questions, share what's led you to contact us, and explore whether Open Dialogue is the right fit for your network.

How much does a Network meeting cost and how many meetings are usually needed?

As a newly launched service, Dialogue Room currently operates on a fee-for-service basis. We are actively working to establish additional funding pathways, including grants and options through Medicare, NDIS, and private health insurance, to support access over time.

Open Dialogue Network Meetings are structured differently from standard therapy. Each meeting typically runs for 90 minutes and is always facilitated by two practitioners. The fee reflects the time, preparation, and relational work required to hold a space where everyone can speak and be heard without rushing or pressure.

We offer flexible options to suit different needs, alongside introductory rates for all new clients for a limited time. For current rates and to discuss what might be appropriate for your situation, please contact us directly.

Regarding frequency, the process moves entirely at your pace. There is no upfront commitment or requirement around how many sessions are needed. Many people start with one conversation and then decide if they would like to continue; every meeting concludes with a collaborative discussion focusing on whether the network wishes to meet again.

Where are you located and how can people contact you?

Meetings are provided via secure telehealth, making them accessible to individuals and families across Australia.



Contact Dialogue Room:

- Via email at info@dialogueroom.com.au
- Book a free introductory call directly via their website: www.dialogueroom.com.au

MHCN KITCHEN: ROCKY ROAD

Ingredients:

- 250 grams or 1.5 cups of dark chocolate chips.
- 250 grams or 1.5 cups of milk chocolate chips.
- 3 cups of pink and white marshmallows, cut in half and packed firmly in the cup.
- ½ cup of unsalted peanuts roughly chopped or your preferred nuts.
- ¾ cup of raspberry lollies, halved.
- ⅓ cup of desiccated or flaked coconut, unsweetened.

Notes:

- You can also add in, or switch any of the above add ins, for some type of biscuit, different nuts like almonds or macadamias, glace cherries, etc.
- In lieu of chocolate chips or melts, you can use Lindt chocolate if you want. However, most chocolate that is not baking chocolate (except Lindt) is not ideal for melting and might seize or burn so beware.



Method:

1. Line a 20cm/8 inch square pan (or approximately similar) with baking paper.
2. Melt the chocolate in the microwave in 30 second increments, stirring in between, until melted and smooth.
3. When the chocolate is all melted, stir in all your add ins (marshmallows, nuts, coconut, etc.) into the chocolate and stir through evenly. Don't be too scant with the add ins, more is more with rocky road and you want to make sure when you bite into it, you get a bit of everything, not just chocolate.
4. Pour the mixture into the pan and spread it out evenly.
5. Put the pan into the fridge for 3 hours or until fully cold and set.
6. Take out of fridge for 30 minutes and then cut into chunks.
7. Store in the fridge to avoid melting.

SELF-CARE TIPS FOR THE HOLIDAYS



While the holidays are meant to be happy and relaxing, they can also feel overwhelming, especially when juggling the responsibilities of caring for someone. The following tips have helped me both in my personal life and in my role as a carer. I hope they offer some support to you too.

Laura Knight

Organisational Development Coordinator

Have a Plan

Unfortunately, over the holiday season, some services and organisations shut. However, being a carer doesn't stop over that period, and your loved one's mental health issues don't mysteriously disappear for its own holiday over that time either (how good if they did though!) So where do you go for help? It's a good idea to lay out a plan in advance that you can turn to over the holiday season. Have a look at what services are open and keep a list handy with contact details and their opening hours, on the fridge and also on your phone if you're on the go. If you're not sure the hours of a service or organisation, ring them in advance to check. You might also want to add situations or times that you think might be tricky to navigate, and some strategies that you find helpful to use in each situation. Sometimes just knowing that you have a plan ready is a big help mentally.

Set Boundaries and Stick to Them

This is a hard one, regardless of the time of year. A few years ago, I had my very own mental health journey. When I recovered, I had to put boundaries in place that were instrumental and crucial in keeping me well, both with the person I care for and in my day-to-day life without wearing my carer hat. It is uncomfortable to do when you first start to do it, and sometimes, it means there are consequences of you putting those boundaries in place, for the person you care for and maybe for others too. Sometimes, you need to let those consequences happen. If you can't, establish the boundaries you can, write them down, and where possible, discuss them with your loved one and your support network.

Get Yourself a Christmas Gift

Despite everyone's intentions, sometimes you just don't quite get what you want for Christmas. Each year, I make time to buy myself a little something or treat myself to something that I know I will love. It doesn't have to be big or expensive. It might be buying that lipstick you have had your eye on, or a book from your favourite author, or going to that café you love to have your favourite brekkie. Even if you're loved ones are magnificent gift givers, still treat yourself to something, just because. This year, for Christmas, I will be getting myself another book by an author called Jojo Moyes. What would you treat yourself to?

Set Time for Yourself to Rest and Recover

I've joked with my partner that the holiday season feels like a nonstop cycle of visiting family and friends then suddenly it's over, and you wonder when you had any time for yourself. This year, we even joked about pretending to be away so we could focus on ourselves, mainly by just staying home! It's not always possible, but consider which events you truly need to attend, which you could skip, or which could be rescheduled to 2026. Try to carve out some time in your calendar just to breathe and rest.

"No" is a Perfectly Reasonable Word and Doesn't Require an Explanation

Sometimes there's just too much to do over the holiday season. Saying no can be a hard thing to do. Saying no without providing an explanation can be harder. As carers, we can often feel like we have more than enough on our plate, and expect to take more on, just because we're the ones that always do. "No" is a full sentence and doesn't require a rationale or explanation. As a person, we should have our own choices and our own control.



Beyond Blue have created some helpful tips on navigating festive stress, avoiding burn out, and dealing with financial stressors at www.beyondblue.org.au

I truly hope you find some of these tips useful, Have a safe and festive holiday season. Please be kind to yourself.

Laura Knight

Organisational Development Coordinator

A WARM WELCOME TO MHCN'S NEWEST BOARD MEMBERS



Nikkie Shoveller

Nikkie is an experienced public relations and communications professional and a carer for her dad. She has a deep insight into the NSW Health system, with much of her career spent in NSW public hospitals and health-focused not-for-profits including The Children's Hospital at Westmead, Sydney Children's Hospital, Randwick and Central Coast Local Health District.

Nikki is Director of Bright Side Communications, PR and Communications Manager for Life Ed Australia, and a volunteer with Coast Shelter. Through MHCN, she has also recently joined the NSW Health Family and Carer Mental Health Program Steering Committee as a lived experience representative.



Dr. Simon Johnson

Simon is a full-time Family Carer with lived experience of Inpatient and Community Services in Northern Sydney. Prior to working with the NSW Health as a Casual Carer Peer Worker he has over 25 years of experience in education and business.

Simon has an interdisciplinary Ph.D. in Management and Anthropology from the University of Melbourne. He is active on many technical clinical standard committees and is Co-Chair for the Northern Sydney Carer Network. In 2021 Simon won the Unsung Hero award for MHDA by leading the development of a carer video project. He is also an Aged Care Board Member and an Owners Corp Treasurer.

THANK YOU TO MHCN BOARD SECRETARY, ELIZABETH PRIESTLEY

It is with heartfelt gratitude and a touch of sadness that we farewell Elizabeth Priestley, who will be stepping down from the MHCN Board in 2026.

Elizabeth began as a Board Member of MHCN in 2024 and served as secretary in 2025.

Her connection with MHCN spans many years, having worked closely with the organisation during her tenure as CEO of WayAhead.

We are incredibly grateful for her guidance, commitment, and support over the years, and we wish Elizabeth all the very best as she embarks on the next chapter of her journey.



GET INVOLVED



Eunice Lonergan Carer Respite Grant Program

MHCN is proud to offer the Eunice Lonergan Carer Respite Grants, made possible through a generous bequest from Eunice Lonergan. These grants give mental health carers and their families in NSW the chance to take a well-deserved break from their caring responsibilities.

Recipients are selected through a random draw, with the next draw scheduled for 2026. As the grant is governed by Eunice's will, eligibility criteria must be met.

To apply, carers must:

- Be a MHCAN member
- Care for someone with a diagnosed mental illness
- Live with the person they care for
- Be 18 or over
- Reside in NSW

For further information on how to apply, [visit our website here](#)



Mental Health Carer Peer Worker Community of Practice

Mental Health Carers NSW has been funded by the NSW Ministry of Health to deliver a Mental Health Carer Peer Worker Community of Practice (CoP) in NSW from 2025 – 2026.

This free program consists of monthly 1.5-hour sessions held via Zoom. Topics will be chosen based on what participants would like to explore each session. Each meeting is facilitated by Alex Li (CPW facilitator) and co-facilitated by Anne Stedman, MHCN President.

These sessions will provide the opportunity for paid mental health carer peer workers to:

- Share lived experience and knowledge
- Provide mutual support
- Engage in debriefing and helpful strategies
- Consider helpful supports, identify risks
- Promote the development and enhancement of good practice in mental health carer peer worker support

Upcoming meeting details:

Date: Wednesday January 28 2026

Time: 3:00pm – 4:30pm

If you are interested in joining the CoP, please [click here to complete the Expression of Interest](#).

Connect with MHCN!

If you'd like to stay informed about MHCN's upcoming projects and opportunities, the best way is to become a MHCAN member or subscribe to our fortnightly e-newsletter for updates:

- [Click here to join our MHCAN membership here](#)
- [Click here to sign up to our e-newsletter here](#)



**Mental Health
Carers NSW**



THANK YOU

We thank our funders, partner organisations, collaborators and the remarkable carers who engaged with MHCN this year. Whether you participated in training, volunteered your time and expertise, or simply subscribed to our e-news, your contributions have strengthened our capacity to ensure that carer voices are heard.