

PARLIAMENT OF VICTORIA

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT  
COMMITTEE

INQUIRY INTO WORKFORCE PARTICIPATION  
BY PEOPLE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS

VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT RESPONSE  
APRIL 2013

## INTRODUCTION

The Victorian Government welcomes the Family and Community Development Committee's report *Inquiry into Workforce Participation by People with a Mental Illness*, October 2012 (the Inquiry).

The case for increasing workforce participation is clear and compelling. All Victorians, including those with a mental illness, want to have access to employment and the opportunity to participate in a strong and vibrant economy. Employment provides people with income to meet essential material needs, and it also links people with society, with work providing a sense of meaning, purpose and social connectedness.

Around one in five Victorians will experience a mental health issue each year and we know people with a mental illness are under-represented in the workforce. This in turn affects families, communities and the economy across our state, with non-participation costing around \$2.7 billion in 2006.<sup>1</sup>

The Victorian Government recognised the importance of action in this area from the outset, with an election commitment *Pathways to Participation*, aiming to increase the education and workforce participation rates of people with a mental illness. A number of Coalition Government election commitments are relevant to the Inquiry's recommendations as detailed in the response.

Workforce participation of people with mental illness is receiving increasing prominence, nationally and internationally. Two important national documents have been recently released, which impact on this area. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) has stated an intention to improve the social and economic participation of people with mental illness through *The Roadmap for National Mental Health Reform 2012-2022*.

The National Mental Health Commission's first report *A Contributing Life: The 2012 National Report Card on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention* extends the national discussion on work opportunities for people living with mental illness.

Further, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment has recently conducted an inquiry into mental health and workforce participation, providing a report *Work Wanted: Mental health and workforce participation*. In February 2013, the Australian Government issued a response to the Committee's final report.

As acknowledged in the Victorian Inquiry report, both the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments have complex roles and responsibilities, across the range of areas required for effective action.

The Commonwealth Government is responsible for income support, employment services and primary mental health care services, while the Victorian Government is responsible for specialist mental health treatment services, education and training and occupational health and safety initiatives.

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<sup>1</sup> Boston Consulting Group (2006) *Improving mental health outcomes in Victoria: The next wave of reform – Report to the Government of Victoria*. Melbourne, Department of Premier and Cabinet, Victorian Government, p.12.

## The Victorian Government Response

The Inquiry's report has 34 recommendations, and the Committee explored a number of themes, including the need for strategic Victorian Government leadership in this area. The Victorian Government response provides an initial summary of Victorian Government activity and directions under the committee's themes:

- ensuring opportunities in education
- changing perceptions
- providing diverse employment pathways
- fostering health and supportive workplaces
- strengthening mental health services.

A key recommendation of the Inquiry is that:

*The Victorian Government develops a mental health employment strategy that outlines its forward plan to increase workforce participation by people with a mental illness with the capacity to work from 29 – 50 per cent across the public and private sectors by 2020 through:*

- *Changing attitudes towards mental illness and the employment of people with mental illness*
- *Preventing people with mental illness from leaving work and education prematurely*
- *Creating diverse and flexible employment pathways for people with mental illness, and*
- *Improving linkages between mental health and employment services.*

The Victorian Government supports the need for a strategic approach and will develop an integrated Victorian Mental Health Employment Participation Plan to better organise and strengthen current efforts, and to drive increased workforce participation of people with a mental illness.

The Inquiry highlighted the critical need for coordination with the Commonwealth Government. We take this opportunity to echo that call and our Plan will necessarily require strong partnership with the Commonwealth.

### **'ENSURING OPPORTUNITIES IN EDUCATION'**

The Inquiry report noted that schools provide excellent opportunities to promote mental health, boost mental health literacy, and identify and respond to emerging mental illness.

The Inquiry confirmed that people who experience mental illness early in life face significant educational barriers that can lead to difficulties in employment. The Victorian Government acknowledges how critical it is to help people with mental illness stay engaged in education and vocational training, particularly in a labour market requiring higher skill levels and qualifications.

#### **Victorian Government effort**

As recognised by the Inquiry, the Victorian Government has a number of initiatives relevant to educational settings to support mental health and wellbeing. These include:

- The Victorian Pathways to Economic Participation Program, a Government election commitment, which has seen four employment/education officers placed in mental health services to help clients access employment and associated educational opportunities. These positions are based on the Individual Support and Placement model, which places emphasis on pre-employment engagement and motivation and provides resources that support clients before and during their employment, as required. This initiative is also referenced under the 'providing diverse employment pathways' theme.
- Flexible learning programs, such as the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) and training courses offered by TAFEs. Flexible learning can help people re-engage or remain in education and training pathways, help them gain skills and find meaningful employment.
- The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) supports professional development for staff in this area, to help them identify risk factors for mental illness. Best practice kits are being published to support vocational education teachers. Training is also available to support school staff and school wellbeing staff.
- Curriculum material is also being made available for all teaching and school staff and the completion of a guide of mental health resources available for use by schools.
- DEECD will continue to support improved professional practice in responding to learner needs including the needs of students with a mental illness. This support includes the promotion of best practice based on research and support for the Vocational education and Training (VET) Development Centre which provides professional development to practitioners.
- Providers of vocational education and training are responsible for ensuring that their programs meet the needs of learners including learners with a mental illness. There are a number of vocational and education training providers who either link to relevant supports or deliver those supports themselves.

The development of a Victorian Mental Health Employment Participation Plan will consider opportunities for building on current;

- school-based activity and programs focused on promoting mental health literacy and early identification of risk of mental health problems, and
- support for people with mental illness who wish to return to education and training.

### **'CHANGING PERCEPTIONS'**

The Inquiry found that public awareness of mental illness has increased over the last decade, with a number of government and not-for-profit agencies running campaigns to reduce stigma associated with depression and mental illness in the community.

Despite these improvements, the Inquiry found that negative perceptions and stereotypes of people with severe mental illness such as psychosis are widespread. It also found that perceptions and attitudes toward people with mental illness in the workforce have not improved to the same extent achieved in the broader community.

The Inquiry regarded community education as important to address stigma and change perceptions across rural, regional and metropolitan Victoria. It argued for more targeted action across workplaces, specifically targeting managers, supervisors and human resources staff – as well as general staff – to change existing perceptions of people with mental illness in employment.

#### **Victorian Government effort**

- Funding of *beyondblue* to deliver anti-stigma campaigns and raise the community awareness of mental health issues.
- *Support for Mental Health Week* which aims to educate and engage Victorians about mental health through a week of interactive events including an official launch, community festivals, art exhibitions, music, theatre and seminars. Mental health week is held annually in October,
- Planning is underway to recognise and celebrate exemplary policy and practice in workplaces to improve employment outcomes for people with a mental illness.
- The Victorian Transport Accident Commission diversity and inclusion strategy includes a number of initiatives to support the recruitment and retention of people with mental health issues.
- Victorian Government Disability Employment Advisory Service helps link people with a disability or mental illness to employment opportunities.
- Local Government Victoria, through the development of the *Social Procurement: A Guide for Victorian Local Government* and the *Social Procurement Implementation Toolkit*, worked with local governments across Victoria to address the recruitment and retention of people with mental illness through social enterprise.

The Victorian Government recognises that influencing employer and community attitudes is vital to providing a conducive environment for the increased employment of people with mental illness.

The Government supports the intent of the Inquiry's recommendations on changing perceptions and will consider the most appropriate ways to address this area as part of developing a Victorian Mental Health Employment Participation Plan. It will seek to coordinate with Commonwealth efforts, acknowledging the lead role in employment services, and in working with national employer groups to promote awareness of workplace strategies and success stories for employing people with mental illness.

#### **'PROVIDING DIVERSE EMPLOYMENT PATHWAYS'**

The Victorian Government agrees with the Inquiry's finding that a range of employment options need to be available to people with mental illness. Flexible employment opportunities are required in recognition of the capacity of people with a mental illness to participate in employment at different stages of their treatment and recovery.

For those ready to look for work, the Inquiry found that support services should be easily accessible and that processes should be streamlined to assist referral and assessment pathways.

The Inquiry also found that training and information services to employers in the management of mental health issues in the workplace can help employers to successfully recruit and retain people with mental illness.

### **Victorian Government effort**

The Committee noted existing local partnerships between mental health and employment support services and suggested increased collaboration across these sectors. Other work includes:

- Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC) is currently developing guidelines in relation to mental illness and employment in consultation groups, for release this year. They also run a phone line for employers to get more information about their rights and responsibilities.
- The Victorian Government, after working closely with Social Firms Australia, supported the establishment of the first social firms in Victoria. Several social firms and social enterprises have now been established as intermediary labour market organisations such as the 'MadCap café' franchise managed by two community mental health organisations.
- A number of programs offer support for organisations who employ people with a mental illness including: Mental Health@Work, which works with large private sector employers; *beyondblue*, which runs a National Workplace Program, eLearning Workplace mental health awareness program; SANE, which runs a Mindful Employer Program.
- The Victorian Pathways to Economic Participation Program, a Government election commitment, which has seen four employment/education officers placed in mental health services to help clients access employment and associated educational opportunities. These positions are based on the Individual Support and Placement model, which places emphasis on pre-employment engagement and motivation and provides resources that support clients before and during their employment, as required.

The Victorian Government supports the Inquiry's recommendations and notes responsibility for this area falls largely within the Commonwealth Government's overarching remit. This will be considered in the development of a Victorian Mental Health Employment Participation Plan.

We will continue to work with the Commonwealth to expand on current opportunities and create greater links between employment services and mental health support services and agencies. In this context, the Commonwealth's release of *Inclusive Employment 2012 – 2022: A Vision for Supported Employment* in May 2012 is noted.

### **'FOSTERING HEALTHY AND SUPPORTIVE WORKPLACES'**

The Inquiry found that supporting people in the workforce to maintain their employment during episodes of mental illness is critical to their long-term recovery; it is also critical to the broader participation of people with a mental illness in the labour

market.

It found that early intervention was the best way to support people with a mental illness to stay in the workplace. Fear of stigma was also identified as a contributing factor to the delay in people raising mental health concerns with their employer.

It also showed the need to address factors within the workplace that can exacerbate, or contribute to mental illness such as bullying and job stress. The Inquiry found that both businesses and individuals benefit from flexible working arrangement for people with a mental illness.

### **Victorian Government effort**

The Victorian Government has a number of active campaigns in this area, most of which are lead by WorkSafe. These include:

- WorkSafe already promotes the importance of mental wellbeing and draws on material, including research commissioned by VicHealth, to understand potential costs and communicate this to employers.
- Worksafe has a strong focus on primary prevention activities, with support for early intervention if issues are identified.
- WorkSafe also provides guidance for employers in relation to return to work for employees – from physical and mental illness.
- In partnership with *beyondblue*, WorkSafe has released guidance on return to work for people with a mental illness.

WorkSafe will be a key partner in the forthcoming Victorian Mental Health Employment Participation Plan. As part of developing the Plan, specific recommendations of the Inquiry regarding fostering healthy and supportive workplaces and the role of WorkSafe, in partnership with employer and industry bodies and health organisations, will be considered.

### **‘STRENGTHENING MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES’**

The Inquiry found that incorporating a stronger focus on employment and education goals could help more people with a mental illness participate in the workforce. It also found that greater understanding is needed between mental health practitioners and the employment services system. It found that employment specialists working within mental health services helped to reduce barriers experienced by people with mental illness.

Local area networks, including employment support agencies, Psychiatric Disability Rehabilitation and Support Services (PDRSS) and Area Mental Health Services, were also considered to be well placed to foster knowledge sharing, collaboration and referral across the employment support and mental health sectors.

It also cited peer support – through the sharing of experiences, skills and participation strategies - as an important tool to help people with a mental illness reach their employment goals.

## **Victorian Government effort**

The importance of supporting good mental health and wellbeing, is recognised by the Victorian Government through the *Metropolitan Health Plan, the Rural and Regional Health Plan* and the *Victorian Health Priorities Framework 2012 – 2022*.

The Victorian Government's reform of the PDRSS service system will sharpen focus on achieving client driven outcomes in relation to education, vocational training and employment, as well as other life domains such as physical health and social participation. Service providers will be required to develop goal orientated individual service plans in partnership with clients, which is inclusive of the individual's education and employment goals. PDRSS providers will be held accountable to supporting clients to achieve these goals through a outcome focused performance management framework which will be linked to quality standards.

Further capacity to support employment participation for people experiencing mental illness and other disadvantage is being provided as part of the Victorian Government's Services Connect initiative, led by the Department of Human Services. Currently being trialled in three local areas, this initiative aims to provide streamlined access, service planning and managed support for disadvantaged and vulnerable Victorians who need multiple support services. A worker focussing specifically on employment participation support needs is operating in each site.

Victorian mental health services employ people with lived experience in mental illness and recovery in a variety of roles to improve quality of treatment, engagement and recovery. This includes consumer peer support workers, who can provide one important avenue of support for those seeking to maintain or re-enter education or employment. Victoria has the second highest percentage of people employed as consumer peer support workers in Australia. A review of mental health consumer carer programs will be undertaken in 2013, and will include consideration of the peer support function and how it might more effectively support consumers.

Current and planned service development of youth mental health services incorporates vocational support as part of recovery focussed models of service delivery.

The Victorian Government actively supports the inclusion of people with a psychiatric disability in the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) - commencing with the launch site in Geelong. Services and support to be available through the NDIS is expected to assist people with mental illness with participation in the workforce.

The Victorian Government strongly supports the intent of the Inquiry's recommendations, which focus on strengthening mental health services in key areas, including mental health professional workforce development, reform of Psychiatric Disability Rehabilitation and Support Services, strengthened peer support programs, co-ordination between specialist mental health services and employment services, and ongoing development of youth mental health services.

Further details of work in this area will be provided as part of Victorian Mental Health Employment Participation Plan.