Health & social services' system

Why it's important

Access to high quality health services is a very important social determinant of health. Health services include health care services that treat people when they are unwell or sick, as well as primary health, health promotion, prevention services such as screening (e.g. cancer screening and dental health checkups) and immunisation, and early intervention.

The same applies to social services, which seek to enhance quality of life of people and communities, and work towards *social justice* for all. *Social justice* is based on the principles of equity and respect for human rights.

Social services provide a range of programs and supports for people during various life stages such as leaving school, having and raising children, finishing formal education or seeking employment, finding appropriate housing, and caring for aged or frail family members. Social services also provide support for people during unexpected life events such as family break-ups and accidents. Such events can cause financial hardship and psychological stress.

An effective social services' system provides financial support for people experiencing hardship and stressful life events and includes services such as counselling, training, advocacy, mentoring and ongoing support in the community.

The health and social services' systems need to be strongly linked to prevent only 'band aid' or temporary solutions to problems. A good health system without equal access to the social system may not improve health and wellbeing outcomes for individuals who are living in inadequate housing, are long term unemployed, have no access to transport, can't read or write, or are socially excluded. Health services need to consider the underlying causes of poor health and wellbeing and work with the social services' system in order to optimise the conditions for good health and help to ensure a more sustainable approach to prevention.

The Social Determinants of Health
Working together to address the social factors that affect the health & wellbeing of Tasmanians
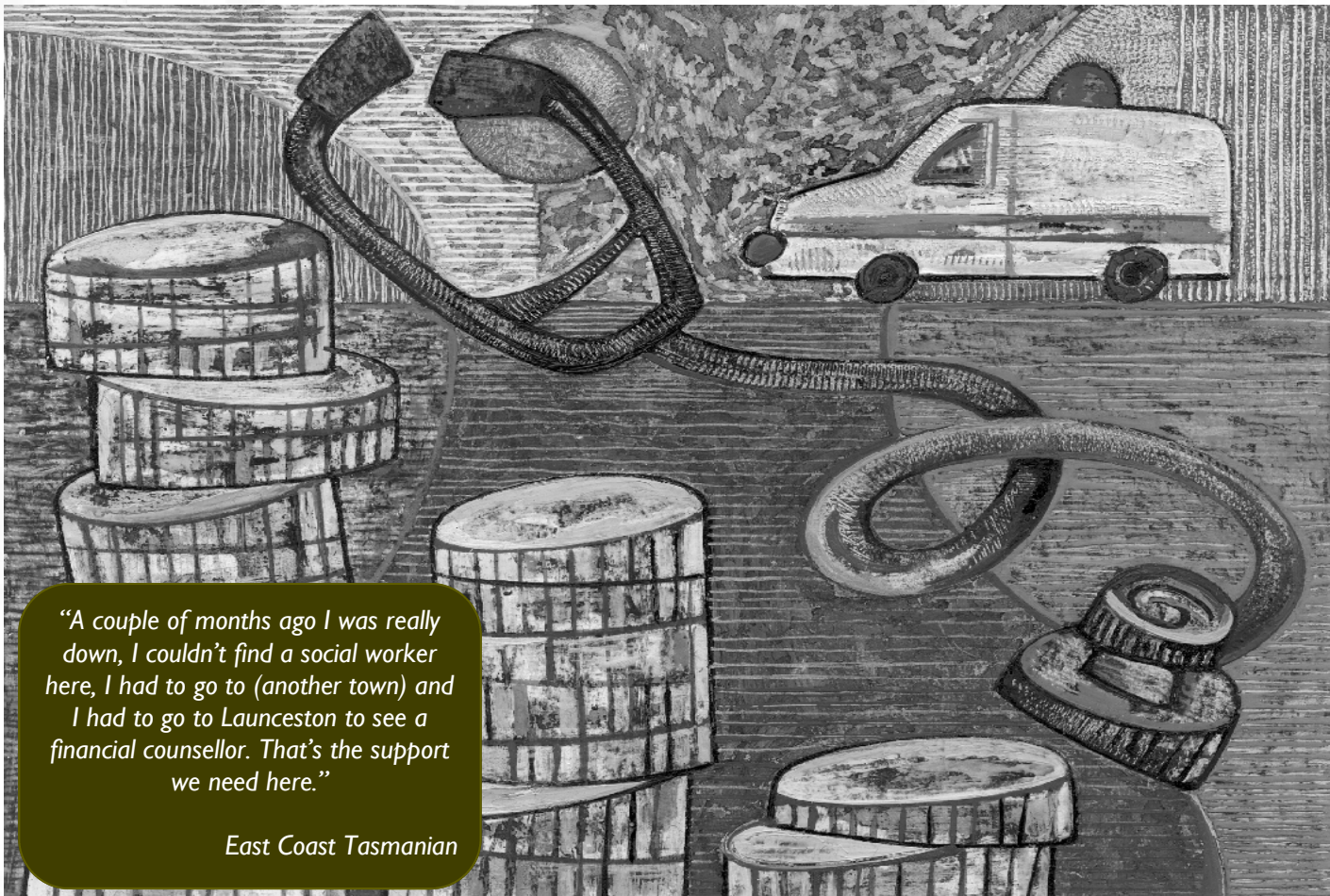
> *"A couple of months ago I was really down, I couldn't find a social worker here, I had to go to (another town) and I had to go to Launceston to see a financial counsellor. That's the support we need here."*
>
> *East Coast Tasmanian*

Why is the *health and social services' system* an issues for the health of Tasmanians?

Many Tasmanians depend on support from the health social services' system	When compared with national rates, Tasmania has a higher unemployment rate, lower labour force participation rate, lower average weekly earnings and a lower proportion of people with beyond-school qualifications – all factors that are linked to increased use of health and social services.[1] In 2014, 65% of Tasmanians reported that they had experienced at least one personal stressor in the past 12 months - the highest proportion of all states and territories. For example, 25% of Tasmanians reported having had a serious illness, 17% reported that they were not able to get a job, 4% reported they had involuntary lost their job, 4% had witnessed violence, 2% had gambling problems and 7% reported experiencing bullying or harrasement.[2]
Many Tasmanians experience poor health	People living in Tasmania are more likely to have a long term health condition (67%).[1] Tasmania also has a relatively high proportion of people with a disability that restricts their core activities (24%) and a high proportion of people who self-report a mental health condition (23%).[1]
Many Tasmanians have difficulty accessing services	Tasmania has dispersed settlement patterns. There are many areas where local health and social services are not available and people are dependent on accessible transport to travel to necessary services. Tasmanians experience higher levels of difficulty accessing service providers (32%) compared with people living in Australia as a whole (25%).[1]
Even when they need services, Tasmanians do not always access them	In 2014, Tasmania had the highest proportion of people who needed to see a medical specialist but did not do so. Tasmania also had the highest proportion of people who needed to see a dental professional, or to go to hospital, but did not do so.[3]
Tasmanians are highly dependent on A&E	In 2014, almost one in six (17%) Tasmanians had visited a hospital accident and emergency (A&E) department in the previous 12 months.[4] Tasmanians are more likely than people elsewhere in Australia to present to A&E even when GPs are available.[3]
Many Tasmanians have to wait for services	Over a quarter (28%) of Tasmanian residents who had seen a medical specialist reported that they had waited longer than they felt acceptable to get an appointment.[4]
Many people are seeing multiple health providers for the same condition	In Tasmania, 16% of people had seen three or more health professionals for the same condition, with 17% of these people reporting that they had experienced issues caused by a lack of communication between health professionals.[4]
Tasmania's health system does not have a strong emphasis on primary health	Primary health in Tasmania is not integrated across the health and social services' system. Primary health, which includes health promotion, has the ultimate goal of *health for all*. It focuses on reducing social exclusion and disparities in health, organising health services around people's needs and expectations, integrating health into all sectors, pursuing collaborative models of policy development and increasing stakeholder participation. There is a clear need for the health and social services' system to strengthen collaborative efforts in health promotion, prevention and care.

References & Resources

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3. ABS 2015, *4839.0.55.002 - Patient Experiences in Australia: States and Territories, 2013-14*: abs.gov.au/ausstats%5Cabs@.nsf/0/40CC75F9D66EB62BCA257E510014B423?Opendocument.

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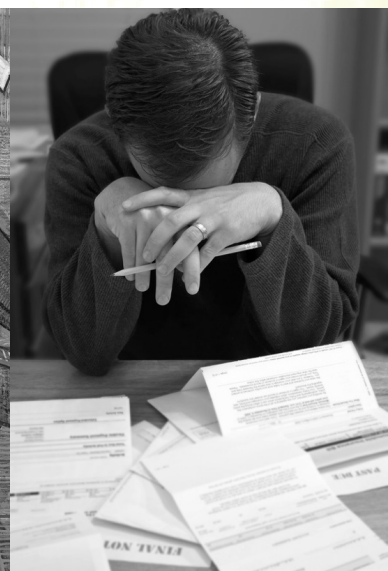
Communities

- Speak out about the need for high quality health services and social services to be available to all (write letters to politicians, become part of lobby groups or write to the media).

- Ensure that the community is well informed about available health and social services.

- Hold a community forum on health or social services, taking a strength-based approach to problem solving (i.e. what are the community's strengths and opportunities and how these can be used to improve health service provision in the community).

- Advocate for health promotion programs in the community that focus on keeping people well.

- Identify community needs - for example, there may be people who could benefit from an opportunity to talk to someone about personal issues such as relationships, financial management or their mental wellbeing. Explore opportunities for attracting visiting services to your area.

- Advocate for services that not only provide support for crisis situations, but also those that offer a holistic approach towards addressing the underlying causes of poor health and wellbeing.

Individuals

- Reach out to people who may be socially excluded.

- Get to know your neighbours and people in the community who may be lonely and would like a visitor.

- Offer a lift to a neighbour who may have limited access to transport.

- Connect with your local community house, volunteer your time or just get to know the staff and what they have to offer the community.

- Volunteer for programs that provide social support for people in the community - for example, become a volunteer for literacy, community transport, shared meal, gardening or befriending programs.

- Speak out about the need for high quality health services and social services to be available to all (write letters to politicians, become part of lobby groups or write to the media).

Workplaces (Managers, Workers, Volunteers) & Service Providers

- Provide outreach services to people where they live.

- Work in partnership with organisations that are on-the-ground in communities. They usually know their communities better than anyone and may be able to provide access to venues and assistance with promotion of particular services.

- Make people feel welcome when they are accessing services and do not tolerate discrimination towards clients.

- Recognise 'transitional periods' in people's lives when planning prevention and early intervention programs - e.g. when young people move from school to work, when women move from work to motherhood and back to work, and when older people move from work to retirement.

- Recognise that some people are at increased risk of poverty (including Aboriginal people, women, sole parents, children, students and young people, people with disabilities, migrants and refugees, older people, homeless people, and people in rural and remote areas) and respond accordingly to people's differing needs.

- Support emergency relief workers to respond better to the long-term needs of clients.

- Consider the complex underlying issues that some people are experiencing and recognise that no one organisation will be able to address all the needs of all clients at any one time. Work in partnership with other organisations to better respond to complex needs.

- If you are a health care provider, ask clients if they are experiencing difficulties with other aspects of their lives - e.g. transport, literacy, housing, relationships and addictions. Their issues may not be as simple as they first appear.

- Provide information in waiting rooms about social services.

- Understand the need for stronger links between the health and social services' sectors to better meet the needs of clients and patients. Work to strengthen those links.

Politicians & Governments

- Maintaining Medicare as an effective and robust universal healthcare system.

- Recognise that all Tasmanians have a right to appropriate health and social services.

- Take action to influence the key determinants that affect health and wellbeing, including income support, education, employment, housing and transport.

- Recognise that economic growth is not the most important measure of a country's success. The fair distribution of health, wellbeing and sustainability are important social goals.

- Implement high level partnerships across agencies to ensure a commitment to recognising health in all policies.

- Adequately fund the social services sector, and ensure appropriate indexation of core funding.

- Strengthen links between the health system and the social services' system in Tasmania and facilitate pathways for effective engagement, consultation and communication between sectors.

- Consider involving the social services' sector in government decision making relating to issues that may have once been thought of as not being relevant to that sector - such as land use planning.

- Do more to reduce elective surgery waiting lists.

- Adequately fund and integrate primary health into the health and social services' system.

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Tasmania's Social Determinants of Health Advocacy Network

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