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**Mental
Health
Council**
OF TASMANIA



Prioritising Prevention

Looking after the mental health and wellbeing of all Tasmanians, and the community organisations that support them

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About Us

The [Mental Health Council of Tasmania](http://www.mhct.org) (MHCT) is the peak body representing the mental health and wellbeing needs of all Tasmanians, and the community organisations that work with and support them. We work closely with government to amplify the voices of our members and Tasmanian communities, to provide input into public policies and programs. We advocate for reform and improvement within the Tasmanian mental health system. Our purpose is to strengthen and advocate for our communities and service providers to support the mental health and wellbeing of all Tasmanians, and our vision is that every Tasmanian has access to the resources and support needed for good mental health and wellbeing.

Prioritising Prevention

Tasmania's health and mental health system is struggling. At the same time, Tasmanians are facing challenges with increasing costs of living. These issues, among many others, are leading to more Tasmanians experiencing mental health concerns, further amplifying the pressure on our mental health system.

That's why the Mental Health Council of Tasmania is calling on an incoming government, and all incoming members of parliament, to demonstrate their commitment to the lives and livelihoods of all Tasmanians.

We must do more to ensure help is available to all Tasmanians.

The issues with the health and mental health system aren't limited to Tasmanians. Across Australia and the world there is a shortage of qualified professionals required to keep up with the demand for mental health supports and services.

While increasing investment in our hospitals will have some impact, we must also be looking at other innovative solutions to help Tasmanians be and stay well, with the added benefit of reducing the demand on our overstretched hospitals and health workforce.

As the landmark Productivity Commission report on mental health in 2020 noted: "Australia's mental health system needs to focus on prevention and early intervention, whether early in life or in the progress of illness. And it needs to be flexible, to ramp up and down as individual and social needs and stresses change."

Our measure of success should be the number of people we prevent going to hospital, not how many we fit into them.

Access to timely and affordable mental health care and support that enables us to live our best and most productive lives goes beyond just a health issue – it is a fundamental human rights issue. That is why we must look to build upon the success of existing initiatives, and invest in new innovative and aspirational ways to help support the mental health and wellbeing of all Tasmanians.

We are calling on an incoming government to:

- ▶ **Invest in the mental health and wellbeing of all Tasmanians through the expansion of MHCT's innovative mental wellbeing literacy campaign, *Take a minute*.**
- ▶ **Ensure the ongoing viability of community mental health organisations by following through on long standing commitments to implementing five-year funding agreements with adequate indexation.**
- ▶ **Expand upon existing initiatives so they're available to all Tasmanians, including the Mental Health Emergency Response Service and Central Intake and Referral Service.**
- ▶ **Commit to joint responsibility and funding with the Commonwealth Government to close psychosocial support gaps.**

The future health, wellbeing and prosperity of our state depends on it.

Empowering Tasmanians to Take Charge of Their Wellbeing

We urge an incoming government to commit to ongoing support for MHCT's unique and innovative mental wellbeing literacy campaign, Take a minute.

It's no secret Tasmanians are living in challenging times and face multiple factors that impact on their mental health and wellbeing. COVID gave us insight into how social determinants such as housing, employment and personal relationships affect our wellbeing. Tasmanians have also been through a necessary but harrowing two-year inquiry into government responses to child sexual abuse in state institutions. At the same time, Tasmanians have felt the brunt of the cost-of-living crisis.

That is why it is vital that the next government continues to support the Take a minute campaign and demonstrate their commitment to Tasmanians, by giving us all the best opportunity to live our best lives, and be healthy, active and engaged members of our many incredible communities right across the state.

Launched in November 2023, Take a minute encourages all Tasmanians to take a proactive approach to their mental health and wellbeing that helps them be and stay well, instead of waiting until they notice a dip in their mental health before reaching out for help.

There is overwhelming evidence that taking a proactive, preventative approach to our mental health and wellbeing leads to better mental health outcomes for individuals, families, and communities, while also reducing the stigma that can be a barrier to people taking action sooner.

Take a minute aims to change mindsets by encouraging people to adopt protective behaviours that include seeking help sooner. It is based on evidence and international research.

Take a minute helps Tasmanians understand what good mental health and wellbeing looks like and identifies positive things we can, and often already do to achieve it.

The Take a minute campaign is initially being brought to life through the 7-minute challenge - this activity guides people through a series of one minute challenges over seven days, which help us identify and understand some of the people, places and things that give our lives purpose and meaning. By helping Tasmanians make a conscious connection between these things and the positive impact they have, we help everyone better understand some of the tools at our disposal that can help us stay on top of our mental health and wellbeing.

This not only empowers all Tasmanians to be and stay well, it reduces the reliance on more intensive and costly supports – many of which have extensive waitlists.

While MHCT has already been working to implement the campaign with over 350 sector organisations, service providers, community groups and individuals across the state there is more to be done.

As stated in our Budget Priority Submission for 2024-25, expansion of the campaign will be achieved by, among other things:

- ▶ Growing our online community and implementing a comprehensive social media campaign, including a social media influencer program.
- ▶ Developing strategies to engage hard-to-reach groups and individuals.
- ▶ Targeting population groups to co-design campaign messages and resources to specifically suit their audiences.
- ▶ Developing tools to enable individuals, communities and workplaces to benchmark and measure improved mental health literacy and wellbeing.
- ▶ Increase awareness and understanding of entry points for mental health support at various levels, to help Tasmanians access lower levels of support sooner.

MHCT looks forward to working with an incoming government to expand the campaign so that it reaches and benefits all Tasmanians.

Supporting A Viable Community Mental Health Sector

An incoming government must ensure the sustainability of the community managed mental health sector by committing to five-year funding agreements that include adequate indexation.

The viability of community organisations that support the mental health of tens of thousands of Tasmanians is at stake. We urge the next government to introduce five-year contracts on funding agreements (with six-month renewal notices) and adequate indexation, to help future-proof the vital community mental health sector, and ensure providers can meet growing demand for people to live well in their communities.

Tasmanians repeatedly tell us they want to access mental health supports where they live, work or play. This means building a sustainable community sector as an alternative to crowded hospital emergency waiting rooms. Community organisations provide a host of services -- from clinical support, counselling and social work, to support for victim-survivors of sexual assault, as well as a range of psychosocial supports and assistance with day-to-day living tasks.

Member organisations tell us there is no capacity to respond to increasing demand, adapt or develop new programs or services. Reducing service delivery is inevitable if funding agreements aren't adjusted. Workforce shortages plague the community sector, reflecting the funding uncertainty and difficulties attracting and retaining staff.

The MHCT-led Tasmanian Mental Health Leaders Forum last year revealed seven community member organisations were trying to fill roughly 22 full-time equivalent positions. These roles ranged from psychologists, mental health nurses to social workers. There were more than five FTE vacant roles for psychologists alone. Some of the varied positions had been vacant for 6-12 months. While data from seven member organisations is a small snapshot, we believe it reflects what is happening across the state based on concerns expressed by members in the past 18 months. The high level of vacancies is backed up by the long waitlists Tasmanians spoke about in the consumer survey above.

Our members cannot offer -- or even plan -- the sort of roles that would attract skilled applicants, especially to remote areas such as the Northwest. They note that renewal notice times can in some cases be a matter of weeks (or in some reported instances, after the contract has ended), which significantly impacts on an organisation's ability to forward plan, attract, and retain staff, maintain morale, and provide services. Renewal notices should be sent six months before a contract ends.

As we noted in our Budget Priority Submission for 2024-25, there has been a long-standing government commitment to implement long-term funding contracts for community based mental health service providers. It is vital that an incoming government follow through with this commitment to five-year contracts, and adequate indexation. If this is not done, we risk jeopardising the viability of the many organisations that support so many Tasmanians.

Building a more sustainable community sector -- which often provide free or low-cost services -- is a crucial step in reducing waitlists. By ensuring supports and services are available to people in their communities, we not only give them the opportunity to live their best lives, we help prevent them becoming increasingly and unnecessarily unwell and keep them out of hospital.

Supporting Tasmanians to Be and Stay Well in their Community

An incoming government must immediately acknowledge the unmet needs of the many Tasmanians unable to access the psychosocial supports they need to be and stay well in their community, and prioritise investment in these services to ensure that no Tasmanian is missing out.

Our image of Tasmania's mental health system should not be hospital emergency waiting rooms or long waitlists to see a psychologist. Community based services should be the bedrock of mental health support in the community. Known as psychosocial supports, these services address the emotional, social and practical needs of people managing complex mental illnesses or recovering from a mental health crisis. These essential services help people manage daily tasks, find accommodation, undertake work or study, participate in the community, and improve social connections. They go beyond psychology sessions or counselling. They help people live well in their community.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that big gaps in psychosocial supports across Tasmania are putting an unnecessary, avoidable strain on our health system. A major complication has been the shifting of disability services to the NDIS. The Productivity Commission report on mental health in 2020 estimated 154,000 people nationally require psychosocial supports but are ineligible to get them through the NDIS. Based on estimates in [South Australia's 2023 Unmet Needs report](#), this figure has likely increased to nearly a quarter of a million nationally.

A full analysis of psychosocial support gaps across Australia is expected to be finalised in March. In the interim, we urge the next government to commit to a 50:50 funding split with the Commonwealth for all supports outside the NDIS. This is in line with the federal budget submission for 2024-2025 made by Community Mental Health Australia, a coalition of mental health peak organisations, of which MHCT is a member.

As stated in our Budget Priority Submission for 2024-25, we also propose the Tasmanian government invest in the codesign of a psychosocial support program for Tasmanians managing complex mental illnesses or recovering from a mental health crisis that would involve:

- Collaboration with consumers, carers, families, and service providers.
- Build upon and compliment current and pending mental health services in Tasmania.
- Address the gaps likely to be highlighted for Tasmania in the unmet needs report.

Psychosocial supports reduce pressure on health and other social support systems (eg housing, employment, education, justice) by diverting people early to alternative care settings, and improving discharge pathways for those who've been hospitalised. They put people at the centre of their own recovery or management of their mental illness.

An incoming government must invest immediately to start closing the gap by increasing the availability of these crucial supports, and work with the Commonwealth Government to accept and implement, in full, the recommendations made in the upcoming national gap analysis.

Our measure of success should be the number of people we prevent going to hospital, not how many we can fit into them.

Affordable and Accessible Mental Health Supports for All Tasmanians

'No wrong door' Walk-in Mental Health Centres

An incoming government must work with the Commonwealth Government to prioritise statewide access to walk-in mental health centres, as crucial points of entry into Tasmania's mental health system.

One of the most frequent complaints of Tasmanians, and the biggest concern voiced by MHCT members, is that the mental health system in our state is fragmented and difficult to navigate. This is particularly true for people accessing support for the first time.

Tasmanians deserve and demand an accessible and affordable mental health system whether they are in crisis, managing a mental illness, seeking help for the first time, supporting a loved one, or simply looking for information on how to be and stay well.

We must increase and focus efforts to create an integrated mental health system that prioritises access and affordability, and the experience of those who use it.

In a 2023 MHCT survey of over 500 people who access mental health services, an alarming 92% of respondents said they faced barriers to accessing mental health services for themselves or someone they support. That's more than nine out of 10 people! The major barriers they sighted were cost and accessibility.

Some 43% of respondents said they, or a person they supported, had been on a waitlist for six months or more. Meanwhile, one of the most under-reported stories in Australia last year was the jump to nearly 39% of young people (aged 16-24) experiencing a mental health disorder in the previous 12 months, up from 26.4% in 2007.

Free walk-in mental health centres have a critical role to play in addressing these issues. Some parts of the state are already seeing significant benefits of such services, but we need to ensure that people across the rest of the state have access to similar services.

It is estimated that in Australia around three quarters of people who present to emergency departments due to mental distress don't require hospital admission, and likely could have avoided the emergency department had a suitable alternative been available.

A hospital emergency department waiting room is rarely the best setting for someone experiencing mental health distress, and no one wants to end up in hospital if they don't have to.

That's why making these walk-in 'no wrong door' mental health centres accessible to all Tasmanians should be of the highest priority. They offer a contemporary approach, allowing people to access the right level of support, no matter their level of need, while also reducing the number of people presenting to our already stretched hospitals.

Two free services at the Peacock Centre (Safe Haven and the Mental Health Integration Hub) in Hobart have provided 3,088 sessions since opening in March 2023, with 418 face-to-face and telephone sessions in January 2024 alone. A new [Head to Health](#) clinic at Launceston has also been popular.

The Commonwealth is funding three Head to Health centres in Devonport, Burnie and outer Hobart (tenders were issued on Feb 5) under a [bilateral agreement](#) on mental health that Tasmania signed with the Commonwealth Government in 2022. [Head to Health](#) is a Commonwealth initiative to establish clinics across Australia that provide immediate and short-term mental health support for free to anyone over 18.

We urge the new Tasmanian government to work with the Commonwealth Government to prioritise statewide access to these vital points of entry into Tasmania’s mental health system, to ensure consistent models of care across the state.

Mental Health Emergency Response Service (formerly PACER)

An incoming government must ensure all Tasmanians have access to the Mental Health Emergency Response Service.

A popular service outside the bilateral agreement is the Police, Ambulance and Clinician Early Response (PACER) team, which responds to mental health 000 calls.

Mental Health Emergency Response teams have assisted over 2,800 people since launching in the south in early 2022. More than 75 percent of those individuals were supported to remain in the community, instead of going to a hospital emergency department which would generally be the outcome without this service.

The clinical and often chaotic setting of a hospital ED is rarely the best environment for someone in distress, so being able to work with the Mental Health Emergency Response Service team to help de-escalate their distress in a safe, home or community environment is not only a better outcome for the individual, their friends, family and other people who support them, but also helps reduce presentations to ED, clearing the way for others to access urgent care.

We urge the next government to expand on the success of the initial Mental Health Emergency Response Service trials, by making it a permanent service that is accessible to everyone across the entire state.

Central Intake and Referral Service (CIRS)

It is vital that an incoming government continue the ongoing work in development and implementation of the [Central Intake and Referral Service \(CIRS\)](#)

The CIRS, also part of the bilateral agreement, will be a single-entry point for all Tasmanians. Trained professionals in Tasmania will assess callers’ needs and provide “warm referrals” to the most appropriate government, private or community service.

MHCT calls on the next government to go a step further and employ full-time lived experience navigators to help people identify and access services. This would include establishing processes to enable warm referral, track wait times and find alternate care pathways when needed. Evaluation and monitoring are also important, after MHCT research in late 2023 showed Tasmania’s compliance with mandatory national reporting of clinician- and consumer-rated measures in public mental health services was poor.

A fully integrated mental health system would bring various services – CIRS, Head to Health, the Peacock Centre, the Mental Health Emergency Response Service as well as A Tasmanian Lifeline -- under one roof. This would ensure Tasmanians can access timely and affordable mental health care in their communities, and avoid unnecessary visits to hospital emergency departments.

Affordable access to mental health support is directly linked to the two issues Tasmanians say concern them the most – health care and cost of living.