

MEDIA RELEASE

Mental health peer workforce growing strongly: meeting to discuss impact in Wollongong and the Illawarra

Tuesday 6 September 2022: Mental Health Peer Workers are the fastest growing workforce in the mental health sector in Wollongong and the Illawarra, driving positive change towards more recovery-oriented organisations.

On Wednesday 7 September, **Mental Health Coordinating Council**, the peak body for non-government community mental health services - with co-hosts – **Grand Pacific Health, Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District, One Door Mental Health, Stride Mental Health and Flourish Australia** - will hold an important networking event for local mental health services to discuss how the sector is responding to meet the needs of the emerging peer workforce.

Mental Health Coordinating Council's recent *Mental Health Workforce Profile* found peer workers now make up 14% of the community mental health sector, growing at a rapid 3% year on year.

Peer workers use their lived experience of mental health to support the recovery of others. It is estimated there is one peer worker for every 9,000 people living in the southeast region of NSW, which takes in Wollongong, Shellharbour and Kiama.

Mental Health Coordinating Council CEO Carmel Tebbutt said lived experience peer workers are recognised as essential to delivering recovery-focused mental health services, yet the rapid expansion of the workforce is not without challenges.

"Common challenges experienced by this vital workforce include workplace stigma, contested professional boundaries, workplace conditions, limited career structures and a lack of opportunities for appropriate supervision," Ms Tebbutt explained.

"There's also an emerging issue with quite high vacancy rates for peer worker positions, which could be impacting many organisation's ambitions to increase their peer work services."

Wednesday's *Meet your Neighbour* event for frontline mental health and community workers will discuss what scaffolding and processes can be put in place to better support the peer workforce in Wollongong and the Illawarra.

Speakers include Sky Smetanin, Team Leader Integrated Recovery, Grand Pacific Health, Julie Carter, Director of Mental Health Service Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District, Irene Constantinidis, Manager Peer Workers/Lived Experience Spokesperson Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District, Tayla Cassidy Peer Worker One Door Mental Health and Renee Harding, Team Coordinator Peer Specialist Flourish Australia.

Media are welcome to attend the panel discussion from 11am at One Door Wollongong & Illawarra Clubhouse, 34 Auburn Street, Wollongong. To request an interview with MHCC CEO Carmel Tebbutt or other speakers, contact Lara Cole on lara.c@mhcc.org.au or 0421 202 643