

JOINT STATEMENT

Community Mental Health Gaps Continue to Widen in NSW, Says New Report from NSW Health

NSW Health has released a new report into gaps in the NSW community mental health system, the first of two gap analysis reports, detailing the difference between demand for mental health services in NSW and the level of service currently available.

The NSW Mental Health Alliance welcomes the release of this initial gap analysis as a first step in long-term mental health reform in NSW. The results of this analysis once again show how far NSW has slipped behind other states in terms of mental health funding and highlight how many people are impacted by the underfunding of mental health services in this state.

We look forward to working with the Government on developing a more comprehensive, quantitative analysis of the gaps in the NSW mental health system, specifically focussing on the service gaps in each LHD to understand the differences between regions, and quantifying the investment required to fully fund mental health in NSW.

Headline figures from the initial gap analysis report include:

- **Significant service gaps for people with severe/complex needs**
 - 29% shortfall in service capacity for people with severe/complex mental health needs in NSW;
 - Equating to 58,000 people with severe/complex mental health needs in NSW who cannot access the care they need;
- **Underfunding of public Community Mental Health services**
 - NSW had the lowest Community Mental Health staffing level per capita, over the past decade, with mental health staff numbers per capita now well behind other states like Victoria and Queensland.
 - 21% increase in Community Mental Health patients in the past decade, however, funding for Community Mental Health services have only increased by 13% in the same period;
- **A critical shortage of all mental health workers in NSW, with the most significant gaps in:**
 - Psychologists: 35% of the National Mental Health Service Planning Framework (NMHSPF) target;
 - Indigenous mental health workers: 37% of the NMHSPF target;
 - Consumer and carer peer workforce: 5% and 14% of the NMHSPF target respectively;
- **Increase in mental health presentations and pressure on Emergency Departments (EDs)**
 - 5% increase in mental health, suicide and self-harm presentations to NSW EDs, over the past decade;
 - 117,555 mental health related presentations to EDs in 2020-21;
- **Need to develop alternatives to Police responses to mental health crises**
 - 42% of critical incidents (an incident resulting in the death of an individual including a police officer) over the last 5 years have involved an interaction with a person experiencing a mental health crisis;
 - 10-30% of police callouts in NSW involve a person in mental health crisis.
- **Community-based psychosocial programs proven to be 'highly effective'**
 - Psychosocial supports are community based, recovery-oriented supports, primarily delivered by community managed organisations (CMOs), which support people with severe and complex mental health challenges to live independently and participate in the community;
 - Psychosocial supports demonstrated a net saving of \$86,000 per person for the NSW Government over 5 years, through a reduction in contact with community mental health services (by 64%), reduced hospital admissions (by 74%), reduced length of hospital stay (by 75%), near zero new criminal charges or community corrections orders.

Quotes from NSW Mental Health Alliance members:

- “This initial gap analysis report provided much-needed data to substantiate what we in the mental health sector experience day-to-day. The gaps in the NSW mental health system are substantial and widening, with NSW now slipping well behind other states. NSW mental health services are in crisis and investment in the state’s mental health can no longer be delayed. We call on the Minns Government to prioritise mental health in the upcoming NSW Budget. We will continue to advocate for NSW to fully fund mental health so that no one falls through the gaps. This will require long-term, substantial funding to reform the system and build the mental health workforce. This work needs to start immediately to meet the urgent need in the community” – **Professor Samuel Harvey, Executive Director, Black Dog Institute**
- “It’s outrageous that so many people experiencing a mental health crisis are dying at the hands of police. Is it a coincidence that a four-day mental health training package for frontline police officers was axed five years ago, while in that same period 42% of critical incidences involving police were responding to somebody experiencing a mental health crisis? We want to see trained mental health personnel responding to most mental health crises rather than police, while also providing all frontline police with quality mental health training to support them on the job.” – **Priscilla Brice, CEO, BEING Mental Health Consumers**
- “Across NSW, too many people are falling through the cracks in the mental health system. But we can’t fix what we can’t see. This initial gap analysis is beginning to paint a sobering picture of where those gaps are, how wide, and how many. For those of us on the front-line of the mental health system, it also validates what we’ve been saying for years. The system is at critical tipping point. Demand outstrips supply. It’s crunch time. The NSW Government has an opportunity at the upcoming Budget to genuinely change and save lives in our community. Mental health investment must be a priority.” – **Dr Angelo Virgona, Chair RANZCP NSW**
- “The Gap Analysis clearly demonstrates that the Government must address the urgent need for greater equity and access to community-managed mental health and psychosocial support services. People with lived experience must be able to further their recovery in the community with the support of the services they need and want at the right time, in the right place. This cannot happen unless there is also a focus on the workforce necessary to deliver those services now and be sustainable in the future.” – **Dr Evelyne Tadros, CEO, Mental Health Coordinating Council**
- “The government is to be commended for commissioning this report into the gaps in our system. Once again, we see demonstrated the big gaps in community mental health supports too often resulting in people getting into crisis. This puts pressure on Emergency Departments, Police, and acute in-patient mental health services. Families and carers often report spending years seeking help they cannot find while trying to cover all the gaps themselves. However, to fix these problems we now need to break the cycle of reports and recommendations without results by developing and funding realistic plans informed by lived experience to increase the capacity of mental health services to meet the un-needs identified.” – **Jonathan Harms, CEO, Mental Health Carers NSW Inc.**
- “The Gap Analysis report’s emphasis on the need for better access to step-up step-down services through models of care in the community is a positive step. Additional funding is urgently needed to support community organisations to provide seamless and comprehensive care for individuals with mental health needs across different levels of intensity and support. The continuum of care across the spectrum of services is critical, from care in the hospital to inpatient care and community-based care. Funding is urgently needed for early intervention, prevention, and ongoing support to ensure individuals, carers, kin, and families are supported in their homes and communities. This includes support in navigating the complex mental health service system which has been identified as a key priority. The mental health services system is fragmented, with multiple services, and intersects with other service systems including education, employment, housing, and community services. Wayahead’s experience is that people struggle to find accurate information about services, treatment options, and how to equitably access services. The stigma surrounding mental illness can also prevent individuals from seeking help and this creates barriers to accessing care and support services. There are broader determinants of mental health, and the report has touched on the need for the mental health system to

better integrate with other social supports and community services to prioritise holistic, recovery-orientated, and integrated care based on a person's unique needs, preferences, and circumstances.” – **Sharon Grocott, CEO, Wayahead Mental Health Association NSW**

- “It is reassuring to see the Gap Analysis paper acknowledge the central role of GPs on the frontline of community mental health with our role across all domains including care navigation, community based treatments and emergency care. This highlights the vital importance of shared care and better communication with us as it is well known that continuity of care with a GP leads to better health outcomes. These stated gaps must be urgently filled. This shortfall in NSW community mental health funding when combined with the larger Federal issues at play including devastating workforce issues will lead to further distress in an already stressed population. GPs on the front line of care for individuals, families and communities are well placed if adequately integrated to support this important work.” – **Dr Karen Spielman, General Practitioner, NSW RACGP/ASPM**

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About the NSW Mental Health Alliance

The NSW Mental Health Alliance is a coalition of leading mental health organisations in NSW, representing mental health consumers, carers, clinicians, community mental health services and researchers.

Joint Statement endorsed by:

- Australian College of Mental Health Nurses
- Australian Society for Psychological Medicine
- BEING Mental Health Consumers
- Black Dog Institute
- Mental Health Carers NSW
- Mental Health Coordinating Council (MHCC)
- Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP)
- The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners
- Wayahead – Mental Health Association NSW

Spokespeople available for interview:

- Professor Samuel Harvey, Executive Director, Black Dog Institute
- Priscilla Brice, CEO, BEING Mental Health Consumers
- Dr Angelo Virgona, Chair RANZCP NSW
- Sharon Grocott, CEO, Wayahead Mental Health Association NSW