



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

Bishops Commission for Social Justice, Mission and Service

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23 January 2020

Mental Health Inquiry
Productivity Commission
GPO Box 1428
Canberra City ACT 2601

Attention: Ms Tracey Horsfall

mental.health@pc.gov.au

Dear Sir / Madam

Productivity Commission - Draft Report – Mental Health

This submission from the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (**ACBC**) on the Productivity Commission's Draft Report on Mental Health is prepared by the Bishops Commission for Social Justice, Mission and Service (**BCSJ**).

The ACBC is a permanent institution of the Catholic Church in Australia and the vehicle used by the Australian Catholic Bishops to address issues of national significance.

The BCSJ is one of a number of commissions established by the ACBC to address important issues both within the Church and in the broader Australian community. One of the BCSJ's areas of responsibility is disability which includes mental health.

More than 60 per cent of Australians profess a faith, and more than one in five Australians are Catholic. There are approximately 5.29 million Catholics in Australia.

The Catholic Church provides Australia's largest non-government grouping of hospitals, aged and community care services, providing approximately 10 per cent of health care services in Australia. It provides social services and support to more than 450,000 people across Australia each year. There are more than 1,750 Catholic schools with more than 94,000 staff providing education to more than 765,000 Australian students. There are two Catholic universities, teaching more than 46,000 students.

The ACBC seeks to participate in public debate by making reasoned arguments that can be respectfully considered by all people of goodwill.

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference welcomes the release of the Productivity Commission's draft report into mental health in Australia.

As an indication of its concern about mental illness, the ACBC recently published a booklet and website focusing on mental illness and outreach guidelines for parishes (copy attached via post):

<https://www.catholic.org.au/donotbeafraid>

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/19hjyfbve9PvUy6rAvlfAXIdbElj3qJim/view?usp=sharing>

It is recognized that mental illness is stigmatizing and that people who experience mental illness and their carers may feel alone, isolated and struggle to access appropriate responsive treatment and rehabilitation services. The challenge in obtaining help at the right time in the right place may be one of the factors influencing the increase in suicide rates in Australia.

The Catholic Church regards access to mental health treatment services to be as important as access to physical health services and all governments have a responsibility to ensure there is adequate planning, and resources for a range of community and inpatient treatment services to meet the needs of a growing population whether in metropolitan or rural and remote settings. In this respect face to face specialized interventions should be the aim, rather than excessive reliance on telephone counselling, which is important but not always appropriate.

Church agencies that provide health, disability and social welfare services have experienced a dramatic increase in demand for mental health services that mirrors the pressure being felt in greatly overstretched and under resourced public mental health services in most parts of Australia. There are flow on effects in relation to increased homelessness, poorer physical health and families left to shoulder the serious consequences without adequate support.

Mental illness covers a wide range of conditions from low prevalence disorders (both episodic and persistent) to high prevalence (anxiety based) and dual disorders complicated by drug and alcohol problems and brain damage. For this reason treatment services must be focused on early identification and treatment across the life span rather than intervention only when a crisis occurs and then by inadequately trained first responders such as the police.

Publication of national mental health plans is an important step, but implementation across all jurisdictions is required with adequate protection of both budgets and expenditures to ensure that current and future resources are being utilized for the purposes allocated. The ACBC believes national audits with progress reports of service improvements, resource allocation, staffing levels and outcomes measurement should be mandatory.

The consequences of not implementing proper mental health services and systems can be devastating for individuals, families and entire communities.

I would be happy to answer questions. I can be contacted via Ms Alison Burt, Executive Secretary, Bishops Commission for Social Justice, Mission and Service on 02 6201 9865 or social.justice@catholic.org.au

Yours sincerely,

Most Rev Vincent Long Van Nguyen OFMConv

Bishop of Parramatta

Chair, Bishops Commission for Social Justice, Mission and Service

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