

## **The Case for a National Mental Health Consumer Organisation**

This submission seeks to explore the groundswell of support for the establishment of the National Mental Health Consumer Organisation (NMHCO) in Australia. Despite lying dormant, perhaps reduced to ashes for three years, the National Organisation has been sending out roots deep into this ancient landscape. Since June 2015, when the Consumer Reference Group (CRG) put out its last, plaintive communique the NMHCO has existed in the hearts and souls of many who listened to the words of the Chair Ian Watts:

*'The reality is that if we want our vision to come to life, we can't let it die.'* (Final Communique CRG, May 2015)

What happened in 2015 and what we need to do to ensure success this time? While it is easy to blame a change of government for the withdrawal of funding from the NMHCO, it is now a good time to revisit the model (and all the structural elements that were produced from 2012 - 2015) and to see if things need to be changed for a renewed push to create a national organisation.

Different pathways exist to create the organisation. We could go back to the work abandoned by government in 2015 or we could seek a new model – one where the national body comprises representative of all state and territory peaks. Such a representative peak could build on existing network and ensure that the national body reaches consumers everywhere. It might also encourage those estates and territories who do not have a consumer peak to establish one.

In many ways the idea of the National Organisation sitting at the apex of a network of consumer organisations is consistent with the National Mental Health Strategy and plans that led to the establishment of state and territory Consumer Advisory Groups (CAGs) and the Australian Mental Health Consumer Network in 1992.

### **Not letting it die**

Since May 2015 consumers have maintained the vision to form a National Organisation through sustained action and engagement, such as:

- The formation of [The Australian Association of Mental Health Consumers](#) in November 2015, following long discussions by a group of consumers from the Facebook group CAPS: Mental Health Consumer Advocates and Peer Support network.
- The Consumer Day at the 2017 TheMHS Conference in Sydney generated passionate calls for a consumer-run organisation. There was a strong sentiment that people were tired of passively waiting for government to implement their own mental health policies around a consumer organisation. This enthusiasm carried over to the main conference and resulted in the Federal Minister agreeing to consider the idea. As a result, a meeting took place with the Minister's office following an extensive and inclusive consultation vis social media.
- Sustained debate throughout consumer and peer worker networks since the launch of the organisation 'Australians for Mental Health'.
- A Symposium and public meeting ay TheMHS Conference 2018, which brought together CEO's of State Peaks with other consumer leaders, Including a member of the original CRG captured the strong belief that a National Consumer Organisation was needed to give consumers a strong, united voice to government. There was consensus that existing mechanisms such as the National Consumer and Carer Forum do not represent consumers effectively.

Recently the cause has been taken up by peak national community organisations.

- Mental Health Australia's pre-budget submission (March 2018) called for the restoration on funding for 'self-governed consumer representation' and for significant new investment to strengthen existing structures and to build new processes.
- Community Mental Health Australia issued a media release on 4 April 2018: 'CMHA calls for a national mental health consumer peak'. CMHA President Liz Crowther noted that, 'A significant missing part of the mental health sector is an established and funded mental health consumer peak that provides a united national voice for mental health consumers'.
- The Australian Mental Health Party supports the call from Community Mental Health Australia to establish a national peak body representing people who access mental health care. Ben Mullings, Chair, noted that 'Perspectives from consumers are often missing from decisions about the direction of mental health policy'.