

Submission: Final review of the Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement

Submitted to the Productivity Commission on behalf of youth mental health organisation batyr Australia.

Contact for this submission: Courtney Bilske, National Strategy & Engagement Manager

Background

Since its inception in 2011, batyr has been at the forefront of transforming the mental health landscape in Australia, focusing on prevention with young people. Our peer-to-peer, community-level approach has been pivotal in reshaping attitudes towards mental health and promoting positive help-seeking behaviors among young Australians. These initiatives are built around the transformational methodology of lived experience storytelling, which not only educates but also empowers young people to take proactive steps in managing their mental health.

The onset of the pandemic brought unprecedented challenges, especially to the youth demographic, exacerbating the pre-existing vulnerabilities within the mental health system. An overwhelming increase in demand for mental health services led to significant systemic strain, with reports of extended waitlists and service providers overwhelmed by the surge. This scenario underscored the critical gaps within our health services and the urgent need for comprehensive reforms.

Impact of the National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement

The 2022 National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement marked a significant milestone in the collective efforts to bolster mental health and suicide prevention in Australia. batyr commends the Agreement's focus on stigma reduction, the incorporation of lived experiences in service design and delivery, and heightened attention to prevention and the well-being of young people.

Recommendations to the Productivity Commission

1. Stigma Reduction

- Prompt finalisation and implementation of the National Stigma and Discrimination Reduction Strategy are imperative. Despite substantial progress in raising mental health awareness, stigma remains a formidable barrier, deterring young individuals from seeking necessary support. Leveraging research, such as that by Dr. Patrick Corrigan¹, we advocate for a peer-to-peer model, which has demonstrated the highest efficacy in stigma reduction. batyr's programs, which train young individuals with lived experiences

¹ Corrigan, P. W. (2012). Research and the elimination of the stigma of mental illness. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 201(1), 7–8. Cambridge Core.

to become community ambassadors for mental health, not only combat stigma but also enhance the participants' employability and personal growth.

2. Youth Inclusion and Peer Workforce Enhancement

- With young people constituting a significant portion of mental health consumers, it is crucial that they are thoroughly represented in the design, delivery, and evaluation of services. However, challenges persist in integrating young people into the lived experience (peer) workforce adequately. To address this, there is a need for accessible, high-quality training pathways that ensure a steady influx of young professionals equipped to face the demands and complexities of mental health advocacy and service provision.

3. Accessibility and Affordability of Services for Young People

- Economic barriers significantly hinder young people's access to mental health services. With the cost of living cited as a major concern among the youth², many delay seeking help until they reach a crisis state, which in turn burdens acute mental health services. Ensuring free access to mental health and suicide prevention services for all individuals under 25, when and where they need it, will be a critical step towards addressing this issue.

4. Prevention Activities

- Supporting young people through prevention means meeting them where they are at. Recent reform from the Australian Government around young people and the use of social media, shows the importance of protecting and supporting their mental health and wellbeing. batyr wants young people to feel connected - not lonely, to gain confidence, to have access to safe spaces, to develop skills and tools to manage their wellbeing, and build a strong sense of community. This must be a priority online and in person. Funding through the National Suicide Prevention Leadership Support program (2022-2025) has allowed batyr to deliver peer-to-peer prevention programs to schools and universities across the country; reaching thousands of young people with evidence based education, and bridging them to the support services available. Additionally, Primary Health Network Targeted Regional Suicide Prevention Program funding has enabled an even more tailored response to sub-groups in the youth cohort, such as young men and CALD populations. However, in order to radically address the youth mental health crisis, and achieve the government's National Preventive Health Strategy 2021-2030, increased investment into programs like these is crucial.

batyr will collaborate with government bodies to drive these recommendations forward, ensuring that every young Australian has the support and resources they need to manage their mental health effectively. Our commitment remains steadfast: to empower the youth of Australia by amplifying their voices and enhancing their mental health outcomes through innovative, evidence-based approaches.

² Black Dog Institute. Navigating Australia's mental health system in 2024 - Consumer Report. September 2024.