ALIA submission in response to the Productivity Commission issues paper 'The Social and Economic Benefits of Improving Mental Health'

5 April 2019

1. About us

The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) is the professional organisation and peak body for the Australian library and information services sector.

On behalf of our 5,000 personal and institutional members, we provide the national voice of the profession in the development, promotion and delivery of quality library and information services to the nation, through leadership, advocacy and mutual support. We represent school, public, academic, research, corporate, law, health, government, National, State and Territory libraries and the people who staff them.

Public libraries

Australia has more than 1600 central, branch and mobile libraries, with 9.3 million registered members and more than 113 million customer visits each year. Offering print and digital books, magazines, newspapers, databases, DVDs, wifi, PC internet access, learning programs, fun activities and expert staff help, they are a much loved, highly regarded and trusted community resource. The public library sector within ALIA is represented by the ALIA Australian Public Library Alliance.

Health libraries

It is estimated there are between 350 and 400 health libraries in Australia, including hospital, community health, government department, research institute, university, public health, pharmaceutical and biotechnology libraries[1]. There are some 1,250 people employed in these libraries; 760 health librarians, 290 library technicians and 200 general staff. Health librarians are an important part of the health information workforce, alongside health information managers and health informaticians. The health sector within ALIA is represented by ALIA Health Libraries Australia.

2. Libraries and mental health

Public libraries
Public libraries are welcoming places in the heart of the community.

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[1] Ref. Kammermann, M. 2016. The Census of Australian Health Libraries and Health Librarians Working Outside the Traditional Library Setting: The Final Report.

- They are places of safety and understanding for people with mental health issues who seek respite from the pressures of school, college, work and home.
- They encourage interaction through group activities and have quiet spaces for individual reflection.
- They provide information for people who are looking for information and answers about ways of managing mental health issues.
- They offer events and health promotion initiatives which raise awareness of mental health issues in the local community.
- They run programs and services to help improve people's quality of life.

Anecdotally, where there are gaps in services and support for people with mental health in the community, libraries provide a default, safe, neutral place. This library role is neither formally recognised nor funded by government but our open-door approach brings with it challenges; for example, requiring councils to invest in training programs for library staff so they can deliver services appropriately to people needing higher levels of support. This is one of the many invisible costs of mental ill-health to the community.

Health libraries
The role of health libraries as important sources of information for medical students, clinicians, and other health practitioners; researchers and academics; medical, nursing and allied health students in universities and on clinical placements is well understood. However, health libraries also provide information and education services for hospital-based consumers (patients, families, carers), consumer representatives, volunteers and the broader community, relating to both physical and mental health.

Health libraries are also viewed as 'safe spaces', offering 'protected time' and support for stressed clinicians in their demanding professional roles; students may also struggle to maintain a work-life balance and juggle competing priorities of transitioning to the professional workforce and ongoing specialisations.

Four of the case studies in the Health Libraries Australia and Health Libraries Inc. HeLIINS research[2] deal with consumer health literacy in physical and mental health. For example, *Words for Wellbeing* (Ipswich Hospital Library with the local public library) caters to both mental and physical health[3].

3. Responses to the issues paper

3.1 QUESTIONS ON HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

What approaches can governments at all levels and non-government organisations adopt to improve:

- **Support for people experiencing mental illness to prevent and respond to homelessness and accommodation instability?**

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[2] https://www.alia.org.au/helins-health-libraries-national-standards-outcomes-national-research-project

[3] https://www.alia.org.au/sites/default/files/documents/CASE%20STUDY%208_0.pdf

Public libraries across Australia provide support and information for people who are experiencing or who are at risk of homelessness. Example: Blacktown City Libraries, NSW, facilitates programs including ongoing employee assistance; an annual health and wellness day; and annual support of RUOK Day.

As public libraries are safe, airconditioned public spaces, they are often used as 'drop in spaces' by people experiencing homelessness.

3.2 QUESTIONS ON SOCIAL PARTICIPATION AND INCLUSION

What role do non-government organisations play in supporting mental health through social inclusion and participation, and what more should they do?

Public libraries operate in more than 1600 service points across Australia where they provide a wide range of programs, to support and promote social inclusion. As described above, they function as a critical space where people can feel included in the community.

Example: Lake Macquarie Libraries, NSW, runs 'Sensory-friendly Santa' every December so that children with sensory issues can enjoy a more relaxed holiday experience. At other times of the year, they provide spaces where members of the community can interact and connect with one another, through 'Small Talk Happenings'. These workshops are not exclusive to Lake Macquarie Libraries and these kinds of activities are common across Australian public libraries.

Example: For the last two years, Shoalhaven Libraries, NSW, has run the 'Community Hotseat' program, a calendar of events that provides avenues for social inclusion. It features a monthly talk provided to short term mental health patients at Shoalhaven Hospital to inform them about the services that the local libraries offer. The libraries provide memberships that can be obtained via an unconfirmed address, which means that users can access library services regardless of their residential status.

Example: Woollahra Libraries, NSW, also provides social inclusion through volunteer opportunities that make people who are isolated feel more included in the community. Volunteers can engage in a range of different roles including local history; home library selection; and general library duties.

Example: Libraries ACT has regular visits from patrons with mental health issues who see the libraries in the region as a safe and welcoming space.

> *Our library has many regular customers, visiting several times a week and daily in many instances. These customers identify the library as a safe space and use a variety of services from newspapers to computers and programs. Many of these customers are unable to provide a formal submission to the inquiry due to their varied and complex needs, and the inability to decipher the abstract concept of purpose and benefit, and subsequently to articulate what the library means to them*
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> *.*
> *Ms W visits our Library once each week. She is an avid DVD borrower. Ms W is familiar with staff, and enjoys interactions with them. Ms W is a regular observer of Giggle and Wiggle as she enjoys the songs and seeing the babies. Ms W visits the library with a support person, but browses the shelves and interacts with staff without supervision. Ms W borrows from the Customer Service Desk as her choices are vetted by staff and*

her support worker as requested on her profile by her parents. Ms W is a highlight of the week for staff, who enjoy her sunny disposition and positive interactions.

Mr X visits our Library daily for between three and seven hours. He uses the newspaper resources to document statistics from the obituary columns. Mr X is familiar with staff, and other regular library customers, after over many years using the library service. Mr X knows the staff by name, and regularly engages to discuss the newspapers. On occasion Mr X engages with staff to discuss the headlines, in particular the mistreatment of children which he finds distressing. He has required consoling in the past when the news becomes overwhelming. The library team notice when Mr X is absent, and have raised concerns after not seeing Mr X for several days.

Mr Z is a regular visitor to the library, up to four times each week. Mr Z enjoys interaction with staff and often asks for assistance when using the internet services. Staff know Mr Z and spend time with him each visit as this is a key part of his library experience. Mr Z has very complex needs, and time and care is required during conversation to ensure his needs are understood and managed. Staff know Mr Z well and he is welcomed into the library on each visit. He is a familiar face to other regular library users and on occasion interacts with other members of the community.

Mr X and Mr Z access our Library independently, confirming the library is a safe and supportive environment for people with complex needs to engage. The community members above are valued, and their engagement is an integral part of the Library community.

Example: The Libraries Tasmania Glenorchy branch has hosted a 'mental health expo' for the last five years. The expo offers the public and service providers the opportunity to engage with one another. In 2018 the theme was 'stronger together' and it had more than 1,000 attendees.

Example: Central West Libraries has trialled Reading Well as part of an international movement to explore the benefits of 'bibliotherapy'. A bibliotherapy program sees libraries partnering with GPs to prescribe books which may help with mental or psychological disorders such as anxiety, depression and dementia.

Are there particular population sub-groups that are more at risk of mental ill-health due to inadequate social participation and inclusion? What, if anything, should be done to specifically target those groups?

Older Australians are more at risk of mental ill-health and feelings of social isolation and this is another space where public libraries assist by facilitating programs such as Tech Savvy Seniors and programs via the Be Connected network that support digital literacy in older Australians.

Example: Lake Macquarie Libraries, NSW, also provides support in this area through the 'Over 55's Program' which is run by its Aged Services Officer.

Public libraries often facilitate workshops and programs that support youth mental health.

Example: Lake Macquarie Libraries, NSW, facilitates the ongoing workshops 'The Nervous Anxious Child', and 'Developing Emotionally Strong Children'.

The continued support and funding of these programs and other social inclusion programs that libraries run is critical to their continued success.

3.3 QUESTIONS ON FUNDING ARRANGEMENTS

How could funding arrangements be reformed to better incentivise service providers to deliver good outcomes, and facilitate coordination between government agencies and across tiers of government?

As has already been stated, the role of libraries in supporting people experiencing mental health issues has not been formally recognised by government. This means that service provision is dependent on the capacity of the library team (with many other demands on their time) and on the capability of staff who may or may not have received appropriate training.

A pilot scheme could be run a small group of libraries to assess the benefits of a more formal, government-funded program, creating a defined, publicly-acknowledged, measurable role for public libraries in supporting people with mental health issues, their families and carers.

4. Summary

Public libraries across Australia provide and facilitate invaluable, community-focused workshops and programs for people with, or at risk of developing, mental ill-health. We provide information, raise awareness and aim to help remove any stigma from mental health issues. Hospital libraries, in addition to providing evidence-based information about mental health, are involved with work-based mental health programs, supporting health professionals for whom it is essential to care first for themselves, before being able to care for others.

As libraries provide this ad hoc support for library patrons it often falls on individual libraries to train their staff in mental health first aid. Additionally, as reading plays an important role in maintaining good mental health, by allowing people to explore other places, times, people, situations, and look for meaning in their own lives, the role that libraries in providing access to books cannot be undervalued.

ALIA recommends that there be more formal support and funding for libraries to facilitate this support, starting with a pilot scheme. Funding for a pilot of a more 'joined up' approach between existing service providers would demonstrate how libraries, in partnership with case workers, could assist those suffering metal illness to be safe and utilise these welcoming and supportive community spaces.

The introduction of more consistent and formalised funding to enable public libraries and hospital libraries to run the programs and workplace initiatives described in this submission is critical to ensure that libraries can continue to provide these services.

ALIA, ALIA Australian Public Library Alliance and ALIA Health Libraries Australia would welcome the opportunity to engage in discussions with the Productivity Commission about the points raised in this submission.

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