



Beyond Blue Response to The Way Back Support Service Interim Evaluation

Beyond Blue acknowledges those who are living with and managing suicidal distress, those who have survived suicide, those who have cared for someone struggling with suicidality, and those who have been bereaved by suicide. We strive never to forget that behind every data point in this evaluation is a unique individual and their friends and family. We thank everyone who has generously shared their time, experience, and knowledge in this evaluation process to date. The Way Back evaluation is vital so that Beyond Blue and others can continue to learn, improve, deliver effective aftercare, and ultimately prevent suicide.

Background

What is the Way Back Support Service (The Way Back)?

- The Way Back provides non-clinical assertive aftercare and psychosocial support for people who have presented to a hospital emergency department or community mental health service following a suicide attempt or suicidal crisis.
- The service complements, rather than replaces, clinical services, and represents a substantial effort to address some of the key unmet needs and gaps in the suicide prevention system.
- Beyond Blue originally developed and piloted The Way Back with non-government revenue before leading the implementation of a four-year national expansion of the service from 2018.
- This expansion is a joint endeavour funded by the Commonwealth (\$37.6 million), matched State and Territory government funding, a \$5 million contribution from Beyond Blue, and a \$2.06 million philanthropic grant secured by Beyond Blue from the Paul Ramsay Foundation.

The Evaluation

- Nous Group (Nous) was selected through a competitive procurement process to independently evaluate The Way Back national expansion from June 2020 to November 2022.
- This response is to the findings and recommendations of Nous' interim, mid-way evaluation report (November 2021) which is available online [here](#). The final report is due in December 2022.
- The interim evaluation report will help us to continue to improve The Way Back model, performance, and outcomes in the short term. We will do this while governments work together to design and implement the [universal aftercare measure](#) announced by the Commonwealth in the 2021/22 Budget (\$158.6M / 4 years).
- The interim evaluation also has critical learnings and implications for the design and implementation of the universal aftercare initiative.

Approach to the evaluation

- The evaluation was designed to assist Beyond Blue, The Way Back service providers, funders, and other stakeholders to understand how the service is being implemented and what works, for whom and why.

- As the first national evaluation of assertive aftercare in Australia, the evaluation was designed to ensure that what we learn will contribute to the evidence-base emerging from existing aftercare models and to inform policy and service design and implementation.
- The evaluation draws from multiple data sources, including:
 - consultations with people who participated in The Way Back, service providers, Primary Health Networks (PHNs), Beyond Blue, and referring health services at eight service sites;
 - surveys of participants and providers and quarterly reports at 21 service sites; and
 - data from the Primary Mental Health Care Minimum Data Set (PMHC MDS) and The Way Back Extension data set for 21 service sites.
- Bellberry Human Research Ethics Committee has approved and has ethical oversight of the evaluation. The evaluation has also gained ethical approval from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS).

Beyond Blue's response to the interim evaluation report

- We can all benefit from people's experiences and lessons learned as we work to prevent suicide. We hope The Way Back and other evidence-based aftercare models will influence how governments build a suicide prevention system that is there for everyone after a suicide attempt or crisis.
- **Beyond Blue welcomes and supports the 11 short-term recommendations and five longer term considerations identified in the interim report.**
 - The 11 short-term recommendations involve changes around performance monitoring and reporting, improvements in data collection and analysis. This will provide a clearer picture of how well The Way Back is being delivered, and what changes are required to make the service more suitable for different clients. We will work with the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments, PHNs, service providers, and other stakeholders to plan and integrate these recommendations into The Way Back in 2022.
 - The five longer term considerations apply to broader changes in referral pathways, governance, funding, and data. Implementation of these recommendations over time, will be done in partnership with the Commonwealth Government and other stakeholders, as we evolve the service model to reach more people.
- **We are encouraged that The Way Back's objectives are being realised** – to improve access to high-quality aftercare, support recovery and increase the capacity of a skilled aftercare workforce.
- **We are confident that The Way Back is contributing to significant improvements in outcomes for people.**
 - The interim results show significant reductions in psychological distress and suicidal ideation scores and increased emotional wellbeing. On average, measures of suicidality decreased 63 per cent and psychological distress decreased 30 per cent among participants. This is based on a comparison of client data collected before and after people's participation in The Way Back, using valid clinical scales.
 - While the comparison of before and after scores only included about 1 in 5 client episodes (19 per cent of all episodes), the characteristics of participants included in the evaluation are no different to those who were not included, indicating the sample is broadly representative of all people who participated in the service.
 - People who identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander experienced greater improvements than those who did not.

- Improvements in people's outcomes were found across all sites, which is an encouraging sign that The Way Back service model is delivering desired outcomes for early recovery.
- **We look forward to building on our understanding of why and how The Way Back service model brings about change, and for whom.**
 - Early findings suggest that trust and rapport with Support Coordinators is critical to driving people's early recovery through engagement with The Way Back.
 - Participants also identified the lack of a waitlist, feeling 'seen and heard' and being empowered to identify their own strengths as a welcome change from previous experiences with clinical mental health services. This is an example of how this evaluation is increasing understanding about the elements of successful aftercare and what early recovery looks like.
- **We note that only a small number of participants were interviewed or surveyed by Nous for the interim evaluation, and acknowledge that those who chose to participate in the evaluation might have a more positive view of the service.**
 - This can be a common issue in evaluations: research participants can be hard to recruit and those who do often hold strong views.
 - On top of this, many people who have experienced suicidal thoughts or behaviours, and moved forward with their lives, often do not wish to participate in research that reminds them of their suicidal attempt or crisis.
 - The evaluation is an important means of giving people the opportunity to say what aspect of the service matters most to them, what motivates them, and what influences their engagement with services like The Way Back.
 - We understand Nous will do more to address this by seeking additional insights from participants in the remainder of the evaluation period, including people who disengaged early and those who chose not to engage.
 - Nous will also seek to better understand the experiences of families and carers in the remainder of the evaluation period.
- **We support the need for greater clarity about how well The Way Back is being delivered.**
 - The interim evaluation found that complex governance and funding arrangements for the service expansion has resulted in issues around accountability and authority. This has meant that responsibilities for performance monitoring and management have been unclear.
 - Beyond Blue strongly supports the recommendations related to governance and the need to clarify roles and responsibilities, and will work with the Commonwealth Government, PHNs and service providers to improve performance monitoring and reporting mechanisms.
- **We are cautious about the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) set for service providers, because of limitations with the data.**
 - For example, the evaluation found that between 20 and 40 per cent of participants do not appear to have a Safety or Support Plan completed, which is an important and mandatory feature of The Way Back model.
 - This aspect of the evaluation was reliant on a national data set (the PMHC MDS) that is under representative of all service activity. Additional data sources show safety plans were completed at a much higher rate than data in the interim report suggest.
 - We are also aware that safety/support plan KPIs may not have been met for different reasons (such as people already having their own safety plan, or not being able to establish one within the required timeframe).

- The need for better quality data and more people-focused key performance indicators will be a key area for improvement in the final evaluation report. Beyond Blue will work with the Commonwealth Government and PHNs to ensure we have access to relevant datasets and improve how we collect and monitor this information going forward.
- **We acknowledge this evaluation provides early evidence of short-term outcomes and does not consider long term outcomes, such as suicide reattempts.**
 - This is a formative evaluation to help understand how – in the first two years of significant service delivery – the national expansion of The Way Back service is being implemented, what is working and why and to inform the ongoing evolution and improvement of the service model.
 - The Way Back model will be subsumed into the universal aftercare measure being designed and implemented by the Commonwealth and State and Territory governments. The interim evaluation also has critical learnings and implications for the design and implementation of the universal aftercare initiative (as will the final evaluation report).
 - We believe a long-term outcome evaluation of aftercare in Australia is essential so that governments, the community, and the suicide prevention sector know if investments in aftercare have had an impact.

Next steps

- Beyond Blue will continue to share what we have learnt through this evaluation, as well as from service delivery of The Way Back, to strengthen the evidence base about suicide prevention and aftercare.
- We are working with the Commonwealth Department of Health to identify and agree how to action the recommendations. The recommendations are relevant not only for Beyond Blue and The Way Back, but also for service providers, PHNs, LHNs and Commonwealth and State/Territory governments, and will require planning and cooperation to implement.
- Beyond Blue will develop an implementation plan with key stakeholders to ensure that The Way Back service model continues to evolve in response to the interim evaluation findings and recommendations.
- The Commonwealth Government is designing the universal aftercare measure, announced in the 2021-2022 Budget, with State and Territory governments. This interim evaluation presents valuable insights on governance, funding and accountability arrangements that must be considered in the design of the universal aftercare measure. Beyond Blue will also continue to share insights and provide advice to assist governments.
- The final report for the evaluation is due in late December 2022. This will provide more comprehensive lessons based on a larger, more complete dataset and analysis, including additional qualitative insights. The final report will also consider the experiences of different participant groups, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, in greater depth.