



Patron: Her Excellency Ms Quentin Bryce, AC CVO

25 June 2013

Senator Penny Wright
Australian Greens Senator for South Australia
Electoral office
Level 3, 27 Leigh Street
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Email: Senator.Wright@aph.gov.au

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Penny'.

Dear Senator Wright

Improving mental health services in country Australia: Voices and experiences

beyondblue, the national depression and anxiety initiative, appreciates the opportunity to comment on the draft report 'Improving mental health services in country Australia: Voices and experiences'.

beyondblue commends the development of this comprehensive report and supports the strong commitment to addressing stigma related to mental health; poor access to sub-acute services; greater community-based mechanisms; better support for carers; and, improved training and education for the rural mental health workforce.

The draft report could be further enhanced by:

- 1. Recommending greater investment into research on stigma related to mental health.** People with depression and anxiety experience significant levels of stigma and discrimination. This has a negative impact on the quality of life of people with depression and anxiety, and their carers, affecting access to treatment, employment, housing, insurance and personal relationships.¹ More research is needed to better understand the different types of stigma that are associated with depression and anxiety, and effective ways to reduce that stigma and discrimination. This additional research is particularly important to understand the stigma associated with anxiety, which has not been well researched to date.
- 2. Emphasising support for innovative models of community based sub-acute services beyond the status quo.** The *beyondblue* Community Access Program (bbCAP) is a trial designed to provide easily-accessible, low-intensity psychological help and support for people with mild to moderate depression and anxiety. The bbCAP will enable people to access specially trained coaches in their community for client centred therapy without having to see a GP first. If higher intensive support is required, individuals will be referred to programs such as *Access to Allied Psychological Services (ATAPS)* and *Better Access*. Regardless, of where a person may be on the mental health continuum (e.g. mild depression through to severe depression and/or anxiety), this stepped care model can provide the most appropriate care for the individual. The demonstration trial will commence in the first of three sites in October 2013.

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3. Adopting a stronger focus on the role of service coordination and integration. Strategies to enhance the capacity of the rural and remote health workforce should focus not only on clinical service delivery, but also on improving service coordination and integration. A successful example of this is the Mental Health in Drought Affected Communities Initiative that *beyondblue*, the Australian General Practice Network and Divisions of General Practice implemented from 2007-11. This initiative aimed to develop community capacity and resilience in drought affected communities. Central to the success of this program was the role and function of Community Support Workers, who were based in Divisions of General Practice, and performed outreach services; networking and brokerage between service providers; and crisis intervention. The evaluation of this initiative concluded that *"the role of the Community Support Worker has been fundamental to building awareness and creating greater access to mental health information, training and support services to organisations, businesses and individuals experiencing or at risk of environmental threats, such as drought."*ⁱⁱⁱ

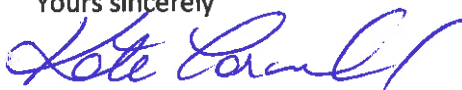
Furthermore, *beyondblue* supports the Partners in Recovery initiative as an evidence based model that facilitates service coordination, improves referral pathways, strengthen partnerships and promotes a community based recovery model to people experiencing severe and persistent mental illness with complex needs.

4. Acknowledging the need for tailored approaches to working with specific population groups. People with depression and anxiety seek help in different ways which varies across population groups and the lifespan. For example, people's beliefs and culture impact their behaviour and attitudes towards seeking help and the effectiveness of different treatment options.^{iii,iv,v} Therefore, targeted interventions to support behavior change need to be directed to priority communities (e.g. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, refugee and migrant communities) along with more universal population level interventions.

5. Including additional recommendations to support the role of carers and their health and wellbeing. Qualitative studies about people's experience of caring for a person with depression commonly identify themes of isolation, ongoing challenges in managing the direct impact of depression on their own life, and a sense of confusion or difficulty in knowing how to support their loved ones.^{vi} A greater investment is needed to support carers. This support should be provided not only when a carer is in a direct caring role, but also afterwards as a carer may have missed important life opportunities such as paid employment, education, leisure and recreation activities.

The 'Improving mental health services in country Australia: Voices and experiences' report has captured a range of issues impacting on access to quality mental health care for Australians living in regional, rural and remote areas. We would welcome the opportunity to continue discussion on the Australian Green's approach to improving mental health services for people living in country Australia and, also, *beyondblue's* work in this area.

Yours sincerely



Kate Carnell AO
CEO, *beyondblue*

ⁱ *beyondblue* Position Statement. (2012). *Stigma and discrimination associated with depression and anxiety*. Retrieved from: <http://www.beyondblue.org.au/about-us/access-and-equity/position-statements-and-policy-submissions>

ⁱⁱ Juriansz, D. (2010). *Mental Health in Drought affected Communities Initiative (MHDl): Independent Evaluation Report 2010*. *beyondblue*: Melbourne.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wilson, C.J., Bushnell, J.A., & Caputi, P. (2011). Early access and help seeking: Practice implications and new initiatives. *Early intervention in psychiatry*; 5 (S1): 34-39.

^{iv} Jorm, A., Allen, N., Morgan, A., & Purcell, R. (2009). *A guide for what works for depression*. *beyondblue*: Melbourne.

^v Jorm, A., Allen, N., Morgan, A., & Purcell, R. (2009). *A guide for what works for anxiety*. *beyondblue*: Melbourne

^{vi} Highet, N., McNair, B., Davenport, T. & Hickie, I. (2004). 'How much more can we lose?' carer and family perspectives on living with a person with depression. *Medical Journal of Australia*. 181:7. S6-S9.