



The work of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System continues

Statement from the Commissioners – 16 April 2020

The coronavirus pandemic has shifted the social and economic landscape in which we live, affecting us as individuals, as a society, and as a nation. As the consequences continue to unfold, we have already seen its profound impact on our mental health and wellbeing.

How we, as a society, respond to this challenge will be a testament to what we value most and who we seek to be. This is a time for humanity, kindness and empathy.

Now more than ever we must maintain our focus on designing a mental health system that is able to respond to current and emerging pressures. While these times, without question, require a rapid and well-resourced health response, we cannot forget how integral good mental health is to our overall wellbeing.

Every one of us, locally, nationally and around the world, will feel the emotional impacts of the coronavirus pandemic. But the weight of these impacts may be felt differently across individuals and communities.

While these may be the hardest of times for many of us, with feelings of stress and anxiety a valid response, we know that some people already living with mental illness, including those who have experienced trauma, may be at an even higher risk of distress than others. We also know that there are increased pressures on many of the families and carers of people experiencing poor mental health.

We have already seen a surge in the demand for mental health services—services that were under pressure long before the coronavirus pandemic. It is clear, that a future mental health system will need to address responses to large-scale events, such as the recent challenges of drought and bushfires and the current crisis.

Our ambition to transform Victoria's mental health system into one that places people at the forefront, is responsive to an ever-evolving world, is trauma-informed and based on the best available scientific evidence is more pertinent than ever. It must function within communities that are cohesive and connected. We all have a role to play in supporting good mental health and wellbeing.

Although we find ourselves in a unique and challenging time, our work at the Commission continues.

While we have recently adjusted our plans, with the cancellation of our second and final round of public hearings, we will continue to collect witness statements from people with lived experience and a range of other individuals. Witness statements will be published on our website from May this year. The Commission will also find new ways of engaging with people living with mental illness, families, carers, people working in the sector, and the wider community. These activities will be announced in coming months.

We recognise the personal resilience many people living with mental illness have had to acquire while living through stressful times and how they can often draw on this strength and resourcefulness.

To those who may be experiencing poor mental health or who are finding the current situation difficult, we want to highlight the continued importance of seeking help and support, particularly for people living with mental illness, their families and carers.

It is extremely important to seek help if you feel like you need it. A range of support services are listed below.

While this is a time of significant uncertainty, there is much hope to hold on to.

It has been encouraging to see such a positive, rapid and flexible response from the mental health sector and its dedicated workforce, including peer workers, in providing additional services and resources to support those experiencing poor mental health. We have seen organisations reconfigure their services, putting in place new telehealth and online responses and supporting people in their homes. We give due and deep acknowledgment to the mental health workforce as it reaches out to consumers, families and carers in new, caring and creative ways.

We welcome the focus on mental health from both the Commonwealth and Victorian governments, particularly the increased funding for additional mental health services in response to coronavirus and for the continued emphasis on the delivery of critical recommendations in our Interim Report. There is a significant opportunity in the face of a crisis to build new partnerships and capitalise on the goodwill and cooperation across sectors and governments. Collaboration will continue to be a key priority for the Commission as our work continues.

We have also been heartened by the conversations about mental health that have occurred throughout the media and in the public discourse. This attention and openness is encouraging as we continue to break down the barriers of stigma and discrimination.

We have witnessed many examples of compassion across the community, as people reach out to one another with empathy. We will harness this collective kindness, and the positive changes that we have witnessed in service responses, as we redesign the mental health system to support generations now and into the future.

Finally, as we practice physical distancing, we must also reduce the impact of loneliness and isolation by keeping socially and emotionally connected. The very best of humanity is being demonstrated through the creative ways that people are reaching out to families, friends, neighbours and colleagues, and it is critical that this endures.

Penny Armytage (Chair) on behalf of Commissioners Dr Alex Cockram, Professor Bernadette McSherry and Professor Allan Fels.

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*If you or a family member has immediate concerns or requires assistance, contact Beyond Blue on **1300 224 636** or Lifeline on **13 11 14**.*

Beyond Blue has [online resources](#) to help you look after your mental health during the coronavirus outbreak.

To stay up to date, follow the Commission on Twitter ([@RCMentalHealth](#)). You can also contact the Commission on **1800 00 11 34** (Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm) or email contact@rcvmhs.vic.gov.au.

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