



Ms. Penny Armytage  
Mental Health Royal Commission Establishment  
Department of Premier and Cabinet  
1 Treasury Place  
Melbourne Victoria 3002

28 March 2019

Dear Ms. Penny Armytage,

**Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System**

Arts Centre Melbourne welcomes the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System (**Royal Commission**), and congratulates you on your appointment as Commissioner and Chairperson.

In advance of a formal call for public submissions to the Royal Commission, Arts Centre Melbourne wishes to take this opportunity:

- Raise awareness within the Royal Commission of a community at risk
- Offer comment on the recently confirmed Terms of Reference for the Royal Commission
- Share learnings with the Royal Commission from Arts Centre Melbourne's mental health program, the Arts Wellbeing Collective, which is funded under WorkSafe Victoria's Mental Health Improvement Fund until June 2021.

Arts Centre Melbourne would be happy to assist the Royal Commission in any way we can, especially in relation to:

- Mental health in the creative industries
- Workplace mental health and wellbeing
- Promotion and prevention initiatives

Please feel free to contact me via the details below if Arts Centre Melbourne can be of assistance.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Claire Spencer".

Claire Spencer  
CEO | Arts Centre Melbourne

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## About Arts Centre Melbourne

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Arts Centre Melbourne's purpose is to enrich the lives of Victorians – culturally, educationally, socially and economically and to provide leadership in the promotion and development of the performing arts (*Victorian Arts Centre Act 1979* (Vic)).

Sitting beneath the iconic Spire, Arts Centre Melbourne is Australia's largest and busiest performing arts centre. In 2017–18, Arts Centre Melbourne staged more than 4,000 performances and events and welcomed a record 3.76 million people through our doors.

As a cultural and architectural landmark in the nation's cultural capital, Arts Centre Melbourne has showcased the best of Australian and international performing arts for nearly 40 years.

## Mental Health in the Creative Industries

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There are approximately 87,000 workers (68,000 FTE) currently employed in Victoria's creative industries, who collectively add \$6.1 billion p.a. in direct value-add to the State's economy.

The most extensive study of arts and entertainment industry workers undertaken anywhere in the world, "Working in the Australian Entertainment Industry" (2015) by Victoria University unveiled shocking statistics:

- Symptomology of moderate to severe anxiety was 10 times higher than the general population
- Symptomology of moderate to severe depression was five times higher than the general population
- 9% of the 3,000+ arts workers surveyed reported a major depressive episode in the previous 12 months
- Suicide attempts for Australian Entertainment industry workers was more than double that of the general population.

A number of risk factors were seen to contribute to these statistics:

- Financial stress: gig economy resulting in low job security, low wages, frequently being asked to work for free or profit share, freelancing and sporadic work patterns
- Expectations: career setbacks, critical review, pressure to perform, extreme highs and lows, and physically demanding / repetitive roles
- Environmental factors: shift work, late night work, long hours and touring lifestyles leading to social isolation
- Culture: skewed balance of power and authority between frontline creatives and management, and perceptions that seeking help would jeopardise future opportunities
- 'The Show Must Go On' mentality: immovable deadlines, performances prioritised at the expense of physical and mental health, compounded by historic underinvestment in supportive workplace practices, policies and procedures (focus on performance and not people).





Despite this, industry workers expressed an overwhelming passion for their creative careers, many reporting it as the 'purpose of their lives' and 'who they were'. However many found it difficult to separate their identity from their professional lives, leading to mental health issues wherein the success of a performance was conflated with an individual's global perceived sense of self-worth.

Working in the performing arts is typically equated with glamour, excitement, and reward. The broader community is rarely aware of the high prevalence of mental health problems, substance use problems, and workplace issues that currently pervade our industry.

In the occasional instances where this is brought to the attention of the general population – often through media coverage of celebrity deaths by suicide – it is often relegated to the domain of the 'tortured artist'.

We draw the attention of the Royal Commission to this at-risk population group and encourage the Royal Commission to make further inquiries in the course of its review work.

### **Feedback on the Scope of the Terms of Reference**

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The Terms of Reference are comprehensive and the scope for the Royal Commission is broad. We are particularly encouraged by the inclusion in paragraph 1 of a mandate for the Royal Commission review prevention measures in addition to 'reviewing the efficacy of the mental health system for those experiencing mental health issues (paragraph 2) and their carers (paragraph 3).

With that prevention aspect of the Royal Commission's work in mind, we make the following comments and observations.

While the mental health workforce is referenced in paragraph 2 of the Terms of Reference, we note that the role of the workplace is not specifically called out, other than as part of the general reference in paragraph 1 to measures to 'most effectively prevent mental illness and suicide'.

In our experience, the workplace plays a major role in supporting those with mental health problems, preventing mental ill health, and promoting positive mental health. In our experience, we are finding that the growing expectation and requirements of employers to promote psychosocial safety in the workplace is not yet matched with a strong evidence base on the most effective interventions and pathways. As we continue to reduce stigma, help-seeking will become commonplace, and workplaces as an initial port of call need to be educated to best manage increasing demands in this space.

In undertaking its work, particularly having regard to paragraph 1 of the Terms of Reference, we encourage the Royal Commission to give equal weight to reviewing measures to prevent mental health problems and promotion of positive mental health, rather than limiting its inquiry to focus on the treatment of existing mental illness. While the statistics around mental illness are extreme, we note the dual importance of prevention and promotion for the 80% of Australian adults not experiencing mental illness in any one year, in order to better promote flourishing and thriving as a long-term solution to reducing pressure on the mental illness treatment system.



It is heartening to see particular population groups and communities identified in the Terms of Reference. In addition, there are industries with specific risk and protective factors and much higher prevalence of mental health problems. In line with the Royal Commission into Mental Health's person-centred approach, it is essential that these population groups are not treated in isolation, but that a person's intersectionality of identities (and resulting risk and protective factors) are acknowledged.

While there is some reference to prevention in the Terms of Reference, it is linked with suicide prevention, an issue not always directly linked with mental illness. We support the recommendation of the Victorian Mental Illness Awareness Council (Section 3.1.8) to approach suicide as a whole of community problem.

We welcome the commitment to improved data collection and research strategies, and would advocate strongly for a similar study to the 2007 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing.

Promoting early intervention and help-seeking behaviour is essential. In our experience, we have seen our community wait until crisis before seeking help, or feeling that they were not unwell enough to qualify for seeking help from the existing services of which they were aware. We hope that the Royal Commission addresses the spectrum not only of mental health and mental illness, but also the spectrum of appropriate services for every aspect of the mental health continuum.

### **The Arts Wellbeing Collective**

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Arts Centre Melbourne is committed to providing leadership in the promotion and development of the performing arts, in line with our core values - Leadership, Community, Care More, and Creativity. As such, we have recently taken bold and significant steps towards addressing mental health and wellbeing in the performing arts with the development and implementation of the Arts Wellbeing Collective.

The Arts Wellbeing Collective is an Arts Centre Melbourne initiative that comprises a consortium of more than 150 Victorian arts and cultural organisations whose shared vision is to effect better mental health and wellbeing for performing arts workers.

Our objectives are to:

- Improve support services for Victorian arts workers
  - Collate and share information
  - Effect industry cultural change
  - Improve support networks within and between arts organisations.
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## Background

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Working with industry leaders, practitioners and experts including psychologist (and renowned performing artist), Greta Bradman, and psychologist, Dr Michael Carr-Gregg, Arts Centre Melbourne developed a Pilot Program to develop a program addressing the unique mental health and wellbeing challenges faced by performing arts workers.

The Arts Wellbeing Collective Pilot Program took place in 2017, delivering more than 40 workshops, seminars and professional development activities, including a regional roadshow to hubs throughout Victoria, and a custom-built website housing more than 20 resources.

The Arts Wellbeing Collective Pilot Program underwent an independent, external evaluation. The Executive Summary stated that *"Feedback was overwhelmingly positive with a desire for the program to continue and expand. The program was seen as timely, useful, resource rich and generally well presented. There was relief that the program had started and gratitude to Arts Centre Melbourne for making it happen."*

In 2018, Arts Centre Melbourne worked with its innovation partner, PwC, to explore strategic opportunities. Arts Centre Melbourne then utilised findings from the evaluation and the PwC report to develop a three-year strategy, which aims to create long-term positive culture change across the sector.

In late 2018, Arts Centre Melbourne received funding from WorkSafe Victoria's WorkWell Mental Health Improvement Fund to enable the expansion of the Arts Wellbeing Collective over three years. The support of WorkSafe Victoria is an incredible asset to the program, particularly as the arts industry does not have the same risk profile as, for example, construction or aged care. Working closely with our regulatory body in a space where there is a lack of 'normal' workplace settings and structures has been enlightening and informative, hopefully for both parties. This support is enabling us to give guidance on the features of a mentally healthy workplace to arts and cultural organisations of various shapes and sizes – a big step forward.

The new Arts Wellbeing Collective strategy was launched on 10 October 2018, World Mental Health Day, and the new program is now in full rollout.

## Strategy

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The Arts Wellbeing Collective model is based on an integrated approach to mental health and wellbeing that addresses issues at a range of levels and in a combination of methods (adapted from research by LaMontagne et al. 2017).

The strategy focusses on promotion, prevention and early intervention, with identified populous groups in universal, selective and indicated (adapted from research by Mrazek and Hoggerty 1994 and Kitchener et al. 2013).



The Arts Wellbeing Collective will not only utilise an integrated approach in its content development, but also in targeting change at all levels, based on an adaptation of Dr Aaron Jarden's work, 'me, we, us' model as Individual and Managers (Me), Arts Organisations (We), and Arts Industry (Us).

Clinical and positive psychology informs practical content, embracing the International Positive Psychology Association definition of "the scientific study of what enables individuals and communities to thrive".

Vitally, all aspects of the program are tailored to the unique environment, challenges, voice and experiences of the performing arts sector.

The guiding principles that inform the work of the Arts Wellbeing Collective are:

- **Prevention focused:** Promoting positive mental health and wellbeing at all levels, raising awareness of mental health, mental health problems and the value of early intervention.
- **Working in partnership:** Ensuring a variety of partnerships state-wide and across the industry - collaboration is core to the Arts Wellbeing Collective and vital to success.
- **Creating systems level change:** Seeking to understand and address systems, cultures and traditions that contribute to poor mental health and wellbeing in the performing arts, and aiming to drive sector-wide changes in culture and practices.
- **Long-term thinking:** Prioritising resources and initiatives that have capacity for long-lasting impact, scalability and transferability, staying abreast of national and international trends, and focussing intently on core vision, objectives, principles and values.
- **Knowledge creation and dissemination:** Working with experts and industry leaders to find, share, create and translate the best available evidence-based information, tailored for creative contexts, maintaining open access to as much programmatic knowledge as possible, with minimal barriers to engagement.
- **Encouraging innovation:** Acknowledging that we are always learning - we do not have all the answers. Test, trial, evaluate, and share useful findings with energy and authenticity. Being rigorously planned, strategically responsive and thoughtfully adaptable.

## The Program 2018 - 2021

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### Support for developing mentally healthy creative workplaces:

The Arts Wellbeing Collective is working in partnership with peak bodies, organisational psychologists and industry leaders to support the development of mentally healthy creative workplaces, acknowledging the sometimes unusual needs and composition of creative workplaces.

**Resources:** Practical, tailored resources such as tool kits, posters, and videos. Recent resources include Tour Well, promoting positive mental health and wellbeing while on tour, and De-Role Guide, mentally healthy tips and techniques for getting out of character.





**Workshops:** Face to face workshops focussing on Creative Self Care, Creative Workplaces, and Mental Health and the Performing Arts - all workshops are co-designed with learning and organisational development specialists, relevant experts and industry practitioners.

**Sector initiatives:** Including the roll out of tailored, accredited Mental Health First Aid, the development of a peer support network, and a helpline staffed by psychologists with specific, dedicated training in performing arts challenges.

Access to all elements of the Arts Wellbeing Collective, including organisational membership are open to all performing arts workers and free of charge.

The Arts Wellbeing Collective Pilot Program has been a finalist in the 2017 Australian HR Awards (Best Health and Wellbeing Program) and the 2017 and 2018 VicHealth Awards (Improving Mental Wellbeing).

As a funded project under WorkSafe Victoria's Mental Health Improvement Fund until June 2021, the timelines for our impact evaluation coincide with the report releases by the Royal Commission into Mental Health. We are open and willing to share our findings on an ongoing basis to support the work of the Royal Commission into Mental Health.

### **Learnings from the Arts Wellbeing Collective journey so far**

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#### **Clearly understanding the problem**

The Pilot Program allowed us to apply design thinking principles to deep dive into the issues that were leading to the prevalence of symptomology of common mental health problems. When embarking on the Pilot Program we sought to query why existing programs were not resonating for our people, and were there underlying issues that were contributing to mental health problems.

Upon first glance, there were environmental factors that impacted our workforce, but these factors were shared by many industries that were not seeing the same levels of mental health problems and suicide ideation as creative industries.

The Pilot Program gave us an opportunity to immerse ourselves fully not in the presenting problems, but in the systems and cultures that gave rise to these issues. By listening, asking, asking again, empathising, testing, and trialling, we were able to identify two key areas of impact for the future strategy to focus on:

- Creative identity, where someone's self-worth, self-esteem, and sense of self is entirely wrapped up in and dependent on their creative output
- Creative workplaces, where existing traditional systems and ways of work are accepted without question, and creative process is used as an excuse for poor practice.

Rather than focussing on 'front of mind' health and wellbeing strategies such as stress management, resilience training and so on, discovering these two core contributors — has been instrumental in the success of the Arts Wellbeing Collective program.



Clearly understanding and articulating key underlying problems to poor mental health outcomes has enabled us to better tailor solutions, and focus on areas of maximum impact.

### **Prevention and promotion**

The Arts Wellbeing Collective operates as much as possible on a strengths-based model. Similar programs that had been unsuccessful in this space often shared the common thread of being deficit based, and without practical, forward-focussed strategies.

The positive positioning of the Arts Wellbeing Collective program has been identified by many participants as a strength, and the practical focus of resources, skills building and initiatives to address systemic issues remains a point of difference for the program.

This may be as a result of the community to whom the program is targeted – the performing arts community needed little convincing of the importance of mental health, the need for early intervention and peer support, and the timeliness of addressing creative workplace practice. This is possibly due to the high prevalence of mental health problems – very few people are unaffected in some way, leading to a heightened understanding of the issue, and a drive to do something practical in this space.

As such, the focus for the Arts Wellbeing Collective has been on practical skills development and knowledge building. While the intent of our community is good, the knowledge of effective psychosocial interventions is low. This is also echoed in the community's lack of awareness of what services are on offer, and the roles of these services.

In addition, there is a fear that seeking help will jeopardise future work opportunities, or lead to judgment. When professional help has been sought, we have been made aware of many negative experiences of mental health professionals not understanding the unique risks to mental health posed by working in the performing arts, and dismissing mental health problems or misunderstanding the extent of the problem. We are seeking to address these barriers in the future strategy through the helpline, Mental Health First Aid, and peer support initiatives. Again, clearly understanding the underlying issues and addressing them at the earliest possible point has been vital.

### **Partnerships and collaboration**

The Arts Wellbeing Collective is unusual in that it is an industry-wide intervention, not an intervention within a single organisation. The performing arts community by its nature works collaboratively – it is impossible to stage a theatre production alone, there are many hands involved in any piece of theatre, no matter the size or scale.

While collaboration is the expected and preferred way of working in the performing arts, it is worth identifying as a key success factor, because of the way in which partnerships enable:

- Validation of issues as whole of community, not just any one person or one organisation
- Advocacy to key groups such as government and funding bodies, as a united front as opposed to disparate attempts to improve a sector-wide problem
- The ability to identify and address trends at scale; seeing what issues, interventions and themes were shared across all arts and cultural organisations, regardless of size and scale





- Industry led – by industry, for industry; this program was initiated at Arts Centre Melbourne for the whole sector, and thus had an existing trusted brand leading the work, and a trust that came from the intrinsic understanding that this program is ‘for us’.

As Arts Centre Melbourne’s core business is performing arts, and not delivering mental health and wellbeing programs, we have surrounded ourselves with a range of experts, whose generosity with time and knowledge has been crucial. Every resource, workshop and initiative is assessed by appropriate experts, from clinical to organisational psychologists, dietitians to mindfulness instructors. While it is useful to consult with performing arts workers to gauge what works anecdotally, in a space with so much mythology and misinformation, evidence and research led initiatives have proved critical to success.

The Arts Wellbeing Collective has garnered interest on a national and international scale. We recently presented at the International Society for the Performing Arts in New York in January 2019, and would be willing to share our experiences with benchmarking the program globally.

We hope that this submission has been useful. For more information on Arts Centre Melbourne, please visit [artscentremelbourne.com.au](http://artscentremelbourne.com.au)

