2019 Submission - Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System

Organisation Name
N/A

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What are your suggestions to improve the Victorian communitys understanding of mental illness and reduce stigma and discrimination?
"A better understanding of mental illness and related stigma and discrimination in forced migrant communities. This understanding is critical for the South Sudanese Australian community.   This community being Australia's largest new community of a refugee background, they have now been part of Australian society for around 20 years. Apart of the trauma many would have experienced, pre-migration, in recent years this community has become the subject of intense media focus which has seen them both criminalised and vilified. This community had been establishing a sense of belonging and identity as Australians. Their children have grown up here and they have made significant contributions to Australian society in terms of leadership, sports and the considerable value to their culture and presence in our multicultural society. But the vilification and stigmatisation has had a significant and serious impact.   Service providers need to understand both the presence of pre-migration trauma and the post-settlement impact of the stigma and racism generated by the 'African Gang"" rhetoric of media and politicians and how this has influenced and generated fear and racism toward South Sudanese Australians. Additional, all of government policy and programming also needs to respond to the racist exclusion of South Sudanese and other African Australian groups. "

What is already working well and what can be done better to prevent mental illness and to support people to get early treatment and support?
"There appears to be little engagement with African communities in prevention as service providers have limited understanding of cultural concerns and beliefs of African communities to do with mental health. These communities needed to be engagement in an appropriate and consultative manner, that informs service providers how to work with these communities appropriately."

What is already working well and what can be done better to prevent suicide?
"Unfortunately, little appears to be working in mainstream services to prevent suicide in the South Sudanese Australian community. While i understand a prevention programme is now beginning in the South East of Melbourne, it needs far more resources and workers from the community to develop a cultural appropriate response. Service providers in Suicide Prevention, needs to understand the complexity of this community, who are far from homogenous. Any prevention programme needs to work in a transparent and inclusive fashion that understands the political and ethnic tensions that exist."

What makes it hard for people to experience good mental health and what can be done to improve this? This may include how people find, access and experience mental health treatment and support and how services link with each other.
"African communities experiences daily exclusion in Australian society. This includes.   1. Open

racism - being abused or insulted in the street, being spat on, followed by security in shopping centres, being excluded or moved on from public and or social spaces. 2. Systemic racism - institutions such as Police, target youth African people, health services do not provide culturally appropriate care, etc. 3. Employment - many African Australians are highly educated and job ready, yet experience significant and long-term unemployment. Others, especially women who have limited literacy have little chance of ever being employed. Which leads to: 4. Long term welfare dependency - long-term poverty, and its associated mental and physical health risks is a significant issue in forced migrant communities. "

What are the drivers behind some communities in Victoria experiencing poorer mental health outcomes and what needs to be done to address this?
  1. Pre-migration trauma. 2. Daily racism and an associated sense of exclusion. 3. Family breakdown. 4. Social Isolation. As above: Resources need to be provided that allows mainstream and community-based service providers to develop better understandings of African migrant communities - especially forced migrants - in a manner that would allow them to provide culturally appropriate services.   The new generation of South Sudanese Australians - those who arrived as young children or were born here - need to be supported and mentored into also providing support services to their community.

What are the needs of family members and carers and what can be done better to support them?
"As above - culturally appropriate information and support, including an understanding of gender roles and the importance of supporting women as care providers in their families, who are often under considerable pressure, especially those who are single mothers. It is essential for service providers to understand the differences in gender relations and expectations between migrant communities and the broader Australian community. "

What can be done to attract, retain and better support the mental health workforce, including peer support workers?
N/A

What are the opportunities in the Victorian community for people living with mental illness to improve their social and economic participation, and what needs to be done to realise these opportunities?
N/A

Thinking about what Victorias mental health system should ideally look like, tell us what areas and reform ideas you would like the Royal Commission to prioritise for change?
"1.Prioritise culturally appropriate programs, service provision and policies which emphasise supporting mothers, especially single mothers in the care of their children who may be showing signs of mental illness and or be at risk of suicide.   2.Support the development of community-based/grassroots organisations that can respond to mental health concerns in their community. 3. Resource settlement programs to address mental illness and prevention during the settlement process. "

What can be done now to prepare for changes to Victorias mental health system and support improvements to last?

"Integrated, all of government response which recognises mental health needs to be managed across multiple platforms and departments. It is essential that government recognises the intersections between poor mental health and the punitive and discriminatory practices and policies of other government departments. Long-term welfare recipients who live in fear of loosing their payment if they haven't been able to fulfil their obligations experience considerable stress which impacts their mental health. That they would then need to seek help from a mental health service because of that, but are unlikely to due to the stigma of it, and therefore become more isolated and risk serious mental illness and possibly homeless is a vicious cycle of government policy that needs to be broken. "

Is there anything else you would like to share with the Royal Commission?
"I have worked with the South Sudanese Australian community in Melbourne for fifteen years - in various capacities, including settlement, community development and now research. Since 2016 and the incident at the Moomba Festival, the media and political vilification and criminalisation has devastated an already vulnerable community. It is deeply disturbing to see Australian society turn on and reject, what was a largely settled migrant group. While they still experienced a range of challenges that were also part of the settlement process, post-settlement, since 2016 has been traumatic and disturbing for this community. The sense of exclusion and loss of belonging has been profound and there is no doubt in my mind that this relates directly to the recent increase in youth suicide. Recent research conducted for the Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY) by (Benier, Blaustein, Johns & Maher, 2018) clearly showed the impact of racism and vilification on young people and their families in this community. The report was released late last year: https://www.cmy.net.au/publications/dont-drag-me-into-this The second stage of this research, looking at the impact of mothers, is currently being completed. "