

# RUSSELL NORTHE MLA

Member of Morwell

5<sup>th</sup> July 2019

Ms Penny Armytage  
Chair Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System  
PO Box 12079  
A'Beckett Street  
VICTORIA 8006

Dear Penny

## Royal Commission into Mental Health Submission

As the State Member of Parliament for the Morwell electorate, I am compelled to provide a submission to the Victorian Governments Royal Commission into Mental Health. Firstly, I commend the Government for undertaking this significant inquiry into the Mental Health of the people of Victoria and I look forward to bearing witness to any positive change it brings about.

This topic is of particular interest to a significant number of individuals, families and mental health service providers in my electorate. Our region sits uncomfortably high in per capita health statistics when it comes to incidences of suicide, depression and anxiety compared to our many other parts of the State. This is exacerbated by higher than State-average levels of disadvantage, unemployment, poor health and disability, the Morwell electorate faces significant challenges in terms of the mental health and well-being of our people.

Community representatives have long been calling for greater support for individuals, families and health professionals since the only dedicated mental health residential facility, Hobsons Park, closed its doors in Traralgon in the early 1990's. Statistics show that related issues are placing enormous strain and pressures on our local health services and our police and emergency services. Once again crime statistics in the areas of drug and alcohol offences per capita are extremely high within the Morwell electorate, and in many cases these offences occur as a consequence one's mental health issues. The workers and volunteers in our mental health and emergency services sector need to be commended for their amazing courage and dedication, but they cannot undertake their role adequately without strong industry and Government support.

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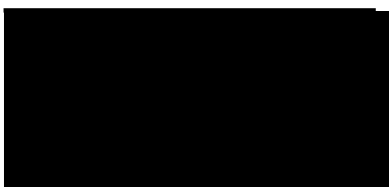
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Their health and safety needs to be considered and I believe we are losing good people to stress and illness because of the strain of their role's and the enormous workloads they amass. There is simply not enough facilities for individuals who are experiencing serious mental illness. For example, the Flynn Ward located at the Latrobe Regional Hospital is constantly at or beyond capacity, waiting lists for GP's and Psychologists are ever increasing and there are very high instances of Emergency Department presentations of those with critical mental health issues. And upon discharge there are simply not enough adequate housing, supports and care for individuals and families.

I digress at this point to state in the strongest possible terms that I have the utmost respect admiration for all individuals, professionals and service providers who operate in the mental health sector, and upon my own observations they do the absolutely best they can with the resources and expertise they have available to them. However the feedback that I constantly receive time and time again from families of loved ones who are experiencing mental illness is that the system is broken, it is fragmented and difficult to navigate, and that there are significant service gaps that require urgent remediation. Indeed far too often families are required to visit their loved ones in mental health and recovery facilities in metropolitan Melbourne, which is an enormous strain financially and emotionally.

Over time in my position as the member for Morwell, I have identified several initiatives that would support our community to improve mental health outcomes. Below are just three examples, where strategic funding would improve mental health outcomes for individuals and families. First, to help tackle our high rates of suicide, I have called for an increase funding to Lifeline Gippsland for its army of volunteers who help save lives right across the country, through its telephone crisis support line. Additional monies would allow the organisation to provide additional training to increase the number of Crisis Support volunteers and fund a Connect Call Back Service, which provides ongoing phone support to people living in Gippsland who are facing ongoing problems. Not only would more funding support these immediate and vital services, it would also service to implement face-to-face peer support groups for some of our most vulnerable people such as our country men.

Second, I am very passionate about supporting is Life Education Gippsland. This service supports the youth of Latrobe Valley in education regarding their safety and well-being that has life-long effects. Currently this organisation is limited in how many school students can



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attend information sessions because of funding constraints. I have called upon the Ministers involved to review that funding arrangement to support our community in growing and fostering positive mental health practices from a young age.

Third, Barrier Breakers is a mental health advocacy organisation committed to providing both systemic and individual advocacy services to improve the quality of life of people who experience mental illness in the Gippsland region. Established in 2006, the association's membership is Gippsland-wide and consists of parents/carers with family members suffering a mental illness, patients/consumers, medical practitioners and other concerned citizens. This important organisation is currently on its knees due to a lack of Government funding and our region can ill-afford to lose this vital service.

Conversely, I was pleased to note the State Government intends to honour its commitment to build a drug and alcohol residential rehabilitation facility in my electorate, but was disappointed to learn that it is limited to for youth only. Certainly in our electorate, access to services for people of all ages is paramount, and constituent feedback tells me that the waiting list for rehabilitation services is a constant barrier to recovery. More pressing in this domain, is the lack of any detoxification beds in our local hospital and across Gippsland as a whole. The link between poor mental health and drug and alcohol abuse is well documented, and the absence of any detox or rehabilitation beds in our region just beggars belief, in my opinion. This needs to change immediately if we are to improve mental health outcomes in regional areas.

I observe that the federal Productivity Commission is also currently conducting an inquiry into *'The Social and Economic Benefits of Improving Mental Health'* and is currently receiving submissions. Irony of the word 'productivity' is not lost on me, nevertheless, an important issue such as mental health is deserved of scrutiny at all levels. I do implore the State Government to make sound use of the resources afforded to a Royal Commission, and in my role as a Member for Parliament I stand ready to work with all stakeholders in delivering upon the relevant recommendations the Commission produces.

In the Morwell electorate, the scope of Mental Health effects cannot be understated. It affects all sectors of our community to an enormous degree. As the first investigation of its kind, this Royal Commission has the opportunity to provide meaningful and far-reaching insights. Any recommendations put forward, need to create a well-developed and holistic Mental Health strategy that will provide a failsafe network of large and small solutions.

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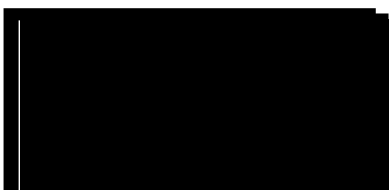
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In closing, I believe that the far-reaching effects of poor Mental Health place this Royal Commission in a position to make an extremely important contribution to the lives, and the future of Victorians for many years to come. It's important to get this task done, and get it done right. Given the information provided in my submission I implore the Commission to undertake public hearings within the Morwell electorate to ensure the voices of my community can be heard loud and clear. Thank you for consideration of this submission as enclosed and good luck with your deliberations.

Sincerely,



Russell Northe | MLA  
Member for Morwell



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

## **Organisation Name**

N/A

## **Name**

Mr Russell Northe

## **What are your suggestions to improve the Victorian community's understanding of mental illness and reduce stigma and discrimination?**

Attached in letter

## **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?**

Attached in letter

## **What is already working well and what can be done better to prevent suicide?**

Attached in letter

## **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.**

Attached in letter

## **What are the drivers behind some communities in Victoria experiencing poorer mental health outcomes and what needs to be done to address this?**

Attached in letter

## **What are the needs of family members and carers and what can be done better to support them?**

Attached in letter

## **What can be done to attract, retain and better support the mental health workforce, including peer support workers?**

Attached in letter

## **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?**

Attached in letter

## **Thinking about what Victoria's mental health system should ideally look like, tell us what areas and reform ideas you would like the Royal Commission to prioritise for change?**

Attached in letter

## **What can be done now to prepare for changes to Victoria's mental health system and**

**support improvements to last?**

Attached in letter

**Is there anything else you would like to share with the Royal Commission?**

Attached in letter