

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

## Organisation Name

"SpiritWest, trading as Western Bulldogs Community Foundation"

## Name

Miss Dimity Gannon

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

"Conversations about mental health need to be further supported and encouraged both in public forums (through state wide campaigns and media) and at the community level i.e. through community programs such as Sons of the West, programs in schools and workplace health programs. We have seen significant improvement over the past couple of years in the AFL industry with a number of high profile AFL players coming forward and publicly speaking about their challenges with mental health. While there is a long way to go to eliminate stigma around mental health in the AFL industry, the improvements that have been made are testament to the impact that public conversations and high profile ambassadors can have. Similarly in the Western Bulldogs community programs, Sons of the West, Daughters of the West and the Youth Leadership Project we create a safe non-judgemental space for conversations about mental health to occur. As a result we see an increase in participants feeling they can reach out for support and access mental health services. "

## 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?

"What is working well: The Western Bulldogs Community Foundation (WBCF) leverages the power of sport to engage diverse community members in activities which aim to support people to reach their full potential. Using the brand of a well-known football club, the WBCF is able to attract diverse groups within the community, educate them through programs and connect them with partnering healthcare providers who they may not have access to or confidence to navigate otherwise. It is important to provide clear pathways into services for people in the community. Research conducted with higher education institutions (such as Victoria University) have shown that these programs are effective in improving mental wellbeing, reducing stigma associated with mental health and improving social connection to prevent isolation. The model of using sport as an engagement tool is powerful for preventing and addressing mental illness. What could be done better? Many participants identify the cost associated with mental health can be a barrier. Many are not aware of the mental health care plan option for assistance. More education around how to access mental health services would benefit the community. In terms of preventing mental illness, there needs to be a greater focus on the determinants of mental illness such as social isolation, lack of access to education and employment and housing, social support etc. In the west of Melbourne and regional western Victoria mental health outcomes are generally poorer than the rest of Victoria and in most cases these outcomes correlate with pockets of economic and social disadvantage. "

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

"While it is difficult to say what is effective in preventing suicide due to the limitations of being able to collect this type of data, it is fair to hypothesise that activities that improve mental health

outcomes may also contribute to the prevention of suicide. Research conducted with higher education institutions (such as Victoria University and the University of Melbourne) have shown that programs such as Sons of the West are effective in improving mental wellbeing, reducing stigma associated with mental health and improving social connection to prevent isolation. The model of using sport as an engagement tool is powerful for preventing and addressing mental illness, particularly among harder to reach audiences who at higher risk of suicide, such as men. The Western Bulldogs Community Foundation (WBCF) programs also connect people in with local services, a local GP and Victoria University Psychology Clinic. Providing people with clear and easy to access to services and encouragement and support to do so may be an effective way of helping to prevent suicide. Giving participants a source of social connection provides additional support. "

**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.**

"In terms of preventing mental illness, there needs to be a greater focus on the determinants of mental illness such as social isolation, lack of access to education, employment and housing, social support etc. In the west of Melbourne and regional western Victoria mental health outcomes are generally poorer than the rest of Victoria and in most cases these outcomes correlate with pockets of economic and social disadvantage. While the mental health care plan is a great asset for people to be able to access we have found through our programs that very few people know about these plans and how to access them. It is commonly assumed that there will be a significant expense associated with accessing mental health care and this is a deterrent. Linked to cost as a barrier, many of the people the WBCF works with in the west who experience poor mental health also experience economic disadvantage. When these people do access mental health care plans they often need additional support after they have utilised their allocated free sessions. As continued access to mental health services comes at a significant cost, this often creates discontinuation of service access before meaningful mental health improvements can be made. "

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

"In terms of preventing mental illness, there needs to be a greater focus on the determinants of mental illness such as social isolation, lack of access to education and employment and housing, social support etc. In the west of Melbourne and regional western Victoria mental health outcomes are generally poorer than the rest of Victoria and in most cases these outcomes correlate with pockets of economic and social disadvantage. Rural areas WBCF works in such as Maryborough, Ararat, Pyrenees Shire and Horsham experience poorer mental health outcomes, which in addition to the above are exacerbated by limited provision of appropriate services in these areas as in all rural and remote parts of Victoria. "

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

Not applicable to WBCF area of work.

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

Not applicable to WBCF area of work.

**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?**

"Programs such as Sons of the West and Daughters of the West attract a diverse range of participants, including a significant proportion of people experiencing poor mental health and mental illness. These programs have demonstrated through rigorous research and evaluation conducted by higher education institutions (such as Victoria University and the University of Melbourne) that they are effective in improving mental wellbeing, reducing stigma associated with mental health and improving social connection to prevent isolation. The model of using sport as an engagement tool is powerful for preventing and addressing mental illness, particularly among harder to reach audiences who are at higher risk of suicide, such as men. There is a great opportunity for the Victorian government to support the roll out of programs that have proven to be effective in improving mental health such as Sons of the West and Daughters of the West, across wider Victoria."

**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?**

1. Improved awareness of how to access mental health services and what is available to people free of charge. 2. Supporting transitions for people experiencing social and/or economic disadvantage from mental health care plans to then be able to access further clinical support required to achieve a meaningful and sustainable mental health outcome.

**What can be done now to prepare for changes to Victoria's mental health system and support improvements to last?**

Lasting improvements to the mental health of Victorians need to address a combination of service system improvements and sustained community based prevention and mental health promotion interventions (as discussed previously). Preventative efforts are particularly important in high growth areas such as the west of Melbourne and regional Victoria where the service system is likely to be unable to meet the growing demand for mental health services.

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

"1. On request, we would be happy to share the research conducted by Victoria University and the University of Melbourne over the past three years. This research demonstrates the impact and effectiveness of programs such as Sons of the West, to improve mental health outcomes for difficult to reach audiences through using sport and the platform of a football club as an engagement tool. 2. The Sons of the West program was a finalist in the 2018 VicHealth Awards for promoting Mental Health."