

The VPS Enablers Network Submission to the Commonwealth Government of Australia's Proposed Terms of Reference for the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System



The Enablers Network

The Victoria Public Sector (VPS) Enablers Network for People with disability ('the Enablers Network') is a staff led network of employees with disability. Our network is made up of members with a lived experience of disability, people who care for others with disability and our allies. First established in 2016, the Enablers Network is an inclusive, supportive, and welcoming forum for people with disability and their allies to express a strong and united voice for change. In supporting Victorian Government departments and agencies to become leading disability confident employers, the Enablers Network advances equity, equality, accessibility, and inclusion for people with disability.

Submission

The Enablers Network welcomes the terms of reference specified for the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System. This inquiry offers a unique opportunity to address inadequacies in Victoria's current mental health system and reduce the stigma and discrimination experienced by those with poor mental health. Specifically, we support the commissions specification on improvement of the mental health outcomes of Victorians *"living with a mental illness and other co-occurring illnesses, disabilities, multiple diagnoses or dual disabilities"* within section 4.2 of the terms of reference. Addressing the vulnerabilities of those with disabilities and the broader intersections between disability and mental health.

This submission seeks to draw upon the advocacy and policy work of The Enablers Network in relation to the role of the workplace in improving outcomes for people with disabilities, specifically those residing within the VPS. Employment plays a critical role in supporting people with disability, and therefore it must be considered when identifying best practice in the improvement and support of the mental health of people in the Victorian community with disabilities. Specifically, we seek to outline the importance of reasonable adjustments (such as modifications to a workplace or flexible working conditions) and the need for a safe and inclusive workplace free from ableism and other forms of discrimination. Our submission is informed by the work of the Enablers Network, the VPSC and the public sector more broadly.

1. Intersections between disability, mental health and the workplace

This submission is broadly informed by the specific mental health vulnerabilities faced by people with a disability. While the Commission seeks to refer to the experiences those living with a mental illness and other co-occurring illnesses or disabilities, we hope to highlight that those with a mental illness face similar social and economic barriers as those with a physical disability. This notion has been adopted amongst key bodies such as the Victorian Public Sector Commission (VPSC), who define disability as;

*"Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term (lasting 6 months or more) physical, **mental health**, intellectual, neurological or sensory impairments which in interaction with various attitudinal and environmental barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others."*

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The Enablers Network hope to highlight the diversity of experiences which produce similar barriers to supportive employment, and therefore discussion of 'disability' within this submission is inclusive of those experiencing poor mental health.

Through this, we hope to highlight the importance of supportive workplaces as a tool to allow individuals to overcome the attitudinal and environmental barriers experienced by those with a disability. A wealth of pre-existing literature highlights the importance of the labour market in the provision of both financial and psychological transactions that are integral to stress and coping models¹. Alongside this, workplaces provide a sense of belonging, opportunities to contribute to shared goals, status and recognition². Ensuring this is recognised amongst employers is a key role of The Enablers Network, and this submission intends to outline key mental health impacts experienced by employees with a disability, and our recommendations for improvement.

2. Accessibility and maintenance of supportive employment

Workplaces play a critical role in supporting people with a disability. The Enablers network notes through anecdotal evidence among our members (numbered several hundred as of 2019) that many staff have suffered workplace injuries because of a lack of reasonable adjustments and have even left their job because adjustments were not implemented. This has had ongoing and understandable impacts on the mental health of these employees. Denial or inaccessibility of reasonable adjustment is therefore a major aspect of our submission, as improvements/oversight of reasonable adjustment within workplaces would contribute both to the wellbeing of employees with a disability, and those who may require ongoing support due to poor mental health.

Following this, other Enablers network members have indicated they have experienced workplace bullying because of their disability and that this abuse was ongoing and systemic. In a recent survey undertaken in one department, results indicated that more than 50% of participants in the survey did not disclose they had a disability with the primary reason for non-disclosure attributed to feeling that it was not safe to do so. Following this, network members have highlighted that the Employee Assistance Programs afforded to them have been woefully inadequate, to the point that they exacerbated poor mental health during times of crisis. Workplace culture which normalises the minimisation and bullying of those with disabilities, and inadequate workplace supports, directly contribute to the burden of poor mental health within the workplace, as they can lead the acquisition and exacerbation of mental health issues. It can also be assumed that the values and beliefs which enable workplace bullying can be generalised to a wider lack of support for those suffering from poor mental health or other ongoing medical conditions.

3. Resolutions and recommendations

This submission outlined the specific ways employment and disability can intersect to produce impacts on mental health, and the critical role workplaces play in minimising mental health issues

¹ Dooley, D. (2003). Unemployment, underemployment, and mental health: Conceptualizing employment status as a continuum. *American journal of community psychology*, 32(1-2), 9-20.

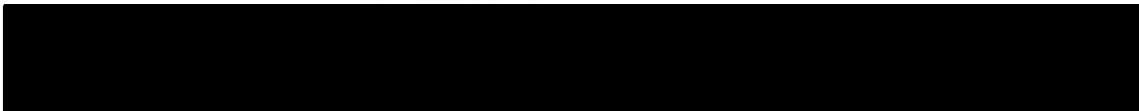
² Evans, J., & Repper, J. (2000). Employment, social inclusion and mental health. *Journal of psychiatric and mental health nursing*, 7(1), 15-24.

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amongst Victorians with a disability. We hope to highlight the importance of reasonable adjustments (such as modifications to a workplace or flexible working conditions) and the need for a safe and inclusive workplace free from ableism and other forms of discrimination. Supportive employment initiatives hold the potential to offer more significant and positive outcomes for people suffering from disabilities and/or poor mental health and must be considered when addressing these populations within the royal commission.

Additionally, given the Enablers Network houses highly skilled public servants living with disability, subject to employer approval, we would be delighted to engage with and support the work of the Commission once established. If you would like to contact the Enablers Network, you can contact our



We look forward to the report that the Commission will produce in due course.

Kind Regards,

The Victoria Public Service Enablers Network.

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

Organisation Name

Victorian Public Service Enablers Network

Name

Miss Ella Broadbent

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

N/A

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?

N/A

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

N/A

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.

N/A

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

"Our submission concerns the role supportive workplaces play in the mental health of VPS employees, including those with a co-occurring disability. Please see attachment for further comment. "

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

N/A

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 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?

N/A

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

N/A

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

N/A