

# Submission to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System



Wellsprings for Women presents this submission to highlight issues in the Victorian mental health system and those specific to Wellsprings' participants. We also propose a number of recommendations that will better support the needs of women and children accessing our services who experience mental health issues. These recommendations are summarised at the end of this submission and a case study can be found at **Attachment A**.

## About Wellsprings for Women

Wellsprings for Women is a Learn Local Neighbourhood House and Community Centre and a women-only Centre—established 25 years ago—which has grown to support hundreds of the most disadvantaged women and children within the City of Greater Dandenong, Casey, Cardinia Shire and beyond. Our Centre is based in Dandenong, the most culturally diverse city in Australia, and our recommendations are informed by our extensive work within these diverse communities.

Wellsprings runs over 40 pre-accredited classes and outreach support programs each week which were designed in consultation with and in response to the needs of women in Dandenong, Casey and Cardinia.

## Pre-accredited Education

We run around 20 Adult Community Education programs including Computers for Beginners/Work and Study, English as an Additional Language, Discovering New Careers and Presentation and Public Speaking which focus on building employability skills and pathways to work or further study.

## Social Support

The Home Visitation Program (HVP) matches socially isolated women with trained volunteers who visit them regularly in their homes and connect them to the wider community. Wellsprings Women's Health and Safety Program aims to improve women's understanding of their own health and safety issues, the steps to take to prevent harm to themselves and their children, maintain healthy and respectful family relationships, build resilience and positive parenting skills, increase their self-reliance, self-confidence and learn about the services available to them and how to access them.

## Wellbeing

We run a range of programs designed to promote health, wellbeing and social connection including gentle exercise, art and craft, choir, bike riding and vegetable gardening.

## Volunteering

Volunteering is an integral part of Wellsprings and we have over 90 volunteers. Volunteers contribute so much to the wellbeing of women who come to Wellsprings where we offer support, encouragement, learning and friendship. In return, our volunteers receive involvement in a lively

community, new experiences, opportunities for personal and professional development, support, and the chance to build fruitful relationships.

### Collaborations

Wellsprings believes in the potential of partnerships, we run more support programs in collaboration with other organisations such as Girl Guides, Brotherhood of St Laurence (Saver Plus) and a number of local primary and secondary schools.

### Mental Health in Neighbourhood Houses/Community Centres

While Wellsprings' focus is on empowerment through pre-accredited Adult Community Education, employment pathways, building social connections and family violence prevention, mental health issues are a daily reality for many of our participants. We also engage over 90 volunteers, including many senior and migrant women, who also experience a high prevalence of mental health problems.

In April 2019, Neighbourhood Houses Victoria (NHVic) submitted a response to the Productivity Commission's inquiry into the Social and Economic Benefits of Improving Mental Health Understanding<sup>1</sup>. It proposed that mental health and first aid type training is an example of what would be beneficial for workers in this sector. They highlighted that people who may be experiencing poor mental health are drawn to the non-judgemental and accessible nature of Neighbourhood Houses. Wellsprings agrees that this welcoming environment puts us in a unique position to support the mental health of our participants through grassroots community mental health education—lessening stigma and strengthening knowledge and referral options. However, we cannot do this effectively without significant improvement to funding in this space and improved communication between mental health services and Neighbourhood Houses such as Wellsprings for Women.

In 2017, there were over 190,000 visits to Victorian Neighbourhood Houses each week, with participation increasing by 24 percent over the last five years<sup>2</sup>. Neighbourhood houses such as Wellsprings have been shown to help people build and maintain social relationships, which is beneficial for mental wellbeing. Resilience is a fundamental part of mental wellbeing that enables a person to cope with adversity and reach their full potential. The 2015 VicHealth Indicators Survey<sup>3</sup> measured resilience to determine people's ability to cope with adversity and setbacks. The average score for residents of Greater Dandenong stood at 5.5 (out of 8)—the lowest score in Victoria and less than the Melbourne average of 7.8. Groups with significantly lower resilience and generally lower wellbeing scores were those who mainly speak a language other than English at home or who are from a non-English-speaking country. It is therefore no wonder we are presented with clients with complex needs such as mental illness, and these issues need to be addressed with an intersectional lens considering culture, language and trauma.

While mental ill health is not what Wellsprings is directly funded or trained to support, we have often needed to respond to the presentation of mental health issues within our centre and outreach programs. Over the years, mental health problems within our cohort have presented in a range of ways—from difficult behaviours in the classroom and sporadic attendance to mental health crisis,

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<sup>1</sup> The Social and Economic Benefits of Improving Mental Health Neighbourhood Houses Victoria response to the Productivity Commission Inquiry April 2019

<sup>2</sup> [2017 Neighbourhood House Survey](#)

<sup>3</sup> Greater Dandenong LGA Profile VicHealth Indicators Survey 2015 Results

threats of suicide and on one tragic occasion, a volunteer finding a Home Visitation Program participant who had died by suicide.

### Training of Staff and Volunteers

One of the actions Wellsprings has taken to date in response to mental health issues in our cohort is supporting our staff and volunteers through professional development. By gaining a competitive Federal Government grant opportunity, we had two staff members trained to become Accredited Mental Health First Aid Instructors. This enabled us to afford to train many of our tutors and volunteers in Standard Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) to reduce stigma and then be better equipped to support our participants and each other. Neighbourhood house staff, tutors and volunteers are in an optimum position to detect a decline in their participant's mental health and are often faced with mental health crisis of individuals who are not connected to any other services. NHVic identifies the cost, time involved and availability of training as barriers to mental health education programs for staff and volunteers<sup>4</sup> and this is something that we agree needs to be addressed.

### Cultural Diversity

Being based in the most multicultural city in Australia, we see the devastating effects of mental illness in culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities. Our staff members who have been delivering MHFA within Wellsprings and other local Neighbourhood Houses have identified significant difficulties with delivering mental health education within CALD communities. People from some CALD backgrounds have reported that their culture does not recognise mental illness, and sufferers may be rejected by their communities. For example, they may be seen as being possessed by spirits and taken to a witch doctor or kept away from the wider community by family.

Stigma within CALD communities is common, and attitudes towards treatment of mental health problems are often conducted in ways that are at odds with Western approaches. Complex terminology and labels used in current mental health community education programs are barriers for people with English as an additional language. This is especially relevant for our participants and volunteers who have not had an opportunity to be educated in their first language and are struggling to learn English. For Wellsprings, this highlights the need for the Victorian State Government to fund evidence-based programs such as MHFA, to be tailored to different cultures and to be translated and delivered in a community's first language, by community members (such as the existing MHFA for Chinese People Living in Australia). As a proud multicultural state, Victoria is well positioned to fund the expansion of the MHFA program to be more inclusive of CALD communities, and to facilitate its rollout in grassroots spaces such as Wellsprings for Women.

### Crisis Management and Referrals

Much time is spent by Wellsprings staff on crisis management and referrals which takes away from our core operations. We have been engaged by a number of other members of the Community Connections Network Greater Dandenong to deliver MHFA training to their staff and volunteers, due to growing concern over mental health issues and crisis presenting in the classroom and everyday operations. If proper training of staff and clear referral processes are not put into place, the person

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<sup>4</sup> [The Social and Economic Benefits of Improving Mental Health Neighbourhood Houses Victoria response to the Productivity Commission Inquiry April 2019](#)

experiencing the mental health issue, the staff and other participants are at risk and their education suffers.

Workers at Wellsprings are usually aware a participant may have mental illnesses, but they sometimes have difficulty connecting them to services due to issues such as; participant not meeting a specific eligibility criteria of a service; participants being scared of entering mainstream mental health services; stigma around gaining a label; lack of time and resources for our staff to make appropriate referrals; lack of funding for staff training and lack of clear referral processes into local mental health services.

We would welcome a stronger relationship with mental health agencies in supporting us and providing clearer referral processes, providing more flexible eligibility criteria and integrated and holistic aftercare services for CALD women and their children. These agencies need to have adequate funding and the capacity to provide culturally appropriate and meaningful assistance to women and their families. This would offer greater support to our women and their children and families.

### Aftercare Support and Referrals

Wellsprings has also identified issues with our service being used by specialist mental health services to exit their client once they no longer meet eligibility criteria. This can compound problems for the client and our centre as the person's complex issues are not always adequately supported by our programs alone. For example, a client might reach the end of their time limit in a supported mental health program, then during client exit processes they are given an informal referral to our Home Visitation Program (HVP) or other education or support programs (see case example attached for a more detailed example). While the HVP program focuses on community connection by matching a volunteer with a socially isolated woman, it is not necessarily equipped to support the complex needs of someone recovering from or developing a serious mental illness. HVP is designed to be an adjunct social support option to professional physical and mental health care. The benefits of which would be greater if the client remained monitored by the specialist mental health services during aftercare and the Wellsprings staff, and volunteers could focus on social connection and feedback any important information to the mental health worker (provided proper mechanisms and consents were in place).

### Family Violence and Mental Health

Partner violence has also been associated with an increased risk of a number of health issues—including anxiety, depression, suicide—and other mental health problems such as substance use disorder<sup>5</sup>. Groups with a higher proportion holding low levels of support for equal relationships were those who mainly speak a language other than English at home (54.0% compared with 37% for Victoria) and from a non-English-speaking country (52.9%). Wellsprings has recently secured increased funding to establish a Women's Health and Safety program and are working in the family violence prevention space. However, this new program has had to expand further to accommodate women who disclose family violence, and whom we have identified as falling through the gaps of large services as they are not at imminent safety risk. However, they are requiring support, information and mental health support which is difficult to address when sitting with family violence

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<sup>5</sup> VicHealth Indicators Survey 2015 Selected findings

issues. We believe making resources and funding more available and addressing these gaps in services and to cater for multiple and complex needs would assist the mental health of women and children living with partner violence.

### Emerging Issues

Wellsprings for Women has held a number of projects in 2018 and 2019 focusing on young women from non-English speaking Backgrounds. We became aware of issues facing second generation youth relating to gender and sexuality. We heard stories of trauma, anxiety and depression experienced by youths in migrant and refugee background families who are fearful of disclosing their sexual orientation due to cultural, religious and traditional factors compounded by migration and settlement processes. These early findings show it would be greatly beneficial to invests resources in researching the impact of gender norms and sexuality on young people's mental Health in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities. Additionally, allocating resources to agencies who express interest in working with and supporting gender and sexually diverse young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds

Wellsprings for Women thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry and hope you take our recommendations into consideration.

### Summary of Recommendations

- 1) That government considers that people who may be experiencing poor mental health are drawn to the non-judgemental, accessible and open-door nature of Neighbourhood Houses, and these spaces should be better funded and utilised as spaces for community education and de-stigmatising programs.
- 2) That government acknowledges that services and prevention or de-stigmatisation programs need to take an intersectional approach to address the issues specific to culturally and linguistically diverse women and children. These issues include diverse culture, language, low educational attainment, family violence, effects of migration and trauma.
- 3) That government funds the expansion of the Mental Health First Aid program to be more inclusive of CALD communities, and facilitates its rollout in grassroots spaces such as Wellsprings for Women.
- 4) That government better acknowledges and allows funds for the time taken and work already being done in centres like Wellsprings for Women. Examples of such work include staff monitoring mental wellbeing of vulnerable people, mental health education and community consultations, building resilience and wellbeing through education and social support programs, crisis management and supporting referrals to mental health organisations, and supporting clients during aftercare phase.
- 5) That government acknowledges there is a growing need for training to equip staff and volunteers in community houses to identify the signs of declining mental health of clients and how to support someone in a mental health crisis (including referral to appropriate professional help). Furthermore, that this training costs considerable funds and staff time which needs to be additional to funding currently allocated.

- 6) That government facilitates and supports the strengthening of referral pathways and communication between Neighbourhood House/Community Centres and specialist mental health services.
- 7) That government provides mental health services with more flexible eligibility criteria and integrated and holistic aftercare services for CALD women and their children. Furthermore, provides additional comprehensive aftercare to keep communication and support lines open between Neighbourhood House/Community Centres, the client and mental health services.
- 8) That government addresses the gap in current services where a woman is experiencing decline in mental health due to family violence, but who is still hesitant to accept a FV referral, or who is not eligible for current services.
- 9) That government invests resources in researching the impact of gender norms and sexuality on young people's mental Health in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities.
- 10) That government allocates resources to agencies who express interest in working with and supporting gender and sexually diverse young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

### More Information

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**Attachment A** – Wellsprings for Women Home Visitation Program Participant Case Study