

Our next government must provide long term vision and innovative solutions with it's mental health policies

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We've come a long way in increasing mental health awareness and reducing stigma over the last decade. But the way we respond to the increased awareness is yet to catch up. From a system perspective, prevention and early intervention are often overlooked in favour of treatment.

This is none more evident than the discussions in the lead up to the election. The conversations around our mental health system, and our health system generally, continue to focus on the pointy end – with major announcements centred on increasing the capacity of our hospitals.

While I strongly believe that our hospitals will always be an important feature of our mental health system, they should be a last resort, not the centrepiece. No one wants to end up in hospital if they can avoid it.

Each year, roughly one in five of us will experience a mental illness. But we shouldn't just accept this as inevitable. We must do everything we can to reduce this figure by prioritising investment in mental health prevention.

Instead, we get a raft of campaign announcements promising 'more of the same'. The approach we're taking clearly isn't working, so doubling down on it is blindly optimistic and ultimately unsustainable. We must be looking at how to reduce demand, instead of only investing in how we respond to it. This requires long term vision and innovative solutions from our MPs, not just knee jerk responses that fit neatly into a political term but do little to address the cause.


Our measure of success should be the number of people we can support to stay out of hospitals, not the number of people we can fit into them.

Psychosocial supports, for example, help people with mental ill-health in their personal recovery, to connect with their community and the things that are meaningful to them. Psychosocial supports are non-clinical (but often complimented by clinical and other therapeutic supports) and include assistance with things like care coordination, personal recovery, accommodation, education, employment, social and community connection.

The parent of a young person with severe mental illness described the psychosocial supports they received as "life changing". Their son's condition had reached a stage where they were unable to attend school or even leave the house. But with a range of tailored psychosocial supports, this young person was able to return to school, and get back out and about in their community.



Connie Digolis, CEO MHCT



Despite the life changing benefits psychosocial supports bring for both individuals and their loved ones, not all that need them can access them. We know a lot of people are missing out, and as a result are much more likely to become increasingly unwell until hospital is their only option.

Psychosocial supports, as well as a wide range of other clinical and non-clinical supports, are usually delivered by community mental health organisations. But these organisations are hampered by short term contracts, impacting their ability to forward plan, and attract and retain staff. Additionally, the indexation applied to these contracts is minimal –in some cases none. With more people reaching out for support, these organisations are essentially being asked to do more with less.

Five-year funding agreements with adequate indexation would give these organisations the certainty they need to continue providing vital support to so many Tasmanians.

We've already seen some great initiatives which we're urging the government to make accessible to all Tasmanians, no matter where they live. The Emergency Mental Health Response Service (formerly PACER) has seen incredible results since it began in 2022 in the south. It has worked with over 2,800 people, with more than 75% of those supported to remain in the community, instead of going to hospital. With such incredible results this must be available across the state.

We also need to empower all Tasmanians with the skills and knowledge to take a proactive approach to their mental health and wellbeing, and to reach out for support early when they notice a dip. One of the ways we've started doing this is through the statewide Take a minute campaign. We need MPs to support the expansion of this campaign so we can reach more and more Tasmanians and embed mental health prevention across the state.

Access to timely and affordable mental health care and support that enable us to live our best and most productive lives goes beyond just a health issue – it's a fundamental human right. Whoever forms government after the election next weekend must demonstrate their commitment to the mental health of all Tasmanians, by prioritising prevention - building on the success of existing initiatives, and investing in new, innovative, and aspirational ways to help support the mental health and wellbeing of all Tasmanians.