



National Mental Health Commission Meeting
3 July 2019
Thursday Island, Torres Strait

COMMUNIQUE

The National Mental Health Commission welcomed engagement and discussion on what is working and what is not working in mental health and suicide prevention in the Thursday Island (TI) region. Commissioners held stakeholder meetings during the day and welcomed the community to the first [Connections](#) Town Hall meeting in the evening. Commissioners valued hearing the experiences of consumers, carers, service providers and sector stakeholders.

Key Messages

- There is a lack of resourcing and support for the workforce. The decrease of 45 health workers (nursing, social workers, allied health, Indigenous and prevention programs) has had a significant impact on the community.
- The cost of living (including food, housing and transport) is impacting on the health and wellbeing of people, with children as young as 4 malnourished.
- Training for the workforce is predominantly off-shore, making it expensive and less accessible.
- Spirituality and cultural connection is important.
- There are no structured activities for young people.
- The Torres Strait often feels left out of government initiatives, planning and services.

Recommendations

- Broader education and awareness with the community about mental health.
- More affordable accommodation and access to nutritious food.
- Structured activities and engagement for young people.
- Support for families in education and the mental health system.
- On-shore training for the workforce.
- Multilevel approach from health promotion, prevention and recovery.
- Recognition of the role of healers to be embedded within mental health and wellbeing services, including hospitals.
- Use existing programs and connect them to create clearer pathways.

DETAILED REPORT

A summary of what Commissioners heard from stakeholders is below.

Courts

- The top four social justice issues affecting the community are alcohol, domestic violence, employment and housing.
- 'Mental health' is not a term commonly used in the community.
- Lena Passi Women's Shelter (24 hr) is the only domestic violence shelter in the region. A strong link between drug and alcohol use and domestic violence exists.
- There are no emergency housing or homeless services on Thursday Island which has resulted in Lena Passi Women's Shelter housing homeless people, without funding.
- There are no structured activities for youth and children under 18 years, which leads to boredom.
- There are limited mental health services and specialists on TI. Two mental health teams currently exist on TI – the community mental health team and social and emotional wellbeing team.
- There is a great need for communication and service connection to improve referrals and ensure people have access to appropriate support. If someone does not meet the criteria for going to the Community Mental Health Service, they often fall through the gaps and do not receive support. Community Corrections and Courts would like a closer relationship with Community Mental Health Services and the Primary Health Network.
- There is a new Indigenous private service (run by an Indigenous Psychiatrist) starting on TI, that will be based on a stepped care model for social and emotional wellbeing.
- Ongoing mental health education and awareness across workforce and the community is required. There is a need for mental health first aid and trauma training to be provided to the workforce on on-shore, as opportunities on TI are very limited. Training is often held in Townsville or Brisbane. It would be beneficial to provide education on responsible drinking from a young age and provide services for support.
- Culture and family are a significant part of people's wellbeing. There is a need for cultural and kinship support through the court system, hospitals and criminal justice system.
- There is a need for regional promotion of mental health services through existing health services so people are aware they exist and know how to access them.

Emergency Department, Police and Ambulance

- Two significant challenges are patient transport and management of acute cases of mental illness in hospitals.
- Policing resources are very limited which results in policing staff sometimes unable to support hospital staff in situations requiring assistance. Police fatigue is common.
- There is a high turnover of hospital staff which impacts on relationship building and continuity of care.
- People are often taken away from their community and family supports to access mental health and emergency services in Cairns which results in social exclusion, displacement and access to drug and alcohol.
- A strong sense of community, inclusion, kinship and family exists in TI. In addition to this, there is a strong connections to religion and culture in the community which

needs to be integrated into staff training and service delivery. In recognition of this, TI hospital has a cultural safety officer.

- Domestic violence is the most significant call for service for police.
- There is a need for mental health outreach programs, which focus on prevention and early intervention.
- There is a need for ongoing training for police and hospital staff in mental health and trauma.

QLD Health – Mental Health Services

- The mental health workforce is significantly under resourced, with limited support and training provided. As a result, workforce burnout is common.
- Conflict between community driven ideologies and systemic ideologies was identified as a significant issue.
- TI and Torres Strait works from the Torres model of care which is a preventative model of care that embodies physical, cultural, social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. There is a need for increased investment in services that provide social and emotional wellbeing support.
- There is a need for mental health awareness and education that considers community language. Current perception and understanding of mental health among the community was identified as a challenge.
- There is a need for cultural competency, cultural safety and cultural protocols to be embedded within mental health service delivery.
- Three key issues identified as requiring specific focus include workforce, children and youth mental health in schools and perinatal support for mothers who have separated from their children.

Education

- The cost of living on TI is very expensive which impacts on the health and mental health of young people. It was reported that malnutrition is quite high for children.
- Key concerns for young people include: an increase in suicide in the past 4 years across all Torres Strait Islands, the impact of social media on Indigenous people, exposure to drugs and alcohol for youth who attend schooling off-shore and a lack of structured activities in the community.
- There are limited resources and services in the TI community to support children and young people with mental health concerns.
- There is a need for youth centres and structured activities to engage young people in the community. A multiagency/drop in centre was recommended to support the wellbeing of young people.
- There is a need to integrate families and parents into the education system.
- Teachers are not provided with training to manage mental health concerns. There is a need for education support in managing mental illness.
- There is a high turnover of education staff which impacts on relationships and management of mental health concerns.
- It would be beneficial to continue to support the chaplaincy program on TI which assists with funding for schools.

Torres Shire Council

- Torres Shire complex and unique because it consists of islands and is very multicultural.
- The Councils in the region work closely and collectively to address the challenges and opportunities.
- There are 37 government agencies operating from TI
- TI is the central hub where services are delivered to the Torres Strait
- Affordable housing is a challenge for the people, with an overreliance on social housing. There is a 7-10 year wait list for social housing which results in families leaving. There is significant overcrowding.
- The Council has been working with the Queensland Government for 20 years to get funding to acquire 30 allotments of land on Horn Island
- The PHN is funding the Police Community Youth Club but there is a great need for more to be done.
- Engagement officers are working to develop baseline data by commencing a needs assessment through talking to people and understanding what already exists.

Connections – Town Hall Meeting

The first *Connections* Town Hall meeting was held on Thursday Island on 3 July, with 31 participants attending. It was a great opportunity to meet with the community and begin a national conversation on a 2030 Vision for mental health and suicide prevention in Australia.

The Commission will be visiting 26 communities across Australia to hold Town Hall meetings of which anyone with a living experience of mental health; consumers, carers, families and those organisations which provide support and care, are invited to attend.

Following each Town Hall meeting, the Commission is publishing a community snapshot. For more information about *Connections* and to see the snapshots from each community visit www.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/our-work/connections

Thank you to everyone who spent time with Commissioners and shared their personal and professional experiences and ideas. This information will be used by the National Mental Health Commission in its national monitoring, reporting and advising role.