



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND YOUTH AFFAIRS
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Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into Youth Mental Health in the ACT

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SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH IN THE ACT

I would like to make a submission to the Inquiry into Youth Mental Health in the ACT and am thankful to have the opportunity to do so.

I refer to one of the Terms of Reference in the Inquiry; ready access to mental health support and services by young people and would like to address my son's experiences within the ACT mental health system.

In the past 12 months, my 15-year-old son has been diagnosed with Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) Inattentive type, Anxiety and more recently, with mild Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

It has been a long road to get to where we are now.

My son has had sensory issues, phobic behaviours, anxiety and issues with organisation for many years, causing him, his family and his school a lot of frustration and heartache. Our family first approached our GP for a mental health plan and referral for our son to see a psychologist over three years ago. She had known our son for 10 years at that point and because he presents quite well at appointments she refused to believe that he had any difficulties. She would not believe us when we told her that our son had multiple issues, including phobic behaviours and severe anxiety. It was not until she had to administer a vaccination to him which he refused (which then formed part of his eventual Anxiety diagnosis) that she relented, issued him with a mental health plan and gave us the names of three psychologists.

I rang all three clinics on the list given to us by the GP. One was no longer practicing, and the other two had closed their books to new patients. I received two other recommendations from a friend but it turned out that both of those psychologists were also no longer taking new patients.

I ended up getting the name of a psychologist from another friend and called that practice. The psychologist recommended by my friend had closed her books and, out of the ten psychologists in the entire practice, only two were taking new patients. I made an appointment in eight weeks time to see one of the psychologists. The practice rang after six weeks, advised that he couldn't see that particular psychologist, so I made another appointment for eight weeks in the future with the remaining psychologist taking patients. My son had two appointments with this particular psychologist, P1. It was not a great fit. My son has sensory issues and the consulting room smelled "funny" to him and she was not very empathetic but I didn't know what else to do as he'd waited so long and I'd booked four other appointments into the future with P1.

In any case, after the second appointment, the practice called and said that P1 had left the practice and they had no space on their books for my son for the time being but that he could go on a "waiting list" for another psychologist, P2, who "may open up his books soon." At this time I also made an appointment booking (four months in the future) for my son to be tested for ADHD by P2. I waited several months, contacting the practice every month or so and finally I got my son an appointment and then he had his first meeting with P2. The relationship has been a great fit, P2 has been a wonderful support to my son, and he was offered fortnightly or monthly appointments up until the time of his ADHD testing. After the ADHD and Anxiety diagnoses, P2 recommended that my son be tested for ASD and gave me several psychologists' names. I made a booking with P3 in January this year for my son to be tested for ASD. Due to P3's heavy workload there were no appointments available until December, over 10 months away. Fortunately P2 intervened and

recommended P3 test my son sooner and he was tested in February and diagnosed with ASD in March.

School has been easier for my son since the diagnoses, and some accommodations have been made for his organisational and executive functioning issues.

As a family we are grateful that our son now has support, and that his school has a plan in place to assist him. But as his parents there are a few things that we wish had been different on our son's journey to diagnosis and treatment.

We would like GPs to have extra training in mental health so that the delay that we experienced doesn't happen to another family. We were brushed aside for over a year which delayed our son's treatment and affected his school and home relationships.

Also, the fact that I was given out-of-date details for psychologists from the GP was quite frustrating. There should be an up-to-date psychologist register for GPs and potential patients to refer to. It should be clear who has availability and the type of patients and issues that they specialise in. If there is an existing register, all GPs should be made aware of this.

We would like the ACT government to invest in more public youth mental health programs, and assist private clinics so they can take the load off the public system. When I rang headspace I was told there was no places and they were unable to say when any would open up. The waiting lists within private psychologist practices are also lengthy, if you're lucky enough to find a psychologist who is still seeing patients and who is a good fit. It is quite demoralising to have to wait so long when your child's home and school life feel like they are in chaos.