



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC RESPONSE
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Submission Cover Sheet

COVID-19 pandemic response

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Submission

Select Committee on the COVID-19 pandemic response



Marathon Health welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Select Committee on the COVID-19 pandemic response. In preparing this submission, we have drawn primarily from our experiences and observations as the lead agency of headspace Canberra, as well as our role in delivering mental health and other wellbeing services to vulnerable people across the ACT.

Improving the mental health and wellbeing of young people is the core focus of headspace Canberra and we believe this provides us with direct exposure to and experience of the mental health challenges facing young people in the ACT and the impact the current pandemic is having on young people in particular.

Background

headspace Canberra was established in 2009 and provides free or low-cost services to young people between the ages of 12 and 25 years who are experiencing mild to moderate mental health challenges. Services at headspace centre around four core streams; mental health, physical health, education and vocation support and alcohol and other drug support.

headspace Canberra is operated by Marathon Health, as lead agency under the headspace Model of Integrity Framework and is supported by funding from the Capital Health Network through the Australia Governments Primary Health Network program.

In 2018-19 financial year, headspace Canberra provided 5,795 occasions of services to 1,507 young people from across the ACT, of which:

- 3.1% identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
- 14% are young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- 31% identify as LGBTIQ.

In response to the COVID-19 restrictions, Marathon Health quickly changed its service delivery model:

- We moved all seven headspace centres that we operate to a virtual service model in a very short time frame without ceasing service delivery, and some services did not cancel a single appointment.
- A majority of clients preferred telehealth appointments over the phone rather than through video – this correlated with the experience of other headspaces nationally.

headspace private practitioners found the use of telehealth advantageous in reducing the number of “Did Not Attends” as the telehealth format was more accessible and overcame the challenge some clients faced in attending the centre in person.

Mental health challenges and needs of young people in the ACT

At headspace, there is no “wrong door” with referrals pathways including self-referral, a referral from family, a support person or their General Practitioner. Most referrals present primarily due to (as identified by the young person based on data from the past 12 months):

- “Feeling sad and depressed” - 36.1%
- “Feeling anxious” - 31%
- “Stress” - 5.9%.

Of the young people that present to headspace Canberra, 62.6% report that this is their first instance of help-seeking for their mental health concerns. Consequently, 71% of young people who access headspace Canberra access Mental Health Support and 26% engaged in Assessment and Engagement.

The headspace model is sometimes criticised for not delivering solutions for young people with complex, ongoing or high needs – however the model has limitations in reaching the “missing middle”. We recognise that there are service gaps for young people where headspace (and early intervention) intersect with moderate to high needs. Our staff often find that for young people who fall outside of the headspace model of early intervention, finding and accessing an appropriate service that can meet the young person's needs is difficult. Services that work with moderate to high care services experience lengthy waitlists or have specific entry criteria that the young person may not meet. In these situations, headspace staff will continue to have contact with the young person until an appropriate service or support is found.

Recent demand increases

Each year headspace Canberra receives more than 2,000 referrals for local young people seeking support and over the past decade headspace Canberra has tracked a 200% increase in referrals.

Demand for headspace services has more than tripled since the beginning of this year. Numbers jumped from 290 occasions of service between January and March to 1,001 occasions of service from April to June. The number of new young people increased by 318%, from 49 to 156, with overall client numbers jumping 174%, from 231 to 403.

While 2019 was headspace Canberra's busiest year since opening in 2009, the 177 new referrals in June 2020 are the second highest June figures in the centre's history, resulting in an increase in waiting times for young people to access an intake and assessment appointment from one week to three weeks.

In the first week of July, we recorded 50 referrals over four days, compared to the long-term July monthly average of 112 referrals. If this trend continues – or demand jumps even more, as social and economic forecasters are predicting - total client numbers may quadruple by the end of 2020. Our centre staff and Youth Reference Group are concerned about this and have raised the need for early engagement low intensity sessions (such as group programs) to avoid people spending long periods on wait lists. We are investigating how we can deliver community-based and virtual sessions as close to home for young people as possible.

Ready access to mental health support and services by young people

headspace Canberra staff work as best as they can to ensure that wait times are reasonable, and continue to connect with young people whilst they await support. If headspace services are at capacity we work with the young person to support them to access another service or supports. This recognises that early intervention and support is key to success when young people present with mental health concerns. Lengthy waitlists are considered counterproductive to both the young person and the service and so the service continues to implement strategies, working within its resources to reduce wait-times.

headspace Canberra has been working proactively with Capital Health Network and headspace National to manage the demand for services. We welcome the recent announcement of additional funding by the Australian Government to manage demand at headspace Canberra. Whilst the details of this have not yet been released, we are pleased that this additional funding aims to increase headspace Canberra's capacity and reduce wait times for young people.

We also welcome the recent announcement of the addition of headspace Canberra South, which will undoubtedly provide a much needed and valuable service to young people, their family, friends and community in the south of Canberra. headspace Canberra notes however, that whilst the new centre will increase provision and accessibility in that region, it is unlikely to impact the demand on headspace Canberra. Our data shows that less than 5% of current young people accessing headspace Canberra reside within the southern Canberra catchment. The trend of increased demand, as gauged by referrals to headspace Canberra is likely to continue with population growth and shows that demand within the age demographic will expand

significantly in the North Canberra region, with potential that the young people in the North of Canberra may be significantly underserved in the years to come.

Engagement via telehealth

A mixed delivery model that includes telehealth has been a part of Marathon Health's service delivery model across all our services for several years and is key to ensuring people living in rural and remote communities have choice in how they access healthcare. Faced with virtual consultations only since March this year, our clinicians and coaches across the organisation adapted quickly. More than 260 people started working from home and, within a week, services were running smoothly, thanks to our existing infrastructure and in-house IT support team. Post the current pandemic, virtual health consultations will remain a key element of service delivery, particular to reach remote and rural communities as part of a blended service delivery model.

While we found some people dropped out of our mental health programs when they could not access face-to-face services, current research suggests that the efficiencies, particularly in reductions in travel times, are significant. An international patient survey by Accenture in May 2020 found that patient preferences had shifted towards virtual care. Overall, the 2,700 respondents said their care experiences had been extremely positive, with nine out of 10 saying their quality of care was as good, or better than before. In what Accenture described as "a new era of virtual care", they found that nearly half of all patients were receiving treatment at home and 60% wanted to use technology more after their pandemic experience.

Telehealth also allowed us to draw staffing resources from other regions and to more effectively respond to fluctuating demands. Our workforce is spread across rural and regional NSW and the ACT. Where face-to-face services are not essential, telehealth provides us with opportunities to redeploy staff and to fill service needs quickly and effectively.

For young people, telehealth appears to work effectively in driving engagement. By the start of April, online headspace services nationally had jumped to about a quarter of what was being delivered and phone services were most common. The experience across our seven headspace centres suggests that telehealth is providing strong levels of client satisfaction, is delivering a positive experience and will be welcome as an ongoing form of service delivery. Outcomes have been strong for quality of life, and treatment adherence among consumers across a broad range of age groups and mental health conditions. It is comparable to face-to-face services in reliability of clinical assessments and treatment outcomes in many cases. In fact, telehealth is the best choice for some young people who find it difficult to access face-to-face services as a result of their health or mental health conditions and other barriers, including transport, work and study commitments. It is also easy and convenient for young people to use.

Across the board, many mental health clinicians have found that telehealth is effective and the results for clients has been unchanged, while results for young people have often improved when the stigma around accessing a headspace centre or other clinic has been removed and the choice and flexibility of services has increased.

Going forward, as we move from physical distancing measures back to face-to-face service delivery, we are committed to continuing to provide a choice of options for our service users that will include not only face-to-face appointments, but also access to telehealth clinical appointments and group programs. We support the extension of the MBS telehealth numbers past September 2020 as this has considerable benefit for service provision across all of our services.

Employment impact

With the impacts of COVID-19, we expect to see the unprecedented demand for integrated mental health and vocational support programs over the coming months. Currently headspace Canberra relies on in-kind services to provide vocational support to local young people. We believe that there is a need for greater investment in evidence-based programs embedded within headspace such as the national Individual

Placement and Support program that focuses on the individual needs of young people with mental illness who are seeking to enter, or remain in, education and/or employment.

We recognise that there are difficult times still ahead as economic uncertainty prevails in the short term and unemployment continues to rise. Vocational support for young people has never been so critical in the post COVID-19 environment, and we look forward to the national roll-out of the Individual Placement Support program. We have seen the clear benefits of the program at our headspace centre at Dubbo, in Western NSW, with 181 young people being supported since the program started. We continue to support a caseload of 38 and have seen an increase of 5% in referrals since the COVID-19 pandemic began.

We also have concerns about our ability to retain private practitioners in current contract roles as they look for more stable, salaried positions during times of economic uncertainty. There appears to be a general trend among staff with looming contract end dates to seek more stable opportunities at this time.

Conclusion

The need for improved access to mental health support through telehealth will be more critical over the next few years, and remains essential over the longer term. COVID-19 has had significant negative short-term impacts for young people who were already experiencing rising unemployment and the impact of drought and bushfires, but the long-term impacts have the potential to be much greater. Nationally each year, headspace data shows that:

- One in four young Australians aged 18-24 years is experiencing a mental health condition in any given year.
- There are rising levels of distress, with 32% of Australian young people (32%) experiencing high or very high levels of psychological stress – triple the rate reported in 2007.
- Many young Australians are still not getting the support they need to achieve their best possible mental health.

In addition, COVID-19 is impacting heavily on the key factors that support a strong future for young people - their social and emotional wellbeing, social connections, educational attainment, workforce participation, and potentially, their longer-term career outcomes and many young people are reporting reduced mental health.

We acknowledge the support of our partner organisations and funding bodies in allowing us to continue service delivery during these difficult times. In our experience, support needs and waiting times for mental health and wellbeing early intervention are likely to continue to increase in coming months. Without additional funding, existing services will not be able to adequately respond and young lives will be at risk. Now is the time to respond to the needs of the ACT's young people to ensure there are study and employment pathways and opportunities and they have the right structures in place to support the needs of their wellbeing and mental health.

More information

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