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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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Standing Committee on education, Employment and Youth Affairs
Inquiry into Youth Mental Health in the ACT

About Us

Mental Illness Education ACT (MIEACT) is the primary local mental health and well-being education provider for workplaces, community groups and secondary schools across the Canberra region and surrounding area.

Since 1993, MIEACT has delivered evidence-informed programs, partnered with lived experience stories that increase mental health literacy, promote early intervention, reduce stigma and emphasise recovery. What makes MIEACT unique is that we bring small audiences into direct positive contact with Volunteer Educators who share their stories of living with a mental illness. Such face-to-face contact is a proven, powerful stigma reduction model, importantly guided by a safe and non-triggering DoNOHarm Framework © for both story-teller and viewer. This is further partnered with evidence-informed educational content mapped to The Australian Curriculum.

In 2019 MIEACT reached over 22,000 Canberrans delivering mental health education programs. Our programs for young people cover topics including stress, body image and bullying prevention. We ensure participants leave not only with an increased knowledge of mental health, but practical tools to manage, support and practice positive help seeking behaviours.

MIEACT has also recently been appointed the local service coordination agency for Youth Aware of Mental Health (YAM) an initiative under the LifeSpan Suicide Prevention model.

Review of Children and Young people in ACT

A key piece of work for MIEACT in 2019 was the Review of Children and Young people in the ACT. This review was completed in partnership with the Office for Mental Health and Wellbeing and Capital Health Network. The purpose of the review was to better understand the experience of young people and the main issues and barriers to help seeking. MIEACT played a lead role in the community consultation that included online surveys and co-design workshops of which over 800 Canberrans participated. The full report and recommendations are available online¹.

A few areas we believe are important to highlight from the Review in relation to our role and work in the community include the main issues and barriers to seeking help.

Main Issues

Youth Respondents were asked what they thought the main issues facing young people in relation to their mental health and well-being. Respondents had a selection of issues co-designed with young people and were asked to choose their top 3. The top 3 identified for those under 25 years are Anxiety/Stress (coping), School of study problems and Experiencing Bullying. It should be noted that for those under 12 years Experiencing Bullying was the top issue. These results reflect other studies nationally such as Can we talk? Seven year youth mental health report – 2012-2018 by Mission Australia Coping with stress has consistently been the top issue for young people across the country.

Through MIEACT's Stress Better program we explore these concerns further to better understand some of the causes of a concern, worry or stressor in ACT youth. This workshop is designed to build an understanding of stress, worry and anxiety, and the connection between the three to equip participants with the tools to manage stress more effectively. Formative assessment data is collected on the top individual concerns, worries or stressors (depending on the age group) this informs future program activities and focus areas. The sample from 714 ACT youth results (272 Primary Age and 447 College Age) has been included in this submission for further exploration on the main issues facing young people in the ACT. Overall, School and school work (41.1%) and Problems with family and friends (19.5%) are of the greatest concern to our learners. Not meeting social expectations (12.1%) and Climate change (10.6%) are also common concerns identified in this program.

Main Obstacles

Youth Respondents were also asked what the main obstacles were for young people accessing help. The top 3 barriers are affordability, wait for access and stigma. The following lived experience from a young Canberran sums up the experiences of our young people.

"There needs to be more programs/services available for low income earners that provide regular and ongoing psychological support rather than just counselling. Medicare doesn't cover enough psychological appointments for those who have serious

¹ <https://www.health.act.gov.au/about-our-health-system/office-mental-health-and-wellbeing/our-work>

and ongoing struggles with mental health no matter their age. Wait times need to be regulated, people do not just seek help thinking they will have to wait 3 months+.” – Respondent, 18-25 years

MIEACT respond to stigma each day in the community. Our lived experience presenters have contributed to the reduction in stigma, but it is still present and a barrier for young people. The review responses highlighted an importance in stigma awareness campaigns from the parents/carers perspective, however, young people felt more interested in the practical tools and strategies they could implement to respond to mental ill-health.

Expanding access to mental health education

MIEACT’s submission to the ACT Community Budget Consultation 2020-21 recommended the expansion of universal mental health education programs, in particular, to reach primary school age students that fosters all young people in the ACT during their early years. We believe it is essential to build their awareness of and strategies to manage a mental health issue, should they need to in the future.

Investing in promotion and prevention of youth mental health has never been more crucial. As outlined in the *Fifth National Mental Health Plan* early intervention through education programs can lead to: improved diagnosis and treatment, more timely and targeted referrals to specialist services, and improved confidence and engagement of primary care providers. As schools strive to develop an environment that is inclusive, supportive and safe for its learners they require programs that enrich the development of the whole child in all aspects of learning. The development of mental health and wellbeing is vital for the social, emotional, physical and academic growth of a child.

As a long term provider of mental health education programs in the ACT, MIEACT is in the best position to expand our work with schools and young people to create healthy communities that foster resilience and wellbeing.

By investing in children and building their resilience we have the best chance of allowing them to thrive, reducing the growing burden on hospital emergency departments over time and other crisis service requirements such as mental health care plans, specialised mental health services, hospital admissions, alcohol and drug-related hospital admissions and mental health related prescriptions.

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