

Senator Rachel Siewert

Chair
Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

3 May 2018

Dear Senator Siewert

Mental Health Australia wishes to make a short submission to the Committee's inquiry into the accessibility and quality of mental health services in rural and remote Australia.

We welcome the Committee's inquiry into this very important issue. There are not sufficient mental health services in rural and remote parts of Australia and it is the responsibility of all governments to urgently address this.

The Committee will no doubt hear first-hand accounts of the impact on individuals, their families and their communities of limited access to mental health services. Local communities will know what contributes to poor mental health in their communities, and will therefore know what services are needed to improve the mental health and wellbeing of their communities. It is likely there will be a wide range of issues that are not limited to the health sector which require a range of responses from all levels of governments.

Responsibility for mental health in rural and remote Australia needs to be shared across portfolios and jurisdictional boundaries. Major economic gains can be made by ensuring that the right governance conditions are in place, improving coordination within and across governments and service providers, and addressing gaps in services.

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Health Council endorsed the Fifth National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Plan (the Fifth Plan) in August 2017. The Fifth Plan provides the framework under which governments have agreed to work together to achieve integrated mental health service planning and delivery at the regional level (Priority Area 1 of the Plan). The Fifth Plan provides the mechanism for filling the service gaps identified by rural and remote Primary Health Networks (PHN).

The COAG Health Council should be tasked to develop a rural mental health strategy, informed by a collation prepared by the National Mental Health Commission of the PHN service mapping in rural and remote areas and other key data that identifies service shortfalls. The Commission should also be tasked with monitoring and overseeing implementation of the strategy, reporting back directly to the COAG Health Council.



Beyond the mental health service system, is it critical that governments examine how the potential economic impacts of policy changes which may affect mental health outcomes are accounted for across portfolios. This may mean reconfiguring current Budget rules in order to better recognise the longer-term and cross-portfolio impacts on mental health in rural and remote Australia as a result, for example, of investment in housing and employment, and support for private commercial enterprises. Public policies that ease the challenges of living, working and running businesses in rural and remote Australia will go a long way to ensure the mental health and wellbeing of those communities.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Josh Fear', with a stylized, cursive script.

Josh Fear
Director, Policy and Projects

