



## ADVICE TO THE COMMISSIONER FOR MENTAL HEALTH COVID-19 Advice Update 11 June 2020

### BACKGROUND

Further to advice given regarding the COVID-19 situation on 3 April 2020, the Mental Health Advisory Council (Council) offers the following brief update as to how the situation is affecting Council members' environments and communities as at mid-May 2020.

### ADVICE

#### Community Mental Health (South Metro)

- In the community mental health setting there has not been an increase in crisis presentations, except in the areas of youth and alcohol and other drugs.
- In-person group activities/therapy are not running, and staff are reporting higher workloads with individual consumers who are not getting the usual support they do from group activities/therapy.
- As restrictions lift, delivery of services needs to remain flexible because some consumers will prefer to continue meeting virtually rather than face-to-face.

#### Technology


- The use of technology has increased the reach of regional organisations which can now offer online services to areas they were not able to service before COVID-19.
- The uptake of telehealth by Aboriginal people has been quite high. Before COVID-19 there were question marks around the efficacy of telehealth in the Aboriginal community. Post COVID-19, this will prove to be fortuitous given the remoteness of some communities.
- Service providers recommended that Government identify one or two online platforms and for use for telehealth and online group therapy, so that consumers and service providers do not have to download and learn to use multiple apps.
  - The WA Department of Health is now using the Health Direct Videocall service which is a secure and encrypted platform.

#### General

- Some community members have reported they feel more connected to their community as they are helping to keep people safe and are doing the right thing by staying home.
- For some people it has been an opportunity to feel more connected to the community while others feel more disconnected from the community.

#### Emerging from COVID-19

- Some community members are worried that restrictions are being lifted too soon and are concerned about a second wave and possible impacts.
- There is a concern regarding an increase in the suicide rate over the coming months as well as the impact of increases in general mental distress and alcohol and other drug use.
- Concern was raised as to the impact on vulnerable cohorts, including Fly-In, Fly-Out (FIFO) workers who continue to have extended periods of separation from their families.

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- Consideration needs to be given to what services and responses we will need most after COVID-19. For example, people did not want to go to Emergency Departments because they believed they were unsafe. Planning needs to consider the establishment of alternative safe places.
  - The development of different pathways into care that do not rely on the current medically focused pathways also needs to be prioritised.
  - The impact of the withdrawal of the increases in Job Seeker and Job Keeper allowances is likely to cause significant mental health distress for people reliant on this income.
  - Council discussed the availability and suitability of online platforms for group therapy. For example, Lifeline WA has an online group program for survivors of suicide attempts. People with lived experience are co-facilitators of the group with a Lifeline employee.

Sincerely



Margaret Doherty  
CHAIR  
Mental Health Advisory Council

11 JUNE 2020