Victorian Youth Strategy

Submission prepared by ReachOut Australia

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Contents

We acknowledge the traditional owners of Country throughout Australia and recognise their continuing connection to lands, waters and communities. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and to Elders past, present and emerging. We recognise connection to Country as being integral to health and wellbeing.

Executive summary

Nearly half of all Australians will experience a mental health challenge over the course of their lives.[1] Timely and appropriate help-seeking, especially during adolescence, can reduce the long-term health, social and economic impact of many of these mental health problems,[2] yet studies continue to show that the majority of people experiencing a mental illness don't get the help they need.[3] This problem is especially pronounced among young people, with 70 per cent of young people who experience a mental illness receiving no help.[4]

While continued investment in mental health treatment services is a priority and required, what is also required is new investment in early intervention and prevention to increase people's capacity to manage their mental health.

This submission is focused on what is required to create a mental health system orientated to young people with a particular focus on:

- access to online support options that address the barriers to help-seeking
- considering the role of online peer support forums in the broader mental health service system
- enhancing support for school staff to ensure they are equipped to recognise mental health and wellbeing issues in their classes and have access to tailored teaching resources that build the social and emotional skills their students need to manage their mental health and wellbeing.

About the inquiry

The Victorian Government is developing a new state-wide youth strategy that seeks to create an environment where all young people are healthy and safe, and empowered to contribute to the issues that affect them. As part of its policy development, submissions have been sought on the 'Victorian Youth Strategy discussion paper.' The Strategy will focus on the following outcomes:
- Victorian young people are healthy and well, mentally and physically
- Victorian young people actively participate in learning, education and training
- Victorian young people are economically active and contribute to the economy
- Victorian young people are connected to culture, community and civic life
- Victorian young people are safe, experience equality of opportunity and are treated fairly
- Government, community services and the youth sector are accessible, appropriate and coordinated, and respond to young people's evolving needs

Recommendations

1. **Ensure young people have access to online support options that address barriers to help-seeking and are aware of the resources available to them.**
2. **Consider the role of online peer support forums in the mental health service system, from self-help to more intensive care.**
3. **Provide school staff with support to identify mental health and wellbeing issues in their student cohorts, match classroom teaching to the issues identified and build student social and emotional skills to manage their wellbeing and mental health.**

About ReachOut

ReachOut is the most accessed online mental health service for young people and their parents in Australia. Its trusted self-help information, peer-support program and referral tools save lives by helping young people be well and stay well. The information it offers parents makes it easier for them to help their teenagers, too.

ReachOut has been championing wider access to mental health support since it launched its online service more than 20 years ago. Everything it creates is based on the latest evidence and is designed with experts, and young people or their parents. That's why ReachOut is a trusted, relevant service that's so easy to use.

Accessed by more than 2 million people in Australia each year, ReachOut is a free service that's available anytime and pretty much anywhere.

In 2019–20,

- More than 2.6 million people in Australia visited ReachOut.com
- More than 60,000 people visited the peer-support forums
- More than 80,000 people visited ReachOut Parents
- More than 30,000 people visited the 'Urgent Help' page
- there were 14,782 referrals to crisis services
- 666 young people required a duty of care intervention

	National	VIC
People who used ReachOut.com or the peer-support forums	2,640,574	709,081
5 most common reasons young people visited ReachOut	1. Addiction 2. Sex 3. Abuse & Violence 4. Alcohol & Drugs 5. Anxiety	1. Addiction 2. Sex 3. Abuse & Violence 4. Alcohol & Drugs 5. Anxiety

July 2019 to June 2020

2020 has been especially challenging for young people due to the impact of COVID-19 on their lives. Young people told us that:

- Disruption to their schooling and routines has made it difficult to be motivated and stay focused, and many are feeling overwhelmed by their workload and the lack of support.
- They need support for their mental health focused on managing stress, staying positive, and managing worries about the future.
- They are feeling disconnected and lonely, and have fewer opportunities to open up to friends about how they're coping with these tough times.
- They are stressing about the future and what their lives will be like, as they contemplate the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on their job and career prospects and their ability to earn an income.
- Many are experiencing tension and conflict in their relationships, exacerbated by ongoing restrictions on and disruptions to ordinary life.

The impact on young people in Victoria was especially pronounced as demonstrated by higher rates of increase in access to ReachOut's information about urgent help resources and high rates of click through to external crisis support services:

Urgent Help (16 March – 30 September)
Total: 24,517 pageviews (+18.59% YOY)
Victoria: 7551 pageviews (+47.74% YOY)

Clicked through to an external crisis support service (16 March – 26 October)
Total: 4688 events (clicks) (+19.50% YOY)
Victoria: 1672 events (clicks) (+77.68% YOY)

Further information on the impact of COVID-19 on young people's mental health, ReachOut's service response and lesson learned during this period is available here.

ReachOut has also undertaken a program of research and released a series of reports that explore the social and financial costs of mental ill-health; consider cost-effective solutions for system reform through online service delivery; help better understand young people's mental health and service needs; and demonstrate the impacts of its service. This submission has drawn on the following reports:

- ReachOut and EY, 2015, *A Way Forward: Equipping Australia's Mental Health System for the Next Generation*
- ReachOut, 2020, *A Measurable Impact: Helping Young People To Be and Stay Well*

These reports, and other research reports, are accessible here.

ReachOut has a measurable impact

A Measurable Impact: Helping Young People To Be and Stay Well, is a report of an analysis of the largest impact study ReachOut has ever conducted and provides a clear indication of the significant impact ReachOut has on young people in distress[5]. ReachOut conducted a longitudinal study of approximately 2000 users, to understand how young people use ReachOut, as well as its impact on their mental health and help-seeking behaviour.

The results, which have been independently peer-reviewed, show that over a three-month period ReachOut contributed to a statistically significant decline in symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress. The biggest changes were seen in young people who had severe or extremely severe symptoms.

Users who took part in the study completed multiple surveys over three months. Surveys were conducted at: Baseline, Week 5 (five weeks post baseline), Follow-up (three months post baseline). While at the beginning of the study, the majority of users rated their mental health as either 'fair' or 'poor', a large proportion of users (68 per cent) scored in the 'severe' or 'extremely severe' range of symptoms of depression, anxiety and/or stress. Analysis of the data from this study found that ReachOut users experienced:

1. *Improvements in mental health*: overall ReachOut users participating in this study experienced a significant reduction in their symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress over the three-month study period, with the largest reduction in symptoms of depression. There was also a reduction in the proportion of participants experiencing severe or extremely severe symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress.
2. *Reduction in suicide risk*: there was a significant reduction in suicide risk; at baseline 12.3 per cent of users were at high-risk of suicide, but this had significantly reduced to 8.6 per cent of users by the three-month follow-up.

3. *Increased help-seeking*: of those participants who were experiencing symptoms of depression, anxiety, and/or stress, but had not sought help within the three months prior to the study 11.6 per cent went on to seek help from a mental health professional and a further 5.7 per cent went on to seek help from a doctor or GP by the three month follow-up.

The impact of mental ill-health

Half of all mental health disorders emerge by the mid-teens, while 75 per cent have their onset prior to age 25.[6] Just under one in four adolescents aged 15 to 19 years live with a probable serious mental health illness, and there has been a significant increase in the proportion of young people meeting this criteria over the past five years, rising from 18.7 per cent in 2012 to 22.8 per cent in 2016.[7]

Mental health disorders, such as depression and anxiety, experienced by this age cohort can cause a range of negative effects to wellbeing, functioning and development, both in the short and long term.[8],[9]

Without appropriate support, mental health difficulties often increase in severity and can lead to social withdrawal, the breakdown of relationships and poor education and employment outcomes.[10],[11] In addition to these significant personal costs, economic analysis estimates the cost to the economy is almost $70 billion per year, which is approximately four per cent of GDP or about $4,000 for every taxpayer.[12] Between $6.29 billion[13] and $10.6 billion[14] of this cost could be attributed to young people aged 12 to 25.

Creating a (young) people orientated system

Recommendation:

Ensure young people have access to online support options that address barriers to help-seeking and are aware of the resources available to them.

Mission Australia's Youth Survey reports illustrate young people's appetite for mental health support that can be provided online[15][16]. In their 2018 survey:
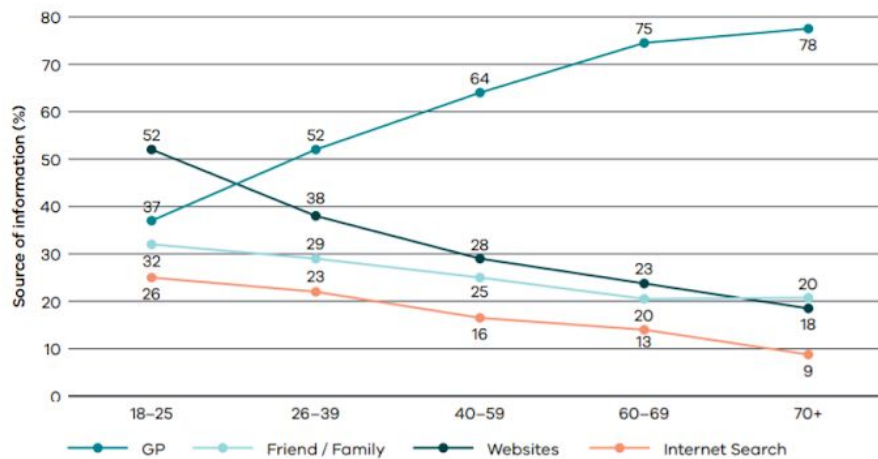
- 31 per cent of all young people, and 37 per cent of those with psychological distress, said they would use the internet to source **information about specific issues**
- 16.5 per cent of all young people, and 22.2 per cent of those with psychological distress, said they would use the internet to access **information about available services**
- 16.5 per cent of young people, and 23 per cent of young people with psychological distress, reported that they would use the internet **to chat one-on-one with someone who has had a similar experience** (notably young people valued this over online counselling with a professional)
- 19 per cent of young people, and 19.8 per cent of those with psychological distress, reported they would use the internet to access an **online quiz or assessment tool**

● 8.3 per cent of young people, and 11.8 per cent of those with psychological distress, said they would use an **online support group or forum**.

Further, the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System noted that children and young people can be reluctant to seek help in person, and many prefer to access support and information online[17]. A survey conducted for the Commission found that, while older people are more likely to visit their GP about mental health concerns, young people are more likely to use the websites of specific mental health support services (see Figure 7.23 reproduced from the Interim Report).

Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System

Figure 7.23: Likely sources of information approach when facing a 'mental health challenge', by age group Victoria

Reference: RCVMHS, *Community Sentiment Survey–Key findings*, November 2019.

Help to understand and seek help

The current stepped model of care presumes a level of self-awareness and acceptance of a mental health problem, which is something many young people do not possess and may prevent them from getting appropriate help. A question in ReachOut's routine monitoring and evaluation, for both ReachOut users and non-ReachOut users, asks 'What's the one thing that stresses you out, but you don't think is important or serious enough to tell anyone?". While many young people report issues like study stress and worrying about the future, others report issues that signal fairly serious mental health symptoms which they are not conceptualising in this way, or seeing as help worthy (see Table 1).

Table 1: "What's the one thing that stresses you out, but you don't think is important or serious enough to tell anyone?"

Responses that may signal mental health symptoms
- Anxiety   - A feeling of hopelessness   - Being worthless   - Eating disorders   - I am worried too much about everything   - I feel extremely sad deep inside   - Just general negative feelings about myself and my life   - My social anxiety I feel like it's silly and other people don't get it like it's just something I need to get over on my own

Young people need help to understand what they are going through and to get them ready to seek further support. Services like ReachOut provide this opportunity by:
- increasing awareness of symptoms and services
- providing a safe space to explore and discuss their situation
- clarifying expectations about what seeking help would look like, what would be required of them and how much it would cost
- building positive attitudes about the benefits of seeking help and decreasing stigma
- sharing other young people's experiences of seeking help
- increasing a young person's sense of agency and motivation in their own help-seeking journey.

ReachOut's NextStep, launched in 2016, is an evidence-based automated triaging tool designed to build service readiness and link young people to the services that are most appropriate for their level of need. NextStep is available on ReachOut.com and has been developed as a 'widget' that can be syndicated and incorporated into other online settings, such as The University of Melbourne website.

The NextStep development drew on the expertise of 10 leading mental health service providers and was co-designed with more than 600 young people. A randomised control trial found it to be effective in reducing negative affect and improving satisfaction with the help-seeking process up to three months after using the tool, when compared with usual help-seeking strategies[18]. The economic analysis also demonstrated that the tool is cost effective, better matching health interventions with the needs and preferences of consumers[19]. Expansion of a tool like

NextStep could play an important role in facilitating the principles of stepped care in an efficient and cost-effective way for young people, and reducing costs in the broader health system.

Online platforms like ReachOut can support young people to become more self-aware in relation to their own mental health, and empower them to access the form of support that is right for them.

The reluctant helpseeker

ReachOut's research and work with young people has shown that a large proportion are unwilling to access face-to-face services, even if they know that they would benefit from doing so. A Mission Australia report showed that 36.5 per cent of the young people surveyed who were experiencing psychological distress agreed with the statement "I have had some problems but I did not get help even though I thought I needed it"[20]. ReachOut's recent impact study, *A Measurable Impact: Helping Young People to Be and Stay Well*, showed that 26.6 per cent of respondents (comprising young people with fairly significant mental health needs) agreed with the same statement[21].

> *"I don't think it is necessary [sic] to tell anyone because I know how to solve my problems and I don't need to bother anyone else about them"*
> *[ReachOut study participant]*

It is well established that young people are often reluctant to seek help for mental health problems[22], with the main barriers to help-seeking being stigma, embarrassment and preference for self-reliance[23]. A 2014 review identified that although young people's experiences of online mental health services are typically very positive, to date there has been little evidence to suggest they facilitate help-seeking[24]. It is therefore encouraging that ReachOut's recent impact study showed it contributed to an increase in help-seeking intentions and behaviours[25]. This highlights the considerable potential of services like ReachOut to mitigate common barriers to help-seeking.

The impact study of approximately 2000 ReachOut users, also showed the service attracted young people with fairly significant mental health needs, and that many had previously sought help from a mental health professional. Of concern is that many did not rate this experience as helpful. It was encouraging that this cohort of young people with unmet needs had experienced improvements in their mental health symptoms after engaging with ReachOut, and rated the support they received positively. While ReachOut is primarily intended as a prevention/early intervention service, it is supporting young people across the spectrum of intervention and all the way through their mental health journey.

Finally, ReachOut's impact study demonstrated that although many young people intended to seek help from a mental health professional, they more frequently relied on friends, parents and online resources. Mission Australia reports similar findings, with friends, parents/caregivers and

the internet being the most commonly cited sources of support[26]. This highlights the reliance on online resources, but speaks to the importance of services which offer resources and support to people, such as friends or parents, who may find themselves providing informal support to a young person.

Increase awareness of available resources

Young people's service preferences make clear the need to ensure that young people are aware of the online resources and supports available to them. ReachOut believes there is much that can be done to increase awareness amongst young people of online mental health resources, including through schools, universities and advertising.

ReachOut is also exploring new content partnerships with other service providers and online youth resources to increase awareness of services and ensure that help-seekers have access to the most relevant information and tools. ReachOut welcomes opportunities to explore further partnerships.

The potential of online peer support communities

Recommendation:

Consider the role of online peer support in the mental health service system, from self-help to more intensive care.

Peer support is increasingly recognised as an important component of the mental health service system, due to increasing demand for this type of support and demonstration of its unique impact and effectiveness. Online peer support communities (or forums) are embedded within a number of services in Australia, for example, ReachOut, Beyond Blue and SANE. Each forum has a similar model, but caters to different consumers.

Peer support is often conceptualised as providing social and emotional support throughout recovery. ReachOut's research and evaluation of its peer support forums shows that it plays an important role throughout the stepped model of care, and even before a young person interacts with the formal mental health system. ReachOut has found that young people use peer support to contextualise what is going on for them, explore what their options are, help manage stress and distress, build their readiness to reach out for more formal support where needed, and as an adjunct to treatment. Further, a substantial number of young people do not post, but are reassured and feel less alone as a result of reading the posts made by other young people and the responses from peer and (less frequently) staff moderators.

The majority of young people accessing ReachOut's forums are affected by poor mental health, and are commonly experiencing feelings of low self-esteem, loneliness and isolation. Some struggle to navigate and maintain close relationships. There is also a reluctance to seek help from a mental health professional within this community. In 2019–20, 666 young people using ReachOut's peer support forums required a duty of care intervention, the majority related to suicide ideation or attempt. ReachOut's research with forum users has demonstrated the

benefits of online peer support in terms of providing social connection, validating concerns, generating a sense of hope and increasing uptake of self-help strategies.

Reachout is also working to develop a new one-on-one model of peer support which will allow young people to connect with trained peer supporters who offer perspective and learnings through their own lived experience. This model is new to Australia and we believe it will meet a clear service gap as our research shows that young people are looking for options to connect safely with other young people who have 'walked in their shoes' when they aren't able or ready to talk to experts.

ReachOut's research found that for young people:

- Being able to tell their story easily, express themselves authentically without judgement and connect genuinely is important
- For most, having a peer listen is not enough. They want to connect with someone with shared experiences so that they can gain new perspectives
- Connecting with a peer the same age or slightly older is valued as they are relatable and can genuinely understand - especially if they have lived experience and supportive qualities
- There is an appetite to connect to a peer more than once so that they can continue a conversation without having to retell their story

ReachOut believes one-on-one digital peer support will be especially beneficial in reaching young people who don't feel they are able to reach out to formal or informal support networks.

Supporting young people during the school years

Recommendation:

Provide school staff with support to identify mental health and wellbeing issues in their student cohorts, match classroom teaching to the issues identified and build student social and emotional skills to manage their wellbeing and mental health.

Schools and teachers play an important role in building students' social, emotional and physical wellbeing. However developing wellbeing programs, which engage students and address the right issues for each class can be challenging. These programs are most impactful when they meet the specific needs of the students they are designed to help.

ReachOut Schools takes a whole of school approach to student wellbeing. By linking resources for parents and carers, information for teachers and engaging content for students we are able to ensure school communities have the tools they need to help their young people.

Our free, evidence based classroom resources aim to build the overall wellbeing of students, targeting protective factors and the development of social and emotional skills. These resources

are linked to topics we know young people find challenging such as friendship issues, study stress and mental health. Each lesson has been created to help teachers build students' coping skills, resilience and problem solving behaviour.

One way we help teachers implement impactful and tailored wellbeing programs is our latest product, Student Snapshot. Student Snapshot is a digital survey, freely available and easily accessible to teachers, that has been created to help support students as they transition from primary to secondary school. The student profile generated after the survey is completed provides teachers with relevant information about individual students which can help them build a meaningful connection with the student. The year group analysis aggregates answers to identify any trends or areas of concern within the cohort. ReachOut Schools then takes into account the identified needs of the group and matches relevant articles and classroom teaching resources accordingly.

ReachOut would welcome the opportunity to work with the Victorian Government to roll this tool out across Victorian schools, tailor it to specific Victorian needs and educational frameworks and expand the tool to cater to other year levels.

Conclusion

This submission has focused on opportunities to create a mental health system that is orientated towards young people – that takes into account their preferences for online services and help-seeking behaviours. It also looks at opportunities to help more young people through online peer support, and by better equipping teachers to support the wellbeing of individual students and whole classes.

In addition to investments in traditional mental health treatment services, there is an opportunity to look at additional investment in early intervention and prevention. By doing so we can increase people's capacity to manage their mental health, and before the first onset of the symptoms, and to prevent mental health issues.

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