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SIDE BY SIDE

SUPPORTING YOUTH PEER WORK IN MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

The mental health peer workforce has strong sector and policy support, and there are now numerous mental health services across the country that employ and support peer workers, recognising their unique value and contribution.

However, there remain several persistent barriers to growing and supporting the peer workforce. In the youth peer workforce many of these barriers are amplified, with key concerns relating to the time-limited and age-restricted nature of roles, and associated impacts on training and professional development needs, career progression and long-term roles.

While a number of frameworks and guidelines exist to support the peer workforce, these unique concerns of the youth peer workforce remain unaddressed. A thriving youth peer workforce will require nationally consistent guidelines that meet their needs, a clear commitment to the growth and support of the workforce, and a national body that represents them and provides youth-specific peer work resources.



KEY POLICY SOLUTIONS

Ten recommendations have been identified in the full report. There are three key solutions that build on current opportunities in policy and the mental health sector.

CLEAR ROLES AND GUIDELINES

The National Mental Health Commission provide youth-specific consultations to ensure that the peer workforce development guidelines address their unique needs.

A CLEAR COMMITMENT TO GROWING THE YOUTH PEER WORKFORCE

Commitments to the youth peer workforce and their supports become a requirement in headspace centres, state and territory mental health plans and PHN commissioning processes.

A NATIONAL VOICE

The creation of a national organisation for peer workers, committed to dedicated consultations and supplementary resources for youth peer workers.

“Put in a clear plan about peer support and make sure the roles are clear. Many places hire peer workers without having a structure in place.”

YOUTH PEER WORKER

CLEAR ROLES AND GUIDELINES

Despite a number of peer work plans and strategies, the needs of youth peer workers are often unaddressed. The development of peer workforce development guidelines by the National Mental Health Commission provides an opportunity to consult youth peer workers and create nationally consistent guidance on well-defined roles, covering senior roles, salaries and employment conditions; exploring whether core competencies and goals differ in youth peer work; providing advice on ageing out processes (when a youth peer worker is no longer eligible for the role as their age no longer meets a service's definition of "youth"); enabling clear commitments to appropriate career trajectories, training and supervision for youth peer workers; and advising on boundaries and dual relationships. This may be covered in supplementary, youth-specific guidelines that build upon current work, ensuring that youth peer workers have their needs addressed and are successfully embedded in youth mental health services.

A CLEAR COMMITMENT TO GROWING THE YOUTH PEER WORKFORCE

Developing sector and policy support for peer workers requires inclusion of youth peer workers. This inclusion should be seen in the headspace Model Integrity Framework, future state and territory mental health plans, and in the PHN commissioning processes for youth mental health services. In addition to a commitment to the inclusion and growth of the youth peer workforce, governments, services and systems must ensure that adequate supports – such as appropriate training, resource allocation and supervision – are made obligatory through policy

commitment. A clear commitment would enable more young Australians to access youth peer workers, an increased number of young people employed as youth peer workers, and a stronger, better-supported youth peer workforce.

A NATIONAL VOICE

A national peer work organisation is needed to support peer workers nationally, ensuring consistent national standards and increasing the supports, recognition and representation of the workforce. This organisation must commit to dedicated consultations with youth peer workers to ensure their needs are represented and addressed. This may be facilitated through an adjunct youth-specific online hub, which would create a centralised 'one-stop-shop' for supplementary youth-specific peer work resources, training and online co-reflection. A national voice and youth-specific online hub will ensure that youth peer workers are well-supported, have access to youth-specific peer work resources and are represented in key forums.



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