



Adult Learning Australia

Lifelong and lifewide learning for all Australians

Friday, 25 November 2016

Fifth National Mental Health Plan Section
Strategic Policy Branch
Health Systems Policy Division
Department of Health
Canberra ACT 2601

TO THE FIFTH NATIONAL MENTAL HEALTH PLAN SECTION

Re: National Mental Health Plan.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the draft National Mental Health Plan.

Adult Learning Australia (ALA) is the national peak body for adult and community education (ACE). We are a not-for-profit entity with both organisational and individual members in all states and territories who reflect the diversity of adult and community education. Our organisational members include Community Colleges, Neighbourhood Houses, Community Learning Centres, Aboriginal community controlled education providers, Men's Sheds, Workers Education Associations and other community based providers of adult learning.

ALA's commitment to equitable lifelong and lifewide learning is a central aspect of the adult and community education sector in supporting the Australian community. It provides place-based opportunities for community development, support and connection. ACE offers a range of learning and social environments across urban, rural and regional Australia in more than 2,500 settings. ACE providers are community based, owned and managed by the not for profit sector, committed to providing a range of place based community development and support activities and programs.

Lifelong learning is learning throughout the adult years via the formal education system, in workplaces and through community participation. Lifewide learning is developing the skills and knowledge required to engage in meaningful work; to participate fully as a citizen in a vibrant democracy; to live in harmony in a diverse, multi-cultural and rapidly changing society and to manage one's health and personal wellbeing, particularly in the senior years.

In Australian policy terms, ACE has two distinct meanings. It refers to adult learning programs that are non-formal and non-vocational and usually have no prerequisites. It also refers to a sector of not-for-profit local community-based organisations that offer adult learning programs. ALA advocates for both definitions of ACE. We seek good quality programs as well as a strong network of providers. Our members are practitioners, administrators, researchers, individuals and other stakeholders in the field based in all states and territories.

The National Mental Health Plan must identify and respond to the key structural inequalities that reinforce mental illness and ensure an integrated approach using the social determinants of health. The World Health Organization defines the social determinants of health (SDH) as the conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live, and age, and the wider set of forces and systems shaping the conditions of daily life. These forces and systems include economic policies and systems, development agendas, social norms, social policies and political systems (http://www.who.int/social_determinants/en/).

In particular, a safe and secure place to live and access to social support and local community learning centres can contribute significantly to individual wellbeing and provide a touchstone for social connectedness, continuity and opportunity.

Leadership in mental health reform must include recognition of the ACE sector. ACE is a gateway for learners who may be disengaged, disadvantaged, and or facing learning barriers. With appropriate resourcing, ALA can contribute to the application of the National Mental Health Plan in terms of advocacy, research and consultation.

ALA recognises that mental health is a complex issue and that it can be compounded by drug and alcohol issues; family violence; lack of employment; and homelessness, or insecure and unsafe housing. It can also lead to social alienation and disengagement. The ACE sector provides a wide range of community learning and social opportunities that complement primary and community mental health services which enable people to stay healthy and active in community life.

Many ACE providers are already engaged with people who have chronic mental health issues. Often their programs or facilities are the main point of social contact for individuals who may be otherwise stigmatised in the wider community. ACE staff and volunteers can provide a familiar, friendly and safe environment, with low cost programs, including access to learning new skills, computer and adult literacy, personal and cultural development, as well as providing pathways to education, training and employment. They can also offer opportunities for people with mental health issues to work as a volunteer in community learning spaces to engage and learn.

ACE providers often work with, or alongside, key health providers to offer specific programs. For example, the South Eastern Sydney Recovery College and the City East Community College in New South Wales; Farnham Street Neighbourhood Learning Centre and McAuley Community Services for Women in Victoria with their Marvellous Mental Health program.

In October 2016, ALA held a forum in Canberra entitled, 'Community Based Adult Learning, Health and Wellbeing, that explored the role of ACE in supporting equitable and effective mental health (MH) reform and to stimulate debate among ACE sector peaks and our peers in the field of community mental health.

The forum included the presentation of the ALA Mental Health Policy, which recommends that the Australian government should:

- ensure that strategies that link people with community-based, flexible and high quality education, training and pathways to employment are prioritised
- ensure that adult learning programs that are accessible to people with mental health conditions are prioritised for funding
- formally acknowledge the role of adult and community education as a discrete fourth sector of education in Australia, offering accessible learning opportunities for adults in

local communities that meet their needs and support place-based community development (<https://ala.asn.au/policy-representation/policy/>).

Recent reforms in mental health emphasise 'person-centred approaches and choices'. We welcome this trend but are conscious that such reforms bring significant change. People must be supported to successfully navigate the choices available to them to improve their access to high quality health and community services.

Lifelong and lifewide learning opportunities provide for a range of individual health benefits; improving human, social and economic capital. When someone has a decent place to live in an area where they can access community supports, such as neighbourhood houses and local learning centres, their chance of staying well and connected is increased. Access to good community infrastructure can enhance people's stability, make it easier to receive care and treatment and enhance opportunities to be active healthy citizens in their own communities.

Please find attached the ALA Background Paper 'Towards A Mental Health Policy' and a copy of ALA's mental health policy.

If you require any further information please contact me on 9689 8623 or email j.macaffer@ala.asn.au.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jenny Macaffer". The signature is fluid and cursive, written over a light grey rectangular background.

Jenny Macaffer
CEO