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Innovative Youth Mental Health Program Will Help Provide the 'Right care, first time, where you live'

Young people in the Nepean Blue Mountains region are struggling with their mental health and often have difficulty accessing, navigating and engaging with the services and programs that are available. Demand for services is high, with general practice data for the region indicating that 14% of patients between 4-17 years have a coded mental health disorder. Population health data also indicates that the region has a higher burden of mental illness and suicide compared to the NSW state average.

Wentworth Healthcare, provider of the Nepean Blue Mountains Primary Health Network (PHN), is one of eight PHNs nationally working with the University of Sydney's Brain and Mind Centre to develop and implement their own dynamic systems model, with their community as part of the 'Right care, first time, where you live' Program funded by the BHP Foundation.

The 'Right care, first time, where you live' Program co-creates a dynamic systems model that can provide a birds-eye perspective on what is happening in a particular region's youth mental health system. A dynamic systems model is a decision support tool that can be used by decision makers to test 'what-if' scenarios. For example, what if we increased mental health education programs in schools? Would that reduce the number of young people going to emergency departments in acute psychological distress?

Co-Director of Health and Policy at the Brain and Mind Centre, Professor Ian Hickie, said that 'Right care, first time, where you live' aims to support regional decision makers to make evidence informed decisions on how to coordinate and fund youth mental health services in their local regions.

"We're delighted to be embarking on the systems modelling phase of the Program with Wentworth Healthcare. Systems modelling helps communities map out and quantify complex problems. It's exciting to be working with this region who are passionate about improving mental health outcomes for young people," said Professor Ian Hickie.

The Wentworth Healthcare region, spanning the Blue Mountains, Hawkesbury, Lithgow and Penrith Local Government Areas (LGAs), is one of the fastest growing regions in NSW. It has a diverse population of 387,496 people, with around 20% of the population having been born overseas. The region has significant disparities in levels of socio-economic advantage and disadvantage.

CEO of Wentworth Healthcare, Lizz Reay, said that youth mental health is so important as it doesn't just affect young people's lives in the present but can influence a whole community as young people mature into adulthood.

"We are committed to improving the mental health of our community and the local mental health system that supports them. Young people in our region have been through so much over the past few years, from drought to bushfires, a pandemic and multiple floods. These traumas could have lasting impacts on young people and our community that could affect them well into the future. This Program will help us identify the necessary services required to better support the needs of young people in our region, now and into the future," said Ms Reay.

"Our research team will work closely with Wentworth Healthcare and community stakeholders, including young people with lived experiences of mental illness, to map out the youth mental health



system in the region, and then co-create, using the best available evidence and data from the region, a dynamic systems model of the youth mental health system”, said Ian Hickie.

“The goal of this process is to support Wentworth Healthcare to improve the youth mental health system in their region. The decision support tool created will assist with integration and coordination of care and will enable Wentworth Healthcare, using data and evidence, to determine the best types of services that are likely to deliver outcomes for the community,” he added.

Lizz Reay said that Wentworth Healthcare is excited by the opportunity to be working with the Brain and Mind Centre on this Program that could have the potential to transform the way decisions are made about local mental health systems.

“Regional place-based decision-support environments are critical to ensure that the right mental healthcare for young people is available in the right place, at the right time, and is sustainable into the future,” said Ms Reay.

“Having a diverse group of people mapping out the youth mental health system in the Nepean Blue Mountains region will enable us to create a dynamic systems model that reflects the reality of the system in the area. As regional providers of federally funded programs, this model will help support our advocacy for services in our region that will meet the changing needs of our local community,” she added.

Local young person from the Hawkesbury, Caitlin Daley, said that she was pleased to be involved in the program and to be able to share her lived experience to help other young people.

“From personal experience, I know that young people in the area have struggled to access mental health services, including psychologists and psychiatrists. I’ve had many friends who have felt like they were out of options, many of whom only ended up getting access to services after they went through an emergency department. I’m sharing my perspective of what is needed, to help other young people to be able to access the support they need without the fear of stigma that currently exists, and to help reduce the barriers to accessing services,” said Caitlin.

The first of three community workshops to design the dynamic systems model was held in Windsor in the Hawkesbury on Friday, 5 April 2024, and will be followed by workshops on Friday, 9 August 2024 and Friday 18 October 2024. If you are 18-25 years of age or work with the youth sector and want to be involved, visit www.nbmphn.com.au/RightCare to find out more about the Nepean Blue Mountains workshops.

To find out more about the ‘Right care, first time, where you live’ Program visit www.RightCareFirstTimeWhereYouLive.com.au.