



yourtown
POWERING **kids**helpline

Select Committee on Health Services in South Australia

A submission to: The Legislative
Council of South Australia

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yourtown is a trusted provider of services for young people, with a focus on mental health and wellbeing, long-term unemployment, prevention of youth suicide, child protection, as well as support for those experiencing domestic and family violence. **yourtown** has evolved to helping hundreds of thousands of young people each year by powering a range of service offerings that support them through difficult challenges.

Our South Australia services

- Kids Helpline, providing professional counselling and support to 5–25-year-olds in South Australia for over 30 years
- Kids Helpline @ School, which delivers early intervention and prevention programs through primary schools
- My Circle, a confidential, private, online peer support network for 13–25-year-olds to share information and build coping skills
- Early Childhood Development Program, supporting pre-school aged children to transition to school in Northern Adelaide
- Education, and social enterprise programs to help long term unemployed young people re-engage with education and/or employment including flexible Learning Options (FLO), supporting young people disengaged from school (Northern Adelaide and Port Pirie) and social enterprises (Northern Adelaide and Port Pirie)
- ParentsNext, supporting parents to join or re-enter the workforce by the time your youngest child starts school
- **yourtown's** Driving School service providing accessible learner driver supervision, including access to an appropriate vehicle to help young people in Port Pirie get a driver's licence
- Penrose Young Parents Program, supporting vulnerable young parents and their children in Port Pirie, and
- Care Plus (Port Pirie) providing early intervention and family support services to improve children's development and wellbeing.

Our other services

- Kids Helpline @ High School, which delivers early intervention and prevention programs through secondary schools
- Mental health service/s for children aged 0-11 years old and their families, with moderate mental health needs
- Domestic and family violence refuge, accommodation, and therapeutic supports for women and their children, including post-refuge support
- Accommodation and therapeutic supports for young parents and their children at high risk
- Parentline, a telephone and online counselling and support service for parents and carers in the Northern Territory and Queensland
- Expressive Therapy interventions for young children and infants who have experienced trauma and abuse, or been exposed to violence
- Employment services to help long term unemployed young people re-engage with education and/or employment.

Kids Helpline

Kids Helpline is Australia's only free and confidential 24/7 phone and online counselling service for young people aged 5 to 25. It offers children and young people a range of care options that are right for their needs and circumstances.

Our commitment to being there anytime, and for any reason, has meant that we have responded to more than 8.6 million contacts from children and young people nationally in the 31 years since our service was first established, whilst also providing tens of millions of self-help interactions via our website and social channels.

yourtown welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Select Committee Inquiry into Health Services in South Australia particularly with respect to improving the quality, accessibility, and affordability of health services for children and young people in South Australia.

yourtown recommends the following issues be addressed within the current health, mental health and connected systems to improve the quality, accessibility and affordability of health services in South Australia:

- Driving a holistic systems approach to achieving health equity
- Prioritising the health needs of children and young people
- Developing a whole of government approach to health that includes collaboration with key stakeholders, and
- Building the digital capability of the health workforce.

Building a whole of system approach to achieving health equity

For more than 31 years, **yourtown** through our Kids Helpline has been at the forefront of providing digital mental health and wellbeing services for children and young people in Australia. Kids Helpline is available 24/7 for children and young people no matter where they live in Australia, anytime they need help, and for any reason. Our service is provided by a professional and experienced workforce comprised of paid qualified psychologists, counsellors and social workers specifically trained in supporting children and young people through digital mediums.

Advancing the health equity of all South Australians, particularly children and young people, regardless of whether they live in urban, rural, or remote areas cannot be achieved by the health sector alone. It requires collaborative action and alignment of priorities across all sectors, services, and between the professionals who deliver them whether in government or non-government service sectors. Through our extensive experience in providing a range of services for children and young people (including our virtual services work), we have observed how systemic impediments can create barriers for help seeking. These barriers can be entrenched by a lack of communication, information sharing and warm referrals between state-wide services whether in mental health, health, child protection, education, employment, or other social systems.

Some of the systems challenges that need to be overcome to achieve a whole of systems approach include:

- Removal of restrictive policies related to information and data sharing, and structural barriers to supporting young people needing services across multiple systems (whether operated by government, or publicly or privately funded non-government services), and
- Designing and investing in a health service system that prioritises prevention and early intervention, and facilitates warm referrals to other support services, and warm 'hand-off's' within health services.

Of particular importance is the establishment of mechanisms to support cross-sector collaboration throughout the health continuum of a person's life. Early life experiences and exposures to differing life events are well known as to how they can shape the health and wellbeing of children and young people, both positively and negatively. Taking a systems approach and intervening early with children can provide the opportunity to set positive health trajectories for them as they become adolescents and then adults.

Design a holistic mental health eco-system for young people where they are comfortable, and want to engage

The children and young people that **yourtown** engages with through Kids Helpline and our other child services are often engaged with or have experiences across several service systems. This includes child protection, education, health, mental health, employment, and youth justice. However, the current systems are not designed to be interactive or collaborative. Navigating pathways within systems can be complex and challenging, while connections between systems might be fractured or disconnected. A well-designed mental health system should be user friendly and designed for young people with young people and their supporters:

- with warm referrals where young people are not only told there are services available, but they are personally connected in with another service
- warm handoffs within health services where young people are transitioned within services to other professionals, ensuring continuity of service, and helping young people feel secure and clear about what is happening
- co-designed with young people
- where they only have to tell their story once, irrespective of staff, service use or location changes facilitated by a coordinated and shared multi-agency care plan and information sharing enabled by law, policy, practice and data sharing
- with clear pathways for young people to navigate the complex service landscape and to identify immediate local support, with an accessible directory of services available to young people at the local level
- with the ability for data capture systems to talk to one another and share information to seamlessly track client needs and ensure they are met
- with entry paths to access or use a service, with support available while waiting, and
- personal and suited to and designed for the spaces that young people are in.

Integrated care

Children and young people with mental health needs should be able to access appropriate support (e.g., through warm referrals that are followed up to ensure they connect properly) when they encounter any government services including child protection, out of home care, juvenile justice, education, employment, housing, domestic violence, or any other form of service support.

The Productivity Commission has proposed integrated care would be enhanced if all governments included in their contracts a requirement to implement warm referral processes that are supported by real time consumer assistance.¹ For example, children in the child protection system, or in out of home care are at particular risk of mental ill-health throughout their life course. With a coordinated response across government and non-government services greater holistic support would be available for the young person's ongoing and future mental health and wellbeing.

Maximising digital solutions for health support

While South Australia has a range of high-quality mental health care options available, it can be challenging for those living in rural and remote locations to access services at times and places when they need it most. With health and mental health systems under increasing pressure and demand, there can be long wait times to be seen, gaps in services and follow up, and be impacted by the system when it applies excessive coercion that may have been avoidable.

¹ Australian Government (2020). Productivity Commission Inquiry Report Mental Health Volume 1 (<https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/mental-health/report>).

Telehealth and digital mental health services (such as Kids Helpline) are critical mechanisms that can bridge the gap when other services are unavailable due to time, location, waitlists, or limited resourcing. They also provide access to a broader range of treatment options than can be offered where they live. 24/7 digital mental health services such as Kids Helpline reach those in rural and remote locations at times that they need them most no matter where a person lives. Kids Helpline offers a safety-net for children and young people by providing support when it's most needed; this includes after hours, weekends, where children and young people may feel isolated and where/when local services are unavailable or closed after business hours.

Strong mental health can also increase the likelihood of a young person obtaining employment and their capacity to earn, while also improving their health-related quality of life.² KPMG and Mental Health Australia estimate e-Health interventions have the potential to deliver a short-term return on investment of \$1.60 for every \$1 spent.³

Systems to collect and share information effectively and safely

Government can support better coordination by establishing systems that measure and track referrals and outcomes. This suggestion aligns with the findings from the Royal Commission into Victoria's mental health system.⁴ The resulting information system would need to be flexible to adapt to the changing needs and contexts of people living with mental illness. This would include accounting for young people's online and face-to-face help seeking behaviours.

Recommendation 1:

That the South Australian Government:

- (a) **implement a mechanism to facilitate better coordinated and integrated care within the health, mental health, and other systems, and**
- (b) **Increase investment in digital health services to bridge the gap when other services are unavailable.**

prioritising the health needs of children and young people

Prioritising early intervention and prevention

Early intervention is key to reducing risk factors and increasing the protective factors in a child's life, whether in relation to wellbeing, health, development, or other factors that could contribute to the likelihood of mental or physical health problems, harm, or other negative outcomes in later life. Adopting holistic approaches to early intervention is essential to identify and provide effective and early support to children and young people at risk of poor health outcomes. Improving the quality and accessibility of the health system is dependent upon quality referrals and connections with other systems (including government and non-government services) who are often 'first responders' identifying the current and emerging health needs of children and young people.

Early intervention approaches have shown that a holistic approach to supporting child development (physical, cognitive, behavioural, and social and emotional development)

² Australian Government Productivity Commission. (2020). Productivity Commission Inquiry Report Actions and Findings – Mental Health (<https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/mental-health/report/mental-health-actions-findings.pdf>)

³ Mental Health Australia and KPMG. (2018). Investing to Save: The Economic Benefits for Australia of Investment in Mental Health Reform (https://mhaustralia.org/sites/default/files/docs/investing_to_save_may_2018_-_kpmg_mental_health_australia.pdf).

⁴ Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System. (2021). Final Report (https://finalreport.rcvmhs.vic.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/RCVMHS_FinalReport_ExecSummary_Accessible.pdf)

have the potential to make the biggest difference and provide benefits throughout a person's life as they mature. Holistic and coordinated care at the systems level will not be effective if holistic support is not provided for children and young people at key developmental and transition stages of their lives.

Mental health issues can affect anyone from any background at any stage in their life, however, they typically start in younger years. Half of all life-time mental illnesses develop before the age of 14 years,⁵ and 75% of all mental health problems first appear before a young person reaches 25.⁶ The Productivity Commission estimated the direct costs of mental ill-health, and suicide in Australia to be between \$43–70 billion in 2018-19.⁷ These estimates include direct expenditure on healthcare and other supports and services (\$16 billion), lower economic participation and lost productivity (\$12–39 billion) informal care provided by family and friends (\$15 billion).⁸ Given the first indicators of mental ill-health can arise during childhood and adolescence, increased focus and investment including improving affordability, accessibility and affordability of prevention and early intervention services for children and young people ultimately decreasing the economic and social costs of mental ill-health in the longer term.

Direct support for key life stages for children and young people

Support for early years' child development

Developmental vulnerabilities (in the areas of physical health, social competence, emotional maturity, cognitive skills, and communication) that are left unaddressed can take their toll on a child's health. Mental health issues in children and young people can have negative effects on life outcomes, including lower educational attainment, poorer engagement with study and school, and higher drop-out rates.⁹ Given how vulnerabilities intersect with and compound mental health issues at a key foundational stage, supporting early child development is critical to developing positive mental health through childhood and school life.

Support for children and young people in school

Young people's support systems are often informal, however, **yourtown** has found that the most common period young people needed help was at the beginning and the end of high school. In **yourtown's** 2021 youth advocacy project (Your Voice), young people in South Australia told **yourtown** that it was important to them that the education system engage and inform teenagers about mental health issues and connected them with appropriate mental health information and supports.¹⁰

Further, **yourtown's** Kids Helpline @ School, and Kids Helpline @ High School programs complement a whole-school prevention approach and assist school staff in delivering evidence informed strategies to promote mental health and wellbeing, and expand upon classroom discussions regarding mental health, respectful relationships, online wellbeing, and resilience. This early intervention social and emotional learning program is provided virtually by qualified and experienced Kids Helpline Facilitators. They engage students and teachers in discussions on a range of topics, including help-seeking, online wellbeing, cyberbullying, emotional intelligence, respectful relationships, coping during COVID-19, and coping with

⁵ Kessler, R. C. Berglund, P., Demler, O., et al. (2005). Lifetime prevalence and age-of-onset distributions of DSM-IV disorders in the national comorbidity survey replication. *Archive of General Psychiatry*, 62(6).

⁶ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2014). *Australia's Health 2014*. Canberra: (Cat. No. AUS 178).

⁷ Australian Government Productivity Commission. (2020). *Productivity Commission Inquiry Report Actions and Findings – Mental Health* (<https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/mental-health/report/mental-health-actions-findings.pdf>)

⁸ Australian Government Productivity Commission. (2020). *Productivity Commission Inquiry Report Actions and Findings – Mental Health*. <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/mental-health/report/mental-health-actions-findings.pdf>

⁹ Australian Government Productivity Commission (2019). *The Social and Economic Benefits of Improving Mental Health – Issues Paper* (www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/mental-health/issues)

¹⁰ **yourtown**. (2021). *Your Voice Recommendations Report* (www.yourtown.com.au/yourvoice)

changes. The programs are integrated with **yourtown's** 24/7 national Kids Helpline service to provide easy access to counselling and support.

Recommendation 2:

That the South Australian Government invest in evidenced-based quality interventions focusing on:

- (a) early years child development and mental health and wellbeing support for children and teenagers in schools, and**
- (b) mental health services, specifically prevention and early interventions that address age and developmental needs, are holistic, and have consideration for ecological factors (including family, school, transition periods and community contexts).**

human centred system design

Health services for child and young people should be designed to meet young people where they are at

In 2021, **yourtown** engaged in a human centred design project to better understand the ways young people and parents seek help. When asked about barriers to help seeking young people raised the following concerns:

- anxiety about talking to someone
- anxiety about talking to someone and concerns related to privacy
- not realising they need help, and
- difficulty navigating different the many and varied systems at the same time

Health and mental health services should be designed from the outset (and updated where relevant) to meet the needs, communication styles and preferences of children and young people living in the 21st Century; to meet them 'where they are at'. This includes designing services:

- that 'don't feel like services', whether through peer-to-peer approaches or similar mechanisms
- for ongoing connectivity and availability of services
- for online access to services, whether through multi-channel use, or ongoing connectivity and availability of services
- that provide reassurance of trust between the service provider and young people
- Designing services that enable young people to tentatively reach out and 'try before they buy' type services
- for privacy, and
- for early intervention and prevention of mental health issues, and ongoing wellbeing

Designing systems that encompass a scaffolded experience

At the system level, the health, including mental health and connected systems, should be re-designed to encompass a scaffolded experience journey. This would ensure support is available for children and young people with mental health needs, as well as parents and supporters along every step to facilitate their help-seeking.

For example, in the mental health system, supporters such as parents or friends can often feel overlooked. A separate path needs to be designed within mental health service delivery system to ensure support networks are equipped with the knowledge and skills to enable them to help young people get services faster and also to provide appropriate evidence-informed support to children and young people's supporters.

Designing a service system that is more user friendly for parents, supporters and carers will also support developmental goals by providing parents, supporters, and carers with access to a range of early intervention and prevention services. Poorer child developmental outcomes can affect the ability of children to engage with their peers and succeed at school. The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) shows that significant poorer child developmental outcomes for disadvantage communities are notable in disadvantaged communities.¹¹

yourtown's learnings from our parenting programs has shown that collaborative approaches undertaken with a child's parents have built upon and strengthened parents' role in supporting their child's mental and emotional wellbeing at home, within their community, and their school.¹²

Recommendation 3:

Services and supports for children and young people should be prioritised and designed to:

- (a) 'meet' young people where they are at, using technology and methods that are agile and relevant in the 21st Century, and
- (b) for a scaffolded experience journey that supports the child, young person, parent, carer, or supporter along every step of help seeking.

building the digital capability of the health workforce

Digital health services will be vital to the future growth and success of the South Australian health, and mental health systems. The South Australian Mental Health Services Plan 2020-2025 already recognises the potential for effective digital technology to transform outcomes and experiences for both health providers and those accessing the services.¹³ Investment in this technology requires investment in a workforce with digital capabilities, particularly if we are to keep pace with the needs of the digital natives of Generations Z, and Alpha.

Digital services can extend the availability of, and complement face-to-face services, including services provided by emergency departments. Additionally, digital services are scalable and agile, meaning they can respond quickly to sudden increases in demand. This is critical given the growing pressures on the hospital system in South Australia which has seen the average emergency department wait time for mental health patients grow from 7.9 hours in 2017 to 11.6 hours in 2021.¹⁴ Further, at the Women's and Children's Hospital, 3010 mentally unwell children presented to the emergency department in 2020 – a nearly 50 per cent rise from the 2024 children in 2017.¹⁵

Kids Helpline is a well-known and well tested digital mental health counselling and support service. Over the last 30 plus years, it has demonstrated its ability to scale up quickly and respond to crises such as bushfires, floods, or pandemics. In 2021, Kids Helpline received approximately 89 contacts per day from children and young people in South Australia, one contact every 16 minutes.¹⁶ Our counsellors provided 528 emergency responses in 2021 to children and young people in South Australia, a 101% increase when compared to 2020,

¹¹ Australian Government. (2021). Australian Early Development Census (www.aedc.gov.au).

¹² Kuhn, E. and Laird, R. (2014). Family support programs and adolescent mental health: review of evidence. *Adolescent Health, Medicine and Therapeutics*. 5, 127-142.

¹³ Government of South Australia. (2020). Mental Health Services Plan 2020-2025 (<https://s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/sahealth-ocp-assets/general-downloads/SA-Mental-Health-Services-Plan.pdf>)

¹⁴ InDaily. 2021. 'Inhumane': ED wait time blowout for mental health patients (inhumane.com.au)

¹⁵ InDaily. 2021. 'Inhumane': ED wait time blowout for mental health patients (inhumane.com.au)

¹⁶ **yourtown**. (2022). Kids Helpline Insights Report 2021 (<https://www.yourtown.com.au/insights/annual-overviews>)

increasing from 263 to 528 with approximately 10 emergency responses a week during 2021. Our counsellors intervened in these cases to keep children and young people safe from harm, including child abuse, suicide attempt, mental illness escalation, self-injury, and harm to others.

Being available 24/7 means that Kids Helpline is always open for business and always available to provide services while other services close for the day, or weekend. In 2021, 54% (almost 9,500) of incoming calls received from South Australia were made between the hours of 5pm and 9am, over 4,000 contacts received on a Saturday and/or Sunday.

Diversifying the health and mental health workforce to emphasise digital skills and capability would lead to more efficient, accessible, affordable, and quality responses to the help seeking needs of various groups including children and young people. This process would include:

- identification of skills and capabilities required for youth-specialist and digital mental health services
- development of a sustainable, innovative, adaptive, and qualified professional youth-specialist mental health workforce
- promotion of education programs to build youth-specialist, digital capability in the mainstream mental health workforce to enable staff to use digital tools and platforms effectively
- development of digital professional skills within tertiary degrees, such as psychology, counselling, and social work and,
- development and funding of information sharing protocols and mechanisms to enhance integration between face-to-face and digital mental health workforces to improve competency and agility across the sector as a whole to deliver blended models of care where digital mental health services are used in conjunction with face-to-face services.

Recommendation 4:

That the South Australian Government develop a health workforce plan and foster opportunities to build digital health capability. This will ensure a range of health and mental health services (including digital services) are available to increase accessibility and affordability for children and young people.

We would welcome the opportunity to explore these ideas with you in further detail. Should you require further information about any issues raised in the submission, please do not hesitate to contact Kathryn Mandla, Head of Advocacy and Research at **yourtown** via email at kmandla@yourtown.com.au.