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Mental health services need long-term funding certainty: Jesuit Social Services

Recent Federal changes to mental health funding have created a rushed transition to a new model and insecure, short-term funding solutions, says Jesuit Social Services.

The organisation's Support After Suicide program has worked with people bereaved by the suicide of a loved one since 2004. It serves as a bereavement support and a suicide prevention program. Support After Suicide, which delivers individual and group counselling, as well as home visits, men's and children's-specific activities and online resources, is impacted by the way suicide prevention programs are now funded at a Federal level.

The program has previously received Commonwealth funding through the National Suicide Prevention Strategy, but after June 30 2016, funding will be devolved to local Primary Health Networks. The change to funding follows the release of the Commonwealth's National Review of Mental Health Programmes and Services paper in November 2015.

"As a result of major changes to the way the mental health system is funded federally, Primary Health Networks are only able to provide services like Support After Suicide with 12 months' funding from July 1, 2016," says Jesuit Social Services CEO Julie Edwards.

Ms Edwards says that the Primary Health Networks are facing enormous challenges at this time as they transition to new service delivery arrangements. While Jesuit Social Services has now received confirmation of funding continuation from a number of Primary Health Networks across Victoria, there are concerns that the funding will not be enough to maintain an appropriate level of service and that a short-term 12-month commitment will leave Support After Suicide in limbo for another year.

"There has been a lack of information around the total amount of funding commissioned to Primary Health Networks to distribute locally. We do not know whether there's the same amount, or less, in comparison with the previous model where services were funded directly by the Commonwealth," says Ms Edwards.

In 2015, Support After Suicide received \$608,000 of Commonwealth funding which provided 3,200 episodes of support and more than 100 group sessions involving more than 1,100 people. The program is Victoria Police's select service for referring family members and loved ones after a suicide and is integrated into their eReferral process to enable police to make direct referrals when they respond to suicides. In 2015, more than 630 referrals were received from Victoria Police.

Ms Edwards says suicide prevention must be a key part of an effective mental health service model, and suicide postvention is a critical element in the service mix.

"The country's suicide rates rose by almost 20 per cent between 2004 and 2014 and we know that people bereaved by the suicide of a loved one are more likely to take their own lives. Reducing Australia's suicide rate will only occur with long-term commitment and long-term funding solutions."

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