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Report highlights areas for reform in mental health system to prevent suicides: Jesuit Social Services

A report released today by Jesuit Social Services' Support After Suicide program shows that parents, partners, children and siblings are struggling in silence against a mental health system that they feel leaves them unsupported and uninformed to care for loved ones at risk of suicide.

Drawing on the experiences of more than 140 Victorians who described attempting to navigate Victoria's mental health system to prevent a loved one from taking their life, the report paints the picture of a system significantly under stress even before the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"This report identifies some major gaps in the mental health system. It is important to note that this is not about casting blame on any organisation or group of individuals, but identifying the type of systemic reform needed to allow professionals to more adequately care for people in need of support, says Dr Louise Flynn, Support After Suicide Manager.

"We understand that there are a range of contributing factors that may lead to someone taking their life. In this report, we focus on the mental health system and its failure to prevent suicide. We raise the voices of the loved ones left behind – these voices need to be part of the story.

"The need for a strong, effective and well-resourced mental health system is even more crucial as we continue to navigate our way through COVID-19, given the significant impact the pandemic has had on the health and wellbeing on many, and tragically, a possible increase in suicides."

The report was compiled from an online survey completed by family members of people who took their own lives. The survey was completed by 142 former and current participants of Support After Suicide's counselling services, from which 28 were chosen for in-depth interviews.

It finds that:

- Around half (47 per cent) of people who took their lives were known to have attempted suicide in the past
- Almost three quarters (70 per cent) of people who died had previously sought help from the mental health system
- 41 per cent of those who suicided were reported by loved ones to have experienced bullying or harassment (more than one-third of these at work)
- 79 per cent of family members said they felt there were barriers to them accessing information or help in caring for their loved one
- 27 of 28 participants interviewed expressed concerns that mental health professionals did not have the skills to recognise their loved one was at risk of suicide or to complete an adequate treatment plan

The mother of a man who took his life at age 30 says: "this guy is seriously, critically ill and you [mental health system] are leaving him with us? It's like if someone [has] a torn artery, and you're leaving them with people like us, who don't have any idea what to do. We should have been given a

lot more support to enable us to act appropriately and give him some chance of accessing the best healthcare, instead of floundering around and getting more and more frantic.”

Dr Flynn says the report also highlights the importance of the family members of people who have taken their lives in being part of the conversation about making Victoria’s mental health system stronger.

“Through our direct work with people mourning the loss of a loved one to suicide, we regularly hear about people attempting to seek help from the mental health system before taking their own life,” she says.

“We also hear distressing stories of people close to someone at risk of suicide – partners, parents, siblings and children – being excluded from care plans and not having their concerns listened to. This includes family members not being told of a loved one’s discharge from hospital or treatment plan, or experiencing negative attitudes from mental health professionals.”

For more than 15 years, Support After Suicide has provided services including counselling, group work and peer support to those left behind after a loved one has ended their life. In 2018, the program helped more than 1,000 adults, young people and children bereaved by the suicide of a loved one.

“The Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System will hand down its final report in February 2021. In its interim report, the Commission heard that around half of all people who died by suicide had contact with a health service in the six weeks before their death.

“This is reflected in what we heard from families time and time again – that people at risk of suicide as well as their loved ones were attempting to navigate the mental health system but encountering barriers to care, poor quality or a lack of support services and people being discharged from care prematurely,” says Dr Flynn.

Among the report’s recommendations is an increase in training, resources and targeted support for health practitioners to assist people at risk of suicide, and a review of how confidentiality practices and protocols limit the information and guidance given to families around appropriate care.

“We also call on the Victorian Government to commit to secure, long-term funding for post-suicide programs including Support After Suicide, which would allow for increased access to services for people in regional and rural areas. Family members of people who have taken their lives experience feelings of grief, anger and sadness and are at increased risk of suicide themselves. An additional \$1m in funding for Support After Suicide would service immediate need and allow for expansion.”

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