



Child and Youth Wellbeing Outcomes Framework - Response

Authorised by:

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Preface

Mental Health Carers Tasmania (MHCTas) is a state-wide leader in the provision of mental health family, friend and carer support. We aim to improve the quality of life for the one in five Tasmanian families, friends, carers and people living with mental health issues and mental illness. We define carers as people who provide unpaid physical, practical or emotional support to a family member, friends, neighbours or colleagues with mental ill health. On behalf of mental health carers in Tasmania, MHCTas welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the draft Outcomes Framework for Child and Youth Wellbeing. MHCTas commends the framework for highlighting that mental health is as equally integral to a young person's health and wellbeing as their physical health. We note that our responses are informed by consultation with our members and relate specifically to the provision of mental health specific measures.

The practical, physical, economic and emotional demands of supporting a loved one with a mental illness can be enormous. For young people who love, live with and care for a family member with mental ill-health, the caring role can have a significant negative effect on their own health and wellbeing.

In the *Position Paper: Caring in a world of government policies*, which was part of the Caring Voices research project, MHCTas referred to the 2010 Australian Government National Carer Recognition Framework to "improve support for Carers and better recognise the vital social and economic contribution that Carers make to Australian Society." The Framework comprises The Carer Recognition Act 2010 and the National Carer Strategy. The cornerstone of the Carer Recognition Act 2010 is the Statement for Australia's Carers, which sets out 10 principles that Australian Government agencies and funded organisations need to adopt in developing policies and delivering services for carers or the person they care for.

In the Position Paper MHCTas notes in particular that of the ten principles, number two refers to young carers, stating that, “Children and young people who are carers should have the same rights as all children and young people and should be supported to reach their full potential.”¹

Sadly, in its consultations across the State MHCTas has found that many young carers are being denied the opportunity to reach their full potential through the challenges of caring for a family member with mental ill-health. And despite the fact that programs do exist for young carers in Tasmania, many of these young people as young as eight are “hidden” carers who have not disclosed their situation nor sought support and continue to bear the burden of care on their own. Sometimes the family fears the consequences should authorities become aware of the carer role of the young person and this can also lead to failure to reach out and secure support. Mental illness and mental ill health remain one of the leading stigmatised health conditions in this country, adding further difficulties for young Tasmanians.

A Wesley Mission survey of 2012 found that many children under the age of 16 were caring for relatives with mental health problems and that more effort needs to be made to identify young carers in the community.² Research has consistently found that the caring role has a strong potential to impact negatively on young carers, limiting life choices and future opportunities with many young primary carers at serious risk of leaving school early. It is also clear that young carers who have no support often face significant barriers to their own physical and mental health and wellbeing. MHCTas believes that any framework designed to address child and youth wellbeing outcomes in Tasmania must not ignore this often isolated and at-risk cohort.

The Tasmanian Carer Action Plan 2013 – 2018 notes that “Appropriate approaches are required to support families with young carers in order to protect their welfare and maintain family relationships in positive ways that encourage young carers to access support.” The Action Plan includes a number of initiatives for young carers but does not fully articulate a process for identifying “hidden” young carers, in particular mental health carers.

It is difficult to calculate with any accuracy how many young people there are in Tasmania who are primary or secondary carers of family members with mental health issues. Any figures currently quoted are likely to be a significant underestimate due to the number of 'hidden' young carers. Young carers may often provide care because they are the only ones available to fulfil this role at home. Even though they may have little choice about taking on the carer role, they are mostly committed to providing care and can be very protective of their family and their caring role within it. This may be the very reason they may choose not to disclose.

MHCTas believes that collecting data to determine the rates of young people identifying as mental health carers and unconnected to supports and programs specifically designed for young carers is of paramount importance. At the very least it would be useful to collect data around:

¹ Mental Health Carers Tasmania (2015), *Position Paper: Caring in a world of government policies*, p. 10, <https://www.mentalhealthcarerstas.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/3.-Caringinaworldofgovernmentpolicies.pdf>

² ABC News, Young mental health carers 'struggling to cope', 14 May 2012, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-05-14/mental-health-carers-struggling-to-cope/4008896>

- Rates of young people identifying as mental health carers currently accessing in-school supports for mental health; and
- Rates of young people identifying as mental health carers currently accessing community based mental health supports.

MHCTas also supports additional focus on the skills needed by education staff to identify and respond to mental health carers within the education context. Staff also require skill sets to work collaboratively alongside the young person and their family keeping sight of what is best for the family as a unit as well for the individuals. Information and education for families experiencing mental ill health about where to find support and help may have the potential to intervene with appropriate supports early in the young person's caring journey.

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