

# Community Mental Health Service Provider Survey in response to COVID-19

Period 1 April – 14 April 2020

## Introduction

There has been a need for community mental health and NDIS service providers to rapidly adapt in response to COVID-19.

As the peak body for community mental health in the Northern Territory, the NT Mental Health Coalition released a survey to assess the impact and concerns of Service Providers.

This report relates to survey responses received between 1 April to 14 April 2020.

The service providers who responded during this period were from the following regions:

- Darwin/Palmerston
- Katherine
- Alice Springs

Included is an overview to provider issues or concerns, service changes and organisational support needs.

## Issues and concerns

Question 1 of the survey sought the five key issues or concerns experienced by service providers in the current operating environment, listed in order of importance. The survey allowed for five free text, open-ended responses. Responses varied in length and included multiple sentiments. An overview of the sentiments expressed is provided below using an \*asterisk to indicate repeated sentiments, which are listed in order of priority.

- Concerns related to clients (approx. 40% of sentiments expressed)
  - o Mental health and wellbeing\*\*\*
  - o Reduced/No support\*\*
  - o NDIS access
  - o ICT access
  - o Food security
  - o Remote clients
- Concerns related to Organisation (approx. 30% of sentiments expressed)
  - o Funding
  - o NDIS income
  - o PPE/hygiene access
  - o Reduced staffing
  - o Available space
  - o Social distancing
  - o Thin/No NDIS market
- Concerns related to staff (approx. 20% of sentiments expressed)
  - o Health risk due to COVID-19
  - o Demobilisation/Reduced hours
  - o Mental health and wellbeing

Of note is organisations' inability to source PPE and hygiene products. The forecast reduction in NDIS income, is the reason for potential staff demobilisation or reduced hours. Food security for vulnerable clients is a risk resulting from changes to service delivery.

Of significant concern are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients who have "returned to country with no proper planning or supports in place, and now with no access to NDIS funded supports".

Regions with thin markets (or no registered NDIS providers) is systemic issue that is unrelated, but likely to be compounded by, the COVID-19 environment. It is a similar case regarding the value of psychosocial support funding for the adequate provision of support.

## Key supports

Question 2 of the survey sought feedback on five key areas of support that would assist service providers in the current operating environment, listed in order of importance. The survey allowed for five free text, open-ended responses which varied in length. Supports have been presented in order of priority below.

- Supports related to Organisation (approx. 55% of sentiments expressed)
  - o Funding\*\*\*
  - o PPE/hygiene access\*\*
  - o Contract flexibility\*\*
  - o Personnel
  - o Resources to support at home activities for clients
- Supports related to staff (approx. 20% of sentiments expressed)
  - o ICT support to deliver remote services
  - o Professional development / training
  - o Clarity / Certainty
- Commissioning body or system level support (approx. 20% of sentiments expressed)
  - o Single point of contact for contract
  - o Service navigation within current environment
- Supports related to clients (approx. 5% of sentiments expressed)
  - o ICT support to access remote services

Funding was again highlighted as an issue for organisations. A funding related support requested by organisations seeking to adapt and modify their service delivery, is the availability of additional flexible funding to procure resources.

Organisations are also seeking clarity from their commissioning agency regarding contract deliverables in the current operating environment. This has been compounded by not

having a single point of contact within one commissioning body to respond to requests for information.

Service providers require support to procure PPE and hygiene products as essential services. To support the facilitation of appropriate advice, information and referral, organisations are also seeking an updated catalogue of programs operating in the COVID-19 environment.

## Changes to services

Question 3 to 5 related to the provision of services in the current operating environment. Two thirds of service providers indicated they had suspended or modified some of their services including

- Suspending group outings
- Reducing/Suspending place-based group activities
- Suspending in-reach to communities
- Reducing face to face support

The reasons for this include

- Inability to maintain social distancing
- Closure of local recreational facilities
- Hygiene related concerns
- Limiting social contact to half an hour
- Insufficient funding to continue the program as a remote service

Organisations listed the following programs have been maintained including modifications as indicated

- Intake and referral
- NDIS support coordination
- Psychosocial support
- Tenancy support
- Transport assistance (modified)
- Group activities (modified)
- Home visits (modified)
- Drop-in services (modified)

In order to adapt to the COVID-19 environment, organisations responded that they were in the process of implementing a series of new

supports in order to maintain client participation. These included

- Individual counselling
- Craft webinars
- Exercise webinars
- Home activity packs with individual tutelage by appointment
- Individual support
- Mindfulness webinars

### Final comments and recommendations

The survey highlighted specific issues, concerns and needs for organisations related to the COVID-19 environment, and more broadly.

In addition to the challenges presented by COVID-19, the Commonwealth funded psychosocial support service providers are faced with uncertainty and potentially very significant impacts to their provision of service from 1 July 2020.

On the 29<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 the Commonwealth government announced a further \$28.4 million from 1 July 2020, to extend support for remaining clients of the National Psychosocial Support – Transition (NPS-T) measure to 30 June 2021. This provides a further 12 months of NPS-T funding, noting however that the value of NPS-T funding constitutes a 75% reduction on the preceding financial year (i.e. \$121.29 million). The impact to NT Commonwealth funded psychosocial support services will be significant given the current value of NPS-T funding exceeds the combined value of Continuity of Support (CoS) funding and the National Psychosocial Support – Measure (NPS-M).

Within the survey, providers indicated challenges supporting Transition clients to test eligibility to the NDIS as a result of COVID-19 and indicated that the value of psychosocial support funding was disproportionate to value required to deliver adequate supports. Support for clients to test eligibility to the NDIS is likely to be impacted over the remaining quarter of this financial year.

Organisations are seeking flexibility from commissioning agencies regarding their current contracts. This requires a clearly identified single point of contact within respective commissioning agencies.

Clarity regarding future Commonwealth psychosocial support contracts is required as a matter of urgency given the magnitude of the NPS-T funding change and potential changes to contractual arrangements that will follow.

In the immediate term, some organisations are seeking a modest increase in funding to use flexibly to facilitate changes to their delivery of service and mechanisms for clients to maintain access to supports.

As essential services, psychosocial support providers require support to secure hard to access PPE and hygiene products to assure the safe provision of service.

Organisations (and the public) also require visibility to an updated catalogue of programs operating in the COVID-19 environment

Lastly, there are many NT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients who have returned to remote communities and now no longer have access to their usual supports. This is priority area of concern that will require planning, coordination and resourcing with specific regional services to address.