

NDS Submission to the Consultation on the National Mental Health

Workforce Strategy

National Disability Services welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Consultation Draft National Mental Health Workforce Strategy.

National Disability Services (NDS) wishes to encourage the National Mental Health Workforce Strategy Taskforce to recognise, within the Strategy, the significant mental healthcare needs of people with disabilities in Australia, and the workforce requirements associated with meeting these needs.

Australians with disabilities, including those with physical, sensory, and intellectual disabilities, are up to five times more likely to experience mental ill-health when compared to the broader Australian population ([Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2020](#)). Furthermore, approximately 4.5% of Australians have been diagnosed with a psychosocial disability ([Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015](#)).

Unfortunately, however, this sizeable cohort is often overlooked within discussions about the mental health system in Australia. NDS has concerns that this has, to a certain extent, occurred within the drafting of the Background Paper for the National Mental Health Workforce Strategy. While the Background paper notes that young people, LGBTQI+ individuals, people experiencing unemployment, and people who have experienced incarceration or homelessness are at greater risk of experiencing mental ill-health, the paper fails to identify people with disabilities as a cohort that is more vulnerable to mental illness.

The Background Paper and Draft Strategy also fail to identify accessibility barriers experienced by people with disabilities when accessing the mental health system. [Research by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare](#) indicates that people with disabilities face significant barriers to accessing healthcare when compared to the general population. NDS understands that many mainstream mental health services do not readily accommodate the needs of people with disabilities, and that this is felt perhaps most acutely by people with intellectual disabilities. [A report developed by the University of NSW](#) indicates that the mental health workforce capacity is lacking in this area, and mental health professionals have limited training and expertise in providing cognitively accessible mental health care. NDS encourages the National Mental Health Workforce Strategy Taskforce to consider how the Strategy can build capacity within the mental health workforce to provide accessible and appropriate mental health care for people with disabilities.

NDS welcomes Priority 4.2 in the strategy to 'ensure the broader mental health workforces have the knowledge and skills to support people experiencing suicidality, mental distress and/or ill-health.' We also welcome Action 4.2.1 which encourages investment in training initiatives to support the development of basic mental health skills in the social services and workforce.

As the peak body for non-government disability service providers in Australia, NDS is acutely aware of a lack of knowledge within the traditional disability workforce around supporting people with disability experiencing mental ill-health. We have found that many support workers have little or no skills in identifying and responding to mental health conditions and crises.

There is also a significant absence of accessible disability-setting specific training for support workers to develop these skills. Providers and workers have indicated a need for access to appropriate and low-cost face to face training options to build workforce capacity in this area. This issue is compounded by strained budgets for training within the NDIS cost model, which has left many workers without the necessary skills to meet the needs of their participants.

NDS recently ran a modest Victorian Department of Health-funded training program to build basic skills within the traditional disability workforce to identify and respond safely to common mental health conditions and crises in the people they support. The program tapped into strong demand within the sector for training in this area, with almost all of the sessions being significantly oversubscribed. Program feedback indicated that the training met a real gap in knowledge amongst disability support workers, many of whom had not received any training in relation to mental health conditions and support.

Given the strong demand and success of the program, NDS is keen to explore opportunities within the Mental Health Workforce Strategy to see that this sort of valuable training in our sector is continued.

The consultation draft highlights the need to complement and integrate with other, related workforce strategies but does not appear to include the NDIS National Workforce Plan 2021 – 2024. People who are most significantly impacted by psychosocial disability are supported by the NDIS. It is also important to note that there is considerable overlap between the disability and mental health workforces, especially for psychologists and disability support workers. Recovery coaches are part of the NDIS supports for people with psychosocial disability but not mentioned in the strategy. There are substantial workforce shortages across the disability sector especially in the area of allied health. Just as there is a need to increase the mental health workforce, the disability workforce is estimated to require 83,000 new workers over the next three years. The mental health workforce strategy needs to acknowledge and be designed to address needs in this context.

We are keen to engage to ensure that this sector is not overlooked, as has occurred with various other government initiatives over the years.

About NDS:

National Disability Services (NDS) is Australia's peak body for non-government disability service organisations, representing over 1200 non-government service providers. Collectively, NDS members operate several thousand services for Australians with all types of disability.