



Chief Commissioner
Scouts Australia

Mr Reg Williams

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Ms Megan Mitchell
National Children's Commissioner
Australian Human Rights Commission

Dear Commissioner

SUBMISSION TO EXAMINATION INTO SELF-HARM AND SUICIDAL BEHAVIOUR

Scouts Australia is pleased to contribute to your examination into self-harm and suicidal behavior in young people. This is an incredibly important issue that demands further attention and action from the community and government.

Scouting has advocated on issues affecting young people for over 100 years and although the program builds resilience and capacity in young people, regrettably our members deal with occurrences of suicide and self harm far to regularly. There is still much work to be done in better informing communities on how to handle this issue.

The attached submission draws on a wide range of experiences which we hope will be valuable to your examination of self-harm and suicidal behaviour, preventative measures and the available support system. The submission has been prepared by our Victorian Branch and contains some language and experiences specific to Victoria.

On behalf of the National Scout Association I commend this submission to you and would encourage you to contact the Victorian team if you require any further information in regards to the issues it raises.

Again, I thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this important work.

Yours sincerely

Reg Williams
Chief Commissioner

2 June 2014



Scouts Victoria

Submission to the National Children's Commissioner's examination into self-harm and suicidal behaviour in children

On 22 April 2014 the National Children's Commissioner called for submissions to assist in examining how children and young people under 18 years can be better protected from intentional self-harm and suicidal behaviour.

Scouts Victoria contributes to this examination as an organisation delivering a quality developmental program to young people and as an organisation fundamentally concerned with the welfare of young people.

Organisational context

Scouts Victoria provides young people aged 6 to 25 with fun and challenging opportunities to grow through adventure. Scouts Victoria has around 22,000 members, making it the largest youth movement in the state. No other organisation offers such a variety of activities for young people across such a wide range of ages.

The Scouts Australia educational youth program incorporates contemporary issues such as youth health, 'responsible risk-taking', vocational skills, and issues pertinent to Indigenous Australians. A curriculum is offered that scaffolds and encourages participation in the full range of age-appropriate developmental activities available, providing recognition of individual achievement and ability. This is underpinned by a 'learning by doing' method.

Scouts engage in a variety of outdoor activities, from outdoor recreation units of competency such as camping and bushcraft, through to more challenging training opportunities in abseiling, overnight hiking, rafting, canoeing, canyoning, snow activities, rock climbing, sailing and even flying. Scouting affords young people the opportunity to participate in personal development activities in the performing arts, leadership development programs, amateur radio operation, environmental projects, large-scale Australian events such as Cuborees, Jamborees and Ventures, international events, and community service at a local, state, national and international level. Scouts also learn valuable practical skills such as first aid and cooking. Every activity is a learning opportunity that develops the leadership capacity and connectedness of young people.

The program's ongoing success is due to enthusiastic and committed adult volunteers from all walks of life who take great pride in encouraging young people to reach their full potential. Our leaders are trained to a basic level in supporting young people through crises and difficulties. This training includes an understanding of the limitations of non-professional counsellors and where to find additional support, for both the young person and the supporting adult. Accredited teams who provide first aid services at major Scouting events are required to undertake mental health first aid training. Mental health first aid training has also been made available on a short term basis in recent years with State Government funding.

Scouting provides all of its leaders with accredited adult training through the Scouts Australia Institute of Training. Increasingly the youth program is also being accredited, which has been recognised in the rest of the education sector through growing demand for school-based Scout programs. Scouting is seen as a valuable contribution to the formal education of young people, as the use of the 'Patrol System' involving youth leadership of small teams is seen to build resilience, self-esteem, self-reliance, independence and connectedness to community. It is seen in the sector as an important contributor to the spiritual, intellectual, social, emotional and physical development, underpinned by a code of ethics.

Preparation of this submission

Scouts Victoria makes this submission not as a deliverer of services relating to self-harm and suicidal behaviour but as an organisation that provides a developmental program to young people and is fundamentally concerned with their welfare.

Scouting is a program that builds resilience in young people which can readily be associated with protective factors that might prevent or mitigate suicidal behaviour or self-harm. Nevertheless, our members still deal with occurrences of self-harm and suicidal behaviour on a regular basis.

This submission has been prepared by a panel of Scout members including young people who have:

- themselves experienced self-harm and suicidal thoughts or risk taking behaviours
- supported young peers who have experienced self-harm and suicidal behaviour and thoughts
- as adult leaders supported young people who have experienced self-harm and suicidal behaviour
- supported adult leaders who have supported young people experiencing self-harm and suicidal behaviour

Our evidence is based on experiences supporting young people and interacting with the service system. On this basis, we direct our comments towards the third, sixth, seventh and ninth points.

3. The barriers which prevent children and young people from seeking help.

Our members have observed barriers such as:

- While mental health issues are commonly more acceptable by the younger generation, there is still considerable stigma attached to such issues by their parents and adults
- Gender issues, with boys less likely to ask for help
- Gender and Sexual Minorities, or LGBTI youth can be less likely to ask for help due to either safety or comfort in identity
- Safety, where low mood is a result of issues at home or with someone abusive, staying silent may seem safer.

Further, we observe the following issues relating to the effectiveness of the service system which may inhibit seeking help:

- Lack of appropriate resources (if a kid calls Kids Help Line, especially someone who is already diagnosed or seeing a psychologist/psychiatrist, by the time they call they have usually already attempted the things they would be advised to do).
- For emergency situations, the Crisis Assessment and Treatment Team (CATT) is an overwhelmed resource that often can't offer assistance.
- Some phone and internet support services are not available 24 hours, and not at the times that young people are most likely to seek them. Online resources such as the Kids Help Line and eHeadspace shut off quite early. Young people that suffer insomnia as a result of mood disorders are still awake and struggling and alone whilst their support networks are unavailable.
- While there are phone services for first contact and services for emergency situations, there is a gap for well-resourced services assisting those living with self-harm and suicidal behaviour. The Mental Health Advice Line was a good point of call for someone

already diagnosed as you can ask about medication issues and the like, and they are more qualified to know what needs to be put into place.

- Schools have limited resources and are over prescribed where they are available
- Youth organisations, like Scouting, do not have the funding or capacity to meet the ever expanding and complex needs of the youth in the communities we serve;
- Many children do not have a home environment conducive to supporting their developmental or mental health needs;

7. The types of programs and practices that effectively target and support children and young people who are engaging in the range of intentional self-harm and suicidal behaviours. Submissions about specific groups are encouraged, including children and young people who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, those who are living in regional and remote communities, those who are gender variant and sexuality diverse, those from culturally diverse backgrounds, those living with disabilities, and refugee children and young people seeking asylum. De-identified case studies are welcome.

The membership of Scouts Victoria includes young people who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, from regional and remote communities, gender variant and sexuality diverse, from culturally diverse backgrounds, living with disabilities, and from communities seeking refuge. Scouts Victoria aspires to be truly representative of the Victorian community both in terms of its youth membership and adult leadership. We trust that the inclusive environment created through Scouting contributes to the welfare of young people in our care.

Scouting has an established and growing presence in migrant communities that have fled war and experienced significant trauma. While successive migrant communities have taken up Scouting in Victoria, a cohort that currently requires support is the growing Sudanese community.

We observe that:

- Current coverage of service provision is inadequate in supporting communities who have experienced significant trauma.
- Funding needs to be directed to support young people in their chosen activities so that when required, support can be readily accessible;
- Funding should provide for triage training of key personnel in the youth sector so that early intervention and support (Mental Health First Aid) can occur in the initial instance with follow up, ongoing support from a mental health practitioner
- Adults in Scouting would benefit from greater external support as they contribute to the lives of young people from these communities.

8. The feasibility and effectiveness of conducting public education campaigns aimed at reducing the number of children who engage in intentional self-harm and suicidal behaviour.

As a youth organisation with a significant membership, we are in a unique position to educate both our youth and their families on issues affecting young people. By helping to raise awareness and reduce the stigma around these conditions by participating in community campaigns, Scouting and community organisations can provide an environment where a young person is more likely to seek help while assisting our adult supporters in identifying at-risk young people.

Mental health first aid training has been made available to our adults on an ad hoc basis in recent years. This has been funded by the State Government in the short-term without ongoing

support or follow-up training. External assistance to ensure the sustainability of this training is viewed as crucial for all youth organisations

Scouting as an RTO and the largest youth organisation with an extensive, accredited National Training program would be well placed to lead such community based training to families and organisations. This may include peer to peer programs, a hallmark of the Scouting curriculum and training programs.

Further, our members identify a need to ensure that mental health first aid training is strengthened through greater national accreditation and regulation.

It has also been suggested that training for young people be considered, providing positive programs aimed at promoting strategies for coping.

9. The role, management and utilisation of digital technologies and media in preventing and responding to intentional self-harm and suicidal behaviour among children and young people.

Communication for young people today is increasingly through digital technologies.

Some of our members report that the idea of face to face communication of social, emotional and physical issues can be daunting, and the option to have a semi-anonymous process is often more appealing as there is no feeling of judgement being laid.

Services are too often not available outside of business hours, including those on digital platforms. Mental health issues are not known to respect conventional business hours, and the increasing time pressures on young people reduce the likelihood that they will take up services only available during business hours. Digital platforms provide an opportunity for services to be offered more flexibly and at times they are needed.

One young person reflects that he and his peers have often struggled when left to their own thoughts, so the hours between 4pm and 6pm (after school), and 10pm onwards, are often times when issues seem to become more unmanageable, and services are unavailable to assist.

We observe that:

- It is essential to have services available that are accessible to a range of cohorts.
- This includes digital services, resourced to be available at the times they are needed.
- Parent guides previously produced by the Scout Association at a state and national level been greatly valued by parents and are worthy of refreshing and adapting for online platforms. Similar products could be produced that are directed at young people.

We would be pleased to discuss this submission with you further. We have no objection to this submission being made public.



Brendan Watson
Chief Commissioner
Scouts Victoria



Morris Orchard
Assistant Chief Commissioner Youth
Scouts Victoria