



MEDIA RELEASE

Youth workers left carrying mental health system amidst psychiatrist shortage

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NSW's severe shortage of child and adolescent psychiatrists is forcing youth workers to carry increasingly complex mental health cases without the clinical resources, authority or support they need, Youth Action said today.

New analysis from the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists found NSW needs an additional 64.3 full-time child and adolescent psychiatrists just to meet current demand, with the shortfall projected to reach 119 by 2048. NSW community mental health teams also receive the lowest state government funding per capita in Australia.

Youth Action said young people were being deemed too complex for primary and early-intervention services but not unwell enough to qualify for specialist or crisis care.

With private psychology unaffordable for many families and specialist waiting lists stretching for months or years, youth workers are being increasingly left to manage self-harm, suicidality and other complex presentations without access to timely clinical assessment or treatment.

Youth Action CEO Lauren Stracey said the shortage was leaving young people without care and shifting a dangerous level of responsibility onto an already stretched youth sector.

"This is exactly what we're hearing from the sector, and it is what I saw repeatedly during my years working as an adolescent psychologist: youth workers are picking up the slack in a mental health system that simply does not have enough capacity.

"Young people are being told they are too complex for early-intervention services but not unwell enough for the very limited amount of specialist or crisis care. That leaves them in a dangerous missing middle with nowhere appropriate to go.



“When referral options are exhausted, the young person remains with the youth worker, who may be left trying to support escalating needs while an overstretched system struggles to provide an appropriate next step.

“These are skilled and dedicated workers, but they are not a substitute for psychiatrists, psychologists or properly resourced community mental health teams. We cannot keep transferring clinical risk onto youth workers and expecting goodwill to hold the system together.

“The further a young person lives from Sydney, the fewer options they have. In regional and rural communities, workers are driving young people hours to hospital, waiting beside them through assessments and then taking them back to the same isolated environment with little or no follow-up.

“The system calls this early intervention, but services tell us they are increasingly working with young people already in crisis. Many are managing self-harm and suicidal presentations while being constrained by funding for lower-level support.”

Youth Action is calling on the NSW Government to invest \$12 million in 15 properly staffed youth hubs across the state, providing accessible, youth-friendly places where young people can receive early support, build trusted relationships and connect with mental health, housing, family violence and other specialist services before their situation reaches crisis point.

“Youth hubs can provide a trusted front door before problems become emergencies. They offer trained youth workers, practical and after-hours support, safe spaces and strong links into clinical and community services,” Ms Stracey said.

“With the planned Thriving Kids changes expected to place even greater demand on state-based services, the NSW Government cannot simply hope the existing system absorbs more pressure.

“Funding youth hubs is a practical step towards ensuring young people receive support earlier, closer to home and before they reach crisis.”

About us:

Youth Action is the peak organisation representing young people and the youth services that support them in NSW. We work towards a society where all NSW young people are supported, engaged, valued, and have their rights realised.



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