

## Working together on Autism and Mental Health

30 May 2022

On 23 November 2021, Amaze and the Victorian Department of Health (Mental Health and Wellbeing Division) convened an historic Roundtable on Autism and Mental Health.

### Context for the Roundtable:

- Shared concern about the extremely high rates of mental ill health and suicide among Victoria's sizeable Autistic population and the significant gaps in mental health care for Autistic people.
- Major transformation of Victoria's approach to mental health and wellbeing supports following the Mental Health Royal Commission
- The opportunity to markedly shift the dial on mental health outcomes for Autistic Victorians by ensuring design and implementation of the Royal Commission's recommendations is done in an autism-responsive way

Attended by over 20 people, the Roundtable on Autism and Mental Health brought together key autism organisations with strong lived experience representation; prominent mental health practitioners and researchers working at the interface of autism and mental health; and senior leaders from the Department of Health and public hospitals who are driving implementation of the Royal Commission's recommendations. It was co-chaired by Katherine Whetton, Deputy Secretary for Mental Health and Wellbeing, and Nicole Rees, Deputy CEO Amaze.

Major changes are happening across the whole of Victoria's mental health system – all parts and all levels – structural, systems, programs and practice – will change. Autistic people will be impacted by this transformation. Consequently, there was wide ranging discussion about positive opportunities to build an autism-responsive approach to design and implementation of the reforms.

Key initial opportunities identified at the Roundtable were:

1. **Victoria's new Collaborative Centre for Mental Health and Wellbeing** to include in its goals, research agenda and service delivery priorities a focus on the mental health of Autistic people.
2. **Building the autism capabilities of mental health and wellbeing services and workforces** by:
  - Expanded workforce training in autism and mental health, ensuring application of Continuous Professional Development points
  - Involvement in developing the Diverse Communities Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework and Blueprint and the Mental Health Higher Education Reference Group's work
  - Prioritisation of autism in activities of the new 'State-wide Capability Entity' (which deals with training needs of the mental health workforce).
3. **Increasing employment of Autistic people in mental health workforce.** There was agreement to convene a future dedicated session to explore this.

4. Revising the state-wide **Dual Disability Plan** to explicitly cover Autistic people with dual disability.
5. Involvement in state-wide, regional and area **Service Planning to ensure an autism focus**, including advising on the establishment of Child, Infant and Family Mental Health & Wellbeing Hubs.
6. Improved **data collection to monitor and track experiences of Autistic people** in mental health services.
7. Establishment of a **Mental Health and Autism Advisory Group** to enable ongoing collaboration with the Department of Health to inform and support the design and implementation of recommendations from the Royal Commission as they relate to autistic people.

The Roundtable emphasised that autism responsiveness needs to be core business for Victoria's mental health system.

Amaze and its partners across the autism community embrace the Victorian Government's commitment to working collaboratively with autism sector and community to ensure Autistic people benefit from the generational reforms underway in Victoria's mental health system.

While there is much to do, positive steps to date were acknowledged and celebrated. These include involvement of Autistic representatives in design of the expanded Hospital Outreach Post Suicidal Engagement program; free autism assessments being available at Child, Infant and Family Mental Health & Wellbeing Hubs (due to open late 2022) and Victoria's new Mental Health and Wellbeing laws which include the objective of improving mental health outcomes for neurodivergent communities.

As a follow up to the Roundtable, Amaze looks forward to convening a Mental Health and Autism Advisory Group in mid-2022 to work with the Department on opportunities to ensure the Royal Commission reforms deliver improved mental health and wellbeing for Autistic people.

**Katherine Whetton**  
Deputy Secretary  
Mental Health and Wellbeing Division  
Department of Health

**Jim Mullan**  
CEO  
Amaze