

Answer to a question on notice by Beyond Blue

Hearing: 15 September 2020

Due Date: 29 September 2020

Date answered: 20 October 2020

Question:

Mr Stott: We've only been collecting postcode data consistently since early July. We haven't gone into analysing the correlation particularly with coronavirus cases across Australia so, as yet, we haven't established it. We've seen at a state level the very significant differences in terms of call volumes but, as I mentioned earlier, not so much variation in terms of reasons for calling, [inaudible] required for demographics. There are some, but it's more reflected the way that the pandemic has impacted different communities that would probably be the strongest correlation. We are now in a position with this data analytics platform to start seriously testing some hypotheses around this, particularly as we add in data from other services to see if there is clear evidence of gaps in services and supports for the community. It's one of the areas that we really want to focus on in the next few months.

Senator SIEWERT: Obviously, that's why I'm going there to look at what the issues are that are coming up—where are the gaps? When will you be in a position to provide that further information?

Mr Stott: I might take that on notice, if I may. I don't want to commit our team, because there's a lot going on in the organisation at the moment. I just emphasise, if I haven't emphasised this earlier, that these calls are counselling calls. We elicit the information through the course of a counselling conversation, and so we're very mindful of the fact that, as I said, it's not a data collection exercise and therefore—

Senator SIEWERT: Yes, I understand that.

Mr Stott: there are limitations. If I could take that on notice, I'll come back to you with some indications.

Answer:

Information provided in Attachment A.



Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service

Background

On 29 March 2020, the Commonwealth Government announced an initial \$74 million package to support Australia's mental health in response to COVID-19. \$10 million of this package was provided to Beyond Blue to rapidly design and deploy a dedicated coronavirus support service to provide all Australians with options to support their mental health and wellbeing. The funding was for a six-month period "to help people experiencing concern due to a coronavirus diagnosis, or experiencing stress or anxiety due to employment changes, business closure, financial difficulties, family pressures or other challenges."¹

The service takes a population health and primary prevention approach and gives people a range of support options, from self-care to professional counselling. It went live eight days after the funding was announced.

Beyond Blue has also directed a \$5 million donation from Medibank Private to enhance the supports we provide to the community during the immediate crisis and afterwards.

The Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service

The objective was to alleviate distress and the effects of isolation, reduce prevalence and exacerbation of mental health challenges, by:

- Providing a vital, rapidly deployed and iterative resource for COVID-19 related mental health prevention and early interventions that empower and equip people via self-management content and tools.
- Decreasing the mental health impacts of the pandemic and its effects of daily lives by linking people to services and supports, delivered by technology and with different models of care to suit their needs.
- Providing navigation advice for people to related services to help alleviate the burden of distress (e.g. Government advice for financial and business support). In later phases, if required and approved, enable access to higher-level support and pathways to more intensive interventions

The launch service included:

- A digital platform with a website (<https://coronavirus.beyondblue.org.au/>) offering practical advice, information and digital tools to help people manage their own mental health and wellbeing. Linked tools included mobile phone apps, such as Smiling Mind, Daybreak and the BeyondNow suicide safety planning app.
- A dedicated 24/7 phone counselling service staffed by mental health professionals (1800 512 348)
- Easy access to online forums providing peer to peer support
- Referral pathways to other specialised services and supports, such as the National Debt Helpline, My Business Health for small businesses and family enterprises, family violence, drug and alcohol and gambling services
- Links to emergency and crisis supports.

New support options are being added regularly, including webchat functionality, where the community can receive immediate online counselling support from a mental health professional.

¹ <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/11-billion-support-more-mental-health-medicare-and-domestic-violence-services-0>

The support service is being promoted through media, social media channels, email distribution lists and digital advertising, as well as Beyond Blue's community and corporate partners.

Digital site

Beyond Blue worked with Medibank Health Solutions and Accenture to plan and deliver a digital platform with a website that includes continually updated practical information, advice and referral points for people concerned about the impact of coronavirus on their mental health and wellbeing.

Overarching principles guiding the approach and design included:

- **Maintaining wellbeing, prevention and early intervention:** playing a role in helping *everyone* cope, preventing people from becoming mentally unwell, and stopping the deterioration of symptoms for people who live with a mental health condition.
- **Easy to use and understand** clear and simple language, information and support options are really important because people have been struggling with information overload. Language like 'wellbeing' is used as well as mental health to ensure as many people as possible see the service as something that they might find helpful.
- **Community need and responsiveness:** reviewing topics, themes and sentiment from people visiting established Beyond Blue channels, support services and content. The needs people have revealed from this reflect the full spectrum of the continuum from stress to severe distress and suicidality. Feedback has come both from people with existing mental health issues and those who have contacted us for the first time.

The content for the site is developed in collaboration with a range of experts: people with lived experience, clinicians, doctors on the front line, child mental health specialists, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advisers and government stakeholders.

New content is added regularly, reflecting emerging themes and community concerns. To avoid duplication and harness the expertise of others, in addition to Beyond Blue's original material, we syndicate content from and links to other mental health organisations. These have included: SANE Australia, Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit), ReachOut, Smiling Mind, Hello Sunday Morning, the Raising Children Network and Black Dog Institute.

Phone and online (live webchat) counselling

A dedicated 24/7 free phone support service was set up and staffed by mental health professionals who were specifically trained for this service, including briefing on the pandemic response. Counselling by webchat was added a few weeks' after launch.

The counselling service operates within a robust clinical governance framework, which includes referral processes for clinical and medical supports, as well as broader social services, such as family violence programs or financial counselling. Escalation protocols are in place for people experiencing acute distress, crisis or suicidality.

Online and phone counselling services can reduce distress and enhance coping ability. As an example, a peer-reviewed study published by the Evaluation Journal of Australasia found just one phone or webchat session with a mental health professional had immediate positive effects.

The evaluation showed the service to be effective with the majority of participants taking some action, feeling less distressed and less hopelessness. Among the findings:

- Three quarters of participants took further action to improve their mental health within three days of contacting Beyond Blue and 85 percent had done so within one month of contacting Beyond Blue;
- Distress levels dropped by an average of 42 per cent after just one contact with the service; and
- Respondents' ability to cope improved by an average of 32 per cent.²

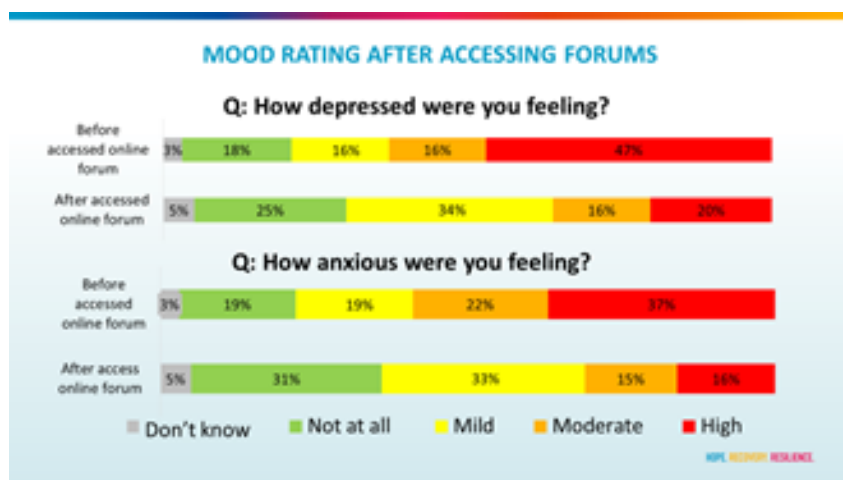
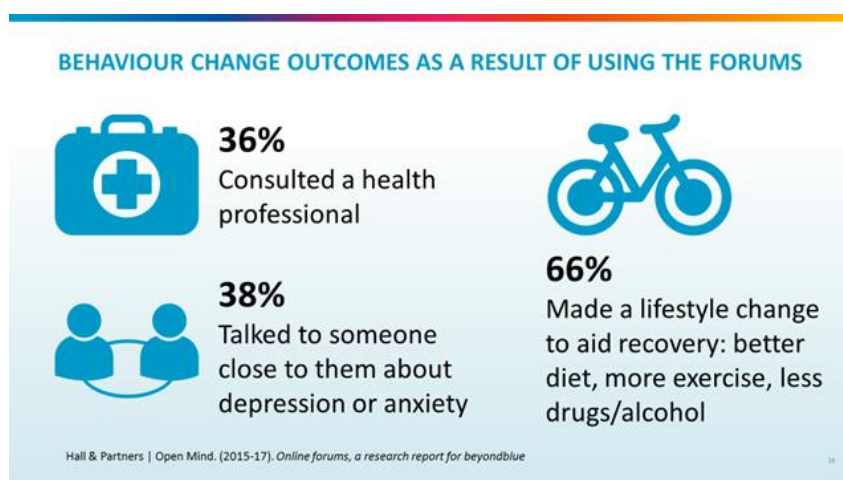
² Hawkins A. et al (2020), *Evaluating telephone and online psychological support and referral*, Evaluation Journal of Australia, 1-19

Online peer to peer support

Beyond Blue’s online peer forums provide a safe and secure platform to anonymously discuss mental health concerns including anxiety, depression and suicidality. The forums feature automated moderation functions that scan the content of all posts and analyse that content against a series of rules for different risk levels, including clinical risk. Depending on the risk level, the post is either approved for posting, held for manual review, or escalated to a clinician for immediate action. Peer support is provided by a small team of moderators and trained Community Champions, who draw on their personal experiences. These teams are backed up by a clinical governance framework where referral or other interventions are required.

A dedicated ‘Coping during the coronavirus outbreak’ thread was established on 13 March 2020 and received over 10,000 views in its first week. This thread has continued to receive a very high level of engagement and has become an integral part of the Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service, receiving cross-referrals from both the website and phone service.

A three-year study on the experiences of nearly 3,400 forums members found the following behaviour changes:



The great news was that most people experienced a reduction in symptoms after their last forum visit. Most encouragingly, those reporting their levels of anxiety and depression as in the red – or severe – before their forum visit were experiencing the greatest reductions.³

Governance and reporting

A Steering Committee comprising representatives from Beyond Blue (including our BlueVoices Lived Experience Advocate), the Commonwealth Department of Health, Medibank Health Solutions and

³ Hall & Partners, Open Mind (2015-17), *Online forums: a research report for beyondblue*

Accenture, keeps track of new developments in the service, monitors trends in service usage and helps to shape the evolution of the service in response to emerging needs.

Reports are generated on a weekly basis. Quantitative reports are sent to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) for collation and analysis alongside other national data sources. Qualitative reports containing themes and direct quotes from community members are also produced on a regular basis. A new data and insights platform is enhancing our reporting capability.

Results to date – 6 April to 15 October 2020

- Valued service for the community – 833,000 microsite users, 1,386,000 peer support forum views and 27,000 counselling sessions
- Required focus on spectrum of support (wellbeing to distress) at a time when we were expecting catastrophic Australia wide pandemic consequences on health
- Demonstrated benefit of community responsive digital-first and omni-channel approach
- Successfully developed a more integrated stepped-care model with partners such as Reach Out, Mind Australia and Lifeline
- Data insight led approach to evolve the service and inform commonwealth and states/territories
- Agile and inclusive governance model enabled
- The benefits of a sector wide integrated approach to support local communities affected by outbreaks, coordinated by governments, e.g. Melbourne public housing towers experience

Feedback from people accessing the service

“Hi, I am writing to express my gratitude and thanks to your team. Words are not enough and I don't really know what to say except to say thank you to your team for saving me. I called numerous times over the past few months and received great support, I was at the point of no return however started to rebuild myself on the numerous calls. I just wanted to thank your numerous support team as it helped me more than words can express. I will never forget the support I had, I hope I never have to call again (you know what I mean) however will always pass on the great advice I received and will open my eyes and ears moving forward if I see someone struggling etc. Thanks again Beyond Blue.” Support Service caller

“It is wonderful we have this forum to connect on, to share how we are feeling, to be supportive, and help each other where we can. Expressing how we are feeling and reacting to situations like the coronavirus can be so beneficial. This virus is very concerning, I appreciate that enormously ... May we all find ways each day, maybe each hour, to get through this.” Online forum participant

“One thing which has become obvious is how differently we are impacted. One person is overstressed at work because of the extra demands made due to the virus, others are out of work experiencing all the negative feelings of that. For some home schooling is easy others really struggle & need a lot of help or encouragement from parents struggling to work from home. Some... are feeling very vulnerable because of their health issues making them at high risk if they contracted the disease others I know are struggling because procedures required to address serious health issues have been postponed. Our family situation, finances and housing have all played a role in how we cope or don't cope during this pandemic. I think it is useful if we take time to read different people's posts and think about their situation.” Online forum participant



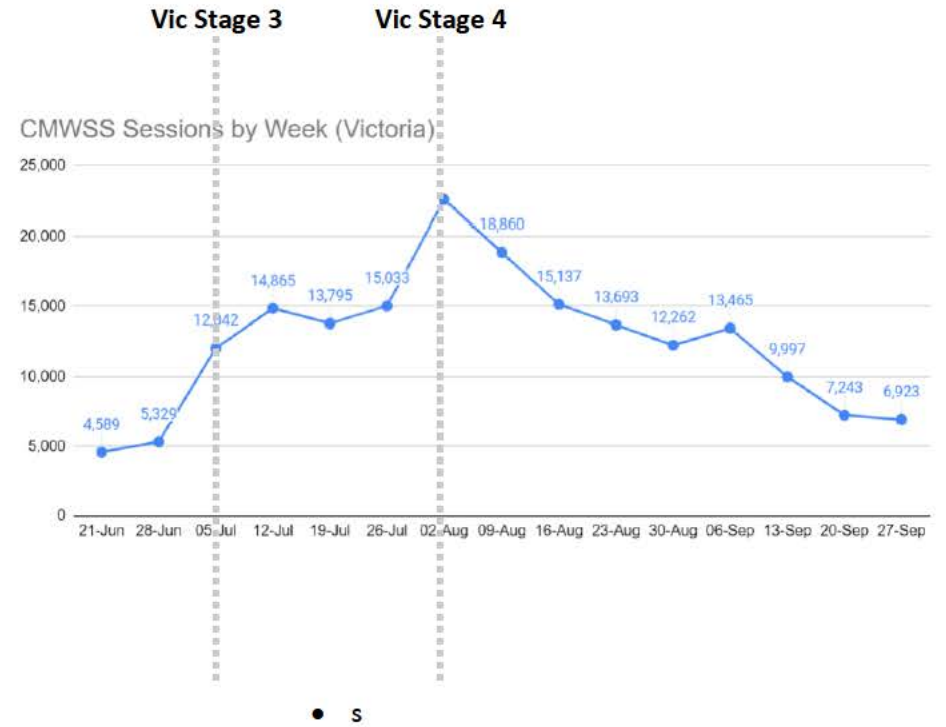
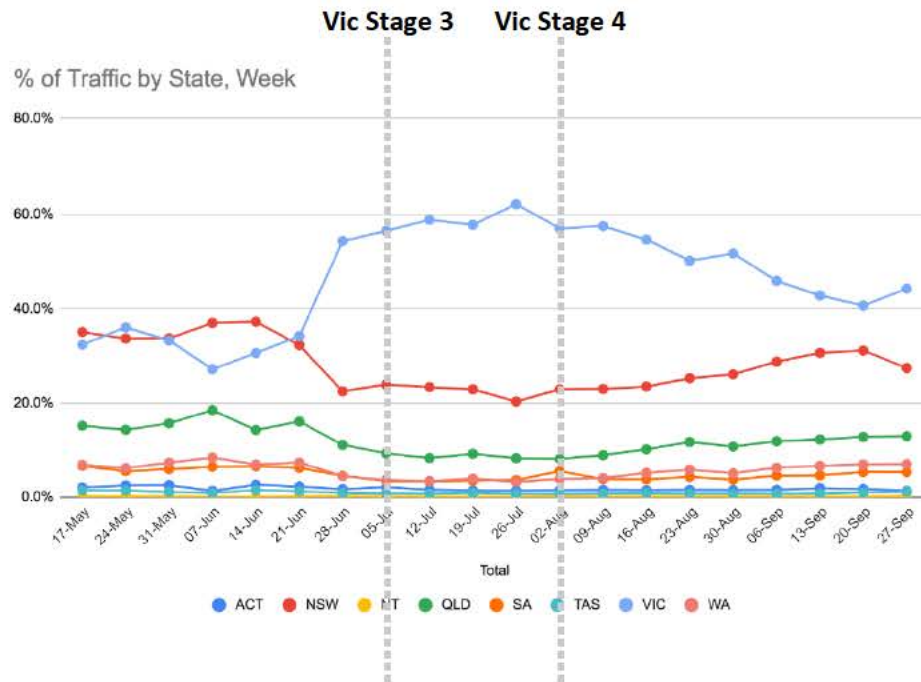
Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service - Hotspot Data Insights

The following data insights are from the Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Service. How the community has accessed this service differs significantly from what we have seen with the longer established and Beyond Blue funded Support Service. We believe this reflects the success of our targeted marketing of the Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service for those particularly impacted by COVID-19.

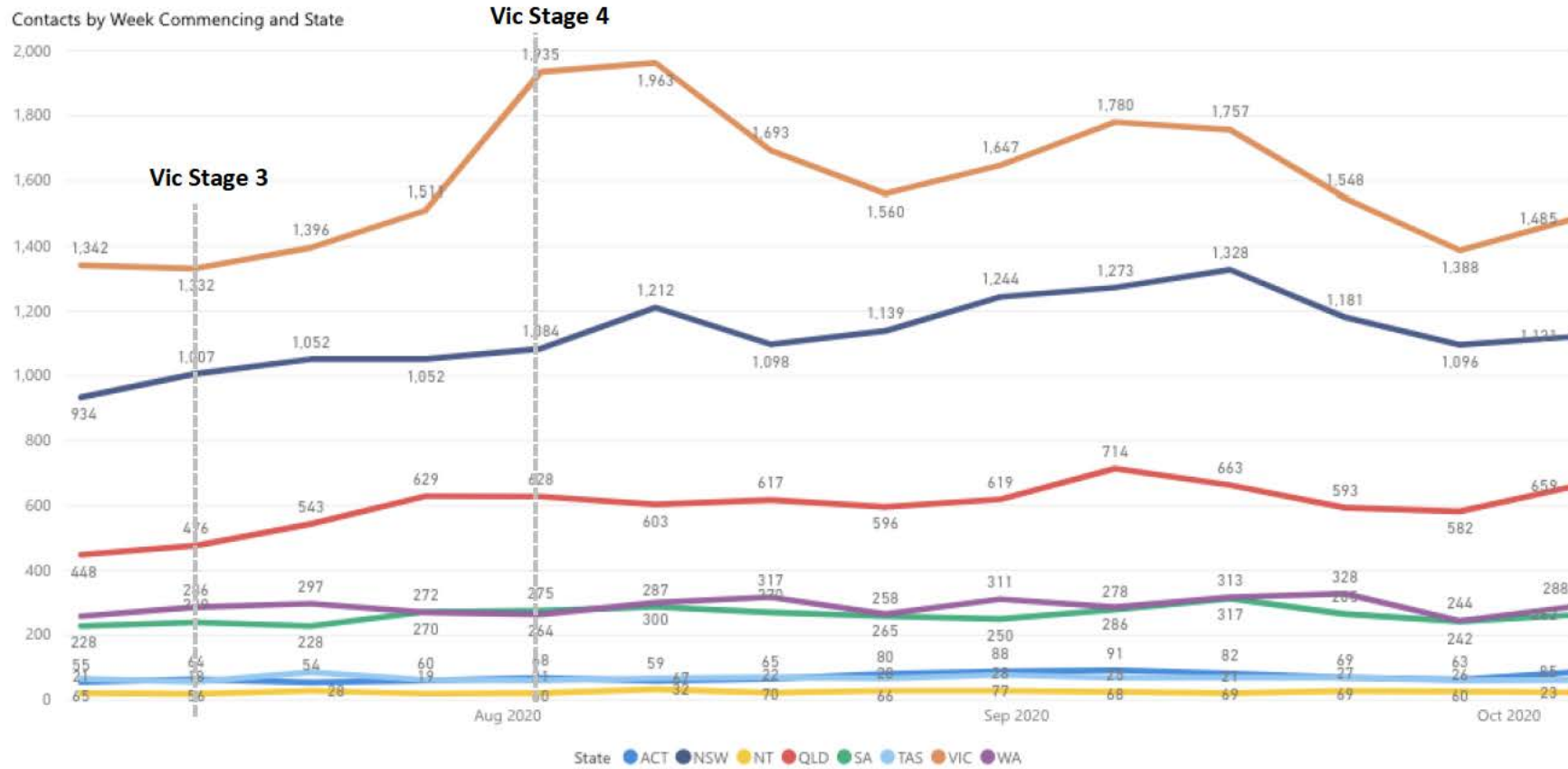
We have used these data insights to enhance how the service supports the community through the COVID-19 pandemic as well as informing the Department of Health and the states and territories via AIHW.

Since early July, we have more consistently collected postcode data for the counselling service. This will enable us to understand regional differences in the future.

A) Location of Microsite Users

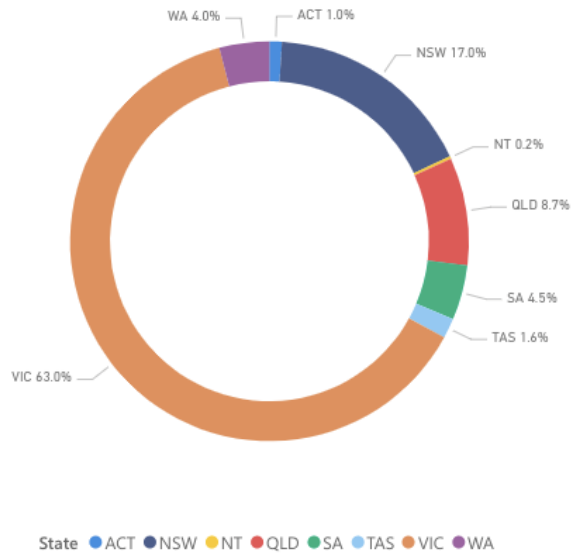


B) Location of Counselling Contacts

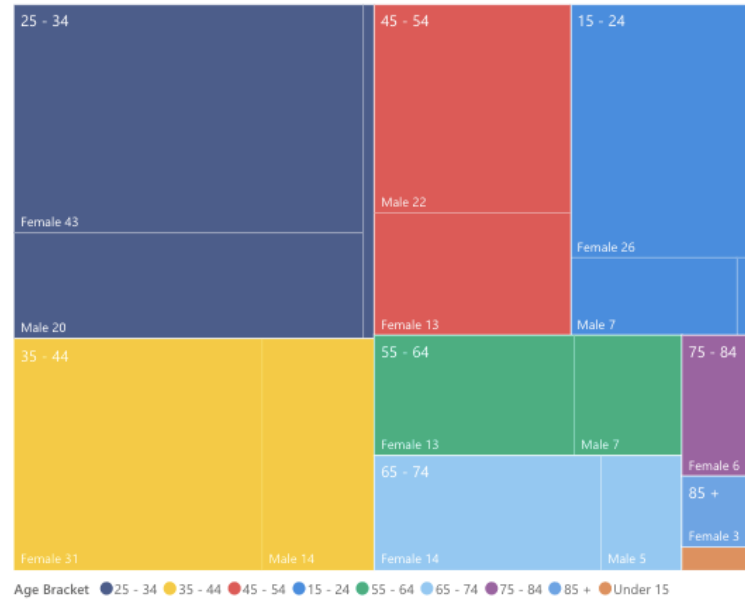


C) Location and Age of Counselling Contacts

Contacts by State



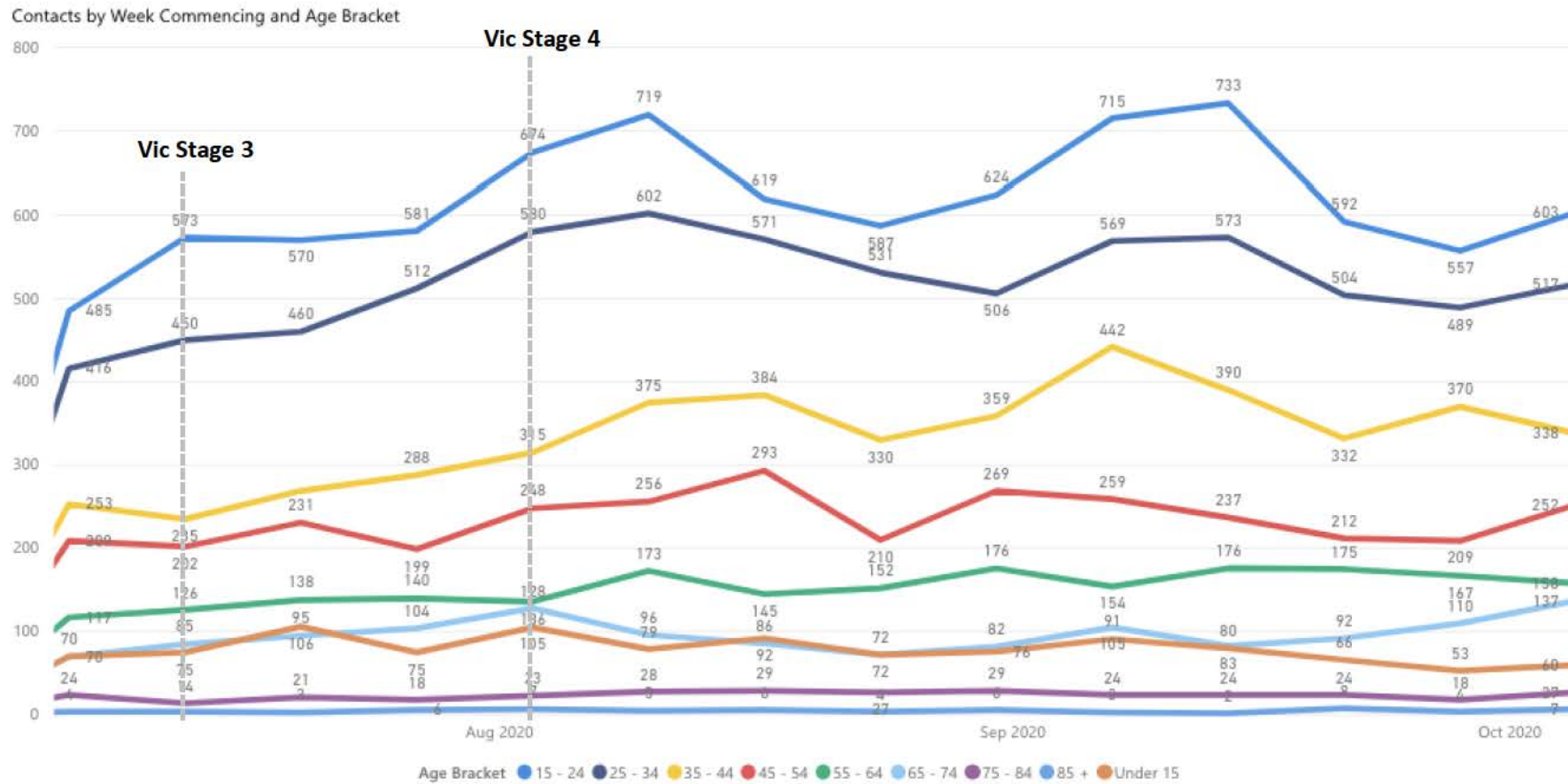
Contacts by Age Bracket & Gender



Insights

- 63% of contacts have been from Victoria since the launch of the service (this compares to 34% of contacts from Victoria to the Beyond Blue Support Service)
- 25-34yo followed by 35-44yo are the most frequent callers (we have seen an older age profile to callers to the Beyond Blue Support Service)

D) Age of Counselling Contacts

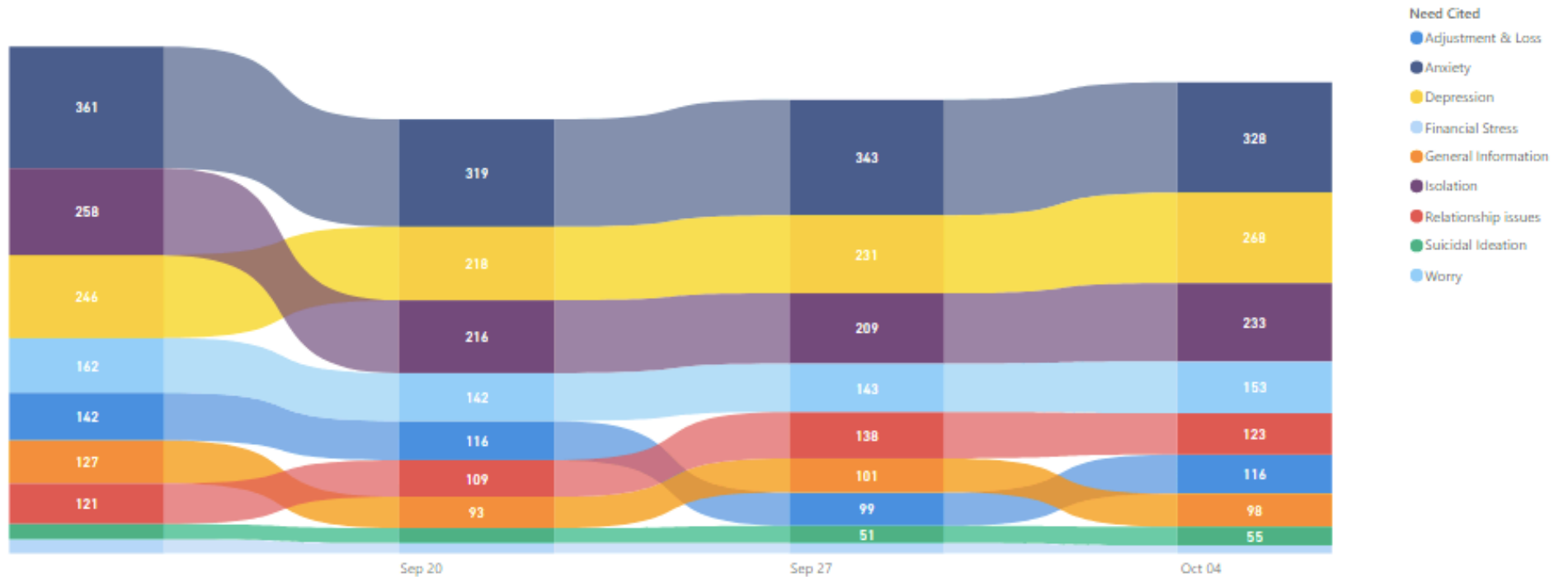


Insights

- We have observed different contact patterns over time between age groups

E) Reason for Counselling Contacts

No. of Calls by Week Commencing and Need Cited



Insights

- We have seen changes over time in reasons for calling with Anxiety followed by Depression being the main reasons
- Isolation has fallen as the reason for calling
- More recently, relationship issues as the reason for contact has increased