

Eastern Health CAMHS Submission
to
the House of Representatives Standing Committee on
Family, Community, Housing and Youth;
'Inquiry into Better Support for Carers'

Submission No. 762

(Inq into better support for carers)

Preamble:

AOC 15/7/08

The following submission is in response to the Standing Committee's call for information and feedback regarding the provision of better support for carers.

At Eastern Health CAMHS, we have conducted two community focus groups and several individual interviews regarding respite and other support needs of carers and families using our service. The content of our submission has been informed by the feedback from some 14 carers/parents who are currently linked with Eastern Health CAMHS.

Brief Summary of Key Points:

- Eastern Health CAMHS is a public Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service.
- This submission pertains mostly to respite needs of CAMHS families.
- A recent review of respite needs and issues for CAMHS families illustrated the lack of relevant information, options and availability of respite for this group.
- Families who have a child or adolescent with mental health problems, particularly when accompanied by behavioural issues or conduct disorder, require flexible in and out of home respite options.
- The respite needs to be delivered by respite workers who are trained and experienced in providing care to children and adolescents with mental health needs.

Body of Submission:

This submission addresses the following terms of reference:

(3) The practical measures required to better support carers, including key priorities for action; and

(4) Strategies to assist carers to access the same range of opportunities and choices as the wider community, including strategies to increase the capacity for carers to make choices within their caring roles, transition into and out of caring, and effectively plan for the future.

Eastern Health CAMHS is a public Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service, funded by the Victorian Mental Health Branch. The service provides support to children and youth aged 0 to 18 and their families.

In partnership with the Commonwealth Carer Respite Centre (CCRC) in our region (Uniting Carer Community Options), Eastern Health CAMHS families were invited to give feedback on respite needs and issues.

Feedback from the families suggested:

- Parents of children and adolescents with mental health problems generally are not aware of the option of respite per se.
 - Parents often think it is their role to care for their own children, regardless of the level of disability or morbidity.
- Those families who have sought respite have not been able to identify or use respite that is tailored to their children's needs.
- Children with autism fall between the services in regards to respite eligibility (disability services funding verses mental health service funding)
- Rigid respite service eligibility criteria often exclude children and youth with behavioural issues.
- Some children/teens are at risk of being taken into custody because their parents struggle with their day to day care and safety issues. They are burnt out trying to protect their children from self-harm, for example. These parents are especially in need of respite.
- Taking a break is made more difficult when respite funding only covers care for the child with disability when the parent has other children also.
- Ideal respite, as defined by the families consulted, includes:
 - Flexible respite that can be applied both in home or out of home,
 - Direct respite services that are provided by caring workers who are trained and experienced in working with children with mental health needs,
 - Availability of both planned and crisis respite,
 - Respite services provided after hours and during school holidays.

Other general feedback includes:

- Parents struggle financially to meet the additional needs related to the caring for a child/youth with mental health issues,
- Parents reported having to reduce their work hours, take unpaid leave or resign in order to care for their child,
- The majority of the care is undertaken by mothers,
- Single mothers are particularly at risk of stress and burnout due to lack of respite.
- Grandparents are often providing care to a range of other family members, as well as their children.

While the CCRC provides financial support via brokerage, the difficulty is the lack of existence of respite facilities or in home services where staff are trained and experienced in providing respite support to children and adolescents with mental health issues.

As a service provider it is also evident that, unlike adult mental health services, there are few, if any peak bodies representing the needs of this group. The families themselves are often so stretched that they are not inclined or able to set aside time to respond to a request for submissions such as this.

Recently FACSIA held local consultations with services who provide respite in our region, however as there are no services who provide respite specifically to this client group, the groups needs were not represented.

For rural families the situation is compounded. A recent consultation in the Albury Wodonga and Shepparton regions identified that the burden of care and costs associated with caring for an adolescent with mental health issues are compounded due to distance traveled to seek specialist support i.e. transport costs, as well as the loss of ability to earn income due to increased time demands visiting specialist services.

Recommendations for Action:

1. Development of respite flexible respite options that can be applied both in home or out of home,
2. Development of direct respite services that are provided by caring workers who are trained and experienced in working with children with mental health needs,
3. FACSIA consultation with service users/parents in relation to respite needs.
4. Development and delivery of training modules to assist respite workers to understand the behaviour and needs of children with mental health issues.
5. Availability of both planned and crisis respite, that can also be provided after hours and during school holidays.
6. Access to flexible work options including Commonwealth funded Carer Leave.
7. Investigate other options for relieving financial stress on families where a child/youth has mental health issues.

We trust this provides the Committee with an improved understanding of the challenges facing carers/parents of children and youth using mental health services, as well as their support needs.

Cate Bourke
Consumer and Carer Participation Worker
Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)
Eastern Health
PO Box 94 Box Hill, 3128, Victoria,
Ph 03 9895 4069

Authorized by
Sue Quartermain
Manager Community Based Clinical Care
CAMHS
Eastern Health.