

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Health

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

Australian Government response to the COVID-19 pandemic

26 May 2020

PDR Number: IQ20-000322

Question Subject: Pandemic response plan 'critical gaps' in mental health and suicide data

Type of Question: Written

Senator: Rachel Siewert

Question:

The pandemic response plan discusses the Department filling 'critical gaps' in mental health and suicide data. What gaps in data does the Department currently have and how will it fill these in order to accurately track increases in mental ill-health and suicide risk as a result of the pandemic?

Answer:

The Department of Health conducts weekly monitoring of mental health and support service activity, including historical comparisons, to understand how COVID-19 is impacting demand for mental health and support services. Weekly reports are prepared by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) and include analysis of the use of Medicare subsidised mental health services, including use of the COVID-19 mental health telehealth items. The reports also include weekly service activity information from a number of key crisis and support services providers including Beyond Blue, Lifeline, Kids Helpline, Head to Health, ReachOut and headspace. The Department is working with other mental health service organisations to provide service activity data. The Department also draws on a range of evidence to understand the mental health and wellbeing of the Australian population, including information being published from a range of national surveys conducted since the introduction of COVID-19 restrictions.

As part of the National Mental Health and Wellbeing Pandemic Response Plan, all jurisdictions are encouraged to:

- Contribute and share available data on service demand and delivery, including mental health services provided by mental health professionals, crisis and support phone lines and digital services, specialised community mental health services, mental health hospital admissions and emergency department presentations. The data should contribute to, and expand, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's (AIHW) National Suicide and Self Harm Monitoring System established by the Australian Government. This system has the support and commitment of all jurisdictions and will provide a comprehensive picture of the mental wellbeing of Australians.
- Support experts in mental health epidemiology and planning to develop a model of the mental health and suicide impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in the short and long term. This should include collaboration with experts to understand impacts at the state and regional level.

To support this work, the Australian Government is investing \$2.6 million (2020-21 to 2021-22) to boost national capability in monitoring, anticipating and reacting to the mental health impacts of the pandemic. This will build on the National Suicide and Self Harm Monitoring System that is already being established at a cost of \$15 million over three years (announced as part of the 2019-20 Budget), and will support the provision of expert guidance for proactive decision making in mental health service deployment.

This initiative will bring together a holistic national picture of how governments are supporting the mental health and wellbeing of Australians, by bringing together data from Australian Government, state and territory governments and non-government organisations to inform policy decision making. The Department of Health and AIHW are working with jurisdictions to support accelerated reporting of mental health related service delivery where possible.