

**Supp. Submission No.10.1**

(Youth Suicide)

Date: 09/02/2011

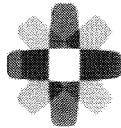


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BoysTown's Response to the Discussion Paper  
for the Inquiry into Early Intervention Aimed  
at Preventing Youth Suicide

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Prepared by BoysTown



BoysTown

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## **Introduction**

BoysTown wishes to acknowledge the inclusive nature of the consultation process being implemented by the Committee. We appreciate the Committee's endeavour in seeking a wide range of opinion on this critical social issue to inform future policy development.

## **Response to the Discussion Paper**

In relation to the discussion paper BoysTown would like to highlight the following issues:

### **1. The Importance of Program Evaluation**

BoysTown strongly supports the Committee's finding that there is a need for ongoing evaluation and assessment concerning the effectiveness of early intervention programs aimed at youth suicide prevention (1.12). In fact this situation reflects the general need for a more rigorous evaluation regime across services delivered by the Not-for-Profit sector. The recent Productivity Commission report titled the *Contribution of the Not-for-Profit Sector* found that evaluation in this sector tended to be both inconsistent and underfunded and noted the need for investment in the development and implementation of a common measurement framework (Recommendations 5.1 to 5.4). Due to BoysTown's own independent fundraising program this organisation is able to employ an internal evaluation and research team comprised of eight (8) qualified staff that ensures that all services have an evidence base that informs service delivery.

A systemic impediment that Not-for-Profit organisations experience is the lack of realistic funding allocated in Government contracts for evaluation activities. The Committee's intent outlined in 1.12 will not be achieved unless Government places increased priority on investing in evaluation as a component of service contracts.

### **2. Collaboration**

BoysTown firmly supports the Committee's call for:

- Greater participation and engagement of young people in the design and implementation of services (1.24).
- Action to integrate responses to young people from services across the health, education and youth sector ( 1.33-1.37)
- The greater use of ICT and social networking strategies in engaging young people about mental health issues (1.20 & 1.37). This was a key recommendation in the BoysTown's submission to the inquiry as our data indicates that young people are receptive to seeking help about mental health issues through web and email counselling modalities.

One area for enhanced collaboration not identified in the Discussion Paper is that between Government – at all jurisdictional levels – and the Not for Profit sector. Government's can assist Not-for-Profit services to increase the effectiveness of service delivery through the better exchange of information and data to improve planning and by investment in research and evaluation to drive innovation.

Furthermore, another area in which Government can increase its level of partnership with Not-for-Profit organisations is in developing opportunities for young people to participate in community life. In our previous submission to the Inquiry we provided extensive evidence from our own research that indicated programs designed to reduce the social isolation and socio-economic stress of young people prevented or reduced risk factors associated with suicidality. An example highlighting this issue was social enterprise development. Interim findings from an extensive and ongoing research project with Griffith University, funded by the Australian Research Council and BoysTown, indicates that long term unemployed young people who have left education prematurely develop a range of personal strengths and skills that increase their resilience in regard to risk factors associated with suicide when they participate in social enterprise programs. Governments can play a significant role in the development of social enterprise programs through the provision of procurement contracts for goods and services to organisations that employ young people as a means of reintegrating them into mainstream employment or further education.

### **3. Mental Health Literacy and Gatekeeper Training**

The Committee notes the importance of developing mental health literacy amongst parents, teachers and other people that play a significant role in the care of young people as a strategy to promote early intervention (1.38 & 1.41). BoysTown agrees with this strategy and furthermore suggests that this can most effectively be facilitated through the introduction of a national Parentline counselling service.

As stated in our first submission BoysTown's Parentline provides therapeutic counselling, parenting skills-building and referral services via telephone and online modalities to parents and carers in Queensland and the Northern Territory. Annually over 9,200 contacts are made to the service.

Our evaluations of Parentline demonstrate that the service is effective in developing the resilience of children in relation to mental health issues. The service promotes increased parenting confidence, reduces stress and improves family relationships overall. Contemporary research indicates that reducing the depression and stress of parents will lessen the likelihood that their children will experience conditions detrimental to their long term development including risk factors related to suicidality.<sup>a</sup> Furthermore parents and carers perceive Parentline as a relevant service in assisting them to respond to concerns about their children's emotional and mental health issues. Almost 30% of contacts from parents and carers relate to issues concerning behavioural management, mental and emotional health concerns and their children's use of drugs and alcohol.

As stated in our submission, it is our assessment that there is currently no consistent national service offering evidenced based counselling, parenting skills development, information and referral. It is argued that investment in the development of a National Parentline Service that provided these services could promote mental health literacy amongst parents and carers that will promote early intervention and subsequently reduce youth suicide.

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<sup>a</sup>[http://www.knowledge.offordcentre.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=174:depression-in-children-treat-the-mother-treat-the-child&catid=45:depression&Itemid=29](http://www.knowledge.offordcentre.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=174:depression-in-children-treat-the-mother-treat-the-child&catid=45:depression&Itemid=29) Accessed April 15 2010

#### 4. Policy Proposals

The Committee has also sought feedback on the relative merits of recently announced policies dealing with the issue of suicide.

In principle BoysTown supports the policies listed in section 1.44 of the Discussion Paper. However we have serious reservations concerning the implementation of these initiatives particularly relating to those associated with supporting communities affected by suicide.

During the last Federal election Prime Minister Julia Gillard provided some detail as to how these policies were to be targeted. In relation to the section titled *Doing more to stop suicide and support communities affected by suicide* she announced that increased funding would be provided to an adult telephone counselling service to increase their capacity to respond to contacts and to enable calls from mobiles to the service to be toll-free<sup>b</sup>. In follow-up discussions with senior officials in the Department of Health and Ageing it was confirmed that at this stage this benefit will only be provided to the nominated adult agency named in this policy.

#### **The question we pose to this Inquiry is what importance does the current Government place on suicide prevention amongst young people?**

This Committee of Inquiry has already demonstrated the critical significance of preventing youth suicide. In our earlier submission we have demonstrated through the presentation of data collected by BoysTown's Kids Helpline service that children and young people are increasingly seeking assistance from dedicated youth telephone and online counselling services in relation to suicide issues. We noted in our previous submission that Kids Helpline was experiencing a substantial increase in suicide related help-seeking rates. In 2009 counsellors responded to a total of 5,067 contacts involving suicide-related issues which was an 82% increase since 2005. The increasing prevalence of suicide related contacts to Kids Helpline has continued in 2010 with 7,401 suicide related contacts being responded to in that year. A further factor to consider in assisting young people is their preference in using mobile phones. As stated in our submission mobile phones are the preferred means of communication to Kids Helpline. Currently about 70% of telephone contacts to Kids Helpline are by mobile phones. BoysTown estimates that Australian young people spend about \$1million annually in seeking assistance for their most serious concerns with Kids Helpline. As noted in the report by the Senate Inquiry into Suicide in Australia the cost of mobile calls is a significant inhibitor to the most vulnerable in our community receiving crisis intervention and support from telephone counselling services. We would suggest that it is time for the Government to act and to legislate that calls from mobile phones to telephone helplines be zero rated (call free) not just for adults but for children and young people as well.

Consequently BoysTown strongly advocates that this Inquiry recommend to the Australian Parliament that urgent action be taken to fully implement Recommendation 23 of the recent Senate Inquiry report into Suicide in Australia. Specifically that the Commonwealth Government ensure that telecommunication providers provide affordable access to telephone and online counselling services from mobile and wireless devices.

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<sup>b</sup> Mental health: taking action to tackle suicide, Julia Gillard and Labor: p5