

Child and youth mental health

The Victorian Auditor-General's Office (VAGO) has recently released a report reviewing the effectiveness of clinical mental health services for children and young people in Victoria. This is the first independent review of these services.

The purpose of the audit was to 'determine whether child and adolescent mental health services effectively prevent, support and treat child and youth mental health problems'.¹ The audit also examined whether these services are administered effectively by the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). To reach their conclusions, VAGO reviewed five public child and youth mental health services (CYMHS)* across the state.

The audit concluded that 'DHHS has not provided the strategic leadership necessary to effectively plan, fund and manage CYMHS'.² The report also found that 'not all Victorian children and young people with dangerous and debilitating mental health problems receive the services that they and their families need' and that there is 'significant variability and inequity in the care that children and young people receive'.³ These services are currently unable to meet service demand or operate as a coordinated system, with system-level responses impeded by a lack of adequate performance monitoring and limited engagement with mental health services by DHHS.

Design, monitoring and access

In regards to the design of CYMHS, the report concluded that:

DHHS has predominantly taken a one-size-fits-all approach to the mental health system's design and monitoring, which does not adequately identify and respond to the unique needs of children and young people.⁴

VAGO found that the design of these services could be supported through the development of a strategic framework and a clear rationale for programs. The report identifies a range of issues relating to monitoring, most significant of which is the existence of seven separate systems which do not connect, coordinate or share information. Access for children experiencing vulnerability is challenging because, for example, DHHS has not reviewed a guideline that they released about prioritising children in out-of-home care and only one site was found to have implemented this guideline. Further, the CYMHS data system is unable to identify children in out-of-home care.

The audit also found:

- Differing age eligibility between services
- No priority access for those most in need
- Lack of performance indicators around length of inpatient stays and family engagement in care
- Clinically unnecessary stays in inpatient beds due to complex needs and a lack of strategic action to address this
- Lack of information sharing with health services about evaluation findings and reviews that could assist with continuous improvement

VAGO made twenty recommendations, all of which have been accepted by DHHS, with implementation to be informed by the outcomes of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System.

¹ Victorian Auditor-General's Office (VAGO), *Child and youth mental health*, Independent assurance report to Parliament 2018-19:26, Victorian Auditor-General's Office, Melbourne, 2019, p. 22.

² VAGO 2019, p. 24.

*This term includes Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).

³ VAGO 2019, p. 8.

⁴ VAGO 2019, p. 8.

The Centre's position

The Centre welcomes this report from VAGO which recognises that children and young people have not been prioritised by government when it comes to the provision of mental health services. We are particularly concerned that children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage are missing out and potentially being affected adversely by the current system.

The Centre is preparing a submission to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System which will focus heavily on the needs of infants, children and young people. We now have an opportunity to make widespread positive changes to the way that services across a range of systems are delivered, and this report provides an excellent starting point for the mental health system. The recommendations included in this report will go a long way towards improving mental health outcomes for children and young people in Victoria.

The report can be downloaded here:

<https://www.audit.vic.gov.au/report/child-and-youth-mental-health>

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