

# **Mental Health Workers Alliance**

## Worker Survey



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Prepared by Essential Media Communications

## Contents

Introduction.....	3
Method.....	3
Summary.....	4
Police surveys.....	5
Nurse surveys.....	6
Doctor surveys.....	7
Emergency and health employee surveys.....	8
Social and community service worker surveys.....	9
Conclusions and recommendations.....	10

## Introduction

The Mental Health Workers Alliance was established in 2004 by the NSW Nurses' Association, the Police Association of NSW, the Australian Salaried Medical Officers Federation (NSW), the Health Services Union NSW, and the Australian Services Union (NSW) in response to ongoing concerns among our members about the entrenched resource deficits in mental health services across NSW.

This situation is compromising the ability of police, ambulance officers, nurses, doctors, allied health staff, security officers, and social and community services workers to get their jobs done and ensure some of the most vulnerable people in our society receive the best care.

This neglect of mental health services has persisted too long and the MHWA has been established to ensure that the public is aware of the depth of the problems in mental health services and to demand that the NSW Government act decisively to rectify this unacceptable situation.

To assist the Mental Health Workers Alliance in achieving this aim, to ascertain support from workers, and to help guide its charter a survey was conducted of more than 600 directly working in or impacted by the mental health system.

## Method

Five versions of the MHWA survey were tailored to ensure they were relevant for the members of each participating union.

The forms were sent out via fax or email from the week starting Monday 18 August to those members working in and around the mental health sector, and those directly impacted by its processes.

Some 654 surveys were then returned by union representatives and individual workers via fax and email to either the participating unions or to Essential Media Communications, which collated the final results.

This report provides a summary of the major findings although where respondents were given the option of providing long answers or telling their personal stories, these remain the property of the Mental Health Workers Alliance. No identifying information of respondents is provided in this report.

## Summary

Responses to the MHWA survey indicated significant concern from frontline workers in the mental health system and from those directly impacted due to its shortcomings.

It revealed that frontline health, police and emergency workers were being forced to take large chunks of time away from their core work duties to care for mental health patients.

The responses showed that a lack of dedicated resources was causing massive problems for people living with mental illness and for those workers left to pick up the pieces. For example:

- More than 90 percent of police officers said caring for mentally ill people was affecting their ability to do core policing work
- More than 80 percent of nurses estimated the occupancy rates of beds dedicated for mental health patients was 100 percent or above
- More than 60 percent of doctors said they felt pressured to prematurely discharge mental health patients into the community and almost 70 percent were unable to find a beds when needed in the past three months
- Some 80 percent of ambulance officers, hospital registrars, social workers and other health and emergency workers listed bed availability, staffing, and resources as major issues impacting on care for mental illness sufferers.

Nearly all respondents indicated support for the Mental Health Workers Alliance campaign and many said they would like to be actively involved.

## Police survey responses

Of the 213 returned police surveys 96% said they were being called upon to care for people with mental health issues and 93% said this was affecting their ability to carry out their core work responsibilities.

Some said they were being called out to jobs an average of 20 times a week because no mental health team was available. The majority indicated they were called out between two and five times per week because mental health teams were unavailable. Police were spending up to 30 hours transporting mentally ill people in police vehicles. On average police indicated they were spending between 5 and 10 hours transporting mental health patients.

More than 90% of respondents said they were being called on to look after mental health patients during the assessment and scheduling processes in hospitals and 70% were being asked to keep them in paddy wagons while they waited for appropriate facilities to become available. This was taking anything from a couple of hours to more than 50 hours every week.

Many police officers felt it was inappropriate to transport mentally ill patients who had not committed a crime in paddy wagons, particularly where they were frail, aged, or in danger of harming themselves. Others said they feared being attacked and were concerned by hygiene issues. Some 79% of police said the routine transportation of mentally ill people in police vehicles should stop.

More than 75% felt themselves in danger or at risk because of this work and only 14% felt they were adequately trained to deal with mentally ill people. Fifty six percent said there were clear protocols in place regarding this aspect of their work but only 15% said these protocols were adequate. Seventy percent said more training was needed.

Support for the Mental Health Workers Alliance campaign was high, at 96% and 91% of respondents were union members.

## Nurse survey responses

Of the 190 returned nurse surveys, 80% estimated the occupancy rates of their beds dedicated for mental health patients was 100% or more (17% said 100% and 63% said more than 100%). The answers may have been higher, except some said they had no beds dedicated to mental health patients.

Prematurely discharging patients was the number one way of dealing with the problem, with 29% indicating this method. Next highest scoring method was keeping them in emergency departments (23%) or general wards (6%), refrain from admitting them (13%), try to manage them in the community (11%), or transfer them around the state (8%). About 8% also indicated they routinely had mental health patients sleeping on couches or on mattresses on the floor. Many nurses expressed concern that community services were being stretched and that they did not have the resources to adequately cope.

Support for the campaign was high, at 90%. Almost 50% would be happy to distribute materials, more than 40% say they would attend meetings, 64% would support taking industrial action and about half would like to receive email updates about the campaign's progress.

When quizzed about whether beds, staffing, or financial resources were major issues, 92% indicated staffing with the same amount indicating bed availability. Financial resources was listed as a major issue by 85% of respondents.

Eighty percent of respondents said they were a member of the NSW Nurses' Association.

## Doctor survey responses

Of the 33 returned doctor surveys 66% indicated they were pressured to prematurely discharge mental health patients who were not fit to be in the community. Some 69% had required a bed for a mentally ill patient and found there was not one available in the past three months and many said they had to keep mentally ill patients in emergency departments for five days or more.

Only 1% of respondents said the occupancy rate for mental health patients was less than 90%. While the rest (51%) said it was either 100% or more (54%). Some doctors gave more than one answer.

Staffing was highlighted as a major issue by 93%, bed availability by 97%, and financial resources by 85%.

Some 84% of doctors said they would support the Mental Health Workers Alliance campaign and 87% said they were a member of ASMOF.

## Health service employee surveys

Of the 79 people that returned HSU survey forms, ambulance officers, social workers, emergency, psychiatric registrars and many more were represented.

The surveys sent back indicated enthusiastic support for the campaign, with 91% of respondents answering this question in the affirmative.

Of the surveys returned, 78% indicated bed availability, 89% said staffing, and 86% said financial resources as major issues.

Some 24% estimated beds dedicated for mental health patients were 100% full and 67% said they were more than 100% full. Just 7% estimated they were less than 90 percent full.

Regarding clear protocols for dealing with mental health clients, 56% said their workplace had these but only 35% said these were adequate. Thirty nine percent said more training was needed.

## Social and community service worker survey responses

Some 139 workers in social and community services responded to the survey questions sent out by the ASU.

Of these, 83% listed staffing as a major issue, 71% listed bed availability and 83% listed financial resources. Respondents to this version of the survey were also asked if they considered long-term supported accommodation options to be a major issue, with 88% indicating that it was.

When asked whether procedures for dealing with mental health patients were clear, 48% indicated that they were, with only 25% saying they considered existing procedures to be adequate. Some 35% indicated further training was required.

A majority feel that the existing centres need more specialist staff (54%) to deal with mental health issues and clients and 84% called for additional community mental health workers. Two thirds (65%) also think more training is a priority if things are to improve. Most workers also suggested that new centres need to be opened to complement and support existing centres (58%) and 37% said other specialist staff was needed. The most common suggestions were for centres specialising in a) supported accommodation, long term; b) centres to cater to dual diagnosis patients; c) more mental health centres to provide resources, support and advice to other centres in the field.

Of the workers who responded 89% said they would support a campaign on the issue of mental health.

The proportion of members to non-members who responded was 61.47%.

## Conclusion and recommendations

Based on the above survey responses, the Mental Health Workers Alliance formulated its Five Step Program for a Saner Mental Health System, calling for:

1. Appropriate funding for mental health by increasing the mental health proportion of the State Health Budget to at least 15%, as recommended by the National Mental Health Strategy, and for mental health expenditure to be transparent and quarantined.
2. Better resourcing for long term supported accommodation options for all people with mental illnesses, including homeless people.
3. Increasing the capacity of inpatient units and community services to guarantee 24 hour access to those in need of treatment.
4. Appropriate crisis care, including 24 hour mental health expertise in emergency departments and community teams, to alleviate pressure on front line emergency services.
5. Addressing the problems of recruitment and retention in the sector by providing incentives to enter to a mental health system

For more information about the Mental Health Workers Association, please visit: <http://www.labor.net.au/campaigns/mhwa/mhwa.html>,  
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