

# Our peer workforce

## Transforming mental health services



### What?

The peer workforce is reshaping the way mental health services and supports are delivered.

Peer workers are people who have experienced mental health issues first-hand and are able to use this experience to help others. They have also experienced recovery, and so provide hope as well as guidance for others on their own journey.

Peer workers work in many different settings, often in multidisciplinary teams – alongside mental health nurses, psychiatrists, psychologists, mental health social workers – with each team member contributing their own skills and experiences to provide comprehensive support for consumers.

Peer workers also operate independently to support people in their communities, and are crucial to reducing stigma and discrimination in the mental health arena.

### Why?

Mental health is an identified health priority for South Eastern NSW, with high rates of mental and behavioural disorders and psychological distress as well as relatively high rates of suicide and self-harm.

COORDINARE is taking an innovative approach to building our region's peer workforce in transforming mental health services and support systems towards a recovery orientation.

### How?

COORDINARE has commissioned a number of providers to implement new peer worker services and supports in our region. These include:

- Next Steps – a suicide prevention after-care service for people who have presented to a hospital emergency department with suicidality or a suicide attempt (Grand Pacific Health)
- Complex Care/Integrated Recovery Service – a service incorporating peer workers working alongside mental health nurses for people who have complex mental health needs (Grand Pacific Health)
- Active8 – a physical health coaching service for people who identify as living with mental ill-health (Neami National)
- The Psychosocial Support Initiative – a psychosocial recovery program for people not eligible for NDIS (Flourish Australia)

Working closely with providers and their peer workers is our dedicated Mental Health Peer Coordinator. We are unique among Primary Health Networks in having a dedicated role to develop and support the expanding local peer workforce.

We are also leading the development of peer worker networks, with three networks established in different locations throughout the region: the Illawarra Shoalhaven, South Coast, and Southern Tablelands. These networks support those working in peer worker services, fostering reflective practice, education, supervision and professional development.

*“Peer workers have a unique ability to rapidly develop authentic rapport and trust with consumers, that inspires hope for recovery”*

*– Nikki Jordan, Grand Pacific Health*

## Outcomes



1 Mental Health Peer Coordinator on staff to develop and support the local peer workforce



3 networks supporting 65 peer workers throughout the region



4 new commissioned services incorporating peer workers, providing support to > 160 consumers

The mental health peer workforce is relatively new to South Eastern NSW. Despite its newness, there have already been a number of positive outcomes, with four commissioned services operating and more services planned. The value that the peer workforce adds to mental health service provision in the region has been clear from the outset, and is illustrated by the feedback COORDINARE receives from service providers.

*“Peer workers have a unique ability to rapidly develop authentic rapport and trust with consumers that inspires hope for recovery. I’ve had a lot of great feedback from clinicians saying how helpful and worthwhile it is working with peer workers, particularly because of their shared experience, strong empathy and insights that they provide. There’s a real richness in working collaboratively... the clinician and peer worker roles are mutually complementary.”* – Nikki Jordan, Mental Health Recovery Services, Grand Pacific Health

*“Our peer workers come from different walks of life, but what they have in common is a strong commitment to communicate that recovery is not only possible but probable, and that despite living with mental health symptoms, everyone can live a life based on their values. They also relate to consumers and understand how improving physical health can improve mental health wellbeing.”* – Andrea Arndt-Jackman, Neami National

## Mark’s story

– using lived experience to help peers with their own recovery



Mark Thompson is a peer worker in Grand Pacific Health’s Integrated Recovery Service in Moruya on the NSW South Coast – a medium term service for adults experiencing complex mental health issues. Mark works alongside clinician Stacey Thomson, each of them bringing complementary strengths to the service.

“Because of my experiences, I can help explain what recovery can look like from the consumer perspective, and provide some insight into what might be happening for them,” he explains.

Mark says many of the people he works with have had negative experiences with mental health services in the past. “I think the peer worker space offers something new for them. At the same time as working with me, they can work with a clinician on the clinical aspects of recovery, so they get the best of both worlds.”

Mark describes his role as ‘a real privilege’. “When people realise you’ve also been through something, they think ‘if this person can get through and recover, then maybe I can too.’ Over time, they often feel more able to interact in the world.”

He gives the example of a consumer whose number one goal – and obstacle – was finding work. “Not only was I able to go out with him and go through all the practical steps needed to get a job, I was also able to talk with him about his anxieties. That’s the great thing about a peer relationship – people can voice their concerns without feeling alienated. And when he got a job... it was fantastic!”

Mark says his role is all about connecting with people – not as a diagnosis or condition, or a problem that needs to be fixed, but as fellow human beings. “When you start connecting as humans, you find a genuinely mutual and useful space. And when you’re in that space, you see those lightbulb moments... like when people try something new and achieve something. It’s very special to be able to share those steps to recovery.”

## Stacey’s story

– collaborating with a peer worker to deliver a more holistic service

Stacey Thomson is a mental health recovery clinician working with the Integrated Recovery Service offered by Grand Pacific Health. She works closely with peer worker Mark Thompson to provide a ‘wrap-around’ or holistic service for consumers with complex mental health issues.

“People don’t come to our service just to address their clinical issues,” she explains. “Working with a peer worker means I can focus on the clinical aspects of recovery, knowing that the client’s other issues are being addressed as well.”

Stacey says since coming into the mental health field, the peer workforce is the best thing she’s come across.

“Clinicians obviously have a big role to play, but the informal and highly practical support peer workers can provide is invaluable.”



“In consumers who work with and connect with Mark, I often see much quicker progress, and I think that’s about the relationships he can build with them,” she explains. “We’re currently working with a young person who’s been in and out of the health care system for a number of years. As a result, he’s never really had the opportunity to develop his own identity outside of the mental health arena. Working with Mark has provided a safe space for him to develop as an individual, and I’m seeing him make massive progress.”

From my perspective, peer workers are the way of the future within the mental health field.”