

Within a community of caring

Central Coast ARAFMI decided to call its services Mental Health & More following a review of its data and family stories, which showed our work and the people we work with to be much more than relatives & Friends of the mentally III. With all the changes happening around us both state and federal we want to continue in the business of hope and optimism and we want families to lead the way.

'Each year in NSW, around one million people have a mental illness. Only 350,000 of these people actually receive assistance. The bar for entry is already high and still rising. People with a lived experience of mental illness report that they cannot access community supports at the first stages of becoming unwell. Without the opportunity to prevent their illness progressing to the acute phase, they may experience longer periods of ill health and may lose jobs, friends and homes as a consequence of being isolated from their ordinary lives. Families and carers express concern about not being kept informed about loved ones treatment. Public community mental health services are commonly under-resourced.'

(P4, Living well in our community-Mental Health Commission of NSW)

The nature and intensity of mental illness has many facets, such as the journey and the path the illness takes. We must consider the preferences of the person living with the mental illness, along with the competing needs and availability of resources and support. Mental Health & More recognises that families often share a unique history and investment in this journey, as carers, family & friends face the challenges of mental illness and more.

'Among all Australian jurisdictions, NSW directed the smallest per-capita proportion of total mental health spending to support community managed mental health service provision in 2010-2011. New Zealand directs 30% of annual mental health expenditure towards such services-about four times the NSW rate. Mental health now accounts for about 8% of total health spending. Meanwhile mental illness accounts for 14% of the total burden of illness in this state.'

(P11, Living well in our community-Mental Health Commission of NSW)

We all know that providing care and support to someone with a mental illness can be a difficult and daunting task. It often brings with it unpredictability and leaves families on tender hooks. Although research findings espouse the benefits of family involvement and

the unique and critical role of fostering a loved one's recovery and well being, barriers to family involvement in the mental health system continue.

Carers provide important information to clinicians and are often the first to notice signs of relapse and to seek help. The voice of carers must not become that of a token committee member or a survey participant, as family support passes its fashionable phase and enters the marketplace.

As the idea of recovery is accepted as a real possibility and people with a mental illness are finding their voice, so too must carers and families be heard. Carers must be given the attention and respect they deserve, in order to support and sustain their own well being, alongside a voice that can be heard loud and clear.

It is no longer sufficient to just have the words, 'carers and families' in the text of a glossy brochure. Carers and families of people with a mental illness need to be resolute about their expectations, expertise and the important role they play. In a community of caring, we need your truth, do not be silenced by others inability to listen.

