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NSW Consumer Advisory Group – Mental Health Inc.

Border to Border: Visions of Hope

A report to the NSW Mental Health Commission

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Getting to places: for people to participate in their community and to stay socially connected, they need to be able to travel between places easily. People's options for getting around are significantly reduced if they don't own a car or drive. For example, people on low incomes might not be able to afford a car and all the associated ongoing costs (registration, fuel, etc). Medication side effects can also affect a person's ability to drive. Without a car, people are reliant on public transport, and find it difficult to get around in the community and access programs.

Transport is a particularly significant issue for people living in regional and remote areas, where health and human services are spread out across large areas, and people frequently travel long distance to other towns for services. In these areas, transport options are limited, services are infrequent, and fares are expensive (especially if there's an additional booking fee). For those relying on public transport, these are significant barriers. This impacts a person's ability to access services and stay connected with families, friends and other forms of social support, which might be in nearby towns or cities.

'Maggie' lives in a regional centre in Western NSW. She lives in public housing and receives the Disability Support Pension. She has difficulties with mobility and going to the local supermarket is a constant battle because the closest bus stop to her home is a few blocks away. She can't afford to travel by taxi, but it is a painful and slow walk to get to the bus stop and she can't carry many groceries back. Due to her income, she also can only afford limited numbers of bus tickets with each pay. To get by, Maggie limits the amount she eats so that the food at home will last longer and she can at least have something to eat every day.



'Kate' works in a non-government service in a regional town in the Murrumbidgee area. As a mental health support worker, her role is to provide individualised mental health support to people living in the community. However, there are no GP services available in her town, and transport between to the next community with a GP is very limited. Instead of using her mental health training to provide a much needed service, once every week, Kate spends her whole day driving a car full of people to and from the next town so they can see the doctor.

In a small town in Western NSW, young people are missing out on youth services. Being half way between two larger regional centres, the town only has a community health clinic. The community mental health team from one of the regional centres provides outreach at the health clinic, but young people don't go there. There are a number of youth services, including Headspace, in the two nearby communities, but the young people who don't drive and can't afford public transport are unable to access these services.

In some areas where there are community transport services, people have an additional option for getting around. However, some community transport staff discriminate against people with a mental illness. Some won't accept passengers who they judge as experiencing symptoms of mental health distress, because of perceived 'risks'. Some simply refuse to take on board any person known to have lived experience of mental illness – even if the person is not experiencing any symptoms and is going to hospital for a physical health problem.

In a remote community in Far West NSW, the nearest place with services is a two hour drive away. The bus going between the two areas runs once a day – it goes to the larger community in the morning and comes back in the afternoon - and it costs \$15 for the return trips. If you miss the bus coming back, you would have to stay in the regional centre overnight and take the bus the next day. This means having to pay for accommodation overnight, or sleeping rough if you can't afford the accommodation.

In a regional town in the Murray Riverina Region, it is easier to travel by public transport to Melbourne for services than it is to go to by public transport to the next community (that's four hours away) in NSW. However, people's ability to access services is still limited by whether they can afford the costs of the long distance train fare and the accommodation for the overnight stay.