

Regional & Rural Youth Voices: Shaping the Future of Mental Health.

Young Australians are experiencing a growing mental health crisis, but not all young people are impacted equally. Young people in regional, rural and remote communities are being left behind by a crisis-driven mental health system.

On April 15-16, batyr brought together young people from across regional and rural Australia to share their lived experiences in a two-day, in-person workshop; **Regional & Rural Youth Voices: Shaping the Future of Mental Health.**



The young people in the room shared their reflections on the mental health disparities facing their communities, and, working alongside the batyr team, they developed key recommendations for decision makers.

A major theme from the two days was the need to see a shift from crisis driven responses to true early intervention and prevention.

Their recommendations:

"We need access to early intervention programs in primary school, teaching kids that it's okay to struggle, before they reach crisis."



Stigma was also a recurrent theme throughout the two days. The young people spoke about the characteristics of growing up in small communities as a double edged sword. Protective and deeply supportive - but at times also isolating and insular. The risk of being rejected from their tight knit community was often perceived to be high enough to deter young people from opening up about their mental health challenges.



"We know that stigma exists, and that it is multigenerational. We see that often we wait for things to go terribly wrong before we respond. We're asking that we spend more energy and resources on relevant preventative strategies that resonate with communities."

When young people were able to open up, they still faced significant barriers accessing mental health support. From long drives to long waitlists, young people growing up in regional, rural and remote communities are being left behind their metro counterparts.

They felt that grassroots, place based change was the key to improvement:

"We've come up with a three phase process to get more access to mental health services. The first step is understanding the needs of each community, the second step is developing a solution for each community, the third step is getting the funding."

They also recognised that every community has different access needs. They advocated strongly for power to be placed back in community hands:

"[we want to see] A localised community grants system that creates change from the bottom up. We'd like to see a solution that gives young people agency to design and come up with programs and solutions that are specific to their reality and their communities. "

Throughout the two days, the young people in the room spoke to the devastating barriers they face living in regional, rural and remote areas. However they also reflected a deep passion and care for their communities. Their pride in the strengths of their community was clear - and it is these strengths that should be at the centre of future change.

