

Rapid-response mental health team to ease strain

Suicide's first aiders



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— Doctor MEGAN HENDERSON

POSITIVE PROGRAM: Clinical psychologist Megan Henderson praised police, Barwon Health and paramedics for their commitment to helping mental health patients.

Photo: MIKE DUGDALE

New program 'could be a lifesaver'

ERIN PEARSON

GEELONG'S new collaborative approach between police and health services has the potential to save lives, according to a local doctor.

Clinical psychologist Megan Henderson praised police, Barwon Health and paramedics for their commitment to PACER, which will see a clinician and specially-trained police officer assess at-risk residents in their own homes, rather than always at hospital.

She said it was crucial that those suffering mental health issues or feeling suicidal felt

validated and understood. "I think the most important thing is that the person needs to be heard. This is more likely to occur when the person is more comfortable rather than in a stressful and unfamiliar environment," Dr Henderson said.

"When a person is in a vulnerable state, they may perceive someone else's behaviour as threatening or invalidating, and that will actually exacerbate their difficulties.

"This initiative has really got the ability to de-escalate mental health concerns, reduce hospital admissions

and provide a more therapeutic intervention for some people."

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics' National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing, an estimated 45 per cent of Australians aged between 16 and 85 years have experienced a mental health disorder.

In Victoria: 53 PER CENT of people detained in police cells have a public mental health record; 70 PER CENT of prisoners have some form of substance abuse/dependency; 66 PER CENT of people that

police take to emergency departments are mental health patients; and, 50 PER CENT of missing persons have a mental disorder.

Superintendent Paul Potage said PACER would provide a more tailored response.

"At the scene, the clinician is able to make a diagnosis and decide the most appropriate response for the person, including ringing ahead to the psychiatric admission unit to arrange for the person's direct admission," he said.

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GEELONG police are attending dozens of suicides each month, prompting a major overhaul on how the system deals with the frightening rise.

In a revolutionary new method called PACER – Police, Ambulance and Clinician Emergency Response – mental health liaison officers will soon attend suicide interventions and mental health related call-outs alongside police.

In recent weeks an officer jumped into local waters to rescue a person trying to drown herself.

The following day he also revived a second person who had tried to end their life.

Police said the increasing occurrence was putting a strain on resources with many officers forced to take personal leave after attending a scene.

Senior Sergeant Michael Reid said the six-month PACER trial, to begin within weeks, would free up both police and hospital resources while providing those in need with more efficient support and treatment where needed.

He said Geelong would be the first regional area to implement the program after local police travelled to Melbourne suburbs to view similar systems in use.

"A divisional van is the first responder to most incidents.

"If they believe the person needs assistance they are currently taken to the Swanson Centre and assessed, but this new idea will see more people treated in their homes, assessed in their own environments," he said.

"Now initial police respondents will request the PACER unit attend to determine more accurately if the person requires further assistance

while the initial responders (police) will be then cleared to return to work and Barwon Health will see less transfers."

Sergeant David Magher, Geelong police's mental health liaison officer, said at least four calls a day involved mentally ill persons, many trying to take their own lives.

"It's a hard thing for police to face, knowing that they're going to be confronted by someone who doesn't want to live," he said.

"We're seeing more than ever and it's people of all ages."

Sgt Magher said nearly half the people Geelong police dealt with suffered from some mental health conditions.

"By bringing PACER to Geelong it shows the dedication we have to providing the community with a better service response," he said.

A Barwon Health spokeswoman said PACER would run from 2.30pm to 11pm seven days.

Barwon Health clinician Karin Karenz said she was excited to be a part of the new project.

"We often will get calls from family members who are concerned about their mother, son, brother or even a neighbour and want someone to go out," she said.

"With this position being available we will be able to go out with police and provide that assistance."

"Once we've done a mental health assessment that person can either come to hospital for further treatment or we can provide early and timely intervention or the person be referred on."

People experiencing personal problems can call Lifeline on 131 114 or Victorian SuicideLine on 1300 651 251.

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