

RURAL HEALTH ALLIANCE AOTEAROA NZ

11 December 2019



Submission to the Parliamentary Health Select Committee on the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission Bill presented to Parliament by the Hon Dr David Clark on the 19 November 2019.

The Rural Health Alliance Aotearoa NZ (RHAANZ) is a membership organisation representing around 35 national organisations that share a commitment to improving the health and wellbeing of all those who live and work in rural New Zealand.

commends the Government on presenting the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission Bill to the Health Select Committee for consideration.

The prompt implementation of this important recommendation from He Ara Oranga – Government Inquiry into Mental Health and Addiction demonstrates an impressive cross-party commitment to improving the mental wellbeing of every New Zealander.

However, the Rural Health Alliance Aotearoa NZ has some concerns about the Bill as it is presented and wishes to draw these to the attention of the Health Select Committee through this submission.

1. **RHAANZ Rural Health Road Map 2019** makes a 'Call to Government' to ensure its Rural Proofing Policy underpins the implementation of He Ara Oranga through:
 - i. The establishment of the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission
 - ii. Procurement of mental health and addiction services
 - iii. Ensure service contracts reflect the realities of rural service provision.

RHAANZ contends that it is imperative that the establishment of the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission (and this Bill) specifically recognises rural New Zealanders as a priority population. This will hold current and future Governments to account for improving the mental health and wellbeing of rural New Zealand in which some of our highest needs and most isolated communities live and work.

Through the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission's mandate to focus on rural New Zealanders, the extent to which mental health and wellbeing services mirror the rural communities they serve will be monitored.

<https://rhaanz.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Rural-Health-Road-Map-2019.pdf>

2. **'Government's Rural Proofing Policy** ensures that when policy makers sit down to design the rules they take into account the unique factors that affect rural communities such as low populations, isolation, and reliance on the primary sector for employment,' Hon Damian O'Connor June 2018
<https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/rural-communities-heart-all-decisions>

The aim of the Rural Proofing Policy is to ensure the unique needs of rural New Zealanders, of all cultures and ethnicities, is reflected in the development of Government's policies and implementation of them. Yet the Bill's **Department Disclosure Statement** appears to indicate that the Ministry of Health has not applied the Rural Proofing Policy Guide to the development of this Bill.

Furthermore, **Section 3.6: External Consultation** lists agencies that the Ministry of Health consulted with in the development of this Bill. We are disappointed that the Ministry of Health's own National Rural Health Advisory Group is not on this list.

It is our view that given the recognition that He Ara Oranga gives to the challenges rural health people have in accessing mental health and addiction services, consultation with this nationally recognised group of rural health leaders should have been an integral part of its development.

<http://disclosure.legislation.govt.nz/bill/government/2019/188/>

3. This Government commissioned two significant reviews relevant to the RHAANZ submission on this Bill:
 - i. **He Ara Oranga** Government Inquiry into Mental Health and Addiction
'While the prevalence of mental health conditions is similar in urban and rural settings, people in rural settings are less likely to access mental health care.'
 - ii. **A Review of the Health and Disability System**
'And we have seen rural communities forced to make do with a level of service accessibility that is simply unacceptable.'

Both reviews clearly identify the inequitable access to health and disability services experienced by rural New Zealanders. He Ara Oranga recognises the significant challenges that rural people experience in seeking help for mental health or addiction needs, and in accessing appropriate services when they need them.

While there are undoubtedly both DHB and NGO mental health and addiction services that are able to work effectively in rural communities, there is no nationally consistent approach to planning and delivering services. Current service delivery frameworks and contracting models are provider-centric, and based around urban centres.

CONCLUSIONS

The Rural Health Alliance Aotearoa NZ concludes that the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission Bill:

1. Does not currently reflect the principles of Government's guiding documents as they pertain to rural New Zealanders
2. Has an essential role in ensuring service planning, funding and delivery frameworks enable rural New Zealanders to have equitable access to the services they need, when they need them.
3. Has the ability to ensure that Government's investment into Mental Health and Addiction Services reaches into rural households so that they are not reliant on this occurring on a trickle-down basis that is derived from urban-centric system changes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Rural Health Alliance Aotearoa NZ recommends that the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission Bill is redrafted to recognise rural New Zealanders as a diverse priority population

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