



**Mental Health  
Australia**

# 2025 Annual Issues & Opportunities Workshop Report

May 2025

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# Introduction

## Annual Issues & Opportunities Workshop

Mental Health Australia hosts an Annual Issues and Opportunities Workshop for members of the National Register of Mental Health Consumer and Carer Representatives (National Register) and the National Mental Health Consumer and Carer Forum (NMHCCF).

Over many years, these two-day workshops have supported the development of advocacy approaches, policy positions, and leadership skills among mental health consumers and carers participating in national policy initiatives. The workshops have also provided important networking opportunities for representatives.

The Department of Health, Disability and Ageing funded the Annual Issues and Opportunities Workshops as part of the Stronger Mental Health Consumer and Carer Representation program.

The 2025 Annual Issues and Opportunities Workshop was the final workshop for these two national groups, as funding for the National Register and the NMHCCF ceased on 30 June, 2025. As part of the evolution of lived experience, the Commonwealth Government has funded new lived experience peak bodies, one for consumers and one for carers, family and kin.

The final Annual Issues and Opportunities workshop was held in Canberra on 7 and 8 May 2025 and was attended by 57 mental health consumer and carer representatives, as well as staff from Mental Health Australia.

The theme chosen for this final Annual Workshop was *"Celebrating Our Past and Building Our Future."* The program featured various speakers, thought-provoking sessions that explored opportunities to stay connected, to advocate through different mechanisms, and to celebrate the achievements of the Forum and Register.

An evaluation survey was sent to all participants following the workshop, and the responses received indicated a high or very high degree of satisfaction with the event.

This report provides highlights from the two-day event, as well as a summary of the key themes from the workshop and the workshop evaluation survey.

## 2025 Workshop Attendees

### **National Register of Mental Health Consumer and Carer Representatives**

The National Register of Mental Health Consumer and Carer Representatives (the National Register) was a pool of 60 trained mental health consumer and carer representatives from across Australia who worked at a national level to provide a strong consumer and carer voice in the mental health sector.

Members drew on their lived experience, knowledge of the mental health system, and communication skills to advocate for and promote the issues and concerns of mental health consumers and carers.

The National Register was a project of Mental Health Australia.

### **National Mental Health Consumer and Carer Forum**

The National Mental Health Consumer and Carer Forum (NMHCCF) was a combined national voice for mental health consumers and carers, auspiced by Mental Health Australia. The NMHCCF provided advocacy on consumer and carer issues through representation on a wide range of national bodies, including government committees, advisory groups, professional bodies, and other consultative forums and events.

NMHCCF members also researched and prepared submissions, raised awareness, and shared information relevant to consumers and carers at a national level.

Members used their lived experience, understanding of the mental health system, and highly developed advocacy skills to ensure that the issues and concerns of consumers and carers were addressed in national policy development and planning processes in Australia.

## 2025 Workshop Working Group

The 2025 Workshop was planned by a working group comprised of consumer and carer representatives, who worked collaboratively with the Mental Health Australia team to shape the theme, agenda and select speakers for the workshop.

The agenda was designed to include a combination of speakers, activities, and networking opportunities, as well as interactive activities. The working group also ensured that some light-hearted moments were incorporated into each day. A thoughtfully decorated relaxation space and peer support were available to participants throughout the workshop.

The Working Group met on nine occasions between December 2024 and May 2025.

Working group members were:

**Michael Burge**

National Register Consumer Representative

**Heather Nowak**

NMHCCF Consumer Representative

**Lyn Anderson**

National Register Carer Representative

**Aislin Gleeson**

NMHCCF Carer Representative

**Anne Barbara**

National Register Carer Representative

**Peter Heggie**

NMHCCF Carer Representative

**Sonia Di Mezza**

National Register Carer Representative

**Facilitator**

Robyn Priest from *Robyn Priest Live Your Truth* facilitated the 2025 Annual Issues and Opportunities Workshop. Robyn is the Co-creator & Chief Non-Conformist for *Robyn Priest Live Your Truth*, a mental health and peer support education and strategy firm based in Canada.

# Day 1: Wednesday, May 7 2025

<b>9:00 – 9.15</b>	Acknowledgment of Country Workshop welcome: Carolyn Nikoloski, CEO of Mental Health Australia Recognition of lived experience: Michael Burge
<b>9:15 – 9.25</b>	Facilitator insights
<b>9:25 – 9.40</b>	Principles for working together
<b>9:40 – 10.30</b>	Keynote Speaker: Rowan – Creative Innovator, Speaker and Speed Painter
<b>10.30 – 11.00</b>	<b>Morning tea</b>
<b>11.00 – 11.45</b>	Recognition and history of the NMHCCF & National Register
<b>11.45 – 12.30</b>	Activity: Identify your skillset
<b>12.30 – 1.30</b>	<b>Lunch</b>
<b>1:30 – 2.00</b>	Activity: How we stay connected
<b>2.00 – 2.20</b>	Presentation: Peer Workforce Association
<b>2.20 – 3.10</b>	Activity: Current issues
<b>3:10 – 3.40</b>	<b>Afternoon tea</b>
<b>3.40 – 4.15</b>	Checking in
<b>4.30</b>	<i>Meeting Close Day 1</i>

## Workshop Opening

### Acknowledgement of Country



Figure 1: 'Untitled', Melinda Brown, 2015, oil on canvas

The workshop started with an acknowledgement of Country, the Ngunnawal and Ngambri People and an Acknowledgement of Country video 'Dadirri'.

*"Dadirri is inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness. Dadirri recognises the deep spring that is inside us. We call on it and it calls to us. This is the gift that Australia is thirsting for. It is something like what you call 'contemplation'."* – Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann

### Workshop welcome: Carolyn Nikoloski, CEO of Mental Health Australia

Mental Health Australia's CEO, Carolyn Nikoloski, welcomed NMHCCF & National Register members to the final Annual Issues and Opportunities Workshop. Some key points from the welcome were:

- A brief history of the NMHCCF and the National Register
- An acknowledgement of the significant impact of the advocacy of NMHCCF and National Register Members
- Recognition that the closure of the NMHCCF and National Register was likely to bring up a range of emotions
- A commitment from Mental Health Australia to continue to ensure that people with lived and living experience of mental ill health, family, carers and supporters will remain at the centre of everything we do. It was outlined that, while planning is still underway, this would be achieved in part by:
  - Continuing to work closely with the lived experience peak bodies and other lived experience member organisations
  - Facilitating the Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Senior Officials Lived Experience Group and Embrace Multicultural Carers and Consumers Lived Experience Group
  - Continuing to embedding lived experience expertise in Mental Health Australia's governance arrangements
  - Continuing to identify other ways of embedding the views and expertise of people with lived experience as carers and consumers



## Recognition of Lived Experience: Michael Burge



A recognition of the lived experience was provided, including all within the room, all that had come before and all that would come in the future.

The following passage was also provided to members as a memento:

*“Forests are more than a collection of trees; they are living, breathing communities. Beneath the surface, trees connect through vast root systems, sharing nutrients with those that are struggling and sending early warnings of danger. Older trees nurture the young, providing stability, guidance and protection as they grow. This quiet, powerful form of mutual care mirrors the strength found in communities of people with lived experience of mental health challenges.”*

### Facilitator Insights

Robyn Priest explained her approach to facilitation and reinforced the importance of the workshop's theme: *Celebrating Our Past and Building Our Future*.

### Principles for Working Together

The principles for working well together, developed at the 2024 Annual Issues and Opportunities Workshop, were shared, with participants invited to provide comments or make any additions. Everyone present agreed that these principles remained fit for purpose and would apply to this year's workshop.

The principles and intentions agreed to were as follows:

**Principles:** Respect, curiosity, inclusion, connection, and timeliness.

**Intentions:** Kindness, acceptance, love, care, graciousness, self-awareness, solution-focused, strength-based, and innovative.



## Rowan – Creative Innovator, Speaker and Speed Painter

Rowan, one of Australia's top speed painters with her own lived experience of depression and chronic illness, provided an inspirational start to the workshop, which many identified as the highlight of the two days.



Rowan shared three points from her book *The Creativity Cycle*:

1. Use what's in your hands
2. Hold your ideas like potato chips – be open to change
3. Walk about – experience different perspectives

Rowan shared the below quote, by renowned author Elizabeth Gilbert:

*"Creativity is choosing curiosity over fear"*

Throughout the day, Rowan finished the painting she began during her keynote. As it took shape, a tiger floating in outer space emerged. Rowan explained that the tiger represented the courage of the people in the room, and outer space represented the feeling of groundlessness; yet, with a clear definition of where to go next and a bit of courage, there was confidence that participants' feet would land.

### Reflections

*"I enjoyed the presentation by Sarah Rowan. Excellent. Innovative and thought-provoking"*

*"Rowan was amazing."*

*"I loved the enthusiasm of the artist and talent and felt encouraged by her tiger painting. The spirit of advocacy will continue to roar!"*

## Recognition of the History of the NMHCCF and the National Register

A commemorative video was played for attendees, featuring photos and videos of members explaining what the National Register and NMHCCF meant to them.

Janet Meagher AM, the first Consumer Co-Chair of the NMHCCF and distinguished mental health activist, provided her reflections on the history of the consumer movement, the NMHCCF and the National Register.

Judy Bentley, an early member of the NMHCCF and an inaugural member of the National Register, reflected on the impact and history of the groups from the carer perspective.

Lorraine Powell, National Register Consumer Representative, presented on her recent extensive work in collating the history of the Forum and National Register through review of published documents and in consultation with a selection of members, noting that this would be compiled into a book and distributed to Forum and National Register members.

### Reflections – Favourite quote from the Workshop

*"Nothing about us, without us"*  
*"Celebrating our past and Building our Future"*

### Activity: Identify Your Skillset

Participants were asked to explore ways to turn words that may be perceived as negative into strengths. Each participant was asked to identify a negative word they had used about themselves, or others had used on them and then brainstorm with their table a strengths-based way to "flip the script". Someone who had been called "outspoken", for example, could be considered as "courageous in voicing diverse perspectives", while "stubborn" could be considered as "tenacious and persistent" or "principle and values-driven".

This exercise was designed to help participants identify their strengths as they move forward in their advocacy work after these groups have concluded.

### Activity: How We Stay Connected

Participants expressed a desire to stay connected, but with both groups concluding on 30 June 2025, they were asked to identify ways to maintain group and individual connections.

Ideas included:

- Share contact details
- Social media
- Virtual catch-ups
- In-person catch-ups
- A website to stay connected
- Connect with other lived experience groups

### Reflections

*"It was wonderful to connect with peers at this workshop and exchange information, both professional and personal"*  
*"This was the real highlight."*

## Peer Workforce Association Presentation

Sharon Lawn, Executive Director of Lived Experience Australia (LEA), delivered a virtual presentation on the Peer Workforce Association, for which LEA had received funding to explore its development. The project aimed to update the 2019 Towards Professionalisation Report, enhance the evidence base on Australia's peer workforce, refine recommendations for establishing an Association, and engage stakeholders from the peer workforce across Australia. As part of the project, the team spoke with 198 peer representatives through 18 focus groups and conducted 24 interviews with peer workforce leaders.

### Activity: Current Issues

Groups were asked to identify the three key current issues in the mental health sector that require increased or ongoing advocacy. The three key topics identified by each table were displayed on the walls, and participants were asked to consider all the current problems and place red sticker dots next to their three key topics from all tables to guide collective prioritisation.

The top three issues identified were:

- 1. The need to refocus on a human rights approach in mental health systems including:**
  - Elimination of seclusion and restraint
  - Stop Community Treatment Orders and involuntary treatment
  - Full implementation of the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture
- 2. The need to focus on and fund community-based mental health services,** for example, community mental health hubs, rather than crisis-driven services such as hospitals (as a mental health response context)
- 3. The need for government-funded open dialogue nationally**

### Check in

Attendees were given the opportunity to check in with each other at the close of the first day.

Following the check-in, there was a spontaneous breakout of music, singing and dancing, in keeping with the theme of celebrating achievements and signalling the deep bonds that had been developed over time.

## Day 2: Thursday, May 8 2025

<b>9:00 – 9.30</b>	Check-in & day one reflections
<b>9:30 – 10.30</b>	Public speaking workshop: Sonia Di Mezza
<b>10:30 – 11.00</b>	<b>Morning tea</b>
<b>11.00 – 11.20</b>	Activity: Express yourself
<b>11:20 – 11.40</b>	Lived Experience Theory of Change presentation: Elida Meadows
<b>11.40 – 12.30</b>	Activity: Future opportunities
<b>12.30 – 1.30</b>	<b>Lunch</b>
<b>1.30 – 2.50</b>	Celebration
<b>2:50 – 3.00</b>	Wrap-up and official close of the workshop
<b>3.00 – 4.00</b>	<b>Afternoon tea &amp; informal networking</b>

## Check-in and Day One Reflections

Reflections from Day 1 activities were shared with members.

## Public Speaking Workshop: Sonia Di Mezza

### Getting to Your Why of Public Speaking

Sonia Di Mezza, CEO of Migrant and Refugee Resettlement Services ACT and member of the National Register, provided a workshop designed to help participants engage in public speaking with greater confidence, including:

- Getting to your 'why'
- How to eliminate nerves
- Preparation as a foundation for creating meaningful communication with your audience
- Guiding principles for creating a high-quality presentation
- Using passion and credibility as your guiding force
- Respecting your audience to create powerful impact
- Voice control and breathing

### Reflections – I learnt something new at the Workshop

One hundred per cent of workshop evaluation survey respondents indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed.

*"I thought the presentation on public speaking was great, with plenty of good advice and useful tips."*

## Activity: Express Yourself

This reflective activity asked participants to express any unspoken words or feelings, whether positive or negative, by writing them down. Participants were given the option to share their written thoughts or rip them up, symbolising closure.

## Lived Experience Theory of Change: presented by Elida Meadows



Figure 2: Partial Image of the NMHCCF Lived Experience Theory of Change

Elida Meadows and Sam Brhaspati Stott were engaged by the NMHCCF Consumer and Carer Leadership working group to produce a lived experience theory of change. Elida provided an overview of the consultation process to develop the theory of change.

The Lived Experience Theory of Change presents a bold and unifying vision for the future, outlining the key activities and outcomes necessary to bring it to life. At its heart is a commitment to a just and inclusive society - one where lived experience is

genuinely valued, where individuals have the support they need to thrive, and where communities respond to mental distress with compassion and understanding.



Attendees were informed that the Lived Experience Theory of Change would be launched via a webinar on 4 June 2025.

### Activity: Future Skills and Opportunities Activity

Each table was asked to identify opportunities for lived experience representation beyond 30 June, as well as the skills required to support this. Key themes included:

1. **Strengthening Sector Relationships:** Participants emphasised the importance of building and maintaining both new and existing relationships within the mental health sector.
2. **Seeking Consultation Opportunities:** There was a strong interest in proactively seeking opportunities to influence reform through consultation and engagement.
3. **Supporting Ongoing Reform Efforts:** Participants expressed commitment to continuing advocacy for systemic change.
4. **Ensuring Sustainable Impact:** To maximise ongoing efforts, participants noted the importance of:
  - Thinking creatively and innovatively
  - Managing consultation and advocacy fatigue
  - Prioritising personal wellbeing to sustain long-term involvement

These insights reflect a strong commitment to maintaining momentum and influence within the sector, driven by collaboration, leadership, and strategic advocacy.

### Celebration



*Figure 3: Members of the NMHCCF and National Register, and Mental Health Australia Staff at the 2025 Annual Issues and Opportunities Workshop*

NMHCCF and National Register members in attendance were presented with a certificate of appreciation from Carolyn Nikoloski, Mental Health Australia CEO. During the presentations, an honour roll was played displaying the names of all current and former members of the National Register and NMHCCF.

## Official Close

The final workshop concluded with an acknowledgement of the National Register and NMHCCF's work, followed by a circle gathering where members shared their final words and reflections.

One of the closing highlights was a rendition of a song by a member of the NMHCCF, including the lyrics "the passion will live on."

## Conclusion

The final Annual Issues and Opportunities Workshop provided an opportunity for workshop attendees to come together for professional development and sector updates, as well as to connect, reflect, and plan for the future.

The groups celebrated their advocacy achievements, progress and camaraderie.

### Reflections

**93 per cent of survey respondents indicated that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the 2025 Annual Issues and Opportunities Workshop.**

*"Speakers were passionate and encouraging with optimism for the future of the consumer & carer movement."*

*"ALL were Very Engaging with us ALL"*

*"I felt that attendees were participative and respectful and felt comfortable to express their views and emotions."*

*"I felt that both days included activities that were of interest to most participants. I observed that most were engaged in the activities, given that there were some strong emotions, which are quite valid given the winding up of the NMHCCF and Register after 23 years."*

*"Important opportunity of mixed emotions of saying farewell"*

## Acknowledgements

Mental Health Australia would like to sincerely thank each of the Working Group members for their contributions throughout the planning process. We acknowledge the thoughtful planning and collaboration that went into designing and delivering the final workshop, which was both engaging and impactful.

We extend a thank you to Aislin Gleeson for volunteering her time and efforts in creating the calming breakout room.



*Figure 4: Relaxation space / breakout room at the 2025 Annual Issues and Opportunities Workshop*

We would also like to acknowledge the efforts of the Mental Health Lived Experience team at Mental Health Australia, particularly Danica Browne, Wendy Anderson and Ebenezer Swan. The success of this final workshop reflects the dedication and creativity of the team, and we are deeply grateful for their commitment to ensuring the voices of lived experience were central to this event.

## More information

For any further information on this meeting or past achievements of the National Register and National Mental Health Consumer and Carer Forum, please get in touch with the Lived Experience Team at Mental Health Australia at 02 6285 3100 or [livedexperience@mentalhealthaustralia.org.au](mailto:livedexperience@mentalhealthaustralia.org.au)