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New suicide data shows the ongoing need for specialised bereavement support

The Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) annual Causes of Death data, released last week, shows that the suicide rate has sadly continued to increase over the past decade pointing to the need for evidence-based and compassionate postvention support to care for the mental health and wellbeing to the increasing number of Australians impacted by suicide loss, says Jesuit Social Services.

"There has been an increase in funding for suicide prevention services in the past few years, but it will take some time before the effect of initiatives will begin to show in the national figures," says Dr Louise Flynn, General Manager of Jesuit Social Services' Support After Suicide program.

"This new data shows that 3,200 people took their own lives in 2022. We must continue our efforts to bring about a reduction to these figures that remain unacceptably and distressingly high."

Suicide was the leading cause of death for people aged 15-44 and remained the 15th leading cause of death last year overall. Males accounted for three quarters of all suicides, and for the first time the ABS also recorded suicide rates by country of birth which indicated that those born in Australia had a higher rate of suicide than those born overseas.

Since 2004, Support After Suicide has provided services including counselling, support groups and online resources throughout Melbourne and regional Victoria. In 2022, it provided direct support to over 1,400 people bereaved by suicide and is one of the few services in Victoria to provide long-term evidence-based support those bereaved by suicide.

"A person bereaved by suicide often has a relentless experience of trying to understand why it happened; how it was that this much-loved person ended their own life. Family breakdown and estrangement can sometimes occur as well. We know that beyond the tragic loss of the person, researchers have found that bereaved people are 65 per cent more likely to attempt suicide if they are grieving for loved ones who took their own lives," says Dr Flynn.

A survey of Support After Suicide participants in September 2022 found that more than 92 per cent of respondents rated the Support After Suicide service as 'very good' or 'excellent' overall, whilst 86 per cent felt that the program had a 'very good' or 'excellent' effect on their hopefulness for the future with a small number of negative responses centred around wait times to access the program.

Dr Flynn hopes the soon to be released strategies from the National Suicide Prevention Office and Victoria's Suicide Prevention and Response Office will commit to fund evidence-based postvention services, such as Support After Suicide. To June 2023, Support After Suicide was funded by the Federal Government through four of the six Victorian Primary Health Networks and has no long-term funding certainty. The program does not currently receive any Victorian Government funding.

"The Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System highlighted the importance of postvention as part of any effective mental health service system. An additional \$1.5m in funding for Support After Suicide would service immediate need and allow for expansion to ensure all Victorians, particularly those in rural and regional Victoria bereaved by suicide have access to the support they need."

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