



OPINION

FRIDAY, 31ST JULY 2020

TRUE IMPACT OF COVID YET TO BE FELT

As the effects of COVID-19 are felt across our region, some people are turning their thoughts to recovery. However, at Mallee Family Care, discussions around recovery seem a little premature, as we continue to receive requests for help from people simply trying to cope with the position they currently find themselves in and with demand expected to increase dramatically in the months ahead.

COVID-19 has done much to highlight the pervasive social challenges that exist within our communities, with the greatest impact being felt by those with the least capacity to weather the storm – part time and casual workers, those on low incomes, the elderly and people with chronic illness and disability. What COVID has also done however, is provide us with a potent reminder that our circumstances can change in an instant.

Among the calls we have received, there has been a notable number from people who have never had to seek support from a service such as Mallee Family Care before. The economic impact caused by the necessary lockdowns and restrictions has seen our region's unemployment rate, which was already higher than the state average, rise sharply.

In the Mildura Local Government Area, we have over 4000 people currently receiving JobSeeker and Youth Allowance. To put that in perspective, that is almost double the region's figures for December 2019 and while we can talk about recovery, for these 4000 people, it is hard to see beyond tomorrow, let alone a year from now. The reality is that on average, there is one job advertised in our region, for every 22 people looking for work.

Historically, Australians have tended to stigmatise those on unemployment benefits, they've been branded as 'dole bludgers' and been described as a 'drain on our economy'. If nothing else, COVID has proved to be a great equalizer in this regard. The people lining up outside Centrelink, confused and shocked, never planned to be there. No one ever plans to be unemployed. No one wants to be unable to pay for their own living costs. Circumstances beyond our control can have a significant effect on our own situation and perhaps as we respond to the ongoing crisis, we would all do well to remember this, particularly when looking at support services and payments.



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Anecdotally, across some of our services, including financial counselling, mental health and wellbeing and homelessness, we have seen a decline in referrals since the Federal Government implemented the increase in income support payments and the Coronavirus supplement. We believe the additional payments have allowed people to meet their costs and given them some 'breathing space'. However, once these measures are no longer available and the employment market in our region continues to struggle, it is anticipated that we will see an influx of people seeking our services. Not only will we be seeing those who are no longer receiving the increased JobSeeker rate and Coronavirus Supplement but also those who were receiving the JobKeeper payment, who no longer have a job to return to and this will all coincide with the expiration of hardship arrangements that were put in place by banks, for mortgage and personal loan repayments. In short, we are yet to see the true impact of COVID-19 on our community.

As a locally based organisation, Mallee Family Care has a lived experience and understanding of the stressors facing our local people and one of the keys going forward is going to be around developing local solutions. Investment must be made into projects and services at a local level, ones that address the specific needs of our community. Crucially, we need to look to the welfare of our young people, who are arguably among the worst effected by COVID-19. Children are vulnerable to the financial and emotional stresses experienced by their families and they are also significantly over represented in the part time and casual work force. There is no doubt that COVID is going to create a divide between the children who are thriving and those who are struggling. We need to acknowledge that access to adequate income supports, affordable, safe housing, employment and education opportunities are critical to individual and community wellbeing and that the various failings speak to structural problems rather than to personal deficits. We need to advocate for policy that lifts people out of poverty and supports opportunity. Policy which encourages a sense of hope because resilience is nothing without it.

If you need support or advice, please phone 5023 5966.



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