



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
SYDNEY

Brain and Mind  
Centre



**Right care,  
first time,  
where you live**

# **Advocacy Toolkit for Young People**

## ***Content warning***

*The information included in this toolkit mentions potentially distressing topics related to youth mental health, suicide, self-harm and substance use. The topics are discussed briefly in relation to statistical information and no explicit imagery is used to describe them. Please be cautious when reading and reach out for support if needed.*



## Introduction

The University of Sydney Brain and Mind Centre has been partnering with young people and mental health system leaders across the country to develop tools to help decision-makers. This project, called the *Right Care, First Time, Where You Live* project, has developed a number of region-specific systems modelling tools with young people like yourself.

This toolkit will provide you with resources to advocate in your local area about issues that are important to you. It will provide you with a brief overview of the tool, some social media tiles, examples of emails and letters, and some example scenarios to help arm you with the data you need to make a difference to youth mental health policy.

## The systems modelling tool

The systems modelling tool will look different depending on where you live. This tool creates a data map of the existing mental health services for young people in a particular region and can help forecast what might happen if changes are made or new services are developed. The examples provided in this toolkit have been generalised, so you should always check your local tool first before publishing anything, but some of the core themes will be similar across regions.

You can use the outputs of the systems modelling tools to advocate for particular changes in your area – the more young people who advocate for the same changes, the better!

## Advocacy

You can advocate in a lot of different ways, and you may already have an idea of how and who you want to advocate to. Advocacy is most effective when you know who your target audience is and what level of influence they have in the mental health system. For example, if you want to advocate about mental health emergency department visits for young people in your area, you can address your message to a local health district or hospital near you. If you want to advocate for more GPs, or more affordable GP visits, you can address your message to your local Primary Health Network (PHN).



**A quick guide is available below:**

Topic	Organisation/Agency to advocate to
<b>Access to GPs, pharmacists, or community nurses</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Primary Health Networks (PHNs)</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Consumers Health Forum of Australia</a> and other national peak bodies</li> <li>• Federal Health Minister</li> <li>• Department of Health and Age</li> </ul>
<b>Mental health inpatient units</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State/Territory Health Department</li> <li>• Queensland – Hospital and Health Services (HHS)</li> <li>• New South Wales – Local Health Districts (LHD)</li> <li>• South Australia – Local Hospital Networks (LHN)</li> <li>• Tasmania – Tasmanian Health Organisations</li> <li>• Western Australia, Northern Territory, Australian Capital Territory – Local Health Network (LHN) or other region-specific term</li> </ul>
<b>Individual advocacy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State/Territory Health Ombudsman</li> <li>• Condition-specific peak organisations, e.g. Butterfly Foundation for eating disorders, Blue Knot Foundation for complex trauma</li> <li>• Local MPs and Senators</li> <li>• Media organisations</li> </ul>

**Some other people you can advocate to include:**

- Your [local headspace](#)
- Child and youth/adolescent mental health services
- Clinical networks or communities of practice
- Your local member of parliament, the Health Minister, or the Assistant Minister for Mental Health and Suicide Prevention
- Your local school or education district
- The Chief Health Officer or the Chief Psychiatrist
- The team leader of your local health service.

Social media can also be a very effective form of advocacy. This toolkit contains social media tiles and text to help you advocate online, as well as examples of how to write letters to health service leaders and politicians.



## Content warnings and sharing safely

We recommend putting a content warning or trigger warning at the top of any social media post that discusses information related to suicide, self-harm, etc. A content warning, commonly seen as a CW or TW at the top of a social media post, gives the readers a heads up that the content in the social media post might have triggering or explicit imagery or information. Any content that includes references to topics like self-harm, suicide, substance use, sexual assault, domestic and family violence, or explicit information about a mental health journey should have a content warning.

For example, if you posted something using the tool talking about how youth suicide rates are going up, you could write something like:

*\*TW\* The following post mentions suicide and suicidal behaviour – please read safely.*

For long-form media like Facebook or LinkedIn, you can expand the content warning to be specific about how the content discusses the triggering content and include links to crisis lines, for example:

*\*TW\* The following post discusses suicide and suicidal behaviour in the context of data trends. No information about means or specific experiences are mentioned. Please read safely, and if you need support, you can reach out to Lifeline on 13 11 14 or contact your local acute mental health service.*

We don't recommend including any explicit images of self-harm/substance use/eating disorder behaviour or discussing means of suicide or self-harm in any online content. It's important to remember that not everyone may share your experience accessing services – and that's okay!

Keeping a story to the way an experience made you feel, rather than a particular service or diagnosis, can help keep you safe and make your advocacy more effective. If you want to learn more about sharing your story safely online, you can visit [Mindframe's](#) website or attend a story-sharing workshop by [batyr](#).





## Resource 1 – Social media tiles and text



### Example 1: Psychological distress is on the rise



**Text (Instagram/Twitter):** Young people experience higher rates of psychological distress every year. We need mental health support that meets our needs, involves us, and listens to us to turn the tide.

**Text (LinkedIn/Facebook):** Year after year, young people experience higher rates of psychological distress than any other generation. Investment in youth mental health services hasn't been enough to stop rates of psychological distress from rising.

The Right Care, First Time, Where You Live project develops forecasting tools for youth mental health service systems. The tool for (insert region) has found that (x intervention) may be the most effective for reducing psychological distress in young people.

We need immediate, effective action to turn the tide, and we're ready to partner with decision-makers to develop services that work for us. It's time to start taking youth mental health seriously.

### Example 2: Suicide and substance use

[Tile]

**Text (Instagram/Twitter):** Using drugs and alcohol is linked to youth suicide, yet drug and alcohol services for young people are few and far between. We need better services, where we are, when we need them, to help curb suicide rates.

**Text (LinkedIn/Facebook):** Young people use drugs and alcohol at higher rates than other demographics, yet there are limited services available for us. We need specialised services that can meet our needs no matter what they are, and that includes addiction services designed with us in mind.

The Right Care, First Time, Where You Live project was recently undertaken in [x region]. A partnership project between the University of Sydney Brain and Mind Centre and [x PHN], the project designed a systems modelling tool for our area with young people with lived experience at the centre. Systems modelling indicates that drug and alcohol usage is strongly linked with youth suicide and emergency department presentations. Urgent investment is needed to support young people who are concerned about their drug and alcohol usage in our region.

Young people with lived experience have the necessary knowledge to inform the design of specialist services. We're here, and we're ready to partner.



## Direct advocacy

Sometimes the most effective way to advocate for an issue is to contact the people with the most power to influence change. Writing to your local Member of Parliament or a Minister can seem daunting but can also be a really effective way to draw attention to your issue. You can find the federal electorate you vote in on the [Australian Electoral Commission](#) website, and a guide to addressing MPs/Senators on the [Parliament of Australia](#) website. For local or state/territory representatives, check the local council or state government websites.

A good rule of thumb for political titles is to check which part of the government they work in. If they're a senator, address them by Senator first, then their surname. If they're in the House of Representatives, address them by their name first, then add MP to the end. If they are or have ever been a Minister, then 'The Honourable' is added to their name. For example, if you have a Member of Parliament who used to be the Energy Minister, then they would be addressed as 'The Honourable [First Name, Last Name] MP'. Double check the Parliament of Australia website if you aren't sure how to address your local representative.



## Resource 2 - Example Letter to a Minister/Member of Parliament

Dear [insert honorific and name],

I am writing to you today as a young person with a lived experience of mental health challenges on behalf of my community, and as a constituent of [insert electorate here]. Young people across the country have been experiencing worse mental health year after year, and I can personally attest that this issue is deeply impactful and distressing for thousands of families in Australia.

Data suggests that youth suicide rates are increasing, psychological distress is almost double what it was 15 years ago, and the percentage of young people with a diagnosed mental illness has rapidly increased. Young people require urgent, targeted investment that is proportional to the level of distress we are experiencing.

Young people are also underrepresented in the design and delivery of youth mental health services. We are keen and enthusiastic about better partnerships with health organisations and governments, but more opportunities need to be created for us so we can help address youth mental health collectively.

Knowing where to invest in mental health can be challenging, as there is significant demand across the sector, but investing in our future generations now is so important to ensure the security of our country's health and wellbeing going forward.

I would welcome the opportunity to continue this important conversation.

With kind regards,

[Your name]



Another effective way to advocate for change is to contact a health system leader directly. This example is a young person who has used a Child and Youth Mental Health Service (CYMHS) in Logan, QLD. They are contacting an Executive Director of the local health service to advocate for expanding the service so more young people can access it.

In your situation, think about the particular service you'd like to advocate for based on what the modelling tool suggests could be effective. Double check the list provided earlier in this resource to find the best service to contact – a lot of government organisations will have a list of names and contact information on their websites so you know who to send the email to. If you're already partnering with a health service, they can help point you in the right direction, and could even help you in your advocacy.

### Resource 3 - Example Letter to a Health System Leader

Dear [insert title],

My name is [insert name], and I'm a young person who has used CYMHS services in Logan. I am reaching out to you on behalf of young people in the region to advocate for expanded services for children and young people with severe and complex mental health challenges.

Mental health and substance use-related issues for young people increase year after year, and we need urgent action in the youth mental health system to start seeing significant changes. Recently, a systems modelling tool was developed for this region that forecast how different system interventions would impact youth mental health outcomes.

The systems modelling tool suggests that significant investment is needed to expand the range and variety of acute mental health services for children and young people to curb the rise of mental health challenges in my community. I have attached these figures for your consideration, and would appreciate the opportunity to have a discussion about how young people like myself can support your service to develop or advocate for more extensive services.

With appreciation and gratitude,

[Your name]



## In Conclusion

Sometimes it can feel like there aren't a lot of ways to advocate for change in youth mental health, but effective use of social media, online advocacy, and contacting people with influence, can shift the dial over time. Using the insights from the systems modelling tool and the resources shared in this pack can help support your advocacy in your local area.

Best of luck in your advocacy journey!

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