

## **Connecting Care with Technology**

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There is no doubt that people seek support through crisis helplines, and that the support provided through these helplines can be life saving. Given the vital role that they play, it is equally vital that helplines, , ensure they have the best possible answer rate, provide a consistent high quality service, are responsive to help-seeker needs, utilise new technologies as they becomes available and collaborate effectively with other service providers and support resources.

Lifeline Australia is the national body representing 42 Lifeline Centres throughout Australia. Lifeline Australia's primary responsibility is to manage Lifeline's national services, including a 24-hour volunteer staffed, crisis support telephone line which answers around 500,000 calls each year. Since its inception in 1963 very little had changed in the way this service had been delivered to the Australian community. However demand for accessible services and the challenges endemic with mental health services in Australia (and in most of the world), meant that the call on Lifeline's telephone and other mental health support services had been significantly increasing. Demand for after hours crisis services was known to 'spike' in response to community and global crisis and events, further emphasising the importance of these services being accessible when people need them most. This increased demand and expectations from the public and specific needs of callers (suicidality & mental health disorders) inspired Lifeline Australia to embark upon a stocktake, and strategic review, focused on modernising the service. This undertaking revealed some disturbing facts about our actual responsiveness, service consistency and quality assurance.

Through significant support from the Australian Government, Lifeline Australia has been able to undertake an extensive reform agenda which resulted in the Greater Access Program (GAP). GAP saw the introduction of VOIP (voice over internet protocol) contact centre technology and Information Technology infrastructure in all Lifeline Centres. This 'enabled call management systems to be put into place to better match demand with available human resources. Now, a call initiated from anywhere in Australia and will be routed to the next available telephone counsellor, from over 60 contact centre locations.

In addition Lifeline has undertaken many practice improvements to ensure a consistent and standardised response to callers which has required significant collaboration and coordination in a widely diverse network of Centres. Improvements in workforce management, supervision measures, nationally accredited training and the development of frequent caller strategies have been implemented. However there are many more improvements to be made before best practice is achieved. The challenge of embarking on such a change program in a federated structure with a largely volunteer workforce cannot be underestimated.

The Lifeline network has agreed on a single Service Description and Practice Model, based on international best practice, contributing to clarity of purpose and helping define the role of a crisis helpline within the health sector as well as consistency of identity amongst the network of Lifeline Centres. All this activity has been achieved while still maintaining Lifeline's value base and basic ethos.

Future directions include the use of new technologies to reach new client groups, outreach and follow-up services to special needs callers, and further clarifying in the broader mental health sector the unique role of services accessible via technology.