

Consumers and the NSW Official Visitors Program (OVP)

What is this about?

To help advise the NSW Government in their review of the Official Visitors Program (OVP), we consulted 155 consumers (people with a lived experience of mental illness) online and face-to-face in May 2014. Here are our key findings.



What is the Official Visitors Program?

Official Visitors are independent from the health system. They advocate for the rights and dignity of people receiving treatment under the *NSW Mental Health Act 2007*. For more information about them: www.ovmh.nsw.gov.au

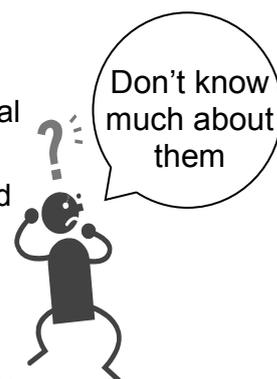
Who we are

NSW Consumer Advisory Group – Mental Health Inc. (NSW CAG) is the independent, state-wide peak organisation for people with a lived experience of mental illness (consumers). We work with consumers to achieve and support systemic change.



What we found

1. Just more than half of the consumers consulted (63%) have heard of the Official Visitors, and just over one quarter (26%) of the people consulted have approached the OVP for a concern.
2. The main ways that consumers became aware of the OVP were through the posters and the Official Visitors' letter box in inpatient units, but most people, including those who have accessed the OVP before were not fully aware of the purpose of the OVP and what it does.
3. People who were staying in hospital for extensive periods, such as forensic consumers, had a higher level of awareness of the OVP than people who had a much shorter length of stay, such as people in acute inpatient units. This could partly be because Official Visitors only visit a facility once a month, so people with a shorter length of stay may never come across an Official Visitor.
4. A likely reason that not many people are using the OVP is that many consumers don't know about the OVP or know enough about them. Some consumers who became aware of the OVP or gained more understanding about it during the course of our consultations said that, in future, they would contact the OVP if they have a concern about their mental health care and treatment in hospital. Some consumers said they wouldn't access the OVP because they had a bad impression of it and were afraid that hospital staff would judge them for contacting outside help.



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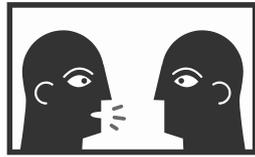
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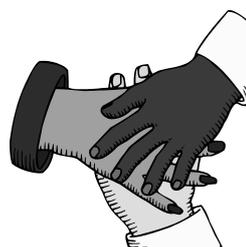
What we found (continued)

5. For consumers who have raised a concern with the OVP, the most common way was by meeting with an Official Visitor in person at the mental health unit, and the least common way was through the Official Visitors' phone line. Some consumers said they wouldn't feel comfortable calling the Official Visitors in the inpatient unit, and some consumers said they had difficulties accessing a phone in the inpatient unit during official hours.

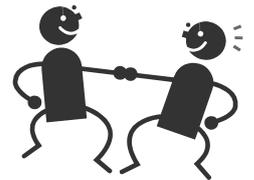


6. Consumers contacted the OVP for a wide variety of issues, including in relation to their rights as consumers; the attitude of and treatment by staff; the quality of care and treatment they received; issues relating to medications and access to care; and restrictive practices, such as involuntary treatments, and the use of restraints and seclusion.

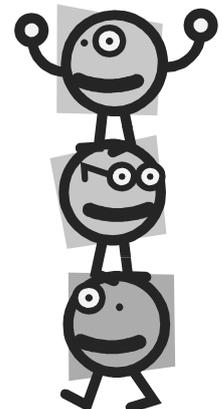
7. Forensic consumers also contacted the OVP for issues more specific to the forensic mental health setting, such as the blockages in the forensic system that are preventing people from progressing to less restrictive care, and which are causing people to be confined in hospitals for years. People wanted Official Visitors to work with them and other forensic consumers, to identify and address broader issues affecting them at the service level and in the forensic mental health system.



8. The majority of consumers who have used the OVP were generally satisfied with the program. Many people who have met with Official Visitors in person found them approachable and helpful. Most people felt safe speaking with an Official Visitor in person at a mental health inpatient unit, primarily because the Official Visitors are independent of the services and are seen as being "on consumers' side". Some people considered the OVP helpful even though the Official Visitors were unable to resolve their concerns. These individuals said it was because the Official Visitors treated them with respect and took their concerns seriously. A small number of people thought the Official Visitors were ineffective or were biased towards the service.



9. Of the forensic consumers who have used the OVP, most people found the Official Visitors friendly and approachable, but many also felt that they were unhelpful. Many forensic consumers thought the Official Visitors either didn't have sufficient power, or weren't exercising their power to effectively resolve people's concerns. Many forensic consumers said the OVP needs to have more power and better connections with people who make decisions higher up at the services and systems level. People also said the Official Visitors need to be clear about what they can do and set realistic timeframes for acting on people's concerns.



What we found (continued)

- 10.** Some consumers said they didn't get any follow up after they contacted an Official Visitor for a concern. Both consumers who have or have not accessed the OVP, wanted the Official Visitors to better follow up with consumers who contacted them. People wanted to know how the Official Visitors were progressing with their concerns, including any issues resolved and improvements made.



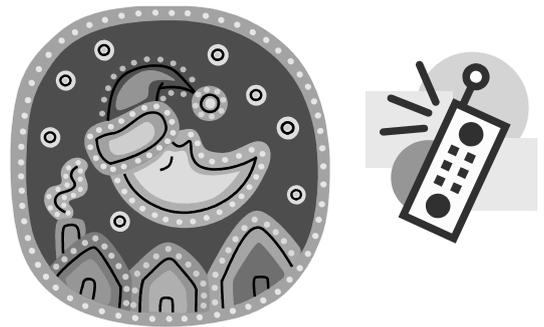
- 11.** The key functions of the Official Visitors are: listening to consumers' concerns; speaking with staff on consumers' behalf to resolve their concerns; inspecting the safety and quality of the mental health units; working with staff to improve the safety and quality of mental health units, and the Official Visitors' phone line.

Consumers generally considered all of these key functions as important to them and to other consumers. Listening to consumers' concerns being the most important and the Official Visitors' phone line being the least important.



- 12.** Many consumers stressed that while listening to consumers' concerns is really important, there is no point in doing that if the Official Visitors are unable to work with consumers to address the concerns.

- 13.** Difficulties with making private calls in an inpatient environment, and especially during office hours, could be part of the reason that the phone line was least important to consumers. Some consumers said it is still important to be able to call the Official Visitors, but it would be better if the phone line was available outside of office hours.



- 14.** Most people were not aware that Official Visitors were able to access their medical files without their knowledge. Consumers at forensic services in particular said that Official Visitors should only be able to access a person's file if they have permission from the person.



Some people also wanted the Official Visitors to provide the person with feedback about what they found in the file, eg, what staff had written about the person and any inaccuracies that needed to be corrected.

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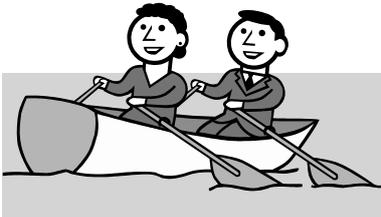
What we found (continued)

- 15.** Across the board, consumers wanted Official Visitors to have a much more regular physical presence in mental health inpatient services. People wanted the Official Visitors to spend more time connecting with consumers in the unit and less time in the nurses' station. People also wanted more information and education about the OVP, including the services it provides, its role and powers, and the different ways people could access it.



Some people wanted to know in advance when the Official Visitors would be visiting and to be able to make appointments. Some people wanted the Official Visitors to do 'surprise visits', so they could see the service as it is.

- 16.** Consumers would like there to be more Official Visitors who also have a lived experience of mental health issues. People felt that Official Visitors who are also consumers would be better able to relate to and understand what consumers are going through, and they would be able to give people more helpful advice about coping, navigating the system, and about recovery.



Some people wanted there to be certified training courses to enable consumers to become Official Visitors. Forensic consumers in particular wanted Official Visitors who have been through the forensic mental health system as consumers.

We submitted a report of our findings from the survey and consultations to the NSW government in June 2014. You can access the full report at our website: www.nswcag.org.au

Acknowledgements

NSW CAG would like to thank the individual participants who generously shared with us their experiences and insights.

We would also like to acknowledge the staff at all agencies that gave us the opportunity to consult with the individuals accessing their services.



Our vision is for all people with a lived experience of mental illness to participate as valued citizens in the communities they choose.