

Whistleblower warns Tasmania's government youth mental health service is in crisis

EXCLUSIVE BY HENRY ZWARTZ

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PHOTO Alina Tyler's son, Braiden, took his own life last year.

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Alina Tyler looks out her window to her backyard in Devonport, on Tasmania's north-west coast, and her eyes well up with tears.

It's where her son, Braiden, used to tinker with his green motorbike.

Braiden took his own life last year. His family said Tasmania's Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) system failed them.





In living rooms across the state, families are struggling with a mental health system seemingly unable to help them.

One state government whistleblower told the ABC the system is in crisis and young people like Braiden are dying.

The ABC spoke with six families as part of this story. All raised serious problems with the Government's youth mental health service.

A revolving door of psychiatrists

Braiden needed help.

He and his family sought it from Tasmania's Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) after Braiden experienced suicidal thoughts and bursts of violence.

If you or anyone you know needs help:

- [Lifeline](#) on 13 11 14
- [Kids Helpline](#) on 1800 551 800
- [MensLine Australia](#) on 1300 789 978
- [Suicide Call Back Service](#) on 1300 659 467
- [Beyond Blue](#) on 1300 22 46 36
- [Headspace](#) on 1800 650 890
- [ReachOut](#) at au.reachout.com

But instead of getting help, Braiden went through a revolving door of psychiatrists who gave conflicting advice.

"He got to the stage where he couldn't trust the doctors, he told the doctors on several occasions that the medication wasn't helping him," Alina said.

"It was doing his head in but they didn't listen to him — they wouldn't listen to us when we were trying to explain that things weren't right."

Each time he had a new psychiatrist he had to go through his issues again. The family said this was a deep psychological blow.

"They never read the notes, they never went through [the notes], we had to tell our story every single time that we went there."

Braiden's grandmother, Pauleen Tyler, said the clinicians gave conflicting advice.

"There was so much in the way of changeover of doctors, polypharmacy was involved, switching medications from one week to the next," Pauleen said.

"There was no continuity in the system, we had to sort of virtually tell them again each time what was going on."

Braiden took his own life in Devonport last year after abandoning CAMHS in 2016.



PHOTO Pauleen and Alina Tyler say Braiden was given conflicting advice from psychiatrists.
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Workers in the state's youth mental health service believe stories like Braiden's are avoidable.

They claim the system is so under-resourced, children are dying.

The Royal Hobart Hospital has 33 mental health beds for adults, down from 42 in 2013.

The strains on adults services were evident last week, with [patients forced to sleep on the floor of the RHH](#).



PHOTO [One of the photos supplied to the ABC of people waiting for treatment at Royal Hobart Hospital.](#)

SUPPLIED: PATIENT B

There are [71 beds across the state](#).

But Tasmania does not have dedicated psychiatric wards for mentally ill young people.

Staff are burning out, whistleblower says

A whistleblower with more than 10 years' experience in the sector said young people are dying because the services they need are just not there.

"Young people are dying and it's something that workers have to deal with, as well as families have to deal with, and it wrecks communities," said Jamie (real name withheld).

Jamie, who is familiar with Braiden's case, said colleagues feel trapped by a system which leaves them without any good options.

"When children present to the ED [emergency department] with serious injuries from self-harm and suicide attempts they're often sent home that day," the worker told the ABC.

"This is because there aren't any wards for young people and you don't want a 14-year-old girl in an adult ward, so staff just say your parents will have to look after you."

A person's hands sit in their lap, one folded over the other.

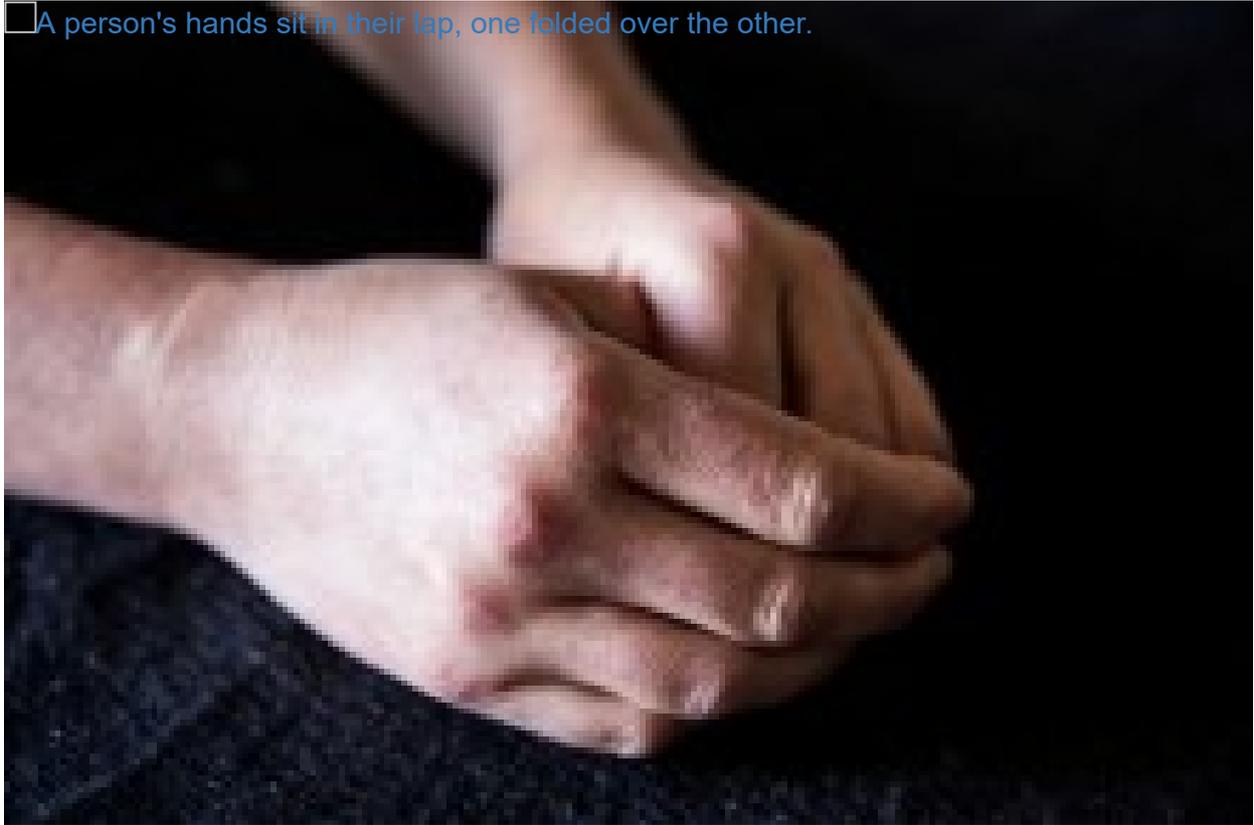


PHOTO A mental healthcare worker with more than ten years' experience says children will keep dying and workers will get burned out if the system does not change.

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Jamie said similar protocols for adults should apply to children.

"If they were presenting with suicide attempts, like adults, they would go to an in-patient facility for at least 24 to 48 hours for observation and then work out a treatment plan from there but that's just not happening because the option isn't there."

The result, the whistleblower said, is young people losing their lives.

"There's no parent that should have to take home their child when they then become anxious themselves," Jamie said.

"Children will keep dying and very highly qualified professionals will get burned out and not work if the system does not change."

Jamie said funding for preventative community services was also needed, [an issue pushed by leading mental health groups](#).

"Young people and families are having to manage their acutely unwell children at home," Jamie said.

They said several staff on the state's north-west were on stress leave, and they were working with full caseloads with about 60 per cent of the workers on the ground.

State Government to inject \$95m to 'build a better system'

Tasmania's Health and Community Services Union confirmed with the ABC that CAMHS is short-staffed.

The Health Department said it was challenging to retain staff in regional areas.

"Recruiting medical staff to regional and rural areas around Australia has been a long-term challenge, including in north-west Tasmania," a departmental spokesperson said.

"Recruitment is progressing for existing vacancies."

Health Minister Michael Ferguson told the ABC the Government was investing \$95 million to "build a better mental health system".

"Over the past four years, we have provided millions of dollars in additional funding, boosting support for child and adolescent mental health and opening more community-based mental health beds," Mr Ferguson said.

"We will continue to deliver and improve services over the next six years, including specialist inpatient child and adolescent mental health facilities in the north and south of the state [LGH and RHH], for the first time ever in Tasmania," Mr Ferguson added.

"These specialist child and adolescent mental health units are being built."

Wayne Frost, who works with Headspace in Tasmania's north, said acute mental health wards were needed now.

"Given that other population centres around the country have them, I think clearly it's considered to be an appropriate form of intervention so they're needed and they don't exist."

Mr Frost said organisations like Headspace were dealing with serious cases that would usually be addressed by CAMHS because the service was not able to meet demands.

"That is obviously a concern for us," he said.

Girl's schizophrenic behaviour 'put down to autism'



PHOTO Rebecca Pitchford says she felt let down by Tasmania's Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service when her daughter became psychotic.

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Rebecca Pitchford feels let down by CAMHS too.

She sought help after her daughter, Bronte, began hearing voices. Things deteriorated and she became psychotic.

"We had a constant flow of locums who wouldn't listen to us as parents, they put her behaviour down to autism," Ms Pitchford said.

"It was hell. It took us eight months to get an appointment.

"She was self-harming. Still the different locums we kept getting weren't listening, we took her out and placed her into private care. She's now diagnosed with schizophrenia."

Connie Degolis from Tasmania's Mental Health Council urged young people to seek help if they needed it.

"What we would say is talk to someone, there are lots of great organisations out there," she said.

Alina hopes other young Tasmanians will not give up hope.

"If the Government continue the way they have been, they're failing children, they're failing families that are coming through the system," she said.

"I've seen it, I've been there, I know people that are going through it and they're letting people down."

She is calling on the State Government to better resource youth mental health services.

"I just want them to realise they've got to start looking after the families and looking after the kids because the situation's getting worse and something needs to be done about it."

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