

Long-term mentoring program to proactively address young people's mental health

Big Brothers Big Sisters Australia – community mentoring program

Department of Health

Big Brothers Big Sisters Australia (BBBS) is a not-for-profit organisation whose mentoring programs nurture life-changing connections between positive role models and young people to help them shine. Our long-term one-to-one community mentoring program is designed to equip young people with the tools they need to build resilience and strengthen their emotional wellbeing. By matching young people with positive role models, the program provides a safe and supportive space for our next generation to foster a sense of belonging and self-worth. The stability offered over the mentoring relationship enables young people to develop the skills, abilities, attitudes and confidence they need to help them plan for and adapt to their external environment, overcome adverse experiences, and practically manage their own mental health.

The early-intervention and preventative approach of targeting young people who are at risk of disengaging from the community not only has a profound, life-long impact on the individual, but also contributes to improved outcomes for the wider community. The impact is even greater when working with disadvantaged groups and those who are at greatest risk. Research¹ has shown that **for every \$1 invested** in BBBS mentoring programs, there is a **\$23 return** when working with the most economically disadvantaged groups.

There are a significant number of young people across Australia that lack a stable, supportive role model in their lives, leading to a lack of skills to build resilience and strengthen their emotional wellbeing, high-risk behaviours, and subsequent mental health challenges. Young people facing social and emotional wellbeing challenges are more likely to seek support from their immediate networks (i.e. friends and family). However, for many vulnerable young people, these natural sources of support are absent, leaving them without adequate guidance to help them overcome such challenges.² This is one of the reasons that suicide remains the leading cause of death for Australians aged 5-17 years, and rates of young people dying by suicide continues to increase.³

There is now an urgent need to address these challenges, and proactively prevent adverse mental health outcomes and increasing suicide rates for young Australians. The Federal government has acknowledged that “many of the mental health challenges in Australia start in childhood... if we are able to address and build resilience and positive psychology and wellness, then we can make a profound difference”.⁴ In addition, the disruption to normal life caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the required restrictions has had profound impacts on the mental health and wellbeing of many young Australians.

Funding from the Federal Department of Health (the Department) of **\$3 million over 3 years** is sought for the sustainability and growth of our long-term one-to-one community mentoring program. BBBS is a trusted, established and recognised service that provides a direct pathway for vulnerable

¹ Social return on investment study conducted for Big Brothers Big Sisters Canada.

² Mission Australia (2016), *Mission Australia's 2016 Youth Survey Report*. Available at this [link](#).

³ Orygen (2019). *Raising the bar for youth suicide prevention*. Available at this [link](#).

⁴ Department of Health (2019). *National Press Club address – Long Term National Health Plan*. Available at this [link](#).

young people and their families/carers to access help. The Department's investment will see more mentees matched with positive adult role models, as well as an expansion of our services to meet the needs of young people across Australia. Investment of \$3 million over 3 years comprises of:

| Amount (\$, per year) | Description | Outcome |
|-----------------------|---|--|
| \$761,000 | Salaries and on costs for 9 x FTE Mentoring Coordinators | Each Mentoring Coordinator can support approximately 33 matched pairs per year. More FTE Mentoring Coordinators will sustainably expand our reach through increased caseloads per Mentoring Coordinator. |
| \$335,000 | Recruitment, screening and training of mentors, to support up to 320 matches over the 3 years | We currently have a waitlist of 500+ requests for mentors. Increased funding will directly cover the costs of matching mentees and mentors and allow us to respond to this waitlist. |
| \$134,000 | Administrative costs | Administrative costs include office expenses and rent, travel and accommodation costs for Mentoring Coordinators, and other overheads. |

We anticipate that the program will be partially funded by philanthropic donations and other fundraising contributions (approximately \$230,000 per year).

BBBS' long-term one-to-one mentoring program is directly aligned to the Department's strategic priorities, specifically, Objective 1 (family and community) of the draft National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy⁵ (the Strategy), which focuses on supported families, increased mental health literacy and community-driven approaches. BBBS' model is based on a community approach to supporting young people, their families/carers and their network through providing a routine positive adult role model and empowering the young person to develop the skills they need to manage their own mental health. BBBS' programs provide preventative intervention at the 'coping' and 'struggling' stages of the wellbeing continuum, as illustrated below in Figure 1.

Figure 1 | How BBBS' programs are aligned with the wellbeing continuum



A 3-year funding commitment from the Department will substantially impact our shared agenda to provide preventative solutions for the mental health challenges faced by vulnerable young people.

⁵ Draft National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy, available at this [link](#).