Strong Foundations

Building WA's Future Through Peer Support

WA State Budget Submission
2026-2027

Alike WA

Acknowledgement of Country

Alike WA acknowledges the traditional custodians of Country throughout Western Australia, and recognises their continuing connection to land, waters, and community. We pay our respect to them and their cultures; and to their Elders past, present, and emerging.

Introduction

Western Australia is home to over 780 peer support groups, each a place-based community initiative that brings people together through shared experience. At their most basic level, these groups provide a unique space for individuals to share stories and find connection with people who truly understand what they are going through. At a broader level, they foster strong relationships, improve health outcomes, deliver early intervention and prevention, and support Western Australians to live longer, healthier lives within their own homes and communities.[1]

In addition to providing connection and support, peer support groups act as trusted community connectors and navigators, guiding individuals through complex service systems and linking them to appropriate health, mental health, and social supports. They are a critical part of preventative infrastructure for the health and mental health systems, reducing pressure by addressing needs before they escalate. Despite their impact, these groups are predominantly unfunded and underrecognised, and rely strongly on the passion and commitment of volunteers with lived experience.

Alike WA is proud to serve as the peak body for peer support groups in WA, representing this diverse sector and advocating for the funding and resources needed to ensure its long-term sustainability. By investing in the emergence, continuity, and growth of peer support groups, we can alleviate pressure on health and mental health services, strengthen early intervention pathways, and build stronger, more connected Western Australian communities.

1 Kowalski, M. A. (2020, Apr). Mental Health Recovery: The Effectiveness of Peer Services in the Community Community Mental Health J, 56(3), 568-580.

Key Priorities

1 Sustainable Sector Funding

2 Accessible Funding for Peer Support Groups

3 Peer Support and Community-Led Solutions

4 Volunteer Retention

1. Sustainable Sector Funding

Since 2020, the peer support group sector has grown by over 20% statewide and 25% in regional WA, reflecting increasing community demand for connection and lived experience support. This has created a need for stronger capability building, advocacy, and connection from Alike WA. However, current resourcing limits our ability to meet this demand, leaving gaps in training, governance support, and sector coordination.

While indexation has followed CPI, our actual organisational costs have risen significantly faster than CPI, creating a widening gap between funding levels and the real cost of service delivery. Wage growth and award adjustments now account for a larger share of budgets, and overheads such as insurance, rent, utilities, compliance requirements, and technology have escalated well beyond CPI.

This challenge mirrors broader systemic issues across WA's community services sector. Key findings from WACOSS and CEWA's Sustainable Funding and Service Viability Report 2025 include structural underfunding, wage costs dominating budgets, and rising and underfunded operational costs.[2] Without addressing these funding gaps, organisations across the sector, including Alike WA, cannot respond to growing demand or adequately service their respective communities.

Recommendation: Commit to the sustainable funding of community services organisations by providing a base uplift across all existing contracts.

Recommendation: Adopt WACOSS and CEWA's recommended revised model of the state indexation formula that truly reflects the cost of services.

2 Western Australian Council of Social Service & Community Employers WA (2025). Sustainable Funding and Service Viability in WA's Community Services Sector Report 2025.

2. Accessible Funding for Peer Support Groups

Peer support groups face significant barriers to forming, operating, and sustaining their activities. New peer support groups often struggle in their first six months with the practical challenges of securing appropriate venues, attracting initial membership, and recruiting volunteers. While Alike WA provides training, mentoring, and guidance to support new leaders, even the most motivated community champions can find it difficult to establish a stable, reliable group without modest, accessible start-up funding.

The need for start-up funding is particularly pronounced in areas where peer support options are limited and demand continues to grow, especially for men, young people, and regional communities. In 2024, men represented 76.5% of deaths by suicide in Australia[3], yet continue to access help at significantly lower rates[4], highlighting the need for male-focused supports that meet men where they're at. At a time when psychological distress among Australian youth is escalating[5], youth-focused peer support groups are notably scarce, with growing enquiries from parents and guardians. People living in regional and remote Western Australia face significant barriers to accessing support services, including service gaps, long travel distances, and social isolation. These challenges contribute to poorer mental health outcomes, as consistently raised through Alike WA's regional engagement.

Established peer support groups are also under increasing pressure due to rising venue costs, insurance fees, and the general cost of living environment. Many operate on volunteer capacity alone, leaving them vulnerable to scaling back or closure without targeted sustainability support.

3 Australian Bureau of Statistics 2024

4 Ford PA, Keane CA. Australian men's help-seeking intentions for anxiety symptoms: The impact of masculine norm conformity and gender role conflict. Heliyon. 2024 Apr 5;10(7):e29114.

5 Brennan, N., Beames, J. R., Kos, A., Reilly, N., Connell, C., Hall, S., Yip, D., Hudson, J., O'Dea, B., Di Nicola, K., & Christie, R. (2021). Psychological distress in young people in Australia: Youth Mental Health Report 2012–2020. Black Dog Institute & Mission Australia.

Alike WA's long-standing grants programs, currently targeted at mental health early-intervention and prevention, offer a low-risk model for supporting grassroots groups through small, targeted injections of funding, from as little as $500 up to $10,000. Through our Grants Management System, Alike WA pays suppliers directly, reducing administration while ensuring accountability. However, demand for these grants is three times greater than available funding, and many peer support groups are currently ineligible because their primary focus is outside the mental health scope.

In 2023–2024, WA recorded around 2.9 million potentially preventable hospitalisations, costing on average over $250 per visit.[6] This highlights the need for greater investment in community-level support to help reduce these figures. Peer support groups reach over 200,000 Western Australians each year. Even if peer support reduced potentially preventable hospitalisations by a conservative 5%, approximately $2.5 million in hospital costs could be avoided annually. Given the clear need for increased funding to both establish and sustain peer support groups across the state, to provide every WA peer support group with even a modest $1,000 grant, at a total cost of under $800,000 to government, would deliver a return of more than three times the investment.

Expanding and adapting Alike WA's grants model would provide equitable access to continuity funding, reduce the risk of service contraction or closure, and help maintain local, community-led support options that play an essential role in reducing pressure on primary health services. With its established infrastructure and long-standing community relationships, Alike WA is well placed to administer accessible, scalable funding models that assist groups at start up, through consolidation, and into long-term durability.

Recommendation: Invest in start-up grants for new peer support groups, with a focus on vulnerable populations and service gaps, to set groups up for success and durability from the outset.

Recommendation: Invest in capacity-building and sustainability grants for existing peer support groups to strengthen operations and enable growth.

6 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2024). Spending on PPH by location. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

3. Peer Support and Community-Led Solutions

The WA Government has signalled a clear commitment to strengthening community-led initiatives that build social and emotional wellbeing, expanding psychosocial supports, and supporting contemporary, community-based, safe places.[7] It has also emphasised that earlier intervention and prevention lead to better long-term outcomes for individuals, children and families, while reducing demand on crisis-driven and high-cost services. These commitments strongly align with the value and impact of place-based, non-clinical supports, particularly peer support groups, which are proven to reach people earlier and more effectively within their own communities.[8]

Peer support groups consistently demonstrate their ability to engage people who may not access traditional services, act as trusted connectors, and help individuals navigate complex systems long before issues escalate into crisis. Evidence shows that these approaches reduce avoidable hospitalisations and costs, improve engagement and recovery outcomes, strengthen social supports, and address the broader social determinants that clinical services alone cannot.[9] Despite this, low-cost, high-impact peer and place-based initiatives remain significantly underutilised, particularly in regional areas where locally grounded, community-owned solutions are most effective.

Recommendation: Increase investment in non-clinical, community-based services and supports, including peer support groups, with a focus on regional and place-based solutions.

Recommendation: Strengthen referral pathways from primary and clinical services into community-led, non-clinical supports.

7 Mental Health Commission (2025) Mental Health and Alcohol and Other Drugs: Proposed Strategic Directions 2025–2030. Government of Western Australia.

8 Department of Communities (2022) Strategic Direction 2022-2025. Government of Western Australia.

9 Kowalski, M.A. Mental Health Recovery: The Effectiveness of Peer Services in the Community. Community Mental Health J 56, 568–580 (2020)

4. Volunteer Retention

Peer support groups rely almost entirely on formal volunteering, yet many are finding it increasingly difficult to recruit and retain volunteers, particularly for core committee roles and group facilitator positions. Volunteers face growing barriers when stepping into these roles, including the cost to volunteer and complexity of mandatory volunteer checks and onboarding procedures.[10] These administrative requirements are also burdensome for the groups themselves, which often operate with limited time, capacity, and resources.

Peer support groups are designed to provide spaces where members can share experiences, support each other, and reduce emotional burden. However, this can place significant emotional load on volunteer facilitators. Without access to structured debriefing or wellbeing support, facilitators can experience fatigue, overwhelm, and burnout, contributing to volunteer turnover and instability within groups. Currently, many grassroots and volunteer-led peer support groups have no access to formal debriefing, which further increases the risk of burnout and group disbandment.

Strengthening volunteer pathways and reducing administrative, financial, and emotional burdens on volunteers is essential to improving volunteer participation, supporting retention, and ensuring peer support groups can operate safely and sustainably.

Recommendation: Remove charges for volunteer checks and streamline volunteer application processes.

Recommendation: Invest in free or discounted debriefing support for volunteer facilitators.

10 Volunteering WA (2023) State of Volunteering Report 2023.

Summary of Recommendations

- Commit to the sustainable funding of community services organisations by providing a base uplift across all existing contracts.
- Adopt WACOSS and CEWA's recommended revised model of the state indexation formula that truly reflects the cost of services.
- Invest in start-up grants for new peer support groups, with a focus on vulnerable populations and service gaps, to set groups up for success and sustainability from the outset.
- Invest in capacity-building and sustainability grants for existing peer support groups to strengthen operations and enable growth.
- Increase investment in non-clinical, community-based services and supports, including peer support groups, with a focus on regional and place-based solutions.
- Strengthen referral pathways from primary and clinical services into community-led, non-clinical supports.
- Remove charges for volunteer checks and streamline volunteer application processes.
- Invest in free or discounted debriefing support for volunteer facilitators.

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Activate Mental Health
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Building Busselton
Busselton Citizen Advice Bureau
Busselton Community Safe Space
Busselton Dunsborough Volunteer Resource Centre
Busselton Pride Alliance
Carers WA
City of Albany
City of Bunbury
Community Employers WA
Depression Support Network Albany
Encephalitis WA
Friends of MND
Gosnells Women's Collective
Frow WA
Heart Support Australia
Hedland Well Women's Centre
IDEAL: Inclusive Disabilities, Events and Listings
Immune Deficiencies Foundation Australia
Investing in our Youth
Invisible Illnesses Inc.
Kadadjiny Aboriginal Corporation
Kings Park ABI Warriors
Lung Foundation Australia
Mandurah Angels Breast Cancer Social Support Group
Men's Health and Wellbeing WA
Mito Foundation
Moorilurrup Women's Healing Group
Neurological Council of WA
NeuFriends Geraldton
Neuromuscular WA
Newton Moore Senior High
Parents Beyond Breakup
PBF Australia
PCaHELP
People With disabilities WA
Pride in Peel
Prost! Exercise 4 Prostate Cancer
Queernarvon
Radiance Network South West
Raising ADHD
Roebourne Men's Group
Ruah Community Services
Scleoderma Australia
Solace Grief Support Group
Southsiders Prostate Cancer Support Group
South West Adoption Group Supporting Survivors
South West Migrant Women's Group
South West Women's Health and Information Centre
Syndromes Without a Name
The Wellness Initiative
Trigeminal Neuralgia Support Group
Umbrella Multicultural Community Care
Val and Kathy's Crafty Kitchen
Veterans Assist
Volunteering WA
WA Country Health Service
WA Council of Social Services
XYY Syndrome Association WA Inc.
Yanchep Community Men's Shed

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