

# 'We must prevent the unthinkable': Youth mental health plea to Premier

## NEWS

South Australia's Senior Australian of the Year has called on Premier Steven Marshall to commit to improving the "dreadful situation" faced by desperate parents seeking help for suicidal children, saying they are "regularly" turned away from the Women's and Children's Hospital.



Mark Le Messurier, a prominent counsellor, educator and author who has worked with struggling children and their families for decades, has written to the State Government urging the Premier to attend a rally on Saturday, organised by youth mental health advocacy group Parents for Change.

"More and more, children are being turned away from the emergency department at the Women's and Children's Hospital," Le Messurier wrote.

"The situation is now dire, and it is only a matter of time before the unthinkable happens. We must prevent the unthinkable.

"Parents and their suicidal children, sometimes children with Autism, are now regularly turned away."

Le Messurier said there was also an acute shortage of public and private psychologists, counsellors and paediatric psychiatrists, with the problem worsening over the past three years.

"Currently many professionals have closed their waiting lists," he said.

"It is common for a client to get on to a wait list for 2023 or 2024. It is heart breaking because these children, teens and parents require immediate help. Often, they are utterly desperate.

"This of course, plays into a new unthinkable and unbearable scenario, particularly if we are to call ourselves a compassionate society. I plead for your kind and urgent assistance."



Mark Le Messurier. Photo: [australianoftheyear.org.au](http://australianoftheyear.org.au)

More than a dozen politicians have committed to attending Saturday's rally at 11.30am on the steps of Parliament House, including Opposition Leader Peter Malinauskas and several Labor MPs, SA Best MLCs Connie Bonaros and Frank Pangallo, Greens MLCs Tammy Franks and Robert Simms and independents Frances Bedford and Dan Cregan.

The organisers say they would also like to see representation from the Liberal Party.

Parents for Change was founded by Adelaide mother Kate Stephens, after InDaily highlighted her family's plight last year, prompting several other parents to contact her with similar stories.

She said Saturday's rally would focus on "giving voice to the parents and their children who have been let down by the health system".

"Thousands of young people are being denied care at every access point," Stephens said.

"In a crisis, they are being sent home with no support, no referrals and no follow-up care. In a first-world country, this is unacceptable.

"I hear the tragic stories of hundreds of parents in the same situation that our family has faced.

"Some have lost their child to suicide after receiving no help at all from CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) or the WCH (Women's and Children's Hospital).

"It really is disgraceful that there is no accountability from this government for a deeply flawed system full of inconsistencies and gaps."

Stephens said the group had invited Premier Steven Marshall and Health Minister Stephen Wade to attend the rally.

She said Marshall had declined due to other commitments and she had not heard back from Wade.

"I'm very disappointed the Minister of Health, Stephen Wade, hasn't responded to our invitation to our Rally for Change," she told *InDaily*.

"Our youth mental health system is broken and the desperate cries from parents are falling on deaf ears.

"That's why on Saturday we're asking people to rally together on the steps of Parliament House to make the Government listen and demand better mental health care for our kids."

A [petition for reform](#) launched by the group now has more than 12,000 signatures and will be presented at the rally.

Le Messurier said it was a long-standing "government funding/resourcing problem".

“There are not enough mental health beds (just 11 to service all the kids in SA), too few staff (20 paediatric psychiatrists to service all the kids in SA), and too few resources (no increase in funding over the past 10 years and 41 percent increase in presentations in the last 12 months),” Le Messurier said in his letter to the Government.

“Consequently, the capacity to assess children, to make a considered opinion or to support parents with a hopeful and supportive plan with follow up is intermittent, or worse.

“The staff is under siege. These are great doctors, psychiatrists, nurses, and psychologists wanting to do what they were trained for, but in numbers too few, and unable to meet demand and expectations.”

Le Messurier said he would like to “enlist the Premier’s representation” at Saturday’s rally.

Labor Leader Peter Malinauskas has agreed to attend and will make a speech.

“This should not be a one-sided affair, so we’d like the Premier to speak,” Le Messurier said.

“This will create a lot of media attention, influence a lot of voters, and both parties are responsible for the dreadful situation parents and children find themselves in.

“This is a consequence of long-term neglect, dismantlement and worse. I’d love both leaders to own it and be equally responsible.

“It would fill my heart with hope to hear them talk sincerely about turning this genuine problem around with clear and deliberate measures – funding and policy changes. Such reassurance and planning is my heartfelt hope.”

Le Messurier received a reply to his letter from a government representative, thanking him for his “exceptional” work in supporting children, teenagers and their parents struggling with mental health, but saying the Premier could not attend the rally.

“We are very sorry to hear that families are struggling to find services to assist their children,” the representative wrote.

“The Marshall Liberal Government has invested an additional \$163 million in the 2021 Budget to support our mental health system, adding beds, building brand new facilities and helping ease pressure on emergency departments across Adelaide.

“Thank you also for inviting the Premier to attend the Rally for Change on Saturday 26 February.

“We have forwarded your correspondence to the offices of both the Premier and the Minister for Health and Wellbeing to consider the invitation.

“Unfortunately, our office has been advised that the Premier will not be able to attend the rally due to a long-standing prior commitment and sends his sincere apologies.

“Thank you again for bringing this rally to our attention.”

*InDaily* has asked the offices of the Premier and Health Minister if any Liberal MP or Government representative will attend the rally and is awaiting a reply.

*InDaily* has also asked both the Liberal Party and Labor Party if they will commit to providing more resources to improve youth mental health services.

Health Minister Stephen Wade said “while I am not attending the rally, I assure the families that the Government takes their concerns seriously”.

“I will be communicating this to the rally organisers this week,” he said in a statement.

Wade revealed the Chief Psychiatrist was “currently reviewing several cases raised by Parents for Change”.

“Mental health is a high priority for the Marshall Liberal Government, we know that Government services can always do better and that’s why the Chief Psychiatrist is currently reviewing several cases raised by Parents for Change,” he said.

“The Government has invested record amounts of funding and delivered innovative services in mental health, and we will continue to do so.

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“After years of neglect from the Labor Government, who went seven years without a mental health plan, we established a comprehensive, well-consulted, consumer-focused plan and continue to deliver on it.

“We accept there is more work to be done but we are the only party who is delivering on a real plan for mental health in South Australia.

“The State Budget delivered a landmark \$163.5 million investment into mental health, demonstrating our commitment to rebalancing the health system back towards mental health.”

Labor health spokesperson Chris Picton said in a statement that, if elected, Labor “will make children’s mental health a top priority for our government”.

“On Saturday, frustrated families will rally at Parliament House for better treatment and care for kids in SA with mental health issues,” he said.

“We will stand with these families on Saturday and explain our detailed plan to look after our kids and make sure they get the health services they need.”

Picton said Labor had “already provided some detail about how we will deliver better care for our kids”.

“The WCH needs more staff to cut delays in services and treat more kids, so we will recruit 48 extra doctors, including 17 senior specialists, and 12 specialist nurses – which will include more mental health care,” he said.

“This is over and above growth of staffing already in the health budget.

“And we will deliver 50 extra beds at the new WCH – fixing the Marshall Government’s inadequate plan for the new hospital.”

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