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New South Wales Parliament Legislative Assembly

Mental Health Month

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October is Mental Health Month. Today I will speak about the Mental Health First Aid [MHFA] program. One in three people will experience some kind of mental illness in their lifetime. Those numbers clearly show it is a common health problem, yet many people feel isolated and stigmatised by their illness. In the Blue Mountains there is a groundswell of community support for people living with mental illness as well as their family and friends. Local organisations are working together to raise community awareness, and bring an end to stigma and health discrimination. I have long been an advocate for people affected by mental illness. Recently I joined with local neighbourhood centres in my electorate to champion the cause and show my support for skills training through the Mental Health First Aid program.

The Mental Health First Aid program is pulled together in a manual outlining the help that should be provided to a person who is developing a mental health problem, experiencing a worsening of an existing mental health problem or in a mental health crisis. The first aid should be given until the appropriate professional help is received or the crisis has resolved. There is a standard mental health first aid course and courses specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, for the suicidal person, for older persons and a blended course for the workplace. Course content deals with the development of mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, psychosis and substance use problems. It also address mental health crises such as suicidal thoughts and behaviours, non-suicidal self-injury, panic attacks, traumatic events, severe psychotic states, severe effects from alcohol or other drug use, and aggressive behaviours.

Course participants learn the signs and symptoms of mental health problems, where and how to get help and what sort of help has been shown by research to be effective. There is also a 14-hour course that teaches adults how to provide mental health first aid to adolescents. We know that mental illness often starts in adolescence or early adulthood. It is important to detect problems early to ensure that young people are properly treated and

supported. Recently I met with representatives from the Blackheath, Springwood and Winmalee neighbourhood centres to discuss ways to challenge the myths about mental illness and provide practical ways to impart knowledge and skills to enable family, friends and the wider community to support those who are experiencing a mental health concern or crisis. I am honoured to be recognised as a champion for the program. It is relevant to the entire community, but as a parent, former teacher and a carer of a family member with a mental illness I am more than aware of the importance of early intervention and providing appropriate support.

It is fantastic to be able to acknowledge in this place some of the people in my community. I thank Jo Davies, the community development worker at Blackheath Area Neighbourhood Centre, and her team. I also thank everyone in our neighbourhood centres and the community services sector. We are lucky to have MHFA instructor and community trainer Jane Armstrong partnering with us to run workshops. Three have already been run and the courses will continue. I encourage people in my community and elsewhere to access the MHFA website if they would like to organise a course for themselves or their workplaces.

Mental Health Month is celebrated each October. The theme this year is Share the Journey.

I acknowledge local advocates Col and Pat Jennings, two people in my community who are especially active in raising awareness for older people. Their studies and their travel around the world have convinced them that being able to engage with others—especially through open dialogue family therapy—and listening to others are important parts of the healing process. In sharing that theme again, "sharing the journey", I acknowledge my family and friends who have helped me at difficult times in the depths of despair.