

The contribution of the voluntary sector to mental health crisis care: a mixed-methods study

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Declared competing interests of the authors: Karen Newbigging was a trustee of the Healthy Minds Board from 2012 to 2017 and a National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Health Services and Delivery Research (HSDR) associate board member from 2016 to 2019. Doreen Joseph reports receiving personal fees during her time as a HSDR Researcher-Led Panel member (2018–20) during the conduct of the study. Benjamin Costello is a director and trustee of Bromsgrove and Redditch Network (BARN), a local council for voluntary services, which is also a volunteer centre; he is also a director and trustee of Redditch Nightstop.

Disclaimer: This report contains transcripts of interviews conducted in the course of the research and contains language that may offend some readers.

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Plain English summary

Voluntary sector contributions to mental health crisis care

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Plain English summary

The voluntary sector is mainly made up of charities. This study set out to understand what the voluntary sector offers people in a mental health crisis.

We used different approaches to understand the voluntary sector. We started by looking at previous studies. We then talked to national experts and did a national survey of voluntary sector organisations in England. We looked at what was happening in four areas. In these areas, we talked to people who plan local services and people working in mental health services or the voluntary sector. We also talked to people who had experience of a mental health crisis and had used voluntary sector organisations for support. Our team included people with experience of a mental health crisis.

We found that people in a mental health crisis often feel overwhelmed. People want to be able to get support quickly and to be understood. A wide range of voluntary sector organisations provide support. These include crisis houses and crisis cafes. Other voluntary sector organisations help people to prevent a crisis in the future. People valued support from voluntary sector organisations. They found it easy to get help and liked the friendly approach. However, we also found that people living in the countryside, people from minority groups and people with ongoing mental health needs had problems getting help in a crisis. Crisis support from the voluntary sector can add to, and provide an alternative to, NHS support. However, how well the voluntary sector and the NHS worked together varied. Funding for the voluntary sector can be fragile, suggesting a lack of trust and understanding of how the voluntary sector works.

A mental health crisis can affect a person's life in many ways. Getting help in a crisis needs to be easy. People need help with the problems that led to their crisis. They, and their carers, need to be involved in the planning and provision of crisis support. A better understanding of what the voluntary sector can offer people in a crisis is needed. The voluntary sector needs to be better funded. The NHS, local authorities and the voluntary sector should agree on how they can best work together.

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