

Executive summary

Supporting healing, empowerment and growth:

An evaluation of the Recovery Options program.

Prepared by Uniting WA and the Centre for Social Impact UWA
Yasmine Hooper, Leanne Lester & Flynn Mahon

“

I'm doing my dream job and that's because they supported me with the study that I needed to do and then even so far as helping me with the interview process and resumes and all of that kind of stuff.

PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW



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WESTERN
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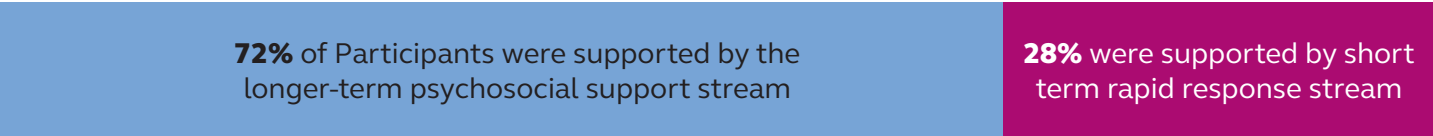
The Recovery Options program is delivered on Noongar Country. Uniting WA and Centre for Social Impact acknowledge the Noongar People as the Traditional Custodians of this land on which we provide our services. We recognise their unique and spiritual connection to Country and waters. We value the oldest continuing culture in the world and pay our respects to Elders past and present.



Executive summary

Uniting WA engaged the Centre for Social Impact (CSI) at The University of Western Australia (UWA) to conduct an independent evaluation of Recovery Options, a community-based mental health program that provides psychosocial support through two streams: 3-month rapid response support for those with unmet needs, a pilot developed in response to an extensive waitlist and evolving needs due to the cost-of-living crisis; and 6-18 month psychosocial support for those who require intensive, recovery-oriented support.

The research sought to understand the efficacy and key outcomes of the Recovery Options program, uncover systemic factors impacting mental health recovery and identify areas for improvement. Using a mixed-methods (qualitative and quantitative) approach, the evaluation drew upon strengths-based and recovery-oriented principles that align with the values of the Recovery Options program and Uniting WA to capture the voices and experiences of program Participants. Of the 116 Participants supported during the evaluation period, ranging in age from 19 to 67, just over two thirds of Participants identified as female, while 29% identified as male and 3% identified as another gender.



Key findings

- Relational support is foundational
- Recovery-oriented, strength-based frameworks deliver meaningful individual outcomes
- Autonomy, choice and control in person-led support is transformative
- Distress is shaped by social context
- Program discharge is complex
- Strong sector relationships and referral pathways are critical.

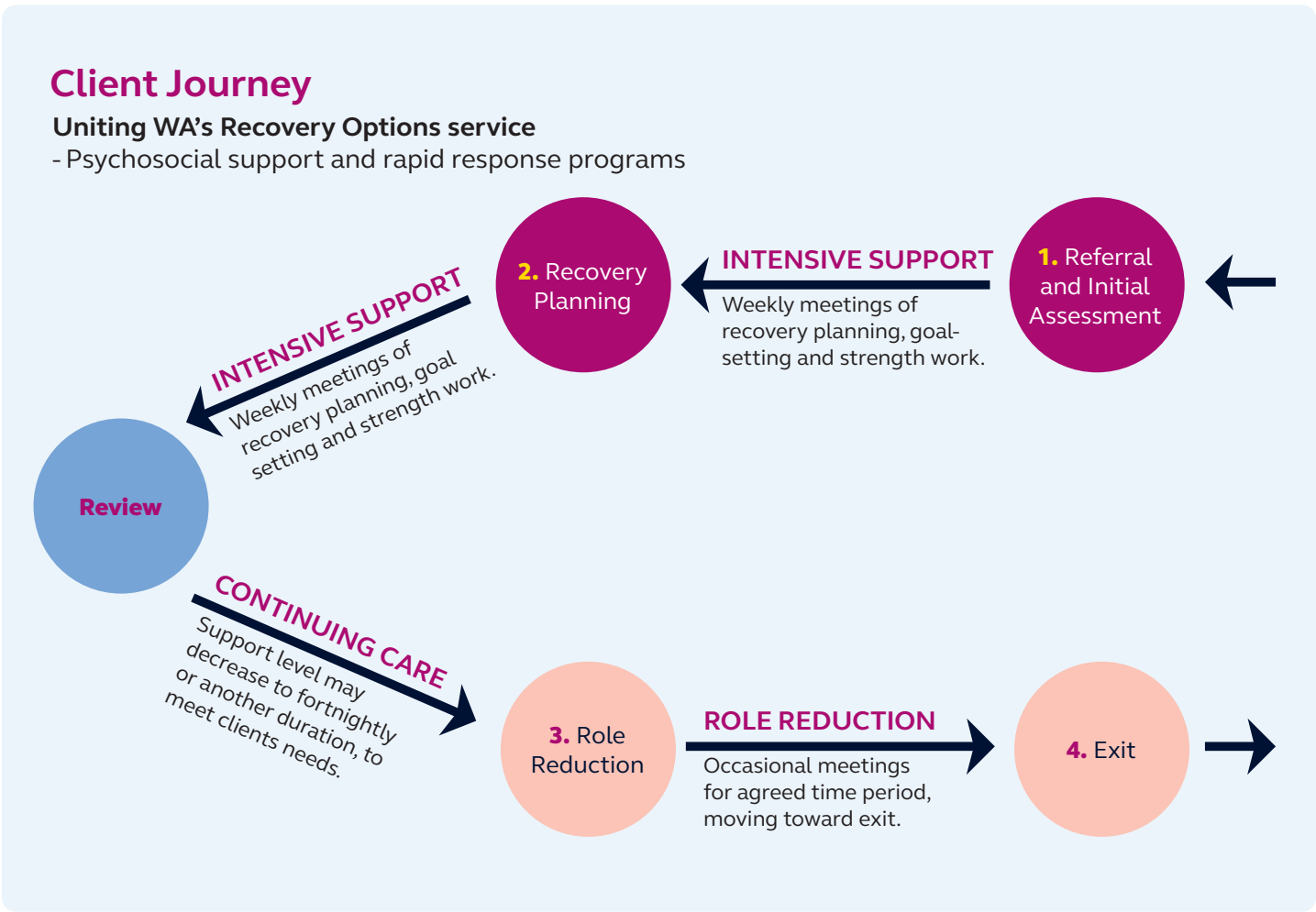
Recommendations

- Increase flexible and sustainable funding
- Prioritise person-led advocacy and care
- Strengthen supported transitions out of the program
- Embed peer and community connection
- Resource personal and practical goal-setting
- Strengthen collaboration and learning with peer support workers and community organisations
- Improve data collection and consent processes.

Introduction

Uniting WA provides community services spanning housing and homelessness, financial wellbeing, disability and mental health support, children, young people and families across the Perth metropolitan area and in the Great Southern region.

Operating since 2008, Recovery Options provides psychosocial support to people with persistent and distressing mental health concerns or challenges. The program supports Participants to engage in daily activities, connect to relevant supports and build skills for coping, through goal-setting and mentoring. Recovery Options was originally provided through the Personal Helpers and Mentors (PHaMs) program and Partners in Recovery (PIR) program, before becoming the Commonwealth Psychosocial Support Program (CPSP) during the transition to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). PHaMs and PIR participants were considered as potentially eligible for NDIS, so Recovery Options also supported them in the transition. This resulted in significantly reduced psychosocial support funding outside of the NDIS, limiting resources despite significant community need. Recovery Options is currently funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care and commissioned by the WA Primary Health Alliance (WAPHA).





“ I think it’s life-changing for a lot of people ... We’ll get a lot of people who have had bad experiences [with mental health services] or they’ve never talked through their problems before. So often we open up conversations around wellbeing, what life might look like, or what’s going on within them that they’ve never considered before.

RECOVERY OPTIONS TEAM MEMBER

Recovery Options: holistic and self-determined recovery

Mental health and wellbeing are multifaceted, shaped by a person’s individual experiences and social context, as well as the broader sociopolitical environment. New ways of working acknowledge the profound structural conditions placed on mental health, such as poverty, housing insecurity, racism, ableism, loneliness and social exclusion. For many, addressing mental health is not solely about symptom relief, but about accessing safety, meaningful connection, dignity and the material resources needed to live well.

People may seek mental health support in different ways, and what constitutes meaningful care or healing is highly individual. Recognising this complexity requires a move away from standardised, one-size-fits-all responses and toward approaches that are flexible, relational and grounded in people’s own definitions of wellbeing.

Key support domains

As a recovery-orientated and strengths-based intervention, Recovery Options is tailored to each individual’s unique needs, motivations and world view. However, the program has a specific focus on six key areas which guide the work mentors and Participants do together, collaboratively, to improve wellbeing and address unmet needs.

These include:

- **Managing day-to-day activities:** Supporting individuals as they carry out everyday tasks such as cooking, cleaning, budgeting or attending appointments, which fosters independence and routine
- **Social skills and relationships:** Enhancing interpersonal skills and building confidence to form and maintain meaningful relationships and social connections
- **Employment or training:** Assisting individuals to access education, training or employment opportunities aligned with their interests, abilities and goals
- **Physical and mental wellbeing:** Promoting practices and supports that contribute to overall health, including physical self-care, safety planning, emotional regulation and healthcare access
- **Connecting to other services:** Facilitating access to various external supports, such as housing or legal aid, to address broader needs
- **Planning and identifying goals:** Working collaboratively with individuals to set personal goals and create actionable plans that reflect their values, strengths and aspirations.

Evaluation

The Recovery Options evaluation was executed in three distinct stages: identifying outcomes; data collection; and analysis and outcome evaluation.

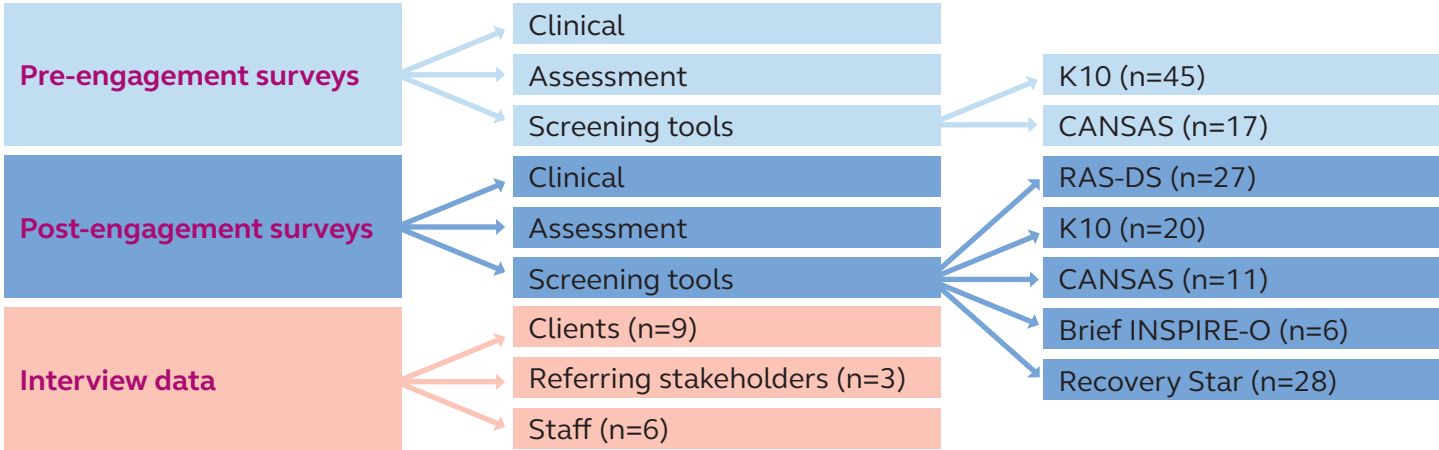
Identifying outcomes

CSI worked closely with Uniting WA to develop a tailored Program Logic and Outcomes Measurement Framework. This framework mapped the intended short, medium and long-term outcomes of the Recovery Options program. The long-term goal of the Recovery Options program is for **people to build and maintain positive connections; participate in their community; and build and maintain independence**, autonomy and agency. Short- and medium-term outcomes are presented below.

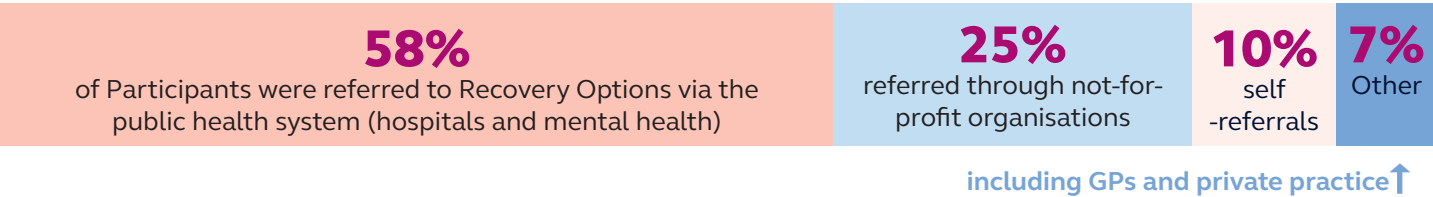
Short term outcomes		Medium term outcomes	
ST1	Increased awareness of (unmet) needs	MT1	Progress towards recovery healing
ST2	Increased awareness of personal strengths and wellbeing strategies	MT2	Working towards personal goal attainment
ST3	Increased supports knowledge	MT3	Connections to address social needs
ST4	Higher NDIS access	MT4	Implementation of relevant coping strategies
ST5	Increased social connections	MT5	Increased sense of hope for the future
ST6	Improved stakeholder partnerships	MT6	Completed NDIS request submission and/or successful transition
ST7	Decreased distress	MT7	Increased agency, autonomy and sense of control over life

Data collection and analysis

A combination of administrative data and quantitative and qualitative tools were used to gather insight into the Recovery Options program.



Referral pathways to the program



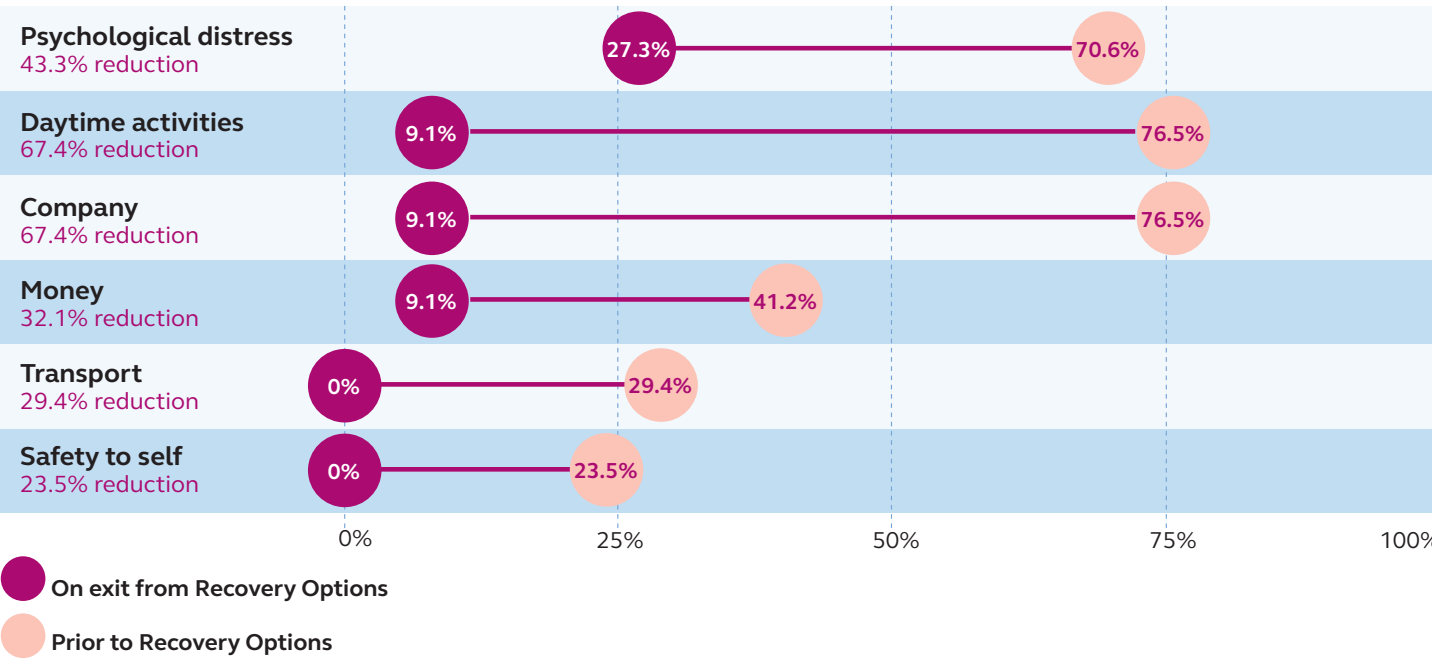
Outcome evaluation

The evaluation focused on assessing changes in wellbeing, autonomy, social connection, and service navigation. Data was triangulated across tools and interviews to validate findings.

The analysis highlighted both individual progress and systemic challenges, offering a nuanced understanding of the program’s impact. Special attention was given to relational dynamics, participant-defined success, and the role of mentors in facilitating recovery.

Addressing unmet needs

Prior to engaging with Recovery Options, the highest proportion of unmet Participant need related to daytime activities, company, and psychological distress. Following engagement with the program, significant, positive changes were recorded against each of those unmet needs.



On exit, all Recovery Options Participants reported that they had made progress towards the goals in their recovery plans and two thirds of Participants reported:

- Feeling better able to manage their mental wellbeing
- Recognising the early warning signs of things that may impact their health and wellbeing
- Being able to implement strategies or seek support when they need to.

Key findings

The evaluation found relational support is foundational to positive outcomes, with recovery-oriented and strength-based frameworks delivering meaningful benefits for individuals. Autonomy and choice are deeply valued by participants, highlighting the importance of person-centred approaches. Experiences of distress are strongly shaped by social context, underscoring the need to consider environmental and systemic factors. Program discharge processes are complex and require careful planning, while strong connections and effective referral pathways play a crucial role in ensuring continuity of care and ongoing support.

Relational support is foundational.

Participants consistently described the relationship with their mentor as the most impactful element of the Recovery Options program. Mentors offered consistent, compassionate and non-judgmental support, creating a sense of safety and trust. This relational foundation enabled Participants to engage meaningfully with their recovery journey and build confidence in themselves and others.

“ [Mentor] is always there. Whether it’s replying to a text message or a phone call on some really bad days, she’s always, always made time for me. Recovery Options Participant

Recovery-oriented, strength-based frameworks deliver meaningful individual outcomes.

Recovery Options recognised and celebrated progress as defined by each Participant. Rather than relying solely on clinical benchmarks, the program supported diverse goals such as reconnecting with family, securing housing, or managing daily routines. This personalised approach fostered motivation and a sense of achievement, even in small steps.

“ It’s really encouraging to know that there’s... maybe hope that I can get better. Recovery Options Participant

Autonomy and choice are highly valued.

Participants appreciated the program’s flexible, person-led model. They were empowered to make decisions about their goals, pace and priorities. This autonomy helped restore a sense of control and dignity, particularly for those who had experienced coercive or disempowering interactions with other programs or services.

“ Something that we do is [show them that they can] trust us in a way, to have a good experience. Because we’re not telling people what they have to do, we’re saying what do you want to do? ... I think that really changes their perspective on mental health and on engaging with services. Recovery Options team member

Distress is shaped by social context.

The evaluation highlighted that mental distress was often rooted in broader social and structural issues, including housing insecurity, poverty and systemic exclusion. Recovery Options responded holistically, helping Participants navigate these challenges while also addressing their emotional and psychological wellbeing.

Unmet Needs	Before Recovery Options	After Recovery Options	Improvement
Food	23.5%	9.1%	14.4%
Accommodation	5.9%	0	5.9%

“ I did a referral [for Recovery Options], and he was too young for aged care. One of the things that sort of happened, I think his fridge just decided it was done, which is the final straw for this poor chap. But the next minute, he says, oh, I spoke to [Recovery Options], and they’re going to help me find funding [for a new fridge].” Stakeholder Interview

Program discharge is complex.

Exiting the Recovery Options program was a vulnerable time for many Participants. Some experienced anxiety, grief or a sense of abandonment when support ended. The evaluation found that transitions need to be better supported, with more gradual handovers, warm referrals and opportunities to maintain connection.

While practical steps are important to support discharge, an effective transition should recognise the importance of connections and acknowledge that discharge will be experienced differently for different Participants.

“ When I found out ... the service was going to end, I was a bit distraught. My history has a bit of abandonment to it. [I’ve always believed] if a person is leaving me, it’s my fault because I’ve done something wrong. And it’s not necessarily that at all ... you have to [discharge] eventually. Recovery Options Participant

Strong sector relationships and referral pathways are critical.

Stakeholders and referrers praised Recovery Options for its collaborative, transparent, and relational approach. The program was seen as a trusted partner that communicated clearly, responded flexibly, and worked alongside other services to support shared clients. This strengthened trust across the sector and improved service coordination.

“ For me, it’s about the relationship I feel I’ve built with them to know that I can just flick them a referral. Stakeholder Interview

“ It’s always been effortless and seamless with referral. Stakeholder Interview

Recommendations

Increase flexible and sustainable funding

Recovery Options delivers measurable impact, but current funding structures limit its ability to meet the needs of people who fall into the ‘missing middle’ — those who require longer-term psychosocial support but who are ineligible for the NDIS. Flexible funding would allow the program to respond to complex needs without rigid timeframes, supporting recovery for people who can move forward without lifelong supports.

Funding structures should enable services to work relationally and responsively, with capacity for extended engagement, smoother discharge transitions, outreach and collaboration with other services and community-based supports. This approach ensures continuity of care and better outcomes for Participants navigating systemic gaps.

Centre choice and control

Participants consistently described the value of being supported by someone who listened without judgment, respected their decisions, and advocated alongside them to support their needs. For some participants, this was the first time they had experienced this type of care and validation. Often, these relational practices were not just supportive but transformative.

Continuing to uphold participants’ agency, affirm their expertise in their own lives, and provide care that is responsive rather than prescriptive, should remain at the heart of service delivery.

Strengthen supported transitions out of the program

The emotional distress Participants reported at discharge reflects both the strength of connection built during the program, and the broader systemic gaps in the mental health sector that have been created by a lack of funding and resources.

Co-designed discharge plans, warm referrals, and opportunities for ongoing connection can reduce distress, build confidence and help Participants maintain progress beyond their time in the Recovery Options program.

Embed peer and community connection

Recovery is relational. Building peer networks and community ties early in the Recovery Options program will help reduce isolation, increase resilience and create lasting support systems that extend beyond formal service delivery.

Resource personal and practical goal-setting

Supporting Participants to identify what feeling safe, secure and ‘okay’ means to them — including goals around housing, work, study or creative pursuits — requires time and flexibility, and Participants valued having Recovery Options mentors walk alongside them in this process.

While most Participants appreciated the flexible approach, some preferred more structure for goal-setting. This highlights the range of Participants’ diverse needs; some thrive with open-ended conversations, others with clear steps. Recovery Options should continue adapting to individual preferences throughout engagement.



Strengthen collaboration with peer support workers and community organisations

Strengthening relationships with peer workers and relevant community-based organisations (both mental health and non-clinical) can broaden the network of support options available to Participants. This collaboration can enhance information sharing, improve continuity of care, and ensure that referrals are meaningful and aligned with Participants’ preferences.

Importantly, this strategy can also support Participants to remain connected with affirming, non-clinical spaces — reducing reliance on hospital and healthcare systems that may be distressing or disempowering.

Improve data and consent processes

Some program Participants are hesitant to provide consent for information sharing, which can create barriers to coordinating wrap-around supports in a streamlined and effective way.

Improving transparency and clarity in data collection and consent processes will reduce Participants’ uncertainty and reluctance, while clear communication about how their data supports their care and drives systemic change can build trust and strengthen collaboration.



Conclusion

The Recovery Options evaluation confirms the program’s vital role in supporting people with complex mental health needs through flexible, person-led, and relational approaches. Participants described their experience as transformative, reporting greater confidence, coping strategies, and ability to manage their mental health. These outcomes show that community-based programs can deliver sustainable change when they prioritise relationships and holistic support.

To sustain and build on these outcomes, flexible, ongoing funding is essential to maintain these gains and expand their reach. Investment would enable longer engagement, smoother transitions, and collaboration with community supports, ensuring more people can access timely, relational, and recovery-oriented care that delivers lasting outcomes and reduces crisis-driven, and potentially disempowering, service use.

Maintaining Participant choice and control, embedding peer and community connections, and strengthening collaboration with community and peer support services will further enhance continuity of care. Additionally, improving data and consent processes will support coordinated care and system learning. Together, these actions will ensure Recovery Options continues to deliver accessible, empowering, and sustainable support that reduces reliance on crisis services and improves long-term outcomes.

Uniting

About Uniting WA

Uniting WA delivers community services across mental health, housing and homelessness, financial wellbeing, disability, and support for children, young people and families throughout the Perth metropolitan area and the Great Southern. Guided by a commitment to dignity, choice and connection, Uniting WA partners with individuals to build pathways toward safety, stability and self-determined wellbeing.

Recovery Options is one of Uniting WA’s longest-standing mental health programs and continues to respond to evolving community need—particularly for those who fall into the “missing middle” and require psychosocial support outside of the NDIS.



About the Centre for Social Impact UWA

The Centre for Social Impact (CSI) is a national research and education centre dedicated to catalysing social change for a better world. CSI is built on the foundation of four of Australia’s leading universities: UNSW Sydney, The University of Western Australia, Swinburne University of Technology, and Flinders University.

Our research develops and brings together knowledge to understand current social challenges and opportunities; our postgraduate and undergraduate education develops social impact leaders; and we aim to catalyse change by drawing on these foundations and translating knowledge, creating leaders, developing usable resources, and reaching across traditional divides to facilitate collaborations.

Acknowledgments

Uniting WA and the Centre for Social Impact UWA acknowledge and thank all Recovery Options Participants who generously shared their experiences and insights. Their voices, expertise and lived experience have shaped this evaluation and strengthened our understanding of what meaningful, person-led recovery looks like.

We also acknowledge the dedicated Uniting WA mentors and staff, sector partners, stakeholders and referrers who contributed to the evaluation and who work tirelessly to support people’s recovery journeys.

Contact

Uniting WA
(08) 9220 1222
info@unitingwa.org.au
unitingwa.org.au

Centre for Social Impact UWA
csi-business@uwa.edu.au
uwa.edu.au/schools/Centre-for-Social-Impact