



The Honourable Nicola Roxon MP  
Minister for Health and Ageing  
MPPO Box 6022  
House of Representatives  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

15 May 2010

Dear Minister Roxon

**Re: Removal of Mental Health services to low income and vulnerable Australians**

We write to you in response to the budget decision to remove social workers' and occupational therapists' ability to offer mental health services under the Better Access to Mental Health Services program. This will hurt the thousands of Australians using these high quality professional services.

The Australian Government states that it "is working to increase access to primary care based mental health services, especially for population groups who may be missing out on services or are hard to reach". Thirty-seven (37%) of accredited mental health social workers operate in regional, rural and remote settings. Many are located in outer suburban areas. Two-thirds of social workers "bulk bill" some clients. The government's decision will impact hardest on the Australians living in rural, regional and remote areas, and those in low income neighbourhoods, where access to psychiatrists and psychologists is severely limited.

The Australian Government maintains that it is aiming "to improve services and support for people with mental illness, their families and carers." Yet this decision has the potential to remove over 1,100 social workers from mental health service provision; professionals who, in 2008-09, delivered 121,540 services under the program, who play a vital role in minimising hospital admissions and provide substantial savings to the health budget each year. It will impact most heavily on people who fall through the gaps of the public mental health system. This includes children and adolescents.

The additional funding announced in the Budget for Headspace programs will shave a mere 3% from the waiting list of 750,000 young Australians currently locked out of the mental health care they and their families desperately need. The scarce workforce available to work in Headspace sites has been also threatened in this budget through the exclusion of occupational therapists and social workers from MBS support. Many regional and rural Headspace centres would struggle without access to these skilled workers.

The undersigned organisations call on you to review and reverse the decision to exclude social workers and occupational therapists from the Better Access program, a decision which is not based in evidence, has taken place before the release of the Review of the Program, and does not

address the needs of Australians with mental health issues on low incomes, and those in rural and regional areas.

The decision will not result in significant cost savings, as social work interventions are only around 4% of the total of allied health services (with psychologists billing 95%); it will not enable more people to receive services, and does not seem to respond to any concerns raised by your officials, the Medicare audit process, or clients receiving the services.

The government's proposal to utilise social workers to deliver more services under the Access to Allied Psychological Services (ATAPS) program is not a substitute for the Better Access to Mental Health Services program. The new funding for ATAPS will focus on chronic serious mental health conditions like schizophrenia and bi-polar disorder. These clients most certainly do need significant support and case management.

While mental health specialist social workers are equipped to work with a range of disorders, those in the Better Access Program usually work with high prevalence disorders such as depression and anxiety, and a transfer to different mental health disorders will not be straightforward.

ATAPS in its current form has significant weaknesses. It requires less credentialing than the Better Access program. It does not require social workers to be members of their professional association, meaning social workers are not professionally accountable through an ethics complaints management process run by their professional association, and are not required to complete professional development accredited by their professional association. It therefore risks delivering lower quality services to Australians with mental health issues.

Furthermore ATAPS is provided solely through the divisions of General Practice. It relies on the GP networks to include social workers in their service provision. Despite lobbying by the Association and individual members, many of the GP networks fail to include highly qualified social workers in their services. There are no guarantees that this will change.

It is deeply disturbing that this decision has been taken in 2010, with no rationale and no alternative plan in place, when the Australian of the year is a mental health expert.

Social work is one of the 5 key professional groups offering services across the spectrum of mental health care. Your own government has financially supported the profession over recent years to develop a strong mental health knowledge base and quality assurance system. Mental Health core curriculum, for example, is required in all accredited university social work programs. Much progress has been made. This decision will be a body blow to this workforce at a time when workforce development in mental health service delivery is a government objective.

A final concern for us is with respect to the Compact signed by your government and ACOSS on behalf of non-government service providers in this country to work with us differently, with respect and collaboration. Having services cut with six weeks' notice and no consultation does not seem to be in the spirit of the compact.

As a matter of urgency, we ask you to examine the evidence and review the decision to prevent this loss of services to vulnerable Australians.

ENDS