



Australian Association of Social Workers Ltd.

Incorporated in the ACT
ACN 008 576 010
ABN 93 008 576 010

National Office

Level 4, 33-35 Ainslie Place
Canberra City ACT 2600

Postal Address

PO Box 4956, Kingston ACT 2604

Telephone 02 6232 3903

Facsimile 02 6230 4399

Email: aaswnat@asw.asn.au

Website: www.aasw.asn.au

Briefing for members' meetings with MPs

Removal of Mental Health services to low income and vulnerable Australians

Role of Accredited Mental Health Social Workers

- Accredited Mental Health Social Workers help individuals with mental health problems to resolve associated psychosocial issues and improve their quality of life. This may involve family as well as individual counselling, and group therapy.
- The Better Access program is focused on early intervention and targets people with depression, anxiety, grief or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.
- In 2008-09 these professionals delivered 121,540 services under the program, played a vital role in minimising hospital admissions and provided substantial savings to the health budget each year.
- Many are located in outer suburban areas.
- Social workers are more likely to 'bulk bill' than psychologists (63% offer bulk billing to at least some clients).

What is the Government's Decision?

Effective from July 1 2010, Accredited Mental Health Social Workers (AMHSWs) and OTs will no longer be able to provide services under the Better Access Program.

Referrals received prior to June 30, 2010, will be able to access the AMHSW for a maximum of 12 sessions for the calendar year.

What's Wrong with This Decision?

- This decision has the potential to remove over 1,100 Social Workers from Mental Health Service provision.
- The Government's decision will impact hardest on the Australians living in rural and remote areas, and those in low income neighbourhoods, where access to psychiatrists and psychologists is severely limited. Most therapy in regional areas is conducted by highly skilled clinical social workers.

- Thirty-seven (37%) of accredited Mental Health Social Workers operate in regional, rural and remote settings. For example within the WA Health Department,
- The Access to Allied Psychological Services (ATAPS) program 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.
- ATAPS relies on the Divisions of GPs to include Social Workers in their service provision. Despite lobbying by the Association and individual members, many of the GP Networks fail to include our highly qualified Social Workers in their services.
- The Government has supported the Australian Association of Social Workers to develop quality assurance systems for Mental Health Social Workers. Now the 'Better Access' services provided by Mental Health social workers will cease in 6 weeks. This is very short notice.
- This is not a cost effective budget measure. In many areas GP's will have to go back to seeing mental health clients in their practice because there is no-one else available within a reasonable time-frame. GP's Medicare rebates are approximately \$228/hour while social workers are only rebated at \$70.45/hour.
- Many mental health clients cannot afford to access help. So the problem is not just that the Medicare rebate is being cancelled for access to Mental Health Social Workers- but that the service will disappear entirely because most mental health clients are unable to pay. A survey of Mental Health Social Workers in 2008 revealed that 68% of clients would be unable to access their services without Medicare funding.
- The decision has been announced before the finalisation of the Review of the Better Access program, suggesting that the Government is not using evidence to support its policy changes.
- The decision will not result in significant cost savings, as social work interventions are only around 4% of the total Allied Health provision (with psychologists billing 95%); it will not enable more people to receive services, and does not seem to respond to any concerns raised by health officials, the Medicare audit process, or clients receiving the services.



Australian Association of Social Workers Ltd.

Incorporated in the ACT
ACN 008 576 010
ABN 93 008 576 010

National Office

Level 4, 33-35 Ainslie Place
Canberra City ACT 2600

Postal Address

PO Box 4956, Kingston ACT 2604

Telephone 02 6232 3903

Facsimile 02 6230 4399

Email: aaswnat@aasw.asn.au

Website: www.aasw.asn.au

What are we calling for?

- The decision to be reconsidered by the Hon. Nicola Roxon and by the Government.

QUICK FACTS

- Nearly 50% of Accredited Mental health Social Workers have 15+ years experience in mental health field
- Nearly 75% with 10 years and over
- 37% located in regional, rural and remote areas
- 63% of social workers bulk bill some or all of their patients. Respondents reported that 68% of clients would not be able to access a service without Medicare funding.
- Main reason for bulk billing is financial disadvantage/low income/unemployment, followed by GP request and health card concession
- Psychosocial issues as part of presentation (in order of prevalence)
Grief/loss (37%); low income/unemployment (33%); social isolation (32%); Discrimination (18%); Domestic violence (16%); unstable housing (13%)