



Briefing for Candidates: the removal of Mental Health Social Workers from the Better Access (Medicare) Mental Health program will hurt low income and vulnerable Australians

What did the Government decide?

In the 2010 Federal Budget, the Government announced that Accredited Mental Health Social Workers (and Accredited Occupational Therapists) will no longer be able to provide services under the Better Access to Mental Health Initiative (Better Access).

What's wrong with this decision?

The Government has failed to produce a single reason for the decision.

The Government's decision will impact hardest on Australians living in rural and remote areas, and those in low income neighbourhoods, where access to psychiatrists and psychologists is severely limited.

The Government failed to consult with social workers about the measure, or with their professional association, the AASW.

Many GPs across Australia report that they are already extremely short of Mental Health professionals.

The decision to remove social workers took place before the final report from the review of the program, which is due later this year.

One part of this review involved interviews with professionals and their clients. While GPs, psychiatrists and psychologists were interviewed, social workers were deliberately excluded. The review has therefore failed to capture any evidence of the services being delivered by social workers, except at a statistical level.

If you are elected to Parliament in 2010, I call on you to:

- Oppose the removal of social workers from the Better Access initiative by opposing the relevant Budget measure;
- Ask the Minister for Health and Ageing to postpone all decisions about the program until the Review is completed;
- Ask the Minister for Health and Ageing to work with the social workers' professional association, the Australian Association of Social Workers, on a compensation package for those social workers adversely affected if the measure does pass into legislation.



Quick Facts

- Better Access is focused on early intervention and targets people with depression, anxiety, grief or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.
- Accredited Mental Health Social Workers (AMHSWs) provide 'wrap-around' support for their clients. This may involve family as well as individual counselling, and group therapy.
- Nearly 50% of AMHSWs have 15+ years experience in mental health field, nearly 75% have 10+ years.
- 37% are located in regional, rural and remote areas.
- Many are located in outer suburban areas.
- In 2008-09 these professionals delivered 121,540 services under the Better Access program.
- 63% of social workers offer bulk billing to at least some clients. They reported that 68% of clients would not be able to access a service without Medicare funding.
- The 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%).
- Social workers represent less than 4% of the cost of allied health professionals in the Better Access program.

The Government says it plans to place AMHSWs displaced from Better Access into the Access to Allied Psychological Services (ATAPS) program, delivered through the Divisions of General Practice. The new proposed ATAPS program is quite different, as it targets people with severe mental illness (like schizophrenia and bi-polar disorder), while Better Access is an early intervention initiative targeting people with issues like depression and anxiety. ATAPS is also more expensive than Better Access because of substantial administration costs.

This is not a cost effective budget measure. In many areas GPs 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.

GPs' Medicare rebates are approximately \$228/hour, while social workers are only rebated at \$70.45/hour.

The decision will not result in significant cost savings. 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 services.

Policy Calls

- **The AASW calls for the decision to exclude social workers and occupational therapists from the Better Access to Mental Health Initiative to be rescinded.**
- **The AASW expects to be treated equitably compared with other professions.**
- **The AASW calls for any decision about Better Access to be informed by the outcomes of the Better Access Review which reports at the end of this year.**
- **The AASW calls for mental health services to be client-centred, flexible, integrated and responsive.**