

Ecological Sustainability - Social Justice - Peace and Non-violence - Grassroots Democracy

AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS LTD FEDERAL ELECTION 2010

1. Over 1,100 social workers will lose their entitlement to offer mental health services under Medicare on April 1. Will the Australian Greens commit to reinstate social workers into the Better Access to Mental Health Services Program (Better Access) if elected? Will the Australian Greens oppose the measure in the House and Senate as part of the Budget Appropriation Bill? If the Budget measure is passed and social workers are excluded from the program, will the Greens support a reasonable compensation package for social workers adversely affected by the measure?

The government say they are taking the money out of the Better Access scheme because they have identified a need for funding for access to rural and regional areas, specifically targeting Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander groups and services for those who might self-harm. However, it's simply not right to take funding from one part of the mental health sector to pay for another.

The Greens have asked the government to explain why they decided to move money for access to occupational therapists and social workers from the Better Access mental health program into the Access to Allied Psychological Services (ATAPS) before a review of the Better Access program which is due to be completed later this year.

The Greens recently announced a package of mental health initiatives which identified the need for considerable increases in mental health funding, including \$100 million per year incentives at the primary care level to target those in need, the vulnerable and long-term clientele working within the community and NGO sector. Since July 2006 the allocation of money for better access to psychiatrists, psychologists, GPs and other allied health professional through the MBS has risen from \$538 million to \$753 million but the Mental Health Council of Australia say the actual amount needed should be closer to \$2 billion.

The government seem to be targeting occupational therapists and social workers (out of a total budget of \$138 million for allied health MBS items, just \$10.7 million was spent on occupational therapists and social workers in 2008-09) in a response to a rapid uptake of the Better Access scheme.

There are reports that demand for ATAPS services are also to set to overwhelm the sector and what this should tell the government is that mental health is at a crisis point - the cause of 24% of all health-related disability - and needs significant levels of investment not cost-shifting and underinvestment - less

than 2% of the government's new investment in health announced at the budget.

The Greens will see how the Minister responds and will consider asking for a Senate inquiry into the legislative instrument for this measure.

2. Will the Australian Greens commit to enhancing the national framework for protecting Australia's children by accrediting the child protection workforce, both in government agencies and not for profit services, to ensure that high quality professionals work with vulnerable children and their families?

The Greens believe that a comprehensive workforce strategy is needed to address the emerging issues in child protection. We firmly believe that the best interests of children who are in care or at risk must be the first priority. We think that a caring, skilled and qualified workforce is a key component in delivering better outcomes and ensuring quality care, but believe this must be delivered in the context of ensuring service sustainability.

The Greens understand the increased multiple and complex needs that are being faced by services who are working with socially excluded families and communities in Australia, and recognise this is why we need better skilled and qualified staff to provide effective support and deliver lasting change.

While the Greens think a national accreditation scheme has some merit, we are concerned that if implemented in isolation from a broader workforce strategy, it could exacerbate workforce challenges in the short term. We are aware that there is already a chronic undersupply of qualified and experienced people, together with diversity in the qualifications people hold and no clear consensus on what qualifications should be required.

The Greens are particularly concerned that some of the most significant shortages are in rural and remote areas as well as in areas where particular skills and experience are required – such as working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and families with a child or parent affected by disability.

This is why the Greens believe that we need a strategic approach that combines increased resources, accreditation and professional development. We want to see the introduction of accreditation as part of a comprehensive package that is implemented in a sustainable fashion. This means one that supports and builds on existing capacity by ensuring governments are paying the true cost of service delivery by qualified personnel, and includes training and support packages to support the existing workforce to transition to an accreditation scheme.

3. Will the Australian Greens provide for a strong role for allied health in the future of Australian health systems by ensuring that all taskforces, working groups, Boards and other decision-making structures must have memberships which reflect the fact that allied health is the third pillar of Australian hospital and health services, along with doctors and nurses?

Yes, there needs to be much greater and fairer representation of health providers across all taskforces, working groups, Boards and other decision-making structures and not just the usual suspects that reflect the dominant lobby-interests of well-established stakeholders in the health sector.

The Australian Greens believe that an effective healthcare system is dependent upon a skilled and well-resourced workforce and that allied health services should be given much greater recognition for their role in healthcare provision.

4. Will the Australian Greens undertake to make income management voluntary at an individual or community level rather than compulsory?

There is insufficient evidence of the benefit of compulsory income management to support its increased use for Australians receiving income support payments and pensions. There is, however, evidence that, when voluntary and community- based, the program can be one effective tool in addressing multiple social disadvantages.

The Australian Greens are the only party who have consistently opposed the introduction of mandatory indiscriminate income management and the other coercive provisions of the NT Intervention. Prior to the introduction of the NTER the Greens advocated for extension and support for the community-based voluntary model Centrepay - which had been implemented successfully for decades by organisations such as Tangentyere Council in the Alice Springs town camps.

Our analysis, and that provided by community sector organisations to the Senate inquiry into the NTER (including AASW), suggests that voluntary and community-based income management schemes need to be accompanied by the provision of appropriate support services to prove effective in addressing multiple disadvantage. On this basis we would regard free prior informed consent of affected communities together with access to appropriate community-based services as necessary elements of a voluntary community-based scheme.

More on our position on this topic can be found in the minority report to the recent Senate inquiry into the national extension of income management at: http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/clac ctte/soc sec welfare reform racial discrim 09/report/index.htm

23 July 2010