



AASW
.....
**Australian Association
of Social Workers**

Submission to the Australian Treasury

2019-20 Pre-budget Submission

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Introduction

Who we are

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the professional body representing more than 11,000 social workers throughout Australia. We set the benchmark for professional education and practice in social work, and advocate on matters of human rights, discrimination, and matters that influence people's quality of life.

The social work profession

Social work is a tertiary qualified profession recognised internationally that pursues social justice and human rights. Social workers aim to enhance the quality of life of every member of society and empower them to develop their full potential. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversity are central to the profession, and are underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and Indigenous knowledges. Professional social workers consider the relationship between biological, psychological, social and cultural factors and how they influence a person's health, wellbeing and development. Social workers work with individuals, families, groups and communities. They maintain a dual focus on improving human wellbeing; and identifying and addressing any external issues (known as systemic or structural issues) that detract from wellbeing, such as inequality, injustice and discrimination.

Our submission

Our vision is for a cohesive, inclusive and just society in which it is possible for everyone to thrive, flourish and develop their full potential. It is the role of government to create and maintain the environmental, social and economic foundations which enable all of us to pursue those goals, paying attention to the most vulnerable members of society. The budget is one of the government's key opportunities do this. The AASW measures the success of the budget by its social impact as well as its economic consequences.

Every day, social workers observe how decisions in the federal budget have a significant impact on the lives of vulnerable groups, including but not limited to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, children, young people, older Australians, people living with a disability and those experiencing unemployment. With this in mind, we have outlined some of the key areas that we believe the 2018-2019 budget needs to address, including:

- Income support and welfare
- Reconciliation
- Mental Health: Medicare, Rural and remote locations
- Housing
- The NDIS
- Family violence
- Aged Care.

Income Support and Welfare

The Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) has calculated the amount of money that is required to provide a minimally adequate standard of living: the Minimum Income for Healthy Living (MIHL). For a single adult with no children, the level of the MIHL is \$433 and for a couple with two children, it is \$814 each week¹.

The current Newstart allowances clearly fall far short of these levels. For a single person, the Newstart Allowance is \$96 each week below what is required for an adequate minimum standard of living, equalling \$4992 each year. For two unemployed adults with two dependent children, the Newstart

¹ Australian Council of Social Service, *The cost of living a decent life: New report highlights the inadequacy of income support for low paid and unemployed Australians*, Media release, 23 August 2017

Allowance is \$126 each week below what is required for a basic standard of living, equalling \$6552 each year.

This shortfall has serious consequences for every aspect of the lives of people forced to rely on government income support. Recent data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) confirms that low income households cannot currently afford necessities such as rent, food, energy, transport and health. Almost two thirds of low income households are living under such severe financial stress that they cannot pay bills and would be unable to respond to an emergency².

Furthermore, our own research into student poverty found that 27 per cent of social work students indicated that the low level of financial study support from the government increased the likelihood of dropping out of the course; this percentage grew to 45 per cent for the full-time students who were experiencing ongoing financial difficulty³.

The AASW also continues to hold concerns about the continuation of the cashless welfare card trial as it

- amounts to an unusual punishment on a group of vulnerable people united only by their location,
- undermines their autonomy and creates creates inconvenience and is not necessarily accompanied by any other intervention,
- lacks an adequate evidence base in relation to its benefits,
- does nothing to achieve long-term structural change nor individual recovery from addiction⁴.

Recommendations:

We call on the government to:

- lift immediately the rate at which Allowances for people of working age are paid to equal the amounts specified in the MIHL,
- increase the rates of pensions, allowances and student payments, lower the income eligibility thresholds, relax waiting periods and decrease the taper rates to ensure that income support payments remain higher than the poverty line,
- undertake a thorough review of the effectiveness of the cashless welfare card before any further rollout is implemented.

Reconciliation

The latest Close the Gap progress report demonstrates that staggering levels of inequality persist across many areas including health, education and employment outcomes. After twelve years, only three of the seven targets are on track to being met. The AASW welcomes last year's review of the Close the Gap campaign, and the draft targets released by COAG in December 2018⁵. The AASW believes that the lack of progress points to the need for a change in both the Close the Gap targets and the processes by which the strategy is implemented.

Progress against the targets requires a commitment from the federal government to adequately resourcing the indigenous services which are working on these targets. It also requires a change in the way this work is undertaken. We welcome the COAG communique on Close the Gap Refresh⁶ and the stated intention to 'ensure that the design and implementation of the next phase of Closing the Gap is a true partnership'. While this communique heralds a new approach to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their communities, it must be accompanied by adequate resourcing to achieve the stated aims.

Recommendations:

That the government commit funds to

- ensure that the services and programs within the Close the Gap initiative be planned, implemented, evaluated and governed by Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisations

² Australian Council of Social Service, *New figures are a wake up call to government*, Media Release, 14 September 2017

³ <https://www.aasw.asn.au/document/item/8772>

⁴ https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/CDCTrialExpansion/Submissions

⁵ https://closingthegaprefresh.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/submissions/association_of_social_workers.pdf

⁶ <https://www.coag.gov.au/sites/default/files/communique/coag-statement-closing-the-gap-refresh.pdf>

(ACCOs)

- ensure that the targets for the priority areas identified in the Special Gathering Statement to COAG⁷ for the next 10 years are achieved.

Mental Health: Medicare

AASW was very pleased to participate in the MBS Review of MH Items. Better Access is an important pathway for people experiencing mental ill-health and psychological distress to access appropriate treatment and support. We welcomed the opportunity to provide evidence and our recommendations for increasing the benefits for clients and patients by enabling them to access the services of an accredited and skilled mental health professional including social workers.

There are currently more than 2200 Accredited Mental Health Social Workers (AMHSWs) playing a clear and important role in the delivery of mental health services under the Medicare Benefits scheme. They form the second largest group of providers after the combined group of Clinical Psychologists and Registered Psychologists.

Inexplicably, the Medicare rebate for an AMHSW is currently less than is paid to psychologists for the identical service. Social workers deliver these services under the same expectations of service delivery, quality and outcomes, using identical item descriptors. Therefore, the AASW maintains that there is no valid reason for there to be any variance between the two rebates under Medicare for Registered Psychologists and AMHSWs, providing services under the Better Access program.

Recommendations:

That the federal budget contain provision to implement recommendations from the MBS Review Taskforce, specifically

- address inequity in rebates under Better Access and remove the 3-tiered rebate schedule
- increase the number of sessions available for mental health services with the introduction of 6 initial sessions, with an additional 6 sessions available on review, and a further 6 sessions per calendar year available under certain circumstances
- provide a rural or remote loading on rebates
- allow residents in residential aged care facilities access appropriate EPC and mental health services with a GP referral regardless of funding scheme.

Mental Health: Rural and remote locations

The recent Senate Inquiry into Accessibility and Quality of Mental Health Services in Rural and Remote Australia heard evidence concerning a wide range of challenges that these communities experience in gaining access to appropriate mental health services. Nevertheless, data on location of social workers across Australia indicates that more than 405 social workers practice in regional, rural and remote locations, making an important contribution to these underserved communities. The AASW urges the government to take this opportunity to implement the recommendations in that report. For example, the challenges of transport mean that the cost of providing services in rural and remote communities is higher than in metropolitan centres; and telehealth plays an important role in mental health for people living remotely.

Recommendations:

We call on the government to:

- build a loading into the estimation of costs of services in rural and remote locations to cover the extra costs to professionals,
- set a priority to guarantee reliable telephone and internet connections to all rural and remote communities to facilitate mental health service delivery,
- allocate a budget for the implementation and evaluation of the *National Strategic Framework for*

⁷ <https://closingthegaprefresh.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/special-gathering-statement-coag.pdf>

Housing

The serious shortfall of affordable housing continues to affect the health, educational, employment, and emotional wellbeing of individuals, families and communities. Declining housing affordability is directly associated with increased numbers of people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Social workers directly assist individuals and families to locate and maintain secure and affordable housing but are experiencing increasing difficulties in achieving these outcomes. The AASW calls on the government to implement the policies identified by the 'Everybody's Home' campaign⁸.

Recommendations:

We call on the government to ensure the 2019-20 budget

- reforms the tax treatment of housing to remove distortions and improve affordability,
- introduces new measures to promote investment in new affordable housing,
- increases the maximum rate and improve indexation of Commonwealth Rent Assistance.

The NDIS

The AASW welcomes the NDIS as a rights-based approach that supports the independence and the social and economic participation of people with a permanent impairment or condition resulting in disability. Unfortunately, social workers are observing that participants are not always achieving their goals because of multiple problems in the transition to the current market based system. These have been documented in the report into Market Readiness by last year's Joint Standing Committee on the NDIS.

The committee concluded that the budget pressures within the NDIS are depressing the prices of services, which translates directly into poorer outcomes for participants. Their report concludes: "*NDIS pricing has been preventing the development of the market, threatening the financial viability of many organisations and leading to providers considering exiting the market*"⁹.

The report makes recommendations as to how to respond, including to establish a body which will balance the competing demands around costs and determine pricing levels¹⁰. Inevitably, an adequate response to this situation will require greater commitment of government funds.

Recommendation:

We call on the government to ensure the 2019-20 budget

- contain provision for full pricing of services within the NDIS as recommended by the Joint Standing Committee on the NDIS.

Family Violence

Family violence affects many members of the community. It is a gendered crime, most commonly perpetrated by men, against women, which also deeply affects children. It is an obvious responsibility of government to adequately fund the service system that responds to women and children who experience violence. This includes family violence services, sexual assault services, health services, judiciary, law enforcement, men's behaviour change programs, and housing services.

⁸ <https://everybodyshome.com.au/>

⁹ https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/National_Disability_Insurance_Scheme/MarketReadiness/Report/c05

¹⁰ Ibid.

The causes of family violence are complex, and include factors that operate at the individual level as well as across the whole of society. Factors such as community attitudes towards women and gender inequality are experienced across all aspects of a woman's life, even if she is not directly subjected to violence against herself. Governments can address gender inequality by adequately fund primary, secondary and tertiary programs across a range of settings so that the work of preventing violence against women is integrated into all levels of society. A comprehensive guide to the reforms that are needed are in the recommendations of the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence.

Recommendation:

We call on the government to ensure the 2019-20 budget

- contain a guarantee of continuous funding for the full range of prevention, early intervention and tertiary programs to prevent and respond to family violence.

Aged Care

Having submitted to multiple inquiries into aged care during 2018, the AASW welcomes the commencement of the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety. Early indications are that the ratios of staff in residential aged care will be the key to improving the quality of care¹¹. Therefore, the AASW anticipates that implementing the recommendations will require a significant budgetary commitment which should be factored in to the government's planning.

Recommendation:

We call on the government to

- provide an undertaking that it will implement all recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety.

Conclusion

The AASW strongly believes that the wellbeing of all Australians needs to be the primary consideration of any budget. Currently, there are many vulnerable people whose quality of life will be affected by measures that are within the control of this government. The AASW calls on the government to make provision for these measures and looks forward to working with the government to implement them.

Submitted by and on behalf of the Australian Association of Social Workers Pty Ltd

¹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/jan/18/aged-care-royal-commission-begins-with-emphasis-on-rising-torrent-of-concern>



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