



AASW

Australian Association
of Social Workers

AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS

NATIONAL POLICY PLATFORM - MENTAL HEALTH

Federal Election 2022

MENTAL HEALTH PORTFOLIO

POLICY STATEMENT

The national conversation about health and mental health must be changed, starting with the recognition that health is a human right, and that everyone in Australia has a positive right to the highest level of services that are necessary for health and mental health.

This includes recognising and adopting policies which respond to the social and environmental determinants of health, that is, the non-medical factors which influence health outcomes. We believe healthy individuals and communities can only be achieved by recognising this.

Yet many Australians in the community face housing insecurity, instability, and/or homelessness. Many in the community are dependent on government support payments which are too low to live a healthy or dignified life. Many experience intergenerational unemployment and this, combined with low income support creates additional barriers to entering employment or pursuing education.

Social workers work to address the holistic needs of an individual and their family, and work to prevent psychological distress associated with disadvantage and discrimination. Through all this work, social workers work to alleviate and treat mental ill health.

Yet, the contribution of social workers is frequently underestimated in national debates about mental health.

To continue our critical work, particularly our frontline roles across multiple service systems and sectors working closely with many of the most vulnerable people in our society, we need support from the Australian Government.

Appropriate professional recognition and greater investment into our profession are needed to enable social workers to better serve the needs of the Australian community.

We also remain an unregistered profession. While we invest in the integrity of the profession through a self-regulation scheme, we know there are flaws in this model which exposes the public to risk, such as those seen in multiple coroners' reports relating to deaths of young children in child protection systems.¹ The 'social work' title needs protection, so that only appropriately qualified professionals with a social work degree accredited by the AASW can call themselves a 'social worker' and work in social work roles with vulnerable people.

For this, we call on the Australian government to introduce and implement legislation for a national registration scheme. With strong accountability measures, adequate investment and support we can thrive as a profession and provide the highest quality services for vulnerable people in Australia.

¹ For the example, the [Coronial Inquest Report in to the death of Chloe Valentine in South Australia](#)

Mental Health Policy Recommendations

A. Accredited Mental Health Social Workers

Recognising the critical role social workers play in the mental health systems and in the Australian community. 40 per cent of Medicare registered social workers (AMHSW's) are located in regional and remote Australia. They support people experiencing distress and work with the complex nature of mental ill-health through holistic interventions and approaches. This needs to be better reflected in the existing system, as do initiatives which foster new and innovative means of drawing on these critical skills and experience. This includes:

- a. Increasing the Medicare Better Access schedule fee rebated to Medicare registered social workers (AMHSWs); and,
- b. Investing in social prescribing initiatives and ensuring qualified social workers are employed in the 'link worker role'.

B. Mental health services

Reforming two key aspects of the Family Law system which are currently used by the perpetrators of family violence to exacerbate and prolong their abuse on their partners and ex partners. This includes introducing a Medicare item for family violence related mental health services. This will indicate that the source of the victim and survivors' specific mental health needs is the violence itself. This will avoid the misrepresentation of the victim's and survivor's parenting capacity by perpetrators and locate the accountability for the harm with the perpetrator of violence.

C. Holistic mental health systems

A mental health system which acknowledges and addresses the social determinants of health, is comprehensive, person-centred, accessible, culturally appropriate and staffed by a skilled, multi-disciplinary workforce which also:

1. Implements the reforms described by the Productivity Commission's report on the *Social and Economic Benefits of Improving Mental Health*, including:
 - a. meeting gaps in demand for psychosocial supports;
 - b. making changes to Medicare to encourage the provision of more group therapy;
 - c. helping schools support the social and emotional wellbeing and mental health of their students;
 - d. developing a nationally consistent policy of not discharging people with mental illness from hospitals, correctional facilities and institutional care into a situation of homelessness;
 - e. addressing the shortfall in the number of supported housing places and the gap in homelessness services for people with severe mental illness; and,
2. Revises the National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement to embed the lived experience of service users, plan for its implementation and monitor its outcomes.

Social Determinants of Health Policy Recommendations to Support Mental Wellbeing for All Australians.

A. Housing

Investing in more social housing and providing greater support for renters. This will mitigate homelessness, mental and physical health issues, financial stress and overcrowding. It will also assist families' financial stability and capacity to plan for long term goals such as educational attainment, and employment plans. It will support work currently underway to decrease domestic and family violence, Alcohol- and Other Drug-Related Harm. We believe we need to:

- a. Build more social and affordable housing;
- b. Develop a National Housing Strategy;
- c. Increase the maximum rate of Commonwealth Rent Assistance by at least 50 percent; and,
- d. Provide Commonwealth leadership to make renting fairer in all states and territories.

B. Income, social protection and employment

Fixing our social security system so that it keeps people out of poverty, enables people to maintain a minimum standard of dignity and health and enables people to find work. To do this we must:

- a. Permanently increase the JobSeeker Payment to at least \$70 a day so everyone can cover the cost of the basics;
- b. Index payments in line with wage movements at least twice per year;
- c. Introduce a \$50 a week Disability and Illness Supplement;
- d. Establish a Single Parent Supplement that recognises the additional costs of single parenthood;
- e. Establish a Social Security Commission to advise the Parliament on the ongoing adequacy of income support payments:² and,
- f. Institute a work or training guarantee to provide individualised assistance.

C. Environment

Protection of the natural environment is inherent to health, mental health and social wellbeing. To address the impact of the climate emergency on mental ill-health and on the social and environmental determinants of health we must:

- a. Implement the recommendations of the Climate and Health Alliance's: *Healthy, Regenerative and Just Framework*.³
- b. Redirect current fossil fuel subsidies and investment into initiatives which reduce health impacts and risks caused by the climate emergency.
- c. Develop a climate change and equality policy statement which ensures that the burden caused by the climate emergency is distributed equally.
- d. Adapt existing housing stock for renters and low-income people to control temperature, reduce energy costs and create employment.

² Points noted in a-e are outlined in the [Raise the Rate for Good](#) Campaign.

³ See Climate and Health Alliance's [Healthy, Regenerative and Just Framework](#).

© Australian Association of Social Workers

Melbourne office

Level 7, 14-20 Blackwood St
NORTH MELBOURNE 3051
PO Box 2008
Royal Melbourne Hospital VIC 3050

ACN 008 576 010
ABN 93 008 576 010

T: 03 9320 1000
W: www.aasw.asn.au
For general enquiries please contact:
social.policy@aasw.asn.au

For enquiries relating to the
Policy Platform, please contact:
Rachel Reilly
Manager, Social Policy and Advocacy
rachel.reilly@aasw.asn.au

