



Mental health announcement misses the mark

The AASW is disappointed that the announcement by Prime Minister Gillard on mental health has failed to address the removal of social workers from the Better Access (Medicare) program.

The Government decided in the May 2010 Federal budget to remove social workers from the Better Access program. The decision was made without consultation and before the completion of the Review of the program, which is due later this year. After a vigorous community campaign the date was postponed to April 2011.

“The Government’s continuing failure to address the unjustified removal of social workers from Better Access is a huge concern for social workers and their clients. Many clients, particularly those in rural and remote parts of Australia, and those on low incomes, are unable to afford access to other mental health professionals and will therefore receive no treatment after April,” said AASW CEO Kandie Allen-Kelly.

While the AASW welcomed the investment in suicide prevention and the increased funding for children and young people’s mental health services, the reduction of funding for Better Access means a cut to prevention and early intervention which undermines other more positive moves.

The majority of clients seeing social workers through the Better Access program have anxiety, depression or post-traumatic stress disorder, and these conditions, if untreated, can lead to more serious mental health issues including suicide.

Clinical social worker Alex Zannoni from inner Melbourne welcomed the additional funding to support families and colleagues recently bereaved by suicide, but is worried by the exclusion of Social Workers from Better Access. “A number of families reported how helpful their sessions with me have been in dealing with their trauma and that they would not have had access to counselling without the Better Access program.”

The announcement also fails to provide a clinical role for specialist mental health social workers in the provision of clinical mental health services through other programs, and this should be addressed by a future ALP Government.

Social workers welcome the training of other professionals in skills to recognize and respond to mental health issues. All social workers, wherever they work, already receive mental health knowledge and skills in their professional training.

The AASW calls on the next Government to:

- Reinstatement social workers into the Better Access program;
- Make any decisions about the Better Access program once the Review is completed;
- Treat allied health professions in the Better Access program equitably.