



Social Workers win Medicare Mental Health campaign, Government backs down

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is tonight celebrating a campaign victory for mental health services for low income and disadvantaged people.

The Federal Minister for Mental Health and Ageing, Mark Butler, and the Minister for Health and Ageing, Nicola Roxon, have announced that the Government has backed down on its decision to remove social workers and occupational therapists from the Better Access to Mental Health Services program (Better Access).

The removal of social workers was part of the May Federal Budget and the AASW and its members have campaigned strongly against the move since then. The Government agreed to postpone the removal of social workers until April 2011 but has now rescinded the decision completely.

“We are delighted that the Government has decided to back down from its decision, which would have removed affordable mental health services from thousand of low income and disadvantaged Australians,” said AASW National President, Professor Bob Lonne.

“The decision shows that the Government listened to the strong campaign run by the AASW and its members. These specialist clinical social workers and their clients will be delighted that they can continue to offer affordable high quality services,” said AASW Acting CEO Karl Charikar.

The removal of social workers from the Better Access program:

- Was not discussed with the AASW or its members prior to budget night in May
- Jeopardised services to tens of thousands of people, as 67% of social workers bulk bill some or all of their clients
- Would have been particularly hard on people in rural and regional areas, where there are few alternative professionals. 37% of social workers in the program work in regional and rural areas.
- Represented a cost saving of only 4% to the Better Access program budget.

Social workers play a vital role in public mental health services, and also provide high skilled clinical interventions through Better Access, ATAPS (Access to Allied Psychological Service) and other programs. The AASW is pleased that the Government has indicated that it recognizes the value of these clinical services and looks forward to continue to work with the Government to offer advice on the development of services to Australians with mental health issues.

The Minister for Mental Health and Ageing will speak tonight (Friday) at the AASW AGM in Brisbane, where he will launch the new *AASW Code of Ethics*.