



Australian Senate

Penny Wright  
Australian Greens Senator for South Australia

L3, 27 Leigh Street; Adelaide SA 5000  
PO Box 8117, Station Arcade, Adelaide SA 5000  
T (08) 8410 4588 • F (08) 8410 4599

Parliament House, Canberra ACT 2600  
T (02) 6277 3626 • F (02) 6277 5992

Toll Free 1300 693 178  
senator.wright@aph.gov.au  
pennywright.com.au

The Hon Peter Dutton  
Minister for Health  
Suite MG 46  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

21 May 2014

Dear Minister  Dutton

**Re: Social workers' inclusion in National Registration and Accreditation Scheme**

I am writing to you in my capacity as the Australian Greens' spokesperson for Mental Health to request that you support the inclusion of social workers in the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme (NRAS), as a registered health profession.

Social work is one of the few health-related professions which is not currently regulated by the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme. Indeed, social work is the only profession working in mental health which is not registered under the NRAS, yet it comprises the second-largest group of mental health professionals after nursing.

The social work profession is a well-defined occupation, with an established body of knowledge and a clear national entry-level qualification accepted across the Australian jurisdictions. Indeed, social work is a registered health profession in most developed economies such as the United States, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

Social workers work with some of the most vulnerable Australians, who experience a wide range of issues such as physical or mental illnesses, domestic violence, substance abuse, frail age, disability, the aftermath of physical or sexual abuse, trauma from war or torture, homelessness, poverty and isolation in rural and remote communities. The level of

vulnerability of their clients, combined with the level of trust and power invested in social workers, places the social work profession at high risk of unethical, unqualified or substandard practice by rogue individual practitioners in the current unregulated environment.

Self-regulation through voluntary membership of the Australian Association of Social Workers has resulted in only one third of social workers being registered as members, with more than two thirds of social workers practising outside of any regulatory requirements. Currently, there are no qualification requirements for individuals who may wish to call themselves 'social workers'.

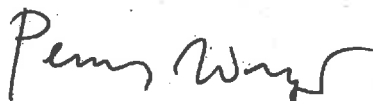
Inclusion in the NRAS would allow for regulation of approved tertiary courses and protection of the title 'Social Worker' which would in turn lead to better protection for the public and better understanding of the profession by the public. Furthermore, inclusion in the NRAS would facilitate workforce mobility across Australia and allow for compulsory continuing professional development for social workers. Importantly, inclusion would also ensure enforced adherence to relevant Codes of Ethics and Practice Standards, as well as ensuring access and accountability to a formal complaints process.

The Australian public deserves the reassurance that social work services are being delivered by registered professionals. Merely applying the *National Code of Conduct for Health Care Workers* to social workers, on its own, is insufficient and will not protect vulnerable clients. This would only be a negative licensing scheme, which would fail to address the lack of a test for 'fitness to practice', and fail to address the lack of supervision and professional development requirements.

In order to ensure that the most vulnerable Australians are protected and to ensure 'best practice' within the profession, I am urging you and state health ministers across the country to carry out a regulatory impact statement for the inclusion of Social Work in the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme, with a view towards formal inclusion by 2015.

I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss this matter further.

Yours sincerely



Senator Penny Wright  
Senator for South Australia  
Australian Greens spokesperson for Mental Health