

# AASW Statement on Mental Health Reform

December 2015

## AASW summary of the key issues from the Government Response to the National Mental Health Review

The Australian Government has released its Response to the Report of the National Review of Mental Health Programs and Services. This is a wide ranging and high level response and at times lacks a great deal of detail. There are nine areas covered but this communiqué will focus on some of the major points and the likely impact on social workers.

### Key messages

These are the Government's three messages worth highlighting:

- It is keen to move away from a 'one size fits all' approach and they are applying this thinking to a number of areas including the Better Access program.
- It is moving to a regional approach to funding, planning and service provision, focusing on the new Primary Health Networks (PHN).
- It will initiate a 'stepped care' approach to interventions for people with mental illness. The Response therefore provides different proposals for the varying types of mental illness presentations and stages of intervention. This is to ensure that services will be offered at 'the right level, for the right person at the right time'.

The Government will commence developing a '*new easy to access digital mental health gateway*' based on website and telephone access. The digital gateway '*will provide consumers with the tools and information they need to successfully navigate the mental health system and make informed choices about their care*'.

Funding from a number of programs, including 'Headspace' will be integrated into Primary Health Networks with the intention of ensuring they are responsive to regionally identified needs. '*PHNs will commission all regionally delivered Commonwealth mental health programmes for the Department of Health into the future, providing a flexible pool from which to target needs within a stepped care approach and against key outcomes and performance indicators*'.

### Better Access

The Department has indicated that there will be no change to Better Access for the foreseeable future. The Response repeated the Review findings that it '*recognised that Medicare-based services through Better Access has provided an efficient means of providing access to primary mental health service delivery for many people*'.

The Government has indicated that they are exploring ways in which people with mild mental health conditions (mild anxiety and depression) can access assistance through an online and telephone gateway: '*It pointed to strong evidence for the efficacy of self-guided and clinician-moderated digital mental health interventions, particularly for depression and anxiety, with digital mental health options demonstrating similar clinical outcomes to more conventional face-to-face therapies.*' However there is no detail about how this is to be implemented.

The review also found that a proportion of people used Better Access '*year in and year out*' suggesting a more severe form of mental illness which might be better addressed through an alternative service delivery model. The Government has therefore indicated that they will explore options for modifying the Better Access Initiative to better target the needs of people with moderate to severe mental illnesses. There is also no detail about this proposal. At this end of the illness spectrum the Government has also

indicated that Primary Health Networks (PHNs) will be seeking to integrate services with the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

## **Access to Allied Psychological Services (ATAPS)**

The ATAPS program will continue and will be integrated into the PHNs funding model. There is no indication that the program itself will change and there should be every opportunity for Accredited Mental Health Social Workers to work in this program.

## **Self regulation**

The AASW has worked extensively with the government, both directly and through Allied Health Professions Australia (AHPA), to ensure that the self regulating professions (including social work) will not be disadvantaged at the PHN sector level. The Australian Health Workforce Ministerial Council has identified this as an issue and has written to all PHNs indicating that they are not to disadvantage this group of professions. In addition the National Association of Self Regulating Health Professions (NASHRP) has written independently to all PHNs and received reassurance from some. This assurance has also been documented in a recent communiqué from the Australian Health Ministers Advisory Council (AHMAC).

## **Summary**

- The Better Access Initiative in its present form will continue into the future inclusive of 'appropriately trained social workers and occupational therapists'
- At both ends of the mental illness spectrum, from mild depression and anxiety to persistent and disabling mental illness, the Government will explore ways of providing alternative care and funding models. This will occur over the next three years
- ATAPS will continue and be integrated into the PHNs.

PHNs will be significant initiators of services and programs into the future, e.g. integrating 'Headspace' services. Social workers already play important roles in the primary health care landscape and it is likely that there will be opportunities into the future through these important regional health sector organisations. The government response refers to many other areas of change in mental health care, including but not limited to schools programs, indigenous services and suicide prevention initiatives.

As the professional representative body for social workers, the AASW continues to advocate for the profession and our clients at many levels including government, private and the not-for-profit sector. In relation to Accredited Mental Health Social Workers, we have been actively engaging with the Federal government's Department of Health through numerous consultation processes including the major review of the Medicare Benefits Schedule and Chronic Conditions National Strategy. Through policy submissions, ongoing discussions and consultation forums we continue to highlight the significant contribution of social workers in the mental health field. It is through our advocacy efforts that we raise the concerns of our members in assuring that the profession is, and continues to be, recognised at a broader policy level.

To read the entire Government Response to the National Mental Health Review, go to <http://goo.gl/m7Ybml>

We will keep you up to date as we receive more information about proposed changes.

**AASW Mental Health Team**