



AASW

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**Australian Association
of Social Workers**

*Submission to the Senate
Community Affairs References
Committee*

*Re: Future of Australia's aged care
sector workforce*

March 2016

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Introduction

Who we are

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the professional body representing more than 9,000 social workers throughout Australia.

We set the benchmark for professional education and practice in social work and have a strong voice on matters of social inclusion, social justice, human rights and issues that impact upon the quality of life of all Australians.

The social work profession

The social work profession is committed to the pursuit of social justice, the enhancement of the quality of life, and the development of the full potential of each individual, group and community in society. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversity are central to the profession and are underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and Indigenous knowledge.

Social workers have a long and proud tradition of working together with older Australians towards active ageing with a strong commitment to self-determination, dignity and respect. Social workers are involved in the delivery of aged care and carer support services in a range of fields of practice including direct service delivery, service planning, service management, research and policy. Using effective interpersonal skills and maintaining a person-centred approach they provide a range of services such as: complex psychosocial assessments, advocacy, mediation or negotiation, counselling, referrals, liaison and education. They support older Australians in many areas including health, housing, income support, Indigenous services, disability, workforce participation and community development. Social workers work collaboratively with older people to identify goals and work towards positive outcomes. Furthermore, they are committed to recognising strengths in order to build capacity, create opportunities and take action. Therefore, social workers are uniquely placed to hold both a broad and an in-depth view of the multiple issues facing older Australians within a rights-based context and with a focus on wellness and social connectedness.

Social work is a tertiary-qualified profession recognised nationally and internationally. The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the key professional body representing social workers in Australia and is responsible for the accreditation of social work university programs. The academic qualifications that applicants to the AASW are required to hold are: a Bachelor of Social Work, Bachelor of Social Work with Honours, or a Social Work Qualifying Master's degree. The curriculum provides entry-level professional social work education addressing education, knowledge, skills and values that can be applied across the diverse range of practice settings, fields of practice and methods of social work practice, and includes an extensive period of field education.

Graduates of AASW-accredited social work courses are eligible for membership of the AASW.

AASW generalist accredited social workers are competent and skilled in providing services and supports that address a wide range of clients' psychosocial needs.

The AASW is the assessing authority, on behalf of the Federal Government, for social workers providing mental health interventions through Medicare Australia. Social workers can be accredited as Mental Health Social Workers (AMHSW) by the AASW. This accreditation recognises the social worker as having specialist knowledge, skill and experience to provide specific mental health interventions.

Our submission

Social workers are integral to services that cater for the health and wellbeing of older Australians in all settings across the aged care continuum including government, non-government organisations, hospitals, health settings, and private practice. Therefore, AASW welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry into the *Future of Australia's aged care sector workforce*.

The AASW's main points

- The aged care system does not adequately consider the full range of psychosocial needs of older Australians and their families.
- A more comprehensive approach is needed in order to identify and care for those older Australians with complex needs that include psychosocial issues.
- The loss and grief associated with the transition into aged care and dementia is not adequately assessed or supported by the existing aged care workforce.
- Currently there is a lack of services able to intervene in complex situations where abuse is occurring.
- Enhanced psychosocial assessments and the resultant appropriate supports will not only improve the quality of life of older people, but also that of their families and reduce work pressures on care staff.
- The aged care sector requires better integration of professional social work services to ensure psychosocial needs are addressed.
- Social work is a highly skilled profession that is specifically focused on providing holistic care, therefore social workers are important partners in meeting the complex and multidimensional needs of older Australians.

Response

a) the current composition of the aged care workforce;

- The current composition of the aged care workforce at all levels does not adequately provide services that consider the full range of psychosocial needs of older Australians.
- There is significant research and literature demonstrating the importance of addressing the mental health needs of aged care residents as they have a direct impact on all other aspects of their physical and emotional wellbeing¹, including care needs. Comprehensive enhanced assessments and supports will not only improve the quality of life of residents, but also that of their families and reduce work pressures on care staff. Improving the skills of the aged care workforce is essential to address issues related to the increased longevity of Australia's ageing population.
- The loss and grief of older persons and their families associated with the transition into aged care services and dementia is not adequately assessed or supported by the existing aged care workforce. This is a highly complex area where individuals and their families are grieving the loss of independence, family and identity that significantly impacts adjusting, coping and wellbeing.
- The aged care workforce needs access to training to adequately identify and address the range of issues experienced by older people and their families, for example the significant mental health and grief and loss issues. Greater emphasis on a comprehensive approach to service

¹ AIHW 2013. Depression in residential aged care 2008-2012. *Aged care statistics series* no. 39. Cat. no. AGE 73. Canberra: AIHW

delivery and education and training of direct service staff is an important factor in meeting the future challenges of the sector.

- The lack of early interventions and preventative strategies will result in increased use of hospital services. Greater inclusion is needed of appropriately trained professionals able to provide support in relation to the complex needs of older Australians.
- The current workforce is hampered and undermined by a lack of service integration leading to poorer outcomes for consumers. Older people with complex needs greatly benefit from coordinated interventions from appropriate agencies and workers.
- Social workers focus on understanding and providing interventions that take into account the full complexities of an older person's circumstances. Family work is an important part of this as complex dynamics and history can compound what is already a difficult situation. Social workers' demonstrated expertise in navigating complex health and social service systems, combined with their unique psychosocial perspective, illustrates the profession's significant contribution to the sector.
- Social work as a profession is informed by practices synonymous with those underpinning the current aged care reforms namely wellness, reablement, goal-orientated outcomes, consumer driven initiatives, strength-based and restorative approaches. Social work is uniquely placed to compliment the focus of the aged care reforms and is supportive of aims.
- Social Workers are also able to provide expert support in the area of elder abuse from assessment through to interventions, developing effective responses to individuals experiencing abuse is difficult especially where cognitive impairment is an issue, where older people may not be comfortable to identify or name the harm they are experiencing as abuse. Currently there is a lack of services able to intervene in complex situations where abuse is occurring and social workers are best positioned to provide this service.
- Embedding social work systematically into the aged care system, will greatly assist the sector in its capacity to achieve its objective of equitable access for older Australians and will fill market gaps in key areas, resulting in:
 - Improved access into the aged care system
 - Shorter admissions in hospitals through better discharge planning
 - Reduction in inappropriate admissions to hospitals through early intervention
 - Reduction in premature admissions into aged care facilities
- AASW is keen to work with the sector to identify and implement consumer-focused, cost effective solutions that improve access and coordination of services.

b) future aged care workforce requirements, including the impacts of sector growth, changes in how care is delivered, and increasing competition for workers;

- As outlined previously there is a real need for an aged care workforce with specialised knowledge and skills in relation to complex psychosocial situations, especially in light of the increasing numbers of older people in Australia who are living longer.
- Social workers provide essential services to enable consumers to maximise their engagement in the aged care system. The following list highlights those vulnerable older people who the AASW identifies as being particularly at risk of falling through gaps in the system.

This includes older people who:

- exhibit challenging behaviours related, for example, to drug and alcohol abuse

- experience difficulties in engaging in the system, including those who will not seek or who would refuse assistance although they would benefit from assistance to remain living successfully in the community
 - are unable to identify or advocate for their support needs
 - are deterred by the 'user pays' system and/or are experiencing financial hardship
 - requiring assistance with service integration from multiple agencies
 - with dementia/memory loss/cognitive impairment requiring specialised support
 - with challenging domestic situations such as where squalor and/or hoarding and self-neglect are issues
 - at risk of or experiencing elder abuse
 - require support with making informed choices and decision making
 - have mental health issues especially those with persistent non-acute mental health issues
 - are from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds
- Access to social work services for complex issues throughout the My Aged Care continuum needs to be guaranteed in order for the aged care reforms to address issues related to equity of access.
 - Despite these initiatives, without adequate access to funded social work services designed to address psychosocial complexity there will be market gaps and greater costs in terms of, for example, increased and longer admissions to hospitals, not to mention the suffering and mental health consequences for older people and their families and significant others.
 - In order to address future aged care workforce requirements it is recommended that a specific funded specialised social work support service be developed within the aged care package for those older people needing assistance but who have trouble in engaging with the aged care system and/or who require funded social work assistance to respond to complex issues. Social workers have the knowledge, skills and experience necessary to carry out this task, which will reduce the risk of market failure. This could be a component of Medicare or as indicated a specific component of a funded package.

c) the interaction of aged care workforce needs with employment by the broader community services sector, including workforce needs in disability, health and other areas, and increased employment as the National Disability Insurance Scheme rolls out;

- The market efficiency of the aged care system will be enhanced by integrated and accessible social work interventions at all levels. This includes social work being active in developing innovative ways of delivering its service e.g. through the PHN network, extending private practice opportunities, a component of NGO funding in the sector and creating a range of business opportunities.
- The NDIS is likely to increase pressure on the workforce, potentially leading to low-skilled workers taking on roles with highly vulnerable Australians. It is important that the sector prioritises employing skilled, knowledgeable and qualified staff.
- Given the increased need for nursing, allied health and general care staffs, greater coordination of the limited workforce is needed. This needs to be paralleled with a greater emphasis on professionals who can address a wide range of complex psychosocial needs.
- As the workforce increases, attention needs to be paid to how social work and other allied health services can interact across this broader community services sector.

- Training opportunities for disability, health and aged care workers will increase as the workforce increases. There are areas of similarity as well as points of difference. Social workers are well positioned to develop training opportunities.

d) challenges in attracting and retaining aged care workers;

- Greater emphasis on employing trained staff such as in the areas of mental health will have a positive impact on the aged care workforce leading to greater retention and improved service outcomes.
- Providing flexible training opportunities and creating dynamic workplaces will assist in attracting and retaining a 'learning' skilled workforce.
- Workforce shortages are exacerbated by low wages and there needs to be greater emphasis on adequately remunerating staff.

e) f) g) h)

i) the role of government in providing a coordinated strategic approach for the sector;

- AASW supports Aged & Community Services Australia's (ACSA) call for the development and implementation of an 'Aged Care Workforce Development Strategy'. This strategy should consider:
 - Improved workforce planning commencing with national and regional staffing projections based on population data that includes the contribution made by support and administration staff;
 - A specific budget allocation to be made available for sector wide leadership development;
 - The impact of emerging models of care on work patterns and the diversity of work roles;
 - Action plans for improving attraction, recruitment and retention in aged care;
 - Key partnerships and initiatives for building a skilled, modern and diverse aged care workforce

j) challenges of creating a culturally competent and inclusive aged care workforce to cater for the different care needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, culturally and linguistically diverse groups and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people;

- Utilising professionals who have the skills and expertise needed to work with individuals from varying and diverse groups, cultures and backgrounds. Social workers have understanding and knowledge of cultural diversity in order to work in a culturally responsive and inclusive way. This includes understanding how health, ageing and disability, for example, are conceptualised in the person's culture of origin. Including developing culturally appropriate ways in which the person can be effectively assisted.
- It is important to ensure that culturally competent workplace practices are developed and in place to ensure the delivery of best practice responses. With their training and experiences social workers play a key role supporting the workforce.

k) l) m)

Conclusion

The AASW believes integration of social work in the aged care sector, needs to occur at all levels of the sector's workforce, leading to enhanced consumer outcomes and increased market efficiency. The AASW seeks active engagement with the sector to identify and implement consumer-focused, cost effective solutions that improve access and coordination of services.

Submitted for and on behalf of the Australian Association of Social Workers Ltd

Appendix

For further information about the contribution of social work to the aged care field please access our Scope of Practice series on our website especially Aged Care, Psychosocial Assessments and Mental Health. <https://www.aasw.asn.au/practitioner-resources/the-scope-of-social-work-practice>



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