

Social workers welcome an increase in Medicare mental health sessions in lockdown areas: a start but not the full answer

The AASW welcomes the announcement by the Health Minister Greg Hunt on Sunday, 2 August on the increase in Medicare Benefits Scheme (MBS)-funded mental health sessions in response to the escalating COVID-19 lockdowns.

AASW National President Christine Craik said, “Our social workers who provide these sessions for those accessing mental health supports under Better Access tell us that the expansion of the number of allowable sessions is critical. The effect of the continuation of the lockdown in Victoria, and the growing uncertainty and anxiety that COVID-19 is causing, will see many people requiring additional and long-term support.

The AASW has consistently, and persistently, called for an increase in allowable mental health sessions, over a long period of time and not just in response to the COVID-19 situation.

Ms Craik said, “As stated in our numerous submissions to the MBS Review, and more recently the COVID-19 Inquiry, we believe MBS Better Access needs to be based on need and level of complexity. One size does not fit all.

“Increasing the number of sessions will allow social work mental health professionals to better support individuals to work through the anxiety and complicated presentations we are seeing at this time. And while it is a welcome start, it will not alone be sufficient to address the growing mental health needs of the community and the growing demand on mental health professionals and services. We also need to see an extension of the use of telehealth and technology to support people where it is appropriate. For example, there is a huge need for work to address recovery for those who have experienced family violence. This has never been met in the current structure”

We have welcomed the focus the government has placed on the mental health needs of the community through the pandemic, and now is the time to implement the recommendations of the MBS Review Taskforce on Better Access.

Accredited Mental Health Social Workers (AMHSWs) have reported instances of their service users rationing their sessions despite significant concerns about the implications of this, combined with a worsening of symptoms as this pandemic continues. AASW social workers report observing an increase in service users presenting with suicidal thoughts and concerning behaviours.

“It is clear that if we are to work to support the mental health of Australians through this pandemic and into recovery, there needs to be adequate service provision, and this is a long-term proposition, not a short-term situation.”

The federal government’s MBS review has identified the need for an increased number of sessions and the AASW looks forward to continuing to work with government on this issue alongside addressing pay parity for all mental health professionals who are undertaking the same work.

All social workers in Australia are supporting people through this current crisis. To locate an accredited mental health social worker, visit the AASW’s GP webpage .

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About Accredited Mental Health Social Workers

Accredited Mental Health Social Workers (AMHSWs) are recognised providers with Medicare Australia and other programs, delivering clinical social work services in mental health settings and utilising a range of evidence-based strategies. Members of the public can receive a referral from their GP under Better Access. For more information, see our website.

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