

## We have to talk about poverty and inequality: Royal Commission into Mental Health Interim Report

The AASW welcomes the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System Interim Report and sees the recommendations as a good start but calls on all Australian governments to address the root causes, including poverty, discrimination and inequality. AASW National President Christine Craik said the Commission needs to make sure they consider how social disadvantage plays a significant factor in understanding mental health outcomes, as was highlighted in our and numerous other submissions. The Commission has identified what is fundamentally a broken system in need of urgent reform. The recommendations provide an important start so people have access to the supports they need but this has to be matched with a comprehensive strategy that looks at how larger social, cultural and economic factors contribute to a person's mental health. Ms Craik said, "As a society, we don't do enough to acknowledge and address the role that poverty, family violence, lack of affordable housing, and a lack of resourcing in education, that enables the conditions for mental health issues to arise in the first place. "The evidence is clear that disadvantaged people disproportionately experience poor mental health outcomes. For social workers, this is our daily reality." The interim report acknowledges this to some degree, but it needs to be matched with a far greater call for action and a sector wide response. Ms Craik said, "The recent senate inquiry into Centrelink's practices highlights how much mental health and poverty intersect, revealing the level of trauma that this is causing people. Then there are the significant mental health impacts that 25 years of low Newstart rates have had on the lives of so many. "It is clear that to understand mental health, we need to look at how age, gender and sexual identity, socioeconomic status, ability, culture, ethnicity and a whole range of other factors interact. Otherwise, we will continue down a highly individualistic path of service provision that will not address the causes. "These factors greatly influence a person's sense of belonging and stability and are known as the 'social determinants of health'. People need to be confident that their basic needs for nutrition, shelter, safety and security are met before they can attain the state of overall wellbeing, as outlined by the World Health Organization in its definition of health. "In our rush to treat the symptoms, we often forget the causes. Paying attention to and dealing with the enablers, is the great strength of social work in the mental health arena." The Royal Commission is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to transform how we understand mental health in Australia, and this must begin by broadening our appreciation of the larger contributing factors. Without this, we will continue to prop up a system that does not address many of the causes of mental health. The AASW sees this report as an important first step and looks forward to continuing to work with the Commission towards improving the health and wellbeing of all Australians.

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