

Select Committee on Job Security

Senate Select Committee on Job Security

(MARCH 2021)



AASW

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Australian Association
of Social Workers

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The Australian Association of Social Workers

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the professional body representing more than 14,000 social workers throughout Australia. We set the benchmark for professional education and practice in social work, and advocate on matters of human rights, discrimination, and matters that influence people's quality of life.

The social work profession

Social work is a tertiary qualified profession recognised internationally that pursues social justice and human rights. Social workers aim to enhance the quality of life of every member of society and empower them to develop their full potential. 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 knowledges. Professional social workers consider the relationship between biological, psychological, social and cultural factors and how they influence a person's health, wellbeing and development. Social workers work with individuals, families, groups and communities. They maintain a dual focus on improving human wellbeing; and identifying and addressing any external issues (known as systemic or structural issues) that detract from wellbeing, such as inequality, injustice and discrimination.

Our submission

The AASW welcomes the opportunity to submit to the Select Committee on Job Security. Social workers see daily the impact that job insecurity has on the people they work with, their families, and the broader community. Additionally, the nature of community sector funding means that many social workers themselves do not have security in their own work whilst also being paid less than many other professions. During the bushfire crisis of 2019-2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic, social workers and the community sector have been integral in delivering support to those who need it most. Working across many fields, including family violence, mental health and housing and

homelessness, the social work profession is fundamental in supporting marginalised people in Australia. At the same time as demand is increasing, many organisations and AASW members are reporting that they are struggling to meet demand in a resource-constrained environment. The resourcing issues are related not only to inadequate funding, but also to insecurity in funding, which translates into difficulty in retaining staff on short-term contracts, and difficulty maintaining continuity of service.

The AASW will address the following terms of reference in its submission:

- a. *the extent and nature of insecure or precarious employment in Australia;*
- b. *the risks of insecure or precarious work exposed or exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis;*
- d. *the aspirations of Australians including income and housing security, and dignity in retirement;*
- f. *accident compensation schemes, payroll, federal and state and territory taxes;*

Summary of recommendations:

- That the temporary income support arrangements under COVID-19 be replaced by a whole of government approach to creating meaningful, secure, adequately remunerated, predictable work.
- That community sector funding is guaranteed for a minimum of five years to allow for staff and service development
- That an amount equivalent to the Equal Remuneration Order supplement be included in the baseline funding grant for community services which were not included in the recent Federal budget's allocation for this
- That government provide targeted support to sectors predominantly staffed by women to reduce women's unemployment and aid economic recovery
- That income support payments be increased to an amount that supports access to housing
- That social housing stock be renewed and increased
- That Accredited Mental Health Social Workers be included in all accident compensation schemes in all states and territories

The AASW's response to Terms of Reference

a. the extent and nature of insecure or precarious employment in Australia

The AASW's vision is for a cohesive, inclusive and just society in which it is possible for everyone to thrive, flourish and develop their full potential. The AASW believes that 2020 provided lessons for official decision makers in what is required to ensure this outcome. One of these lessons was that we can boost the economy by responding to inequality. As the unemployment rate rose sharply across the country in 2020, the Federal Government introduced the COVID-19 supplement for those receiving income support. These measures were instrumental in both lifting people out of poverty

and in stimulating the economy, and the community sector provided extensive documentation of the secondary benefits for families and communities that flowed from the increase.¹

Although Australia is moving into the recovery phase of the pandemic and unemployment levels are decreasing, challenges remain for people who are returning to the workforce. One of these is that there is an increasing trend for newly created and/or entry-level jobs to be classified as casual or part-time², meaning that workers are often not provided with sufficient hours to cover the costs of living, or as demonstrated during the pandemic, are at risk of losing their employment altogether should circumstances quickly change.

As the economy rebuilds, it is important to ensure that the jobs which are created are structured and remunerated in a way that gives people adequate income and predictability. What is needed is a multi-faceted strategy which will create jobs to fill current gaps in understaffed sectors of the labour market and provide tailored support to people who could be employed to do that work.³ This will include measures to ensure that the work is structured in such a way that pays a living wage and allows workers to have stability in their lives.

In regard to the community sector, contractual funding arrangements are often time-limited with periods ranging from as little as one year to the more common three-year funding cycles. This hampers the ability of social workers to plan for their own future, as well as future planning for improvements in service delivery and provision. It also makes the retaining of experienced and highly skilled staff in the community sector difficult, particularly in already under-resourced regional and rural areas of Australia.⁴

Equal Remuneration Order

Introduced in 2012, the Equal Remuneration Order (ERO) supplement allowed the increase of wages across the lower-paid but vitally important community sector in line with the private sector. The Federal Government will however no longer pay the ERO supplement from July 2021 on many grants, with the baseline of funding grants not increasing to include the supplement. This will result in significantly less funding for community sector organisations, including the housing and homelessness sector, with less funding leading to a decrease in staffing levels, service provision, or in some cases both.

¹ ACOSS, Next steps for Income support, briefing paper, July 2020, https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Social-security-next-steps-JUL-UPDATED-2-9_.pdf

² <https://www.acoss.org.au/faces-of-unemployment-2020/>

³ Anglicare Australia, 2020 Jobs Availability Snapshot, <https://www.anglicare.asn.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/2020-jobs-availability-snapshot.pdf?sfvrsn=4>

⁴ <https://www.acoss.org.au/the-profile-and-pulse-of-the-sector-findings-from-the-2019-australian-community-sector-survey/>

Recommendations:

- That the temporary income support arrangements under COVID-19 be replaced by a whole of government approach to creating meaningful, secure, adequately remunerated, predictable work.
- That community sector funding is guaranteed for a minimum of five years to allow for staff retention and service development .
- That an amount equivalent to the Equal Remuneration supplement be included in the baseline funding grant for community services which were not included in the recent Federal budget's allocation for this.

b. the risks of insecure or precarious work exposed or exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis

It is impossible to discuss the consequences of COVID-19 on work without acknowledging that this is a discussion about women's work, its critically important role in society and the low value that society places on it. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted this already existing inequality in the labour market while also demonstrating the critical importance of the caring work that is performed by women. Women were hardest hit by job losses across the hospitality and caring sectors while those who could work from home were required to juggle increased family and childcare commitments alongside their paid employment in an ever-changing and stressful environment.⁵ At the same time, it was the work of women in the health, disability, community service and aged care sectors that was responsible for many people surviving an outbreak of COVID-19. Workers providing personal care to older people and NDIS participants are generally on casual or short-term contracts which leads to working across multiple sites, and are among the lowest paid among the overall workforce. As well as demonstrating the injustice for the workers themselves, COVID-19 demonstrated the risk to the community from this situation. Because of the low wages and insecure employment conditions workers were obliged to continue working across multiple Residential Aged Care Facilities, this is one of the factors that contributed to the spread of COVID-19 through residential aged care.⁶

Women also make up the majority of the overall social work workforce.⁷ As stated in the response to term of reference A, many in this sector are employed on short-term contracts in line with funding cycles, often with the clause "subject to funding" as a condition of their employment. These time-limited contracts have many drawbacks, including the capacity to plan properly for one's future, such as being able to apply for home loans or making the decision of when to have children. It is also very stressful on staff not knowing whether they will be able to keep a job to which they have dedicated significant time and effort to make sure clients are appropriately supported. One social worker on yearly funding contracts for three years told the AASW of the impact on their mental health, stating that the annual stress and uncertainty of not knowing whether they would get to keep working in a job

⁵ <https://www.wgea.gov.au/publications/gendered-impact-of-covid-19>

⁶ *Royal Commission on Aged Care Quality and Safety, Special Report: COVID-19, 03/03/20, p11.*

⁷ <https://www.aasw.asn.au/document/item/6778>

they love and the fear of what would happen to their clients significantly damaged their wellbeing and their ability to support vulnerable people. As COVID-19 increased demand for services across the community sector, this uncertainty has only been exacerbated.

Recommendations:

- That government provided targeted support to sectors predominantly staffed by women to reduce women's unemployment and aid economic recovery
- That community sector funding is guaranteed for a minimum of five years to allow for staff retention and service development

d. the aspirations of Australians including income and housing security, and dignity in retirement

The social work profession is committed to maximising the wellbeing of individuals and society. We consider that individual and societal wellbeing is underpinned by socially inclusive communities that emphasise principles of social justice and respect for human dignity and human rights. This includes the fundamental right to housing, adequate standards of living across a person's whole lifespan, and the right to meaningful work. Social workers directly assist individuals and families to locate and maintain secure and affordable housing but experience increasing difficulties in achieving these outcomes. Therefore, social workers' commitment to making Australia more equitable includes advocating for the provision of affordable housing for all.

Housing costs are increasing across all types of tenure and all age groups in Australia. Rates of those renting privately and for longer are increasing while home ownership is decreasing.⁸ The nature of insecure and casual employment and low rates of income support payments are related to this trend.⁹ Growing numbers of older people, particularly women, are retiring with lower amounts of superannuation and assets due to a lifetime of insecurity in employment, taking time out of the workforce to care for children and elderly parents, and the gender pay-gap.¹⁰ This is leaving them at considerable risk of poverty and homelessness as many also retire while renting or paying off a mortgage. Immediate government action is required to address housing unaffordability and low rates of income support to avoid widespread poverty among older Australian women..

Recommendations:

- That income support payments be increased to an amount that supports access to housing.
- That social housing stock which is suitable for older women be renewed and increased.

⁸https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/BriefingBook46p/HomeOwnership#:~:text=Certain%20age%20groups%20exhibit%20more,cent%20to%2062.2%20per%20cent.

⁹ ibid

¹⁰ https://www.ahuri.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0029/65855/AHURI-Final-Report-322-An-effective-homelessness-services-system-for-older-Australians.pdf, p. 19

f. accident compensation schemes, payroll, federal and state and territory taxes;

The AASW is the accrediting body for Accredited Mental Health Social Workers (AMHSWs). AMHSWs are one of the few designated Allied Health professional groups eligible to provide private mental health services to people with diagnosable mental health conditions or people 'at risk' of developing mental health conditions under the Commonwealth Medicare initiative and other schemes such as Department of Veterans Affairs and the NDIS. As a group of providers, AMHSWs are the second largest after the combined group of Clinical Psychologists and Registered Psychologists.¹¹

In some states AMHSWs are recognised as professionals able to deliver supports through the state-based compensation schemes for people whose insecure work makes them ineligible for employer funded leave. This is not however consistent across jurisdictions, and to the detriment of those people who would benefit from the highly trained and holistic support practices of AMHSWs. Without a change in the current situation, consumer choice in accessing support is significantly limited. AMHSWs work from a biopsychosocial, whole-of-person perspective and their training provides an appreciation of the impact that social, environmental and cultural factors have on total health and wellbeing. Their person-in-environment approach (that is the bedrock of all social work education) makes AMHSWs experts in dealing with complexity. Their experience in supporting people and their families after an accident is instrumental in being able to deal with any mental trauma experienced as a result of their accident. It also means that workers are better supported to make the transition back to secure work and are therefore less reliant on income support and job services agencies.¹²

- That Accredited Mental Health Social Workers be included in all accident compensation schemes in all states and territories

Conclusion

The AASW welcomes the opportunity to discuss any of the matters raised in this submission.

¹¹ <https://www.aasw.asn.au/document/item/11704>

¹² https://www.monash.edu/__data/assets/pdf_file/0017/446210/Vol413-Grant.pdf



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