

Development of COAG mental health action plan

Background

- At the 10 February 2006 meeting, COAG agreed to develop a 5-year action plan on mental health for consideration at their June meeting
 - the Commonwealth has committed \$1.9 billion in new funding for the action plan
- The action plan is to include options to improve the diagnosis and treatment of mental illness, eg early intervention and better integration of different types of care
- The action plan also explicitly called for options to increase participation in the community and in employment
- **Members of Catholic Social Services Australia work with a significant number of clients with mental health problems**

Increasing participation in the community and in employment

- **We recommend that COAG adopt a broad approach, looking beyond “medical” issues to the adequacy of broader support services for people with a mental illness. Such support services include income support, housing, employment, training and rehabilitation**
 - This was a key issue identified by the Senate Select Committee on Mental Health in its first report¹
 - It is especially important to ensure adequate co-ordination and integration of service provision across sectors
- New Commonwealth funding for personal helpers and mentors to assist people with a mental illness access social services is a welcome initiative
 - Commonwealth funding includes \$284.8 million for 900 personal helpers and mentors to assist people with a mental illness who are living in the community²
- However, resource constraints in broader support services are limiting our ability to work with clients with a mental illness, for eg in the Personal Support Program (PSP)
- Studies have found that three-quarters of PSP participants are people with a mental illness³
- An additional 2,500 places in PSP for people with a mental illness over five years (at a cost of \$40m) from 1 July 2006 were announced as part of the COAG package⁴
- However, the waitlist for the program continues to be high
 - as at the end of April 2006, the current waitlist for PSP was 7,600⁵
- Providers still do not have access to brokerage funds, such as the Job Seeker Account in Job Network, to purchase support services that people with a mental illness need, such as drug and alcohol counselling

¹ see Chapter 10, Senate Select Committee on Mental Health 2006, *A national approach to mental health – from crisis to community*, First Report

² *ibid*

³ Mission Australia 2005, *Mental Health: A critical contemporary issue*, Snapshot 2005 and Perkins, D 2005, *Personal Support Program evaluation: interim report*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, p.v

⁴ Budget paper no.2, p.244

⁵ Senate 2006, *Hansard*, Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Committee, Budget Estimates 2006-07, p.EWRE21

Social security system

- **We recommend that COAG call for revisions to the social security system to take proper account of the incidence among income support recipients of mental illness, especially where mental illness is undiagnosed or undisclosed and/or untreated**
 - a good starting point is provided by Recommendations 43 and 44 of the Senate Select Committee's Second Report⁶
- Given that people with a mental illness now have participation requirements, their ability to understand and comply with their requirements is unclear
- Safeguards to ensure that people with a mental illness are not subject to non-payment periods appear to suffer from flaws
- A non-payment period will not be imposed where the mental illness 'had a significant effect' on the person's capacity to comply with their participation requirements
 - Welfare Rights has called for Centrelink staff to receive greater training on how to identify symptoms of mental illness⁷
- The design of the financial case management system appears to be provide a safeguard against people with a mental illness from an 8 week non-payment period, as long as they are receiving medication
 - however, a large proportion of people with mental illness (about 60%) do not receive treatment from health services in any 12 month period⁸. These people would not be eligible for financial case management

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⁶ Senate Select Committee on Mental Health 2006, *A national approach to mental health – from crisis to community*, Final Report, p.18

⁷ Welfare Rights Centre 2005, Submission to Senate Select Committee on Mental Health

⁸ Mission Australia 2005