MEDIA RELEASE

Government can’t provide reason for freezing funding to vital mental health nursing program

A Senate Estimates hearing has revealed that the Government has effectively frozen funding for a vital mental health service without any evidence or evaluation to justify their decision.

The Community Services Senate Estimates Committee was told that the Mental Health Nurse Incentive Program (MHNIP) has been frozen, although the Department of Health and Ageing was unable to provide relevant information to explain why this one program was singled out to be sacrificed for the Government’s Budget savings.

The MHNIP is a gap-filler. It helps people with complex mental health problems and stops them falling through the cracks and chasms that is Australia’s patchwork mental health system. The MHNIP provides one-on-one clinical nursing support and case management to people who have been put in the too hard basket by the system. The program helps people who have regularly been admitted to hospital, people who are suicidal, homeless people, and young people who have withdrawn from school and families. There is no other program that delivers for these vulnerable and marginalised people.

The Department of Health and Ageing refused to be drawn on what would happen to those with severe and complex mental illnesses who couldn’t access the MHNIP. The Department found it “a bit hard to speculate” on whether there would be waiting lists for those with mental illnesses, or indeed how the level of services are to be measured or capped.

Greens spokesperson for Mental Health, Senator Penny Wright and Shadow Minister for Mental Health, Senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, asked numerous questions regarding costing, reasoning and evidence for the decision to freeze the MHNIP funding. Their questions were met with bureaucratic jargon, confusion and statements about “constrained financial circumstances”.

Adjunct Associate Professor Kim Ryan, CEO of the Australian College of Mental Health Nurses, believes the Government’s inability to answer questions highlights how ill-conceived this freeze on mental health services is.

“The decision to freeze funding for the MHNIP at the 2011-12 levels has been made and organisations have been advised, yet the Government can’t tell us how this funding freeze will be implemented.

“This is a demand driven program and the evidence shows there is a desperate demand for it. I repeat my call for the Government to rethink this funding freeze and live up to their promise to make mental health their second term priority,” said Ms Ryan.

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