Dear First Ministers

We are writing to implore you, the leaders of the states and territories and the Commonwealth of Australia, to urgently work together to reform our nation’s failing mental health system.

The most recent review of Australia’s mental health system, conducted by Professor Allan Fels and the National Mental Health Commission (NMHC), described a deeply flawed system, characterised by:

*Poor planning, coordination and operation between the Commonwealth and the states and territories, resulting in duplication, overlap and gaps in services.*
The NMHC posed the question:

*If the Commonwealth and states can’t be sure about their respective roles and responsibilities, then how is a person with mental health difficulties, or provider, expected to know where to go?*

Only you, the First Ministers of our governments, can resolve this long-standing confusion and achieve lasting and effective reform.

We, the mental health sector, last wrote to First Ministers in December 2012 urging the adoption of national, whole-of-life, outcome-based targets and indicators to drive mental health reform. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) responded by announcing “new governance and accountability arrangements that will directly engage stakeholders and ensure that governments are held to account.”

At the same meeting, COAG committed to adopting “whole-of-life and outcome-based national indicators and targets,” and sought independent expert advice on the most appropriate indicators and targets.

COAG received that advice two years ago but has not acted. In the meantime, Australia’s mental health crisis has deepened.

We write today with two clear priorities for action. While the challenge is daunting, we believe the immediate priorities are clear.

First, we ask governments to act on your commitments of 2012 by urgently implementing national, whole-of-life targets for improving mental health outcomes that reflect the aspirations of consumers and carers, backed up with indicators to demonstrate progress and performance.

Second, we ask your governments to urgently develop and agree on a fully funded National Mental Health Agreement which, at a minimum:

- includes specific responsibilities across portfolios including health, social and community services, employment and education
- boosts investment in early intervention and prevention
- expands and streamlines services in the community, close to need, and
- guarantees an acceptable standard of services to Australians who experience mental illness and their carers.

Upon releasing the NMHC review, Federal Health Minister the Hon Sussan Ley MP said that Australia needs a reform plan for mental health that is “national”, “coordinated” and “binding”.

We agree, but stress the need for a plan that reflects a whole-of-government approach to mental health. History demonstrates clearly that a national agreement developed by health ministers and health departments alone will fail to improve the whole-of-life outcomes that, as COAG has already acknowledged, are the true test of reform.
Only you, Australia’s First Ministers, can ensure your whole cabinets, including your ministers for employment, education, defence, finance, social and community services, Indigenous affairs, health, and your Treasurers, all play their part in improving the mental health of an entire nation.

The economic and social benefits of whole-of-government action on mental health will be profound, but they can only be realised through your collective leadership.

We, the undersigned, stand ready to assist you in the reform that lays ahead.

Sincerely

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Australian Council of Social Services

Arthur Papkotsias, CEO
Neami National

Sue Murray, CEO
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