

Media Release

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Great news from the Commonwealth on dollars for mental health – but be cautious on coordination with state based initiatives.

The Howard Government announced today a substantial allocation of \$1.8 billion over the next five years for spending on mental health with \$500 million allocated in the last year and thereafter. The Prime Minister in his address encouraged the States to match the Commonwealth's contribution by increasing funding to State mental health responsibilities such as supported accommodation, emergency and crises services, hospitals and prisons.

Increases to specific Commonwealth responsibilities announced included:

- greater support for clinical services in the community particularly arrangements for psychiatrists and GPs to employ allied health staff and nurses to treat and follow up clients under new Medicare arrangements
- funding for an additional 400 nurses and 200 clinical psychologists each year
- 650 new non-clinical respite services for up to 15,000 families and carers
- an increased number of places under the Personal Support Program designed to assist people attain and retain employment
- increased support to NGOs to run living skills programs for those people unable to enter the paid workforce
- more community based programs under the Suicide Prevention Strategy
- increased funding to Lifeline and development of a national call centre network
- a range of programs targeted at youth including the Youth Pathways Program which assists young people stay in school and transition to the workforce as well as funding for mentoring and recreational programs
- additional funding for services working with people affected by substance misuse and mental illness with a focus on indigenous communities

Jenna Bateman, Executive Officer of the Mental Health Coordinating Council commented, "The Howard Government has put their cards on the table and they are looking pretty good. The focus of identified programs for funding is, on the whole, in keeping with how we see the need within the community in areas of Commonwealth responsibility. There is however concern that greater emphasis is required to establish how these new Commonwealth initiatives will dovetail with current state based initiatives and processes".

"MHCC is particularly concerned that development of the NSW Community Mental Health Strategy, currently nearing completion, is informed by the contents of the Commonwealth package and does not duplicate or confuse proposed directions. NSW needs to get a clear picture of who is doing what in mental health – without clear delineation of responsibilities there is greater risk of people falling through the gaps such as has happened in NSW with delivery of care to people with psychiatric disability. It is hoped that the COAG meeting in June will ensure there is a collaborative approach to roll out of new and enhanced programs".

"Mental health care is so under funded in most States at the moment that commitment by John Howard to up spending in the area is applauded. The NSW Government has a good record on mental health to date and has demonstrated its commitment to improve things further. This is a hopeful and positive time for people with mental health problems, their families and carers"

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*MHCC is the peak
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