

Submission  
No 97

**INQUIRY INTO EQUITY, ACCESSIBILITY AND  
APPROPRIATE DELIVERY OF OUTPATIENT AND  
COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH CARE IN NEW SOUTH  
WALES**

**Organisation:** Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW)

**Date Received:** 5 September 2023

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**AASW**

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Australian Association  
of Social Workers

**Equity, accessibility and appropriate  
delivery of outpatient and community  
mental health care in New South Wales**

**PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE NO. 2 - HEALTH**

**AUGUST 2023**

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## About the Australian Association of Social Workers

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the national professional body representing more than 17,000 social workers throughout Australia. The AASW works to promote the profession of social work including setting the benchmark for professional education and practice in social work, while also advocating on matters of human rights to advance social justice.

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## Executive Summary

Social workers and Accredited Mental Health Social Workers (AMHSWs) provide a valuable contribution to the mental health workforce. AMHSWs are highly educated and experienced mental health professionals who can offer availability to fill service gaps. Social workers and AMHSWs are also ideal candidates to lead social prescribing programs, aimed at improving access to appropriate care for people at risk of poorer health outcomes. <sup>1</sup>The AASW welcomes further engagement with the NSW government for social workers and AMHSWs to improve mental health and wellbeing outcomes for individuals and the community.

The following Terms of Reference will be addressed in this submission:

- a)** Equity of access to outpatient mental health services,
- d)** Integration between physical and mental health services, and between mental health services and providers, and
- e)** Appropriate and efficient allocation of mental health care workers, including psychiatrists, nurses, psychologists, General Practitioners, counsellors, social workers, allied health professionals and peer workers.

## Recommendations

The AASW recommends:

- That AMHSWs are included in mental health workforce planning given their availability and geographic spread, to fill service gaps and increase accessibility of mental health service provision.
- That AMHSWs and social workers are included in the design, implementation, and evaluation of social prescribing programs, which aims to increase integration between physical and mental health services and address the social determinants of health.

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<sup>1</sup> [australia-s-primary-health-care-10-year-plan-2022-2032-future-focused-primary-health-care-australia-s-primary-health-care-10-year-plan-2022-2032.pdf](#)

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## Background information on social work and Accredited Mental Health Social Workers (AMHSWs)

Social workers operate at the interface between people and their social, cultural, and physical environments. Social workers maintain a dual focus on assisting human functioning and identifying the systemic issues which create inequity and cause injustice. As of May 2023, according to Jobs and Skills Australia, there are 48,472 social workers employed in Australia.<sup>2</sup>

Social work practice focusses on a holistic, whole-of-person and life-course approach, and as such social workers are skilled at providing assessments and interventions for people with complex presentations.

Regarding state and territory specialised mental health care facilities, of the approximately 36,700 full-time equivalent staff, 2,670 were social workers.<sup>3</sup> Social workers are a crucial part of the mental health workforce.

Social work is a four-year, or two-year masters qualifying, tertiary-qualified profession recognised nationally and internationally. Building on this tertiary qualified foundation is the opportunity to gain a further credential in mental health demonstrating expertise through evidenced practice experience.

Social workers who are members of the AASW and who have met certain criteria in mental health settings can seek accredited status as an Accredited Mental Health Social Worker (AMHSW), which was introduced prior to 2008. The AASW is an Accrediting Authority recognised by the Federal Government.

The accreditation indicates that the practitioner is a highly skilled mental health clinician in assessment, treatment planning, complex case formulation, and the delivery of evidence-based therapeutic interventions across formative and life stages in collaboration with clients.

Accredited Mental Health Social Workers are recognised providers with Medicare Australia and other programs, delivering Focussed Psychological Strategies (FPS) in mental health settings and utilising a range of evidence-based strategies.

To become an AMHSW, social workers must satisfy the following requirements:

1. Hold current membership of the AASW. \*
2. Experience:
  - Have at least 2 years' full-time equivalent (FTE) post-qualifying social work experience in a mental health setting within the last 5 years.
  - An applicant must be able to articulate how their experience meets the AASW Practice Standards.

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<sup>2</sup> [NERO dashboard | Jobs and Skills Australia](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Workforce - Mental health - AIHW](#)

3. Have received at least 2 years' full-time equivalent (FTE) post-qualifying supervision in a mental health setting within the last 5 years.
4. Have met the Continuing Professional Development requirements.
5. Demonstrate ability and knowledge of Mental Health social work practice.
6. Verification of applicant's Skills and Competencies in Practice – Referee statement and position description; arrange for an employer or supervisor to provide a referee statement related to each post-qualifying nominated mental health position in which you have had 2 years FTE practice experience within the last 5 years (see criterion 2 above).

(\*Note membership of the AASW is available to applicants holding either an AASW approved social work qualification from an Australian tertiary institution or qualifications from overseas that have been recognised by the AASW as comparable to an AASW approved social work qualification.)

As of 20<sup>th</sup> August 2023, there are **2,996 active AMHSWs** across Australia. Further information about AMHSWs can be found via the link [here](#).

## Responses to the Terms of Reference

### Recommendations:

- That AMHSWs are included in mental health workforce planning given their availability and geographic spread, to fill service gaps and increase accessibility of mental health service provision.
- That AMHSWs and social workers are included in the design, implementation, and evaluation of social prescribing programs, which aims to increase integration between physical and mental health services and address the social determinants of health.

### a) Equity of access to outpatient mental health services

As outlined, AMHSWs are social workers who provide mental health treatment across a range of programs and schemes, to enhance a person's recovery.

In August 2022, the AASW undertook a comprehensive survey with the AMHSW cohort. Key findings relating to access of mental health services can be seen below:

- 47% were in regional, rural, or remote locations.
- 14% were actively seeking new clients.
- 50% can take on new clients.
- 37% were adequately booked but had the ability to take on more clients.
- 9% were able to see clients on the same day of booking.
- 16% had a wait list of 1 week.
- 60% had a wait list of 2 weeks or less.

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These findings indicate that AMHSWs are a specialist mental health service provider, who can fill service gaps in regional, rural, and remote areas. It also suggests that AMHSWs are more readily available than other mental health professionals and this should be taken into consideration when undertaking workforce planning and allocation of resources.

#### d) Integration between physical and mental health services, and between mental health services and providers

Social prescribing enables healthcare professionals to introduce people to a range of non-medical support in communities to boost health and wellbeing and use voluntary and community sector resources to improve support for people with long-term conditions. It is widely promoted to address complex health; psychological and social issues present in the community.

Social Workers are well equipped to undertake social prescribing as they typically combine several roles, including assessment, counselling, and ongoing support. They have the training necessary for the provision of quality case management services. This is especially true in intensive types of case management, where their multidisciplinary knowledge base is advantageous for mobilising resources and coordinating services for a person with a mental illness. They are also adept at identifying and mobilising community resources for family members.

For mental health, social prescribing has the potential to become fully integrated as a patient pathway to strengthen the links between healthcare providers and community, voluntary and local services. Social prescribing for mental health provides a framework for developing alternative responses to mental distress; a wider recognition of the influence of social, economic, and cultural factors on mental health outcomes across the whole spectrum of disorders; and improving access to mainstream services and opportunities for people with long-term mental health problems.

The broader, holistic framework evident in social prescribing is consistent with social work practice as it has an emphasis on personal experiences, relationships, and social conditions, which is more compatible with contemporary understandings of mental wellbeing and mental distress.

The proactive approach to mental health promotion employed in social prescribing can strengthen provision for those with mental health needs across the spectrum of disorders, offer greater patient choice, and improve the wide range of health and social outcomes that are linked to mental wellbeing.<sup>4</sup> It is consistent with a range of current policy guidance and recommendations and has the potential to save future costs through early intervention.

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<sup>4</sup> [social-prescribing-for-mental-health.pdf \(citizen-network.org\)](#)

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e) appropriate and efficient allocation of mental health care workers, including psychiatrists, nurses, psychologists, GPs, counsellors, social workers, allied health professionals and peer workers

As mentioned previously, our survey information suggests that AMHSWs are more readily available than other mental health professionals and have a broad geographic spread. This needs to be taken into consideration when making decisions about the appropriate and efficient allocation of the mental health workforce.



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