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MEDIA RELEASE: Door opens for people with severe mental illness outside the NDIS

Community Mental Health Australia (CMHA) welcomes the recommendation from the Independent NDIS Review for foundational community based mental health and psychosocial supports for people outside the NDIS. CMHA also enthusiastically welcomes the associated announcement from National Cabinet for agreeing to 50:50 funding, which CMHA has been advocating for, to help meet the huge unmet need for these services and supports.

CMHA is the coalition of the state and territory community mental health peaks. Bill Gye the CEO of CMHA says, “Numerous less costly psychosocial services existed previously but these were cut when funding was shifted to the NDIS. In the interim, the unmet need outside the NDIS has grown.”

The most recent data coming from the SA Report on Unmet Need for Psychosocial Support released in September indicates that per capita around 275,000 people in Australia are living with severe mental health issues and currently have no support from the NDIS, or any existing Commonwealth or state and territory psychosocial programs.

The growth rate of the number of people in the NDIS with psychosocial disability accelerated over the last few years. On 30 June 2020, there were 39,637 people with psychosocial disability in the NDIS with an average annual package was $50,900. On 30 June 2023, there were 62,011 people with psychosocial disability and their average annual package increased to $71,600. This is an average annual growth rate of over 25% per annum, way above the intended 8% growth target announced in the Federal Budget this year.

“Clearly alternative pathways are needed to channel future demand and to help meet the massive gap that is being revealed in the current national assessment of unmet need being commissioned by the Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care. Some of these alternatives already exist in effective state and territory community mental health programs, they just need to be expanded,” says Mr Gye.

The CMHA coalition, and several other national organisations, have been advocating strongly for an effective transformative alternative, one that is evidence-based, recovery-oriented, and adapted to local needs and the existing service ecology. Most importantly this alternative should be co-designed by people with the lived experience of mental ill-health together with community-based providers, advocacy, and commissioning bodies.

“These future services and support can be both effective and more economical while returning significant wellbeing and social benefits,” says Mr Gye.

CMHA and its members are cautiously optimistic but aware that many things could go wrong in the implementation as there are many competing priorities and different perspectives.

“It would be all too easy to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. We don’t want cheap coffee and conversation programs and we certainly need an alternative to the current system of waiting for people to

go into crisis, which takes up ambulance and police time, dragging them to hospital, patching them up, and then sending them back out to do the same cycle again," says Mr Gye.

This will require all stakeholders to work together carefully to take advantage of this arising opportunity to improve the social and emotional wellbeing of some of the most disadvantaged people in Australia outside the NDIS while supporting the sustainability of the NDIS.

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