

**ECONOMIC
INDEPENDENCE**
& Income Support

LACK of SUPPORT for INCOME SUPPORT

from conversations with
Dr Tessa Boyd-Caine

Deputy Chief Executive Officer Australian Council of Social Service
at the inaugural Australian Council of Non-Government Organisations
on mental health, October 9, 2012

The fragmentation of mental health and allied services affects the continuum of care available to people using those services. Critical services include employment, housing, legal, family and health services.

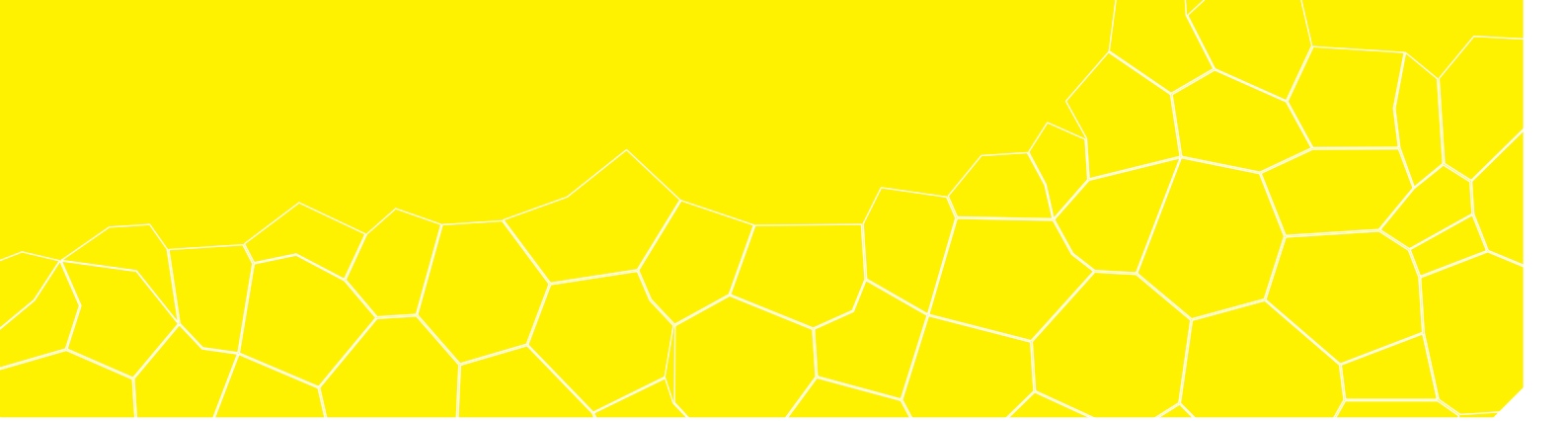
The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment Inquiry in 2012 resulted in the Work Wanted: Mental Health and Workforce Participation report (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment: 2012). The committee summed up the key issue as: 'increasing numbers of people with a mental health condition being on income support'.

This includes 800,000 people receiving employment-related allowance payments including the unemployment benefit Newstart Allowance (NSA) and Youth Allowance – Other (for jobseekers). Most are living in poverty, especially those on the \$35 per day of NSA for a single person.

The single rate of Newstart has fallen in proportion to the minimum wage from 52% to 45% since 1994, when it was last increased. Compared to wages, the single rate of Newstart is the lowest unemployment payment in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development at 40% of a low full-time wage after tax – and that includes rent assistance.

From the Work Wanted report, we know that in the 2007 Australian Bureau of Statistics National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing, 45% of Australians aged 16-85 years reported experiencing at least one, or a combination of, mental illnesses at some point in their lifetime. And 20% of Australians reported experiencing one or a combination of mental disorders in the previous 12 months.

Mental illness is the single largest cause of disability in Australia. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), mental disorders account for 13.1% of Australia's total burden of disease and injury and are estimated to cost the Australian economy \$20 billion annually in lost productivity and labour participation (Begg, Vos, Barker, Stevenson, Stanley and Lopez: 2007).



We know this has a particular impact on ability to gain and retain paid work, as does the lack of unskilled jobs for low-qualified workers, which ACOSS members see as one of the reasons for increasing numbers of people on NSA.

The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) partners in an international report (IndustriALL Global Union: 2012) on secure work points to growth in agency or contracted labour as a significant factor in increasing job insecurity. The report was completed by IndustriALL, a new international organisation made up by unions representing 50 million workers in 140 countries across the mining, energy and manufacturing sectors. It showed that between 1996 and 2009 the number of workers in labour hire and contract work had doubled. Labour hire agencies' revenue has increased from \$105 billion to \$257 billion in the same period.

The Productivity Commission has estimated that a quarter of a million Australian workers are employed through labour hire (Productivity Commission: 2013); ACTU reports Australia

has the second highest rate of insecure work in the developed world, at 40% of the workforce (ACTU Australia: 2013).

In October 2012 SANE talked about more Australians calling for help, with enquiries to the national helpline rising 27% from July 2011 to June 2012, as compared with the same period in the previous year. Women seeking help outnumbered men, three to one.

Just under half the callers were enquiring about support in the community, while a further third were asking about treatment. Analysis of SANE Helpline's statistics show Australians are concerned about their loved ones' health, with almost half (42%) of all enquiries coming from people worried about the mental health of someone they know or care for (SANE Australia: 2012).

One in five enquiries are related to undiagnosed symptoms. 'Often there has been no diagnosis and people are seeking information, advice or encouragement to take the first and most important step of contacting a general practitioner for help or assessment,' SANE Chief Executive Officer Jack Heath explains. 'Others need help to navigate the healthcare system, while some

people require assistance to access housing or jobs, or require financial or legal advice.'

There are also particular challenges for people seeking legal services. The Australia Institute has conservatively estimated that 490,000 Australians each year miss out on legal help for financial reasons or lack of knowledge. Furthermore, over 80% of the people helped by community legal centres earn under \$26,000 a year.

The National Association of Community Legal Centres shows the most common issues community legal centres help people with are tenancy, debt, employment issues, family violence, family law issues about children, divorce, consumer issues, family law issues about property, wills, powers of attorney and guardianship, minor crime and fines, car accidents and social security. About 60% of the work is in civil law, 35% in family law and 5% in crime.

Yet, Australian Government funding for legal assistance services has failed to keep pace with demand, inflation and population growth, and budget figures show falls in real terms in per capita funding for the next three years.

The reality is that while demand for community services is growing, the complexity of the needs of people seeking services is also growing. While an employment service may secure a job interview for someone, their capacity to maintain paid work is going to be undermined if they cannot at the same time fill a prescription, secure the housing they need, and meet the costs of their child's schooling. We need holistic services that support people's overall health and wellbeing, not just a particular condition, if we are to truly support people living with mental illness to maintain socially and economically participating lives.

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