

# Build, Support, Prepare: Investing in Australia's Future

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# Executive summary

- There is a critical shortage of psychologists in Australia, with the current workforce meeting only 35% of the national demand for mental health services. We must urgently develop innovative solutions and scale up the workforce through increased funding and opportunities for post-graduate training programs for psychologists.
- The Better Access initiative has enabled millions of Australians to access quality psychological care but more needs to be done. The need for psychological services has never been greater and has been compounded by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and other climate change related disasters that have affected communities around Australia over the past several years. The recent *Evaluation of the Better Access Initiative: Final Report<sup>5</sup> (Better Access Evaluation)* has made several recommendations for reform. In line with, and in addition to, those recommendations, we are calling for specific measures to improve equity and access to Better Access services.
- Australia needs to scale up a disaster-ready psychology workforce to better support preventative actions and early interventions in disaster-prone communities and respond to the increasing number of climate-related events which are having significant economic, social and emotional impacts.
- Climate change and natural disasters are also impacting the mental health of our children and young people. We need to support them as a national priority with prevention and early intervention programs aimed at building readiness and resilience, enhancing coping strategies, and providing a sense of optimism for the future.

# Three key pillars for reform

## Build

### A strong psychology workforce

- Increase psychology placements
- Build the capability of the psychology workforce
- Reduce the wait-time for patients to see psychologists

## Support

### Better mental health

- Increase access to affordable psychological treatment services
- Support psychologists to deliver services to rural and remote communities
- Leverage psychologists' expertise in Chronic Disease Management

## Prepare

### Disaster readiness and resilience

- Build resilience in Australian communities
- Expand the APS' Disaster Response Network
- Invest in child and youth mental health

### Return on Investment

**\$2.52**

for every \$1 invested

### Return on Investment

**\$3.74**

for every \$1 invested

### Return on Investment

**\$3.45**

for every \$1 invested

# Introduction

## About the Australian Psychological Society

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) is the leading professional association for psychologists, representing over 28,000 members nationally. The APS is dedicated to advancing the scientific discipline and ethical practice of psychology and works to realise the full human potential of individuals, organisations and their communities through the application of psychological science and knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Against the backdrop of a mental health, cost-of-living and climate crisis, our diverse profession continues to support Australians who need it the most.

As psychology continues its trajectory of evolution and impact, the APS continues to support the profession, and through it, the Australian community. Our most recent Annual Report shows that in 2021-22, the APS experienced another extraordinary year with a number of significant achievements, including:<sup>2</sup>

- Making more than **48 policy submissions** across a range of areas affecting Australian communities.
- Representing the psychology profession and the needs of our patients on **working groups, committees, inquiries and expert advisory groups**.
- Facilitating an extensive program of Continuing Professional Development including **350 activities, equating to over 900 hours of expert-led learning and development**, for not only psychologists but also other health and mental health professionals.
- Conducting more than **50 emergency response deployments** through our Disaster Response Network (DRN), delivered in partnership with the Australian Red Cross, plus PHNs and Health Districts based in NSW, Queensland, and Victoria. In addition, since contacting 31 PHNs we have received **173 requests for service** in November 2022 alone, as compared to one request in November 2021.
- Supporting the growth of the **APS Find a Psychologist service**, with a 30% increase in page views and 3000+ PsychEngage appointment requests, helping Australians to access psychological support in a timely and tailored way.
- Responding to over **8,000 queries through our Professional Advisory Service**, helping psychologists to provide ethical and professional services which are compliant with regulatory requirements.
- Supporting and promoting over **60 member research projects** to advance evidence-based psychological practice and social impact in Australia.
- Developing and delivering **new or updated free resources for the public and APS psychologists** to support the mental health and wellbeing of Australians in a number of significant areas, including resources about managing the psychological impact of COVID-19, practice guides, tip sheets, and assessment templates.

## The 2023-24 Budget

Ahead of the 2023-24 Budget, the APS believes that all Australians should be able to access expert psychological support to ensure all aspects of their mental health and wellbeing needs are met.

This is now more important than ever with mental health disorders becoming the leading chronic disease in Australia. More Australians live with mental ill-health than other key long-term chronic conditions.<sup>3,4</sup> Unsurprisingly, mental health disorders account for a substantial portion of the total burden of disease in Australia, on par with musculoskeletal and cardiovascular diseases.<sup>5</sup>

Given the significant burden of mental health conditions, the full contribution that the psychology workforce makes to the mental health and wellbeing of Australian communities through prevention, early intervention and treatment programs should not be underestimated.

In this Pre-Budget Submission, we outline three sets of initiatives which will have a significant positive and measurable social and economic impact on the Australian community, both now and for the benefit of future generations:

1. **Build** — Improve the mental health and wellbeing of our communities through strengthening the psychology workforce;
2. **Support** — Address issues related to access and equity in relation to psychological services within the Better Access initiative and the MBS more generally; and
3. **Prepare** — Assist the APS to build the capacity of psychologists to work with individuals and communities to prepare for and respond to disasters, and to support our children and young people, including in response to potential climate change events, by building resilience and improving their mental health and wellbeing.

The APS has commissioned a rapid cost benefit analysis (CBA) by ACIL Allen to evaluate the economic value of the requests in this Pre-Budget Submission.<sup>6</sup>

This CBA shows that each of these three initiatives would return a Benefit-Cost Ratio (BCR) well above 1, even using conservative models. In other words, each initiative described in this Submission is projected to generate economic returns far greater than the costs to implement and operate them. This is in addition to the many indirect socio-economic benefits which we have not estimated here. The analysis by ACIL Allen recognised the:

*significant and broad-reaching impact [that] psychological services make on those receiving treatment and care. This is evident through both expanding access to the psychological workforce, but also by reducing barriers to accessing treatment and care and supporting those who require it following climate-related events (p. 20).<sup>6</sup>*

At a time marked by growing economic, social and health challenges, the APS believes that the 2023-24 Budget must include measures which directly support the resilience and wellbeing of each member of the Australian community.

We look forward to working collaboratively with the Government in the further development, implementation, and evaluation of these evidence-based initiatives.

# Build

**A strong psychology workforce**

# Initiative 1: A strong psychology workforce

The 2023-24 Budget provides an opportunity to invest in change to address the critical shortage of psychologists in Australia.

Australians need access to evidence-based, high quality psychological assessment, diagnosis and treatment to support their wellbeing, economic participation and engagement in the community. However, the current psychology workforce only meets 35% of the national demand for psychologists in mental health services.<sup>7</sup>

In this Submission, we therefore propose measures which will strengthen the psychology workforce by ensuring a sustainable and diverse training pipeline, as well as support for psychologists in practice. Our proposed measures address the drivers of equitable access to psychological services,<sup>8</sup> ensuring that Australians are able to access timely and expert psychological services no matter where they are located or their financial circumstances.

The conservative CBA undertaken by ACIL Allen shows that this initiative, based on the four proposed measures below, will return at least \$2.52 for every dollar invested.<sup>6</sup>

## What does the Australian psychology workforce look like?

As of 30 September 2022, there are 35,315 registered psychologists across Australia, with a further 7,977 provisional psychologists who are currently in training.<sup>9</sup> Over three-quarters of registered psychologists are female, and more than half of the workforce practice part-time.<sup>10</sup>

Of all registered psychologists, 42% have an Area of Practice Endorsement (AoPE), representing advanced training (at the Masters or Doctoral level) and expertise in one or more areas of psychological practice.<sup>9</sup> There are nine AoPEs recognised by the Psychology Board of Australia: Clinical Neuropsychology, Clinical Psychology, Community Psychology, Counselling Psychology, Educational and Developmental Psychology, Forensic Psychology, Health Psychology, Organisational Psychology, and Sport and Exercise Psychology. In addition to the work of generalist psychologists, psychologists with an AoPE contribute to the wide and diverse scope of psychological practice to support and enhance the wellbeing and lives of Australians across the lifespan and across many different contexts.

Psychology is the only profession where students of accredited postgraduate programs complete their studies 'practice ready' in mental health. Due to the quality of our training and requirement for ongoing professional supervision and development, psychologists are well equipped to manage the demands that can sometimes accompany working in mental health and suicide prevention. Psychologists are able to address the full range of mental health and wellbeing needs, from preventative and community-level interventions to the treatment of individuals with complex and high acuity presentations. Psychologists are also valued members of multidisciplinary teams and can provide clinical leadership, research, supervision and lead innovation across the health, mental health, disability and other sectors as part of delivering person-centred, evidence-based and high-quality services.



## What is limiting psychology workforce growth?

The APS has identified three main factors which are limiting the sustainable growth and development of the psychology workforce in Australia:

1. Constraints on university funding and resources needed to **train future psychologists**;
2. The limited number of supervisors and the absence of coordination for supervised placements and registration programs for psychologists to **complete their professional training**; and
3. The lack of **digital supports** available to psychologists to assist them to meet the demand for their services from the Australian community.

### University Training of Future Psychologists

Despite psychologists being at the forefront of supporting Australians' mental health and wellbeing, current policy and funding settings reflect an undervaluing of the importance of training future cohorts of psychologists to meet existing demand and to create a sustainable workforce. Professional postgraduate university psychology courses (that is, those which lead to registration as a psychologist) are significantly underfunded. Specifically:

- Training programs for psychologists (e.g., Master of Professional Psychology or Master of Clinical Psychology programs) are in Funding Cluster 2, with a 2023 Commonwealth contribution of \$13,836. By comparison, programs with a similar level and rigour of professional training (including medicine, dentistry and veterinary science) are in Funding Cluster 4, with a 2023 Commonwealth contribution of \$28,196.<sup>11</sup>
- The current level of funding is inadequate to cover the cost of psychology training, particularly the significant financial cost associated with placements. Through these structured professional learning opportunities, students work as provisional psychologists in the community, often providing high-quality mental health care while also developing essential professional and clinical skills. However, there are limited resources to identify, support and develop placement opportunities and supervisors, or to improve the coordination of placements.
- This shortfall of funding leaves either universities or students covering a substantial amount of the costs associated with their study and training. The current gap acts as a disincentive for universities to increase student numbers, as effectively there is a financial loss for every additional postgraduate psychology student that they accept.
- Due to these funding constraints, the APS has seen, with great disappointment, the closure of several AoPE courses across Australian universities particularly over the past five years. Postgraduate courses in an AoPE which were previously provided at 15 universities are no longer available. Apart from clinical psychology programs, programs in the other eight AoPEs are available at fewer than five universities across Australia, limiting the number of future psychologists in these important areas of psychological practice.
- As such, there are few professional psychology training programs available and each is only able to accept a small number of students each year. This creates a very narrow training pipeline and with even fewer opportunities for students to undertake advanced training. That is, although there is a very high level of need for psychologists in the Australian community, and a very high level of interest from potential psychologists (particularly students at the end of their undergraduate psychology studies), there is currently insufficient capacity to train and maintain the psychology workforce.

- This discontinuity in the training pipeline can be traced directly back to the funding for postgraduate psychology places. If the number of places in postgraduate programs (e.g. a Master of Professional Psychology or an AoPE program such as a Master of Counselling Psychology) were sustainably increased to enable at least a greater proportion of undergraduate psychology students to continue their studies and to become registered psychologists, we could effectively change the psychology workforce numbers in a comparatively short period of time.
- There are also very limited resources to encourage psychologists to undertake training places in areas of chronic workforce shortage such as regional, rural and remote locations or low socio-economic advantage areas where greater access to psychologists is needed.

## Support access to supervision for psychologists

Supervision is one of the essential components of psychologists' training and professional development. Provisional psychologists in a 5+1 program, such as a Master of Professional Psychology, must complete a one-year internship involving supervised clinical practice before being eligible for full registration as a psychologist. Psychologists who have completed an AoPE program (e.g. a Master of Clinical Psychology or a combined PhD/Master of Educational and Developmental Psychology) are required to undergo up to two years of supervised practice through a registrar program in order to receive their AoPE (that is, for a Master's graduate and registered psychologist to be able to work with their AoPE title, for example, as a counselling psychologist).

Unfortunately, interns and registrars often have to find and pay for their own supervision. Demand far exceeds the supply for supervisors, limiting the growth and sustainability of the profession, including across the range of AoPEs, while also creating significant financial burdens for psychologists who resort to expensive private supervision in the absence of other options.

**Invest to future-proof the mental health and wellbeing needs of all Australians by increasing training opportunities for the psychology workforce**

Similarly, psychologists choosing to become supervisors must undertake, and pay for, supervision training approved by the Psychology Board of Australia, and complete refresher training masterclasses to maintain their supervisor status. Cost estimates place supervision training at between \$1,500–2,000 for the initial course and \$500 or more to undertake a masterclass. At current rates, over a 10-year period, this amounts to approximately \$2,500 to \$3,500 per psychologist. This is likely to be a sufficient disincentive for psychologists who may otherwise wish to be part of supporting their peers and developing the next generation of practitioners.

This situation could be remedied through a national program which encourages more psychologists to become supervisors, and also supports psychology graduates to find work in organisations where supervisors are readily available. This would ensure a pathway to registration (for 5+1 interns) or practice endorsement (for AoPE registrars) without unnecessary cost and administrative burdens. In keeping with Recommendation 3 of the Better Access Evaluation, a nationally-coordinated program would also be able to support supervisors, interns and registrars in rural and remote areas.<sup>8</sup>

The APS already provides a well-regarded and growing Board-approved supervisor training program. In 2021-22, for example, the APS delivered additional supervisor training sessions in response to increased demand from APS members. With appropriate support, the APS would be in a position to train hundreds of psychology supervisors who could work in either the public or private system across Australia. This would expand the psychology workforce pipeline, producing highly trained and experienced psychologists for the benefit of the Australian community.

## Enhancing digital supports for Australians seeking psychological treatment

Psychologists in practice are also currently struggling to keep up with the unprecedented demand for their services. Nationally, 1 in 3 psychologists who work under the Better Access initiative report having to close their books to new patients, and many patients are waiting up to six months to access care.<sup>12</sup> The situation in the public sector is similar with a high demand for services provided by a limited number of psychologists. While there are other measures to increase the effectiveness of psychological mental health services (see Initiative 2 below), the APS has also identified opportunities to support psychologists by reducing the administrative burden in meeting the swell of demand for their services.

One such opportunity is to reduce the friction points for clients to find and consult with a psychologist. The APS already supports this through its *Find a Psychologist* service, which allows potential clients to find, learn about and contact a psychologist who may be suitable for them. *Find a Psychologist* is the largest online directory of psychologists in Australia and continues to grow. Almost 7,500 APS members are currently subscribed to *Find a Psychologist* and in 2022, there was a total of 1,103,409 page views. As stated previously, our most recent Annual Report shows that there has been a 30% increase in page views over 2021-22, and we anticipate that this number will increase in the next financial year.<sup>2</sup>

As a service to our community, the APS has updated *Find a Psychologist* with new tools and resources which help explain psychological therapy and assessment for everyday Australians. With further investment, the reach and scope of this leading and trusted platform could be further enhanced to facilitate seamless and tailored connections between psychologists and clients, allowing psychologists to devote more of their time to providing expert assessment, treatment and support for their clients.

The APS would like to further develop the *Find a Psychologist* service to incorporate a 'virtual waiting room', with resources and tailored information to help Australians to access and navigate the mental health system and to be well-informed about psychological treatment. This would include details regarding the process of seeing a psychologist, and other options which may be more suited to current needs. Such support will enable treatment to be more effective and efficient when it begins through realistic and informed expectations, while also providing information and support for people on a waiting list. This model would be consistent with Recommendation 1 of the Better Access Evaluation,<sup>8</sup> by helping patients to make an informed decision about their mental health support, and by providing digital services where appropriate.

## The APS is calling on the Federal Government to:

1. Change the banding for postgraduate professional psychology programs to Funding Cluster 4, to provide adequate funding for universities to train more psychologists across the full range of AoPEs;
2. Support the development of a nationally coordinated psychology supervision and placement model, led by the APS, to connect professional postgraduate psychology students with appropriate placements and to identify and develop placements and supervisors while minimising the associated administrative burden, particularly in rural and remote areas;
3. Support all psychologists to develop and work to their full capability, as well as easing a major bottleneck in the training pipeline, by funding APS Board-approved supervisor training to meet the current demands; and
4. Invest in the APS *Find a Psychologist* service to address wait times and to connect Australians to psychologists through trusted and person-centred APS-led digital mental health solutions, thus streamlining access to a highly trained, workforce which is able to meet current and future demand. In addition, support the expansion of the *Find a Psychologist* service to provide access to tailored resources and information in a 'virtual waiting room' until their psychological treatment begins.

Analysis undertaken by ACIL Allen<sup>1</sup> shows that this initiative, based on the four proposed measures above, provides a return on investment of \$2.52 for every \$1 spent.

# Support

**Better mental health**

## Initiative 2: Better mental health

While the Better Access initiative has enabled millions of Australians to access effective and high-quality psychological treatment,<sup>8</sup> more needs to be done to provide a sustainable and equitable model for both patients and psychologists. The need for psychological services has never been greater and has been compounded by the fall-out from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The analysis undertaken by ACIL Allen<sup>6</sup> demonstrates that this initiative, based on the proposed measures below, will return at least \$3.74 for every dollar invested. Given the recent Better Access Evaluation, the 2023-24 Budget is a critical time to invest in initiatives which are important to the Australian community, as well as those that have a significant quantitative return on investment.

### Where should we be focussing our attention?

There are many vulnerable groups and cohorts who require more support through the Better Access initiative.<sup>8</sup> Both the continuation of existing measures, and the introduction of simple improvements to mental health services as part of the Better Access initiative would lead to advancements in mental health care for all Australians.

### The APS is calling on the Federal Government to:

- Introduce a 'youth mental health safety net' (i.e., higher Medicare rebates to subsidise Better Access sessions for young people and reduce out-of-pocket expenses) to ensure all Australians aged 16 to 24 can access the psychological care they need without financial hardship for themselves or their families. This is consistent with Recommendation 11 of the Better Access Evaluation which proposes the introduction of different options to increase the affordability of the initiative.<sup>8</sup>

**Invest in Better Access  
to support our most  
vulnerable and the  
psychology workforce  
who support them**

- Extend the MBS to cover psychologists to provide services to victim-survivors of family and domestic violence (FDV) without the need for a GP referral. Many victim-survivors of FDV also experience coercive control or financial abuse.<sup>13,14</sup> The requirement to see a GP before seeing a psychologist adds additional practical and financial barriers which may prevent some victim-survivors from accessing the timely support they need. The requirement to obtain a mental health diagnosis from a GP as part of the Mental Health Treatment Plan may also unfairly pathologise a victim-survivor's experience.

Removing these barriers to psychological support and safety may also help prevent a 'revolving door' situation of victim-survivors being forced to return to violent or coercive relationships.

Providing direct Medicare-subsidised access to psychologists would therefore be a major step in ensuring the provision of effective services to assist people in times of crisis and heightened risk. This measure would also represent a cost saving to Government as it waives the requirement of a GP Mental Health Treatment Plan.

- Similarly, extend the MBS to cover perinatal mental health treatment by a psychologist without the need for a GP referral. Perinatal anxiety impacts 1 in 5 new birthing parents, with 1 in 10 experiencing perinatal depression during pregnancy, and 1 in 7 in the first year following birth.<sup>15-17</sup>

Furthermore, evidence suggests that 1 in 10 new non-birthing parents will experience postnatal depression,<sup>18</sup> with many having limited awareness that perinatal mental health issues also affect them.<sup>19</sup> Changing practices and circumstances associated with COVID-19 have also been shown to increase the likelihood of maternal perinatal mental health disorders,<sup>6</sup> with potential impacts on partners and extended families.

Direct access to psychologists would help address the nearly 100,000 Australian parents affected by perinatal mental ill-health each year.<sup>15</sup> This measure also provides a clearly preventative opportunity to improve the mental health for both parents and their infants and developing child. It is important that early psychological treatment is provided to improve the outcomes for both parent(s) and children.<sup>20,21</sup> Again, this measure represents a cost saving to Government by waiving the requirement for a GP Mental Health Treatment Plan.

- More generally, allow up to three sessions of psychological treatment under the Better Access initiative without a GP referral or Mental Health Treatment Plan to remove a potential barrier to ensure ease of access and increase affordability. This measure overcomes the practical, financial or psychosocial difficulties experienced by some people in seeing their GP for a mental health appointment, enables them to be seen more quickly by a psychologist. It also allows the psychologist to undertake an initial assessment to advise the GP regarding eligibility for a Mental Health Treatment Plan.
- Shift the requirement for GP Mental Health reviews to follow 10 sessions rather than 6 sessions, irrespective of how many total sessions are available under Better Access. GPs and psychologists can, of course, still determine if it is clinically necessary to review a patient prior to the 10 sessions allowed.

This measure will reduce Medicare costs and the administrative burden being carried by both GPs and psychologists in line with Recommendation 12 of the Better Access Evaluation which states that "alternative review cadences might be recommended based on consumers' levels of need" (p. 328).<sup>8</sup>

- Introduce bulk billing and other rural and remote practice incentives for psychologists, equivalent to those provided for GPs. This includes creating new incentives, as well as expanding the Workforce Incentive Program to include psychologists as primary recipients and reducing the HELP debt for psychologists willing to work in rural and remote areas.

- Increase Chronic Disease Management (CDM) sessions for psychologists and align rebates with Better Access items to enable psychologists to address issues associated with chronic conditions which affect almost half of all Australians and account for much of the total burden of disease in Australia.<sup>4,5</sup>

Increasing CDM sessions for psychologists would also help psychologists to support Australians living with the mental health impacts of Long COVID,<sup>22</sup> and to help older Australians to experience optimal ageing. The ability for psychologists to provide an additional five sessions to CDM patients, on top of the five sessions shared between other allied health professionals, would appropriately recognise the value of psychological treatment to support physical interventions and to encourage behavioural change that promotes physical health.

**Analysis by ACIL Allen<sup>1</sup> shows a return on investment of \$3.74 for every \$1 spent on this initiative.**



# Prepare

**Disaster readiness and resilience**

## Initiative 3: Improve Disaster Readiness and Resilience

The 2023-24 Budget is a timely opportunity to strengthen resilience in our communities by improving our disaster preparedness and response, and to focus on building optimism and confidence in our children and young people through better mental health.

There is a growing need to scale up a disaster-ready psychology workforce to better support preventative actions and early interventions in disaster-prone communities, and in response to the increasing number of severe climate-related events occurring in Australia. The current cost of disasters (estimated at \$38 billion p.a.) is likely to almost double to \$73 billion p.a. by 2060, even under a low-emissions scenario.<sup>23,24</sup> As such, the APS joins with other experts to call for national investment in disaster resilience and mitigation activities as the most effective way to protect people and communities from these impacts.

### Protecting our young people

Climate change and natural disasters are also impacting the mental health of our children and youth. We need to support them as a national priority with prevention and early intervention programs aimed at building resilience, enhancing and coping strategies, and providing a sense of optimism for the future.

ACIL Allen's analysis shows a return on investment of at least \$3.45 for every dollar spent for the APS' proposed initiatives to expand the successful Disaster Response Network (DRN) to support the mental health of our frontline workers and the communities they support, and to develop programs aimed at protecting our children, their parents and carers through improved resilience and wellbeing.

### What do we need to ensure a disaster-ready psychology workforce?

Evidence shows that mental ill-health affects not just those who directly experience a disaster, but also the frontline workers and first responders who care for and support them, as well as the wider community as it makes its way towards longer-term recovery.<sup>25,26</sup>

**Invest in a disaster-ready psychology workforce to support our frontline workers, first responders and other disaster response services**

Psychologists have highlighted the importance of taking preventative action to minimise disaster-related risks and intervening early to support mental health, in addition to disaster response and recovery. Yet prevention and early intervention are not being funded appropriately in Australia, with the Productivity Commission finding that only 3% of taxpayer funds are allocated towards these activities.<sup>27</sup>

Rural and regional communities, where there is already a disproportionate lack of an appropriately qualified mental health workforce,<sup>28</sup> tend also to have lower capacity for disaster resilience,<sup>29</sup> making it even more important for psychologists to support response readiness and resilience in these areas.

## What is the APS Disaster Response Network?

The Disaster Response Network (DRN) is a network of 700+ APS psychologists who volunteer their time and expertise to provide targeted and evidence-based psychological support to frontline workers and communities following disasters. Members of the DRN have been assisting Australians through a multitude of disasters since it was first set up following the Black Saturday bushfires in 2009. The APS and the Australian Red Cross deploy DRN psychologists to areas of need to ensure a coordinated response. Psychologists must complete Disaster Support training and have full registration with the Psychology Board of Australia to become members of the DRN.

To build greater awareness of this important work, the Federal Government commissioned the APS in 2021-22 to better engage the Primary Health Networks (PHNs) with the DRN. This timely, albeit modest, initial investment has revealed a significant unmet demand for DRN services. The ongoing severe climate-related events experienced by many Australian states over the past several months, and the overlapping impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have had devastating economic, social and emotional impacts on frontline workers and the communities they support. In 2022, the APS DRN provided:

- 350 disaster / emergency response deployments delivered in partnership with the Australian Red Cross and a small number of PHNs and Health Districts based in NSW, Queensland and Victoria.
- Escalations to support the mental health and wellbeing of frontline workers in a range of disaster situations - including floods, cyclone, bushfires and collective trauma events.
- On the ground support for the Australian Red Cross Telethon Flood Appeal, and
- A new, temporary dedicated remote activation support phone line set up for the Red Cross in March 2022 in direct response to the NSW and Queensland floods.

Having contacted all 31 PHNs as part of this initial engagement, it is clear that there is significant future scope to expand the reach and impact of the DRN to meet the rapidly escalating demand for our services. We have also uncovered a wide range of unmet community needs for which the APS is well placed to co-design practical solutions which promote disaster readiness and build resilience, in collaboration with all levels of Government, relevant service providers, local communities and those with lived experience.

## The APS is calling on the Federal Government to:

Expand the successful APS Disaster Response Network to:

- Increase access to a flexible, agile and trained **psychologist workforce** to reach the growing number of frontline workers requiring psychological first aid via expanded phone wellbeing checks and a **dedicated telephone support line**.

- Introduce **physical deployments** by DRN psychologists to deliver **face-to-face** psychosocial support to supplement telephone wellbeing checks in higher-risk disaster impacted communities;
- **Automate DRN deployment** to expand reach and impact, enabling easier access to psychological first aid and frontline worker wellbeing checks, particularly in **rural, regional and remote** communities facing workforce shortages;
- Establish new group-based **psychosocial wellbeing workshops** and **community forums** in disaster-impacted areas to facilitate peer-to-peer, community-led recovery;
- Develop new **psychosocial self-care resources** on mental health and resilience-building for frontline workers and the wider community; and
- Develop targeted training courses to enable psychologists and other mental health professionals to proactively provide **psychosocial support** to communities in times of crisis.

## What do we need to protect our young people?

- Climate change, COVID-19 and other natural disasters are also having a specific impact on the mental health of our young people. Research shows that young Australians are deeply concerned, and at times overwhelmed, by uncertainty associated with the climate crisis.<sup>30</sup> We need to support them as a national priority, with prevention and early intervention psychosocial programs aimed at building their resilience, enhancing coping strategies and providing a sense of optimism for the future.
- In addition, each year, 1 in 7 Australian school-aged children experience one or more mental health or neurodevelopmental disorders.<sup>31</sup> These child and youth mental health challenges are usually preceded by non-specific psychosocial concerns, which can serve as an early warning indicator of future ill-health. Alarming, pre-pandemic figures show that 1 in 5 Australian children started school showing signs of social-emotional stress.<sup>31</sup> Updated information demonstrates that COVID-19 has had a large negative impact on the mental health of school-aged children. Parents have reported worsening of their children's mental health as the pandemic has progressed, and almost three-quarters of adolescents reported declining mental health outcomes due to COVID-19.<sup>32</sup>
- The recent Productivity Commission Report and first National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy prioritised educational settings, in partnership with family, community and service systems, as critical for developing the mental health and wellbeing in children and youth.<sup>33,34</sup> Psychologists have a vital role to play in implementing this strategy. When well resourced, psychologists in schools can provide an integrated model of care incorporating promotion, prevention and early intervention for children and families. Working with and supporting school leaders and teachers as a member of the school staff team is a significant aspect of the work of school psychologists.

**Invest in our young people to strengthen their mental health, build resilience and minimise the longer-term impacts of climate change related disasters**

- To realise the benefits that psychologists can bring, the final report of the Select Committee on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention recommended that Commonwealth and State Governments work together to increase the ratio of school psychologists to a minimum of one full-time equivalent for every 500 students,<sup>35</sup> reflecting the long-held position of the APS.<sup>36</sup> With just over 4 million students in Australian schools, over 8,000 school psychologists are needed now on the ground.
- Increasing the number of psychologists in schools would significantly benefit parents who are unable to afford or access psychological care for their children via the private and public health systems. Teachers and fellow students would similarly benefit from school psychology reform with the increased capacity of support and intervention leading to reduced behavioural issues within the classroom.

## The APS is calling on the Federal Government to:

Invest in the development of new APS-led programs providing psychosocial support to school-aged children, their families, and carers to improve their social and emotional wellbeing.

In addition to our call for a greater psychologist-to-student ratio across the country, we identify the following priority areas for which the APS is ready and prepared to work with the Government for the benefit of our children and young people, their families and teachers:

- There is a need for expert psychological interventions to help **teachers** to support students with a lived experience of trauma, students with neurodiverse presentations, and students with behavioural issues.

The APS calls for the development of nationally consistent prevention and early intervention programs, especially for students making the transition from primary school to high school. Initiatives developed together with the APS would enable teachers and school leaders to improve student outcomes by addressing disruptive behaviour and re-engaging students within the educational process.

- Initiatives targeted at developing nationally consistent measures for **students'** psychosocial wellbeing, including accreditation and evaluation of mental health programs, are also urgently required in our schools.
- **Parents** too, need help via psycho-socially oriented programs that reinforce and facilitate their role in supporting their young and adolescent children. School-based support programs for parents, and other carers, normalise the challenges inherent in raising children and provide a means to develop their understanding and capacity to support their children.

Likewise, children should be able to access complementary programs via their school curriculum, for example, regarding the impact of climate change on mental health and resilience-building strategies.

Children and young people can benefit significantly from school-based preventative programs and early intervention. The National Mental Health Commission, for example, demonstrated that school-based depression prevention programs result in fewer depression cases and can save over \$37 million.<sup>37</sup>

Overall, according to the Productivity Commission's *Mental Health Inquiry Report*, investing early in children's mental health and wellbeing results in a return-on-investment between \$1 and \$10.50 for each dollar spent.<sup>33</sup> Clearly, investing in our young people, supporting their education, and building their resilience in the face of climate change and other natural disasters, is a national imperative. As the peak body for psychology in Australia, the APS looks forward to working with the Government in the 2023-24 Budget and beyond to enhance the contribution of psychologists to our young people.

**ACIL Allen's analysis of our measures shows a return on investment of \$3.45 for every \$1 spent when combining both initiatives specific to the APS' DRN and support for the mental health of our children, their parents, teachers and carers.<sup>1</sup>**

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