

**Answer to question on notice – Sarah Wayland, Manna Institute, University of New England**

**To what extent have the New South Wales and Australian governments effectively renewed or improved funding models for regional communities to access mental health services?**

The global pandemic, benefitted regional and remote communities in NSW and Australia given the rapid expansion of funding to improve telehealth and digital access to mental health services, as travel time, a significant barrier, was replaced by connectivity to services. However remote internet connectivity remains a funding gap, to enhance access to crisis and ongoing community mental health services.

As noted in this consultation, relating to regional universities and their role in bolstering the mental health workforce, initiatives such as incentive schemes to attract and retain staff, as well as schemes to attract students to universities, or support internships or clinical placements, have capacity to meaningfully impact community wellbeing. However the funding is not consistent across the health workforce. The Australian Government Psychology education grants provide opportunities for courses, internships, and supervisor training, as well as Mental Health Coordinating Council funding for scholarships to support people seeking to do a Certificate IV in mental health peer work, however investment in social work education, mental health nurse training and other allied health professions has not been forthcoming.

This lack of a joined-up approach (between investment in pre-service training and workforce retention strategy), means that investment on the ground (such as regional community investment in community mental health teams from the NSW Government, to add positions such as nurses and social work, to better respond to people with complex mental health conditions, and the NSW Government mental health single front door 2024 funding) may not have significant impact if investment in the creation of that workforce is absent.

Manna Institute notes that while some improvements, from one-off or renewed funding; such as accessibility of digital services and investment in targeted initiatives, will continue to yield workforce shortages and workforce fatigue, as well as regional, rural and remote NSW getting limited services in comparison to their metropolitan friends. Systemic barriers due to socio-economic status, lack of cultural responsiveness, workforce retention issues, and poor infrastructure means that funding outcomes will only show minimal impact.

What is needed is a commitment to ongoing, embedded evaluation of the programs and initiatives invested in, extended funding cycles for those promising programs, and authentic community and stakeholder involvement so that funding leads to lasting change.