



Submission: Alternative Structure of the Social, Community, Home Care and Disability Services Industry Award 2010

About

The Northern Territory Mental Health Coalition (The Coalition) is the peak body for community managed mental health services across the Northern Territory. We work in collaboration with a wide network of community mental health organisations, people with lived experience, and their families and supporters. As a peak body, the Coalition ensures a strong voice for member organisations and a reference point for governments on all issues relating to the provision of mental health services in the Northern Territory. The Coalition provides advice and input into mental health care policy and associated challenges around service delivery to all levels of government and contributes to national mental health networks and associated peak bodies.

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Response

The Coalition supports the submissions of the NT Council of Social Service (NTCOSS) and the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS). It aligns with the positions advanced by the Mental Health Coordinating Council (MHCC) NSW in calling for an alternative structure of the SCHADS Award that protects workers and strengthens the sustainability of the social and community services workforce. This sector delivers essential, high-risk and highly skilled work, often to people experiencing significant disadvantage, trauma and unmet need. Any revised award structure must recognise this reality and ensure workers are not left worse off as a result of reform.

Consistent with the evidence presented by ACOSS and MHCC NSW, the final structure of the SCHADS Award must protect existing pay levels and conditions and ensure no worker experiences a reduction in remuneration or classification. It must adequately reflect the complexity, risk and responsibility inherent in community and mental health work, including exposure to vicarious trauma, psychosocial hazards and high levels of emotional labour. Greater flexibility is required to recognise equivalent experience, including lived experience of mental ill health, addiction and suicidality, and the acquisition of skills and knowledge through practice, supervision and professional development, rather than relying solely on formal qualifications. Clearer classification descriptors and guidance are also required to prevent systemic under-classification and to support fair and transparent transitions to any new award structure. As noted by ACOSS, staged implementation is essential to manage funding, administrative and service delivery impacts, particularly for small and medium non-government organisations.

Workforce data underscores the urgency of reform. The Australian National Mental Health Workforce Strategy identifies current workforce shortages of up to 32 per cent, projected to increase to 42 per cent by 2030. In the Northern Territory, workforce surveys indicate even higher vacancy and turnover rates across the community mental health sector. As MHCC NSW has highlighted, award reform presents an opportunity to address workforce shortages



by improving role clarity, career pathways, pay equity and workplace protections. Without meaningful improvements to remuneration and classification, the sector will remain uncompetitive in an increasingly tight labour market.

Funding insecurity further compounds workforce instability. The majority of roles covered by the SCHADS Award are tied to short-term or insecure funding arrangements. This insecurity has significant impacts on workers and their families and is a key contributor to high turnover, burnout and loss of organisational knowledge. Current pay increases are often borne by funded organisations, while indexation and award increases are not consistently or adequately passed on by funding bodies. As ACOSS has consistently noted, this results in reduced service capacity and places additional pressure on an already stretched workforce responding to growing levels of unmet need.

The current application of the SCHADS Award continues to undervalue the skills, qualifications and experience of the community and mental health workforce. Pay levels are not competitive with comparable roles in other sectors that involve less complexity, lower risk and reduced exposure to trauma. This undermines recruitment and retention efforts and discourages entry into the sector at a time of escalating demand. The alternative structure, as currently proposed, does not go far enough in addressing pay rates to attract and retain staff in a highly competitive job market.

These issues affect the entire workforce, particularly frontline and entry-level workers. Administrative and support roles are also routinely exposed to complex client presentations, intersecting disadvantage, trauma, food insecurity and the broader social determinants of health. A revised SCHADS Award must acknowledge the reality of these roles and ensure fair classification and remuneration across all levels.

NTMHC urges the Commission to adopt an alternative structure that reflects the evidence presented by ACOSS, MHCC NSW and the broader sector, and that delivers a fair, sustainable and future-focused award capable of supporting the workforce on which community and mental health services depend.

References

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