

300 community organisations seek help to keep vital services operating

300 community service organisations across Australia have joined together in an unprecedented alliance to ask for support from state, territory and federal political parties to commit to funding the vital services they provide to six million Australians each year.

Community organisations kept Australians afloat during the financial crisis. They provide emergency relief services, crisis accommodation, youth employment services, aged and disability care. These organisations help almost a third of Australia's population.

In a statement released today, the organisations say they are in crisis, brought on by years of inadequate funding from private interests and governments that cover only 70% of the funding of contracted services.

The funding shortfall has reduced the ability of organisations to pay adequate wages. An average wage for a community mental health social worker is \$42,000, compared with \$72,000 for the same job in government or the private sector.

Historically community sector work has been undervalued. 87% of community workers are women and only a small number of organisations have the ability to enter into enterprise bargaining.

In recognition of this inequity, last year the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission awarded pay increases of 18 - 37%. The Queensland Government responded with additional funding of \$414 million towards the cost of higher wages.

A landmark equal pay case brought by the Australian Services Union before Fair Work Australia is seeking to address the pay disparity.

Without a commitment for future funding, some organisations may have to close their doors.

"We are asking governments and opposition parties across the country to recognise the vital role of social services in our community and to commit to fund any award increases for the community sector," says the statement.

"The community sector makes a significant contribution to the economy - contributing 6.7% to annual growth.

"Without our workers, the services we provide would cease for the 6.5 million Australians who rely on us."

The Victorian Government has already committed to fund the outcomes of the national case. The Commonwealth and ACT governments have also expressed support for the case, but neither they nor the remaining governments and opposition parties have committed to increased funding for pay rises.

"We are unable to pay our community workers what they deserve for the vital work they perform, and are unable to compete with the pay offered by the government and private sectors for doing exactly the same job," says the statement.

"We help people find emergency housing; work in nursing homes; and help young people find skills and training.

"We make sure women and children fleeing domestic violence have somewhere to go; that families who need help with emergency funds can pay their bills."

The organisations have launched a campaign to seek commitments from all those who support the sector, to ensure that the vital work of social services is sustained by paying decent wages to the workers upon whom these services depend.

The campaign has been coordinated by the community sector peak, ACOSS. Print advertising will be run on Saturday 7 August.

The Councils of Social Service across the country have written to the federal government and opposition, premiers, chief ministers, and opposition leaders.

To view the advertisement, click on or copy and paste the following URL into your browser:

http://acoss.org.au/images/uploads/045%20FRSA%20ACOSS%20Newspaper%20AD_07.pdf

Media contact

ACOSS, State and Territory Councils of Social Service are available to comment:

Ross Womersley, SACOSS - 0418 805 426

Clare Cameron, ACOSS - 0419 626 155