

7 June 2016

Hon Susan Ley MP
Minister for Health
PO Box 6022
House of Representatives Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Minister Ley

I am writing to seek confirmation that the \$20M allocated in the 2015-16 Budget for drought assistance (Enhanced Social and Community Support Measure) will be included in the funding package to the Primary Health Networks from 1 July 2016.

On the ABC Q&A Program, Monday 6th June 2016, The Deputy Prime Minister, The Hon Barnaby Joyce was asked about the Government's recent budget decision to cease funding of the Enhanced Social and Community Support Measure which was part of the drought relief funding. The Deputy Prime Minister advised that the drought relief funding was a "one off" programme (finishing on 30th June 2016) and further funding for these services will come through the Primary Health Networks (PHN) from 1 July 2016. We urgently seek your assurance that these services will continue to be funded and without a service gap from 1 July 2016.

Catholic Social Services Australia members currently deliver this programme to 52 out of the 69 local government areas affected by drought in New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Victoria and Tasmania. We work on the ground with drought affected communities and see the difference this programme makes to the lives of individuals and families. We remain very concerned about the uncertainty surrounding this programme and its impact on farmers, their families and the community more broadly. Based on the current provision of services, we estimate that the cost is in the order of \$290,000 per year, per local government area, a modest investment for the health and wellbeing of rural communities.

The Enhanced Social and Community Support Measure drought assistance package is not a traditional clinical mental health counselling service but a community mental health model that develops support networks and builds resilience, enabling rural communities to withstand the challenges of life in rural and remote settings. This programme has begun to break through the social and cultural barriers to people in need of support, linking people in to the services they need, supporting families who are trying to cope in the face of an ever worsening drought, and building more resilient and cohesive communities.

This delivery model has a proven record of supporting the unique needs, culture and circumstances of individuals and families living in rural and remote communities. Through outreach to individuals, families and communities, this programme takes support to people, offering counselling, community development initiatives, and referrals which are personal, readily available and accessible to people doing it tough in regional Australia. The engagements began as social events bringing communities together for their wellbeing and developed into education programmes and therapeutic counselling to benefit the diversity of the rural communities.

The cessation of the current programme will cost jobs in rural and regional communities and undermine the work of our agencies in creating pathways for farmers, their families and the community more generally to improve their resilience and overall wellbeing. We are therefore seeking a commitment from you as the responsible Minister that provision has been made in the PHN Budget for the Enhanced Social and Community Support Measure.

I stand ready to meet with and brief you on this matter of urgency and importance to rural communities across Australia.

Without an assurance by 17th June 2016, about the continuation of this programme we expect that the public discourse, in rural and regional Australia will continue. We will publish your response through our communications.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Marcelle Mogg". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized 'M' and 'G'.

Ms Marcelle Mogg
Chief Executive Officer