

Senate Community Affairs Committee

ANSWERS TO ESTIMATES QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

HEALTH AND AGEING PORTFOLIO

Supplementary Budget Estimates 2012-2013, 17 & 19 October 2012

Question: E12-316

OUTCOME 12: Health Workforce Capacity

Topic: RURAL AND REMOTE HEALTH

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Senator: Senator Wright

Question:

Provide detail about the strategies to support and expand the nursing workforce in rural areas particularly in relation to mental health trained nurses, and also the allied health professionals and psychologists and the training of people from rural or in rural areas.

Answer:

A number of programs support the delivery of mental health services by people in rural and remote regions of Australia, e.g. the Mental Health Services in Rural and Remote Areas program and the Access to Allied Psychological Strategies program. Other programs provide a financial loading for services delivered by health professionals in these areas, e.g. the Mental Health Nurses Incentive Program.

The Department of Health and Ageing also funds a range of training initiatives to support the mental health workforce, which by their design, also support workers in rural and remote regions these include:

- The Mental Health Professional Online Development (MHPOD) program, which is an innovative web-based professional education tool for use by mental health professionals. MHPOD provides approximately 70 hours of material on 50 topics, written and produced in Australia.
- The Mental Health Professionals Network (MHPN), which has been funded to implement a multidisciplinary education and training package, including workshops and a website with webinars. MHPN is implementing strategies for providers in rural and remote locations to participate in networks, including general and special interest groups.

The government funds scholarship and locum programs to support and expand the health workforce in rural areas, including health professionals providing mental health services.

Scholarships

Commonwealth funded scholarships are available for nurses and allied health professionals under the Nursing and Allied Health Scholarship and Support Scheme (NAHSSS) and the Puggy Hunter Memorial Scholarship Scheme (PHMSS).

Each scholarship scheme is supported by an independent advisory group, which includes representatives from key health professional organisations. The advisory group assesses the eligible applications and ranks them in accordance with the selection criteria. Scholarships are awarded to the highest ranked applications.

- The NAHSSS provides scholarships to nursing, midwifery and allied health professionals and students, including undergraduate, postgraduate, continuing professional development and clinical placement scholarships.
 - In 2012, a total of 444 postgraduate and continuing professional development (CPD) scholarships were awarded to rural nurses through the NAHSSS. Of these, 61 were for mental health courses.
 - In 2012, a total of 273 postgraduate, CPD, clinical placement and postgraduate scholarships were awarded to rural allied health professionals through the NAHSSS. Of these, 85 were for psychologists.
- The PHMSS provides scholarships to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are undertaking study in a health related discipline at an undergraduate or TAFE (Certificate IV and above) level.
 - In 2012, a total of 97 PHMSS scholarships were awarded to undergraduate health students in rural Australia. Of these, two were for students undertaking a psychology course and 11 were for students undertaking other studies in mental health.

Locum Program

- The Commonwealth provides funding to support nurses and allied health professionals (including psychologists) in rural areas to take professional and personal leave through the Nursing and Allied Health Rural Locum Scheme (NAHRLS). The NAHRLS allows organisations to back-fill their positions for up to 14 days.
- Since 1 January 2012, 36 placements requested that the locums have a skill set that included a mental health background. No applications for psychologists were received.