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Earlier intervention services a significant step towards vital structural reform

The Federal Government's commitment to earlier intervention will give more Australians access to mental health support while relieving some pressure on the system, says Beyond Blue CEO Georgie Harman.

Ms Harman said while there was much more to do to build a mental health system that matches all Australians' needs, new investment to establish a free digital early intervention service represented a major step towards the structural reform that remains long overdue.

"Right now, many people are feeling pressure in their daily lives, whether from high costs of living, loneliness, relationship issues or workplace stress. The evidence is clear that if we can address these issues as soon as they emerge, we can prevent them from snowballing," Ms Harman said.

Earlier intervention services for depression and anxiety are effective for anyone feeling unsettled, low, alone or overwhelmed. They encourage early action to stop issues from spiralling and having a more significant impact on a person's life by equipping people with strategies to self-manage and build resilience.

Earlier intervention options, which have strong and lasting recovery rates, have the potential to support people at all levels of need, from mild to moderate and even emerging severe symptoms as part of a stepped model of care.

Ms Harman also welcomed an additional two years of funding so Beyond Blue can continue to support small business owners who are doing it tough – the Budget commits \$10.8 million over two years to extend the Small Business Debt Helpline and Beyond Blue's NewAccess for Small Business Owners service.

"Beyond Blue has been developing models and advocating for evidence-based earlier intervention services for more than a decade because, as various mental health inquiries have found, these options have the potential to support millions of Australians as part of a redesigned mental health system," Ms Harman said.

"Earlier intervention and prevention matters. That's why Beyond Blue's new strategy is all about making it easier for people to feel better earlier, to get well and stay well."

In 2020, the Productivity Commission estimated half a million Australians who were not accessing any mental health support and up to two million being treated with medication and/or individual therapy, could benefit from these kinds of options. The Commission estimated that 450,000 people receiving support through Better Access could be better served through such services.

Ms Harman welcomed the Budget's expansion of the clinical workforce at Medicare mental health centres, adding it was also important to keep developing complementary workforces.

"There will never be enough clinicians to meet the nation's mental health needs. So, as well as continuing to expand existing workforces, we need to nurture and grow other workforces that help address different levels of need across the community."

Ms Harman also welcomed investment in youth mental health, wrap-around support for people who have complex mental health needs, a new peer workforce association and funding for First Nations Peoples.

She said redesigning the mental health system would take time and steadfast bipartisan support.

“There is no part of the mental health system that doesn’t need fixing and, by spreading a \$361 million investment across the spectrum, from emerging distress to severe and complex needs, this Budget acknowledges that,” Ms Harman said.

“But to be clear, this funding does fall far short of what’s required for the scale of change that’s needed for Australia to provide appropriate support for people with lived and living experience of mental ill-health and their supporters.

“Such transformational change must be planned and executed in a careful, sequential way through collaboration between states, territories and the Commonwealth and it must start now,” Ms Harman said.

ENDS

Beyond Blue Support Service: 1300 22 4636 or beyondblue.org.au/getsupport