
Australians Talk Mental Illness

Join your voice to the thousands of Australians concerned about mental health!

This sheet offers some suggestions and hints for getting the best from your contact with your democratic representatives

Background

Australia has three levels of government and they are all responsible for different areas and initiatives, in relation to mental health these are:

Federal	State	Local
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Taxation• Medical Benefits Scheme• Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme• Social Security• Employment services• Private health insurance• National Health and Medical Research Council	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Public hospitals• Mental health services• Public housing• Professional registration boards	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Home and community care• Rates and planning issues

Federal Government background:

The Federal Government is made up of the Senate and The House of Representatives. There are a number of government departments responsible for mental health; they are described in more detail in the accompanying edition of Mental Illness Fellowship Australia's Engage.

The **House of Representatives** is where the Australian Government is formed and consists of 150 Members. A large part of the role of the House of Representatives is to pass legislation or amend existing legislation.

The **Senate** is one of the two houses of the Australian Federal Parliament. It consists of 76 Senators. It has virtually equal power to make laws with the House of Representatives.

Tips for advocating with politicians

Contacting a Federal Member of the House of Representatives or a Senator:

- Each MP has an electorate office and published contact details
- Contact can be made by letter, telephone call, email or personal attendance, generally by appointment
- If you feel anxious or nervous, bring a family member/friend to accompany you
- Remember that as a voter, you have a right to express your concerns
- Remember that MPs are there to represent your interests to the Minister, the Government and/or the Department
- When speaking to an MP (who is not a minister), he/she should be addressed as Mr, Ms, Mrs or Senator
- In written communication to Ministers, the letter should be addressed as:

Ministers -	The Hon John Smith MP	<i>"Dear Minister"</i>
	Minister for Health	
Members of Parliament -	Mr John Smith MP	<i>"Dear Mr Smith"</i>
Members of the Senate -	Senator Maria Papas	<i>"Dear Senator Papas"</i>
- Do not assume that MPs know about or understand mental illnesses
- It is important to personalise your letter, however it should be kept to the point (see attached examples).
- Ensure that you include your personal contact details in your letter (and/or take business cards etc to your meeting)
- Be clear about what you wish to achieve from your contact with the MP
- Request a response
- Follow-up if you don't receive a reply or if the reply is unsatisfactory

- If the outcome is good, write a note of thanks

Meeting with politicians

- Prepare! Research your position (check out the fact sheets on www.mifa.org.au for more background) as well as the history of the particular politician on the topic (if any)
- Decide beforehand what you'd like to happen and work towards it (be realistic)
- Write this down clearly with background and examples (both personal stories and any statistics etc), as well as exactly what you are seeking from the meeting. Give the politician (or their staff) copies of this document¹
- Take the submission to parties produced by Mental Illness Fellowship Australia, sent with this pack
- Make sure your issues are linked to the broader public interest – obviously with 20% of the population having a mental illness, better mental health is in the interests of all Australians
- Be brief and limit the number of requests
- Be polite and courteous to all people involved especially office staff as they can have a lot of influence. Thank them all for their time
- After the meeting, follow up with a letter explaining any actions you have taken since and ask for their progress update also

Other things you can do

- Also seek to meet with candidates from the other parties (see web address list below or our website for contact details for the opposition parties)

www.alp.org.au
or (03) 9687 7355²

www.nationals.org.au or
(02) 6273 3822

www.liberal.org.au
or (02) 6273 2564

www.democrats.org.au
or (08) 8371 1441

www.familyfirst.org.au
or (03) 9800 5393

www.greens.org.au
or 1800 017 011

- Write to your local newspaper but make sure you localise the story
- Talk about the issues with a variety of people – eg, friends, neighbours and work colleagues
- Make calls to talk-back radio and write letters to the editors of newspapers
- Send copies of your letters and any replies to:

Attention: Election07
Mental Illness Fellowship Victoria
PO Box 359, Clifton Hill
or election07@mifellowship.org

And remember:

- Your effort does make a difference and it is a worthy cause
- 20% of people have a mental illness in any year – it's a big issue for all Australians!

¹ You can also send us a copy here so we know what the campaign is looking like on the ground. Send to: election07@mifellowship.org

² This is the number for the Shadow Minister Of Health's office, once the election is called they will have a national campaign number

SAMPLE LETTERS (use as much or as little of this content as you wish)

Date:

Ms Jo Bloggs, MP
(address)

Dear Minister,

My son, aged 19 was diagnosed with schizophrenia six months ago. The effects of his illness made it impossible for him to continue his employment as a service station attendant and he was subsequently dismissed.

After six months of hospital admissions and various medication trials, my son was advised by the hospital staff that he should apply for the Disability Support Pension. He was assessed as not being eligible for the Disability Support Pension, but for Newstart Allowance (Partial Capacity) and was told that he must apply for seven jobs per fortnight to keep his allowance.

My son spent weeks searching for employment and eventually, through a Job Network service, obtained part time work as a kitchen hand. My son experienced difficulty in this work; he felt persecuted by the head chef, who constantly yelled at him for being too slow. He was afraid of the commercial dishwasher as he could hear voices through the churning water. He lasted in that employment for nine weeks and was then dismissed. The reasons given were that he did not "fit in", that his facial expressions were unsettling and he did not communicate well. The Job Network did not seem to be able to offer any assistance other than finding another job. Maybe if the employer had of known more about mental illness he might have kept his job?

- I would like to know why my son could not get anymore help than this to keep him in his job?
- And why he was put in this high stress job in the first place?
- His employment consultant did not seem to know much about mental illness and the limitations and needs someone with schizophrenia might have. How are the people in the employment services trained?
- Are there specific programs that work in getting people with mental illness (especially schizophrenia) into work?
- What is your government doing to educate employers about mental illness so this doesn't happen to other people?
- I am also worried that the stress of this has meant he is becoming unwell. I have tried to find out what happens then. The Job Network suggested that he could start in the Personal Support Program that is for people who are not ready to work yet, but I am told there is an 8 month waiting period.

I look forward to your response,

Yours faithfully,

NAME

ADDRESS

PHONE NO: (optional)

DATE

The Hon John Smith, MP
(address)

Dear Minister,

I have a mental illness and am unable to work. My sole income is the Disability Support Pension and I live with my elderly parents. My parents are now leaving their home to enter an aged care facility and I need to find private rental accommodation. I do not want to enter Supported Accommodation, as I feel that I will be able to manage without support. Rents have gone up and I haven't been able to find a house that I can afford on my Disability Support Pension. Also I feel when I'm looking at houses people are stigmatising me.

I have placed my name on the waiting list for public housing, however I was advised there is a **ten year waiting list**. And I have been told it is much harder for people with psychiatric disability to get on to the priority lists. This uncertainty of my accommodation is putting my recovery at risk, I feel less secure and settled each day I don't have long term accommodation.

I would appreciate your advice on what the Government is doing to alleviate the ten year waiting list for public housing; especially for people with mental illness for whom uncertainty is very difficult to deal with. I would also like to know what other options your government would offer for me to get a permanent home.

I would also like you to tell me why it's harder for people with psychiatric disability to get on to the priority lists for public housing; this seems like discrimination.

I look forward to your response.

Yours faithfully,

NAME:
Address:
Phone (optional):

Date:

To: A member of an opposition party

Dear Ms,

I refer to the Federal Election which is due to take place in either late 2007 or early 2008. I am writing with regards to getting more education to families and people who are developing a mental illness.

When she was a teenager, my daughter Jayne started 'cutting' and I was alarmed. She would stay in her room pretty much the whole time and changed from a sunny happy kind of person to being grumpy and withdrawn often on a daily basis. I have other children so I know that teenagers can be a bit like that anyway, but this was extreme and I did not know what to do. At first I suspected drugs but she hardly ever went out and she assured me she wasn't taking anything.

I know there are lots of organisations and helplines and so on, but I still did not know where to turn. The hospital services told me she wasn't unwell enough for them, but still she kept getting angry and making a mess of her arms! I took her to our local GP who suggested it may be a mental illness. This led to a couple of years of going to various professionals, including psychiatrists, trying to work out what was wrong.

I felt like I was flying blind. I wished I could have had more knowledge of what to do and how to help, and how the systems work etc. Much later I found out there are a limited number of programs like this in some places around the country. I wish I had known at the time. I also believe my daughter could do with such a program. She has tried attending support groups and just found she was sitting around drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes with people sicker than her.

If you are elected how does your party intend to:

- Make sure that families are better resourced and knowledgeable about mental illness and the services?
- Make sure there are programs for people with mental illness to learn manage their illness better on their road to recovery?
- Expand the current family education programs so that people can participate when and where they are needed?
- Ensure that the programs are of high quality and are helpful?

Looking forward to your response,

Yours faithfully,

Name
Address
Phone (optional)