



The Hon Emma McBride MP
Assistant Minister for Mental Health and Suicide Prevention
Assistant Minister for Rural and Regional Health

Ref No: MC24-014355

Councillor Linda Scott
President
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Dear Councillor

Thank you for your correspondence regarding resolutions carried at the 2024 National General Assembly (NGA) of Local Government.

The Australian Government recognises the challenges that Australians living in regional, rural and remote communities face in accessing the health services that they and their families need. We have made historic investments in Medicare to deliver critical funding to meet urgent healthcare needs, whilst progressing reforms to build a stronger Medicare for the future.

The Government is investing \$3.5 billion to triple the bulk billing incentive for GPs, so more children under 16, pensioners and concession card holders can receive care without paying an out-of-pocket fee. People outside major cities will benefit most from this measure – GPs who bulk bill an eligible patient for a standard consultation in a remote area had their bulk billing incentive increased from \$13.15 to \$39.65 from 1 November 2023.

The Single Employment Model (SEM), which allows GP registrars in regional, rural and remote locations to deliver services in community-based medical practices without losing employment benefits, has also been expanded. An evaluation commenced in 2023 and will conclude in 2027, with results to be brought back to government for consideration.

The Australian Government has also provided \$34.6 million for a new program to support international medical graduates who are new to Australia to work in primary care and remain in smaller regional communities, and to continue the Other Medical Practitioner Extension Program, which provides higher Medicare rebates for doctors without fellowship.

Additionally, the most recent budget includes \$358.5 million to support the roll-out of Medicare Urgent Care Clinics, including eight new clinics, to relieve pressure on the health system and enable Australians to access bulk-billed urgent care.

Furthermore, the \$220 million *Strengthening Medicare – General Practice Grants Program*, supports all general practices and eligible Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations across Australia to make investments in innovation, training, equipment, and minor capital works to expand patient access and improve their services.

The Government also acknowledges the barriers people are experiencing in accessing affordable and high-quality mental health care, particularly in regional, rural and remote areas. In the 2024-25 Budget, the Government has invested \$361 million over four years in the mental health and suicide prevention system.

This investment is taking crucial steps to transform the system into a stepped care model and expanding the range and reach of free mental health services to better cater to all Australians. This includes the introduction of a new national early intervention service providing free, safe and high-quality therapy and resources; support for Primary Health Networks to work with general practices to offer wraparound care for people with high needs (such as mental health nurses, counsellors, peer workers and other primary care supports); and an enhanced national network of 61 Medicare Mental Health Centres which will offer free, walk-in access to psychologists and psychiatrists.

Ensuring the mental health workforce is appropriately skilled, well-distributed and supported is a priority for the Government and the focus of the 10-year National Mental Health Workforce Strategy (Strategy). The Strategy includes actions to improve the supply, distribution and structure of the mental health workforce, and recognises the need for tailored responses to address workforce supply in rural and remote areas. Programs, such as the National Mental Health Pathways to Practice Program Pilot, aims to boost the training pipeline into the mental health sector across Australia, and provide placements and support, including for nursing students and graduates, in non-acute mental health settings.

Yours sincerely



Emma McBride

18 December 2024

cc: The Hon Kristy McBain MP, Minister for Regional Development, Local Government and Territories