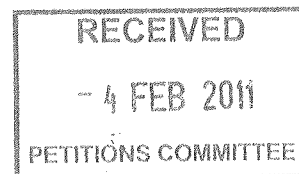
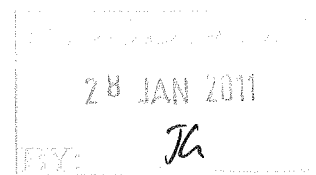




**THE HON MARK BUTLER MP  
MINISTER FOR MENTAL HEALTH AND AGEING**



The Hon John Murphy MP  
Chair  
Standing Committee on Petitions  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600



Dear Mr Murphy

Thank you for your letter of 22 November 2010 to the Minister for Health and Ageing, the Hon Nicola Roxon MP, regarding the proposed removal in the 2010-11 Budget of social workers and occupational therapists as eligible providers under the Medicare-funded Better Access to Psychiatrists, Psychologists and General Practitioners through the Medicare Benefits Schedule (Better Access) initiative. Your letter has been referred to me as the Minister for Mental Health and Ageing.

The then Chair, Mrs Julia Irwin MP, also wrote to Minister Roxon on this matter on 22 June 2010.

I note that there is an expectation under Standing Order 209(b) that Ministers will respond to a referred petition within 90 days of presentation, however due to the Federal election and extended caretaker period there was a passage of some months before the Australian Government could recommence consideration of this issue, hence the delay in responding to the Chair's letter of 22 June 2010.

The Government has listened to stakeholder feedback indicating that the removal of social workers and occupational therapists under the Better Access initiative was premature in the context of wider mental health reform, including the evaluation of the Better Access initiative which is due for receipt at the end of the year.

Following consultations with the sector about different needs in mental health, the value of the skills of mental health trained social workers and occupational therapists to provide vital interventions for people with a mental health disorder has been reinforced.

On 12 November 2010, following consideration of stakeholder feedback and consultations with the mental health sector, Minister Roxon and I announced that social workers and occupational therapists will continue to be able to provide Medicare-funded services under the Better Access initiative. I have attached the relevant media release for your reference.

I trust that the above information is of use.

Yours sincerely

**MARK BUTLER**

19 JAN 2011

Encl



**THE HON NICOLA ROXON MP**  
**Minister for Health and Ageing**

**THE HON MARK BUTLER MP**  
**Minister for Mental Health and Ageing**

**JOINT MEDIA RELEASE**

12 November 2010

**Better Access to Continue for Social Workers and Occupational Therapists**

The Minister for Health and Ageing Nicola Roxon and the Minister for Mental Health and Ageing Mark Butler today announced that social workers and occupational therapists will continue to be able to provide Medicare-funded services under the Better Access Initiative.

In the 2010-11 Budget, the Government diverted funds from the Better Access Initiative to provide additional support to Flexible Care Packages for people with a severe mental illness. This diversion of funds resulted in social workers and occupational therapists no longer being able to provide Medicare-funded services.

Following stakeholder feedback, Minister Roxon asked the new Minister for Mental Health and Ageing to consult further with stakeholders on the Budget decision as a priority following his appointment.

The Government has listened to stakeholder feedback indicating that this change was premature in the context of wider mental health reform and the Better Access Review, which has prompted this announcement today.

“As we’ve been talking to the sector about different needs in mental health, the value of the skills of social workers and occupational therapists has been reinforced,” Minister Butler said.

“We’ve also been talking to our stakeholders about ways to incorporate social workers and occupational therapists into our Flexible Care Packages so people with a severe mental illness can get the best care they need when the Packages begin on 1 April 2011.”

Mr Butler said social workers and occupational therapists will also continue to be able to provide services under other Labor Government-funded mental health programs, such as Access to Allied Psychological Services (ATAPS) and Mental Health Services in Rural and Remote Areas programs.

“The Prime Minister has stated that mental health will be an important second-term agenda and this Government is committed to addressing the mental health needs of the Australian community,” he said.

“The Better Access initiative has become a very significant and fast-growing component of this Government’s expenditure in mental health.

“Better Access is currently undergoing a comprehensive evaluation, which is due for receipt at the end of the year.

“The evaluation will tell us whether we are getting the ‘best bang for our buck’ out of this very large investment, and if we’re not, that’s something we would want to look at tackling as part of the broader mental health reform process.

“As I prepare options to present to the Government for further mental health reform, that evaluation will be an important addition to our evidence base.”

The Government is looking forward to working in partnership with social workers, occupational therapists and the wider mental health sector on mental health reform for the future.

The financial impact of this policy was included in the 2010-11 Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook released by the Treasurer this week.

**MEDIA CONTACTS:**

**Minister Roxon’s Office (02) 6277 7220**

**Minister Butler’s Office 02 6277 7280**