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Beyond Blue backs National Mental Health and Wellbeing Pandemic Response Plan

Beyond Blue welcomes the National Cabinet's new plan to address the mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia.

Beyond Blue Chair The Hon Julia Gillard AC said the push to reach particular groups and have governments more rapidly collect and share data were essential steps towards building a better mental health system for all Australians, now and into the future.

"The collaborative, bipartisan response to the mental health challenges posed by this crisis has been swift and decisive and reminds us of what we can achieve by working together," Ms Gillard said.

"Our mental health system is in urgent need of reform and the response should not be more of the same. The National Mental Health and Wellbeing Pandemic Response Plan, unanimously endorsed by the National Cabinet today, is a step towards delivering some of the changes people, families and communities have needed in this country for a long time."

Beyond Blue CEO Georgie Harman said the Commonwealth's next \$48.1 million commitment would start to fill some of the urgent gaps that have emerged: real-time data collection and analysis so responses are targeted and more agile; assertive outreach to people disproportionately affected by the pandemic, including people with complex mental health needs, carers, essential workers, First Nations people, the elderly and culturally and linguistically diverse communities; and keep people connected to services and supports.

"We know the strong partnerships between governments, and the partnerships between governments and the community, have been a vital part of Australia's public health response to COVID-19. The same must happen for the mental health response," Ms Harman said.

"We went into this crisis with a mental health system in need of profound change and we've already seen rapid change and creativity. We need to maintain this momentum as we work to reshape the system so that people who need support have options that match their needs.

"This pandemic is affecting those who live with mental health issues, and those who have never struggled before, and the National Mental Health and Wellbeing Pandemic Response Plan highlights the need for rapid access to services and supports for people experiencing varying levels of distress.

"It also confirms we need solutions that exist outside of the traditional health system – in homes, schools and workplaces – and to build up new workforces, especially at a time when unemployment is a major concern.

"The anticipated rise in demand for mental health support over the longer term offers an opportunity to invest in peer workers and mental health coaches, and in a range of high and low intensity options that work.

"Clear communication is going to continue to be essential and any communication campaign needs to be enhanced by trusted, grassroots community leaders and organisations.

“We are seeing how quickly and efficiently we can effect positive change and this plan offers a solid foundation for further reforms with the Commonwealth and States and Territories working together and with people living with mental health issues and their support people.

"To implement the plan we know there will need to be further investment, so we welcome the fact this has started today with a \$19.5m investment by the Victorian government."

The free Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service is available 24/7 at coronavirus.beyondblue.org.au Its dedicated phone line, staffed by mental health professionals trained on the pandemic response, is now open on 1800 512 348.

Beyond Blue’s existing support service will continue to operate alongside the new service. The Beyond Blue Support Service is available via phone 24/7 on 1300 22 4636 or via beyondblue.org.au/get-support for online chat (3PM – 12AM AEST or email responses within 24 hours).