



**HACSU**  
Health & Community  
Services Union



**VAHPA**



**ATTENTION**

**The Hon. Tim Pallas MP**

By Email: [tim.pallas@parliament.vic.gov.au](mailto:tim.pallas@parliament.vic.gov.au)

**The Hon. Danny Pearson MP**

By Email: [danny.pearson@parliament.vic.gov.au](mailto:danny.pearson@parliament.vic.gov.au)

**The Hon. Ingrid Stitt MP**

By Email: [Ingrid.stitt@parliament.vic.gov.au](mailto:Ingrid.stitt@parliament.vic.gov.au)

**The Hon. Mary-Anne Thomas MP**

By Email: [mary-anne.thomas@parliament.vic.gov.au](mailto:mary-anne.thomas@parliament.vic.gov.au)

**14 November 2023**

**RE WORKCOVER SCHEME MODERNISATION BILL**

---

Dear Minister Pallas, Minister Pearson, Minister Stitt and Minister Thomas,

We are writing to you on behalf of healthcare workers across the State to convey our extreme opposition to the *Workcover Scheme Modernization Bill 2023*.

While we, the undersigned, acknowledge that mental injuries mainly caused by bullying, harassment or discrimination will be covered, and these exclusions will not apply to workers in frontline roles, serious concerns remain in relation to conflict, workload pressure and long hours in the health and community services sectors.

The last three years have been some of the most testing years on record for healthcare workers, their patients, participants and the families they support. Healthcare workers have persisted and excelled despite these challenges; they have continued to look after our State's most vulnerable – often in full PPE, working overtime, spending time away from their friends and family, and often at a financial and leave disadvantage.

Over the pandemic, many have labelled our members “healthcare heroes”, and while we appreciate this newfound appreciation for the critical work of our members, they are not heroes but dedicated workers who deserve to be safe at work and respected. Our priority is ensuring that this newfound appreciation translates into better wages and conditions, and the ability to access critical mental health support.

**Healthcare is Dangerous, and Underfunded**

Wages and conditions have deteriorated due to extreme funding pressures and inadequate timelines for critical reform. Across the board in hospitals, allied health services, mental health settings, pathology labs, disability services, aged care services and drug and alcohol services, acuity and workloads have increased to levels that are simply unsustainable and unsafe for workers and their patients.

Services are unable to recruit the workers needed to deliver the State's most critical services. Wards, community teams, supported independent living accommodation services and health providers are dangerously understaffed, with far too many graduates going without support,



**HACSU**  
Health & Community  
Services Union



**VAHPA**



training opportunities and/or supervision. Regional services struggle to attract graduates and, as the current vacancy rates demonstrate, are unable to attract experienced healthcare workers.

### **Agreed outcomes of Bargaining Delayed and Unfulfilled**

Furthermore, many announcements made by the State government have not been rolled out and others sit fallow because of underfunding. These failings are placing significant pressures on the workforce and on health services. Concerningly, the government appears to have reneged on its commitment to implement critical workforce interventions, those agreed to in tripartite negotiations between the unions, employers and the government, including the recruitment of hundreds of desperately needed healthcare workers. The scale of this failing is unprecedented by Victoria.

### **Predicted Workforce Pressures**

We note that the Victorian Skills Plan for 2022 into 2023 highlighted that the State requires an additional 65,000 healthcare workers in the next three years and the 2023 into 2024 plan highlighted that the State expects that there will be an additional 83,399 additional workers in health by 2026.

The lack of available workforce, sustainable funding and meaningful wages and conditions mean that interpersonal conflict, workload pressure, long hours, stress and burnout **are not unusual** and go far beyond what is reasonably expected during our members' employment.

**It is our firm belief that this recruitment will be impossible until such time as fundamental shifts in the way in which our services are funded and delivered are rectified.**

As a collective we are extremely disappointed in the proposed legislation and note that for the most part, healthcare workers are not afforded adequate workplace prevention and early-intervention measures in relation to mental ill-health, addiction, bystander intervention and respectful relationships and a pernicious culture of bullying and intimidation dominates the sector. Interventions readily available in the construction, maritime and transport sectors such as a worker-led Employee Assistance Program, general awareness training, on-site toolbox talks and 24-hour critical incident response have not been considered, invested in or discussed.

We are all finding that our members are increasingly seeking employment opportunities elsewhere or choosing to retire earlier than they otherwise might because the workplace culture has become one of overwork and undervalued.

Collectively we hold grave concerns for the mental health workforce who will inevitably be negatively impacted by this change. Recommendation 16 of The Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System titled "*Establishing Mentally Healthy Workplaces*" which called for a collaborative approach between employers, employees and associations to work together to create a positive culture in the workplace. Investment in this space will yield immense benefits for all working people and their families and will begin to reduce pressure on the already broken mental health sector. To implement this change prior to truly



**HACSU**  
Health & Community  
Services Union



**VAHPA**



establishing mentally healthy workplaces across the State will be disastrous for the Victorian mental health workforce and our members alike. We note that our sectors are largely female-dominated and that it is highly likely that the new eligibility requirements will have a disproportionate impact on women workers who are statistically more likely to be diagnosed with stress and anxiety due to the nature of their work.

When Government fails to properly fund programs, the reality on the ground is an increase in workload and associated stress and anxiety. When Government then chooses to then absolve itself from responsibility for the increase in workplace injuries caused by its own actions, that is shameful.

### **Requests**

We respectfully request that debate on the Bill be delayed and for the Labor government to consider the following:

1. Launch an inquiry into public sector culture in the health and care industries.
2. Genuine consultation with the health, caring and emergency services sectors to implement prevention and early intervention measures inclusive of a worker-led employee assistance program, critical response service (24 hours post a workplace event), general awareness training inclusive of mental health first-aid and Suicide ASIST training for the workforce, employers and government departments responsible for funding our services.
3. Unfettered access to the People Matters Survey to stamp out predatory, bullying and stressful perpetrators in the health sector and public service.
4. A safe and supported mechanism for workers and unions to whistle blow on poor behaviour within the health and caring sector by bosses.
5. A firm commitment to costing all enterprise agreements and memorandums of understanding for the duration of the bargaining process.
6. Stabilized funding across the health and community services sectors.

### **Conclusion**

We know that reducing workload pressure will go a long way to cutting down the instances of Workcover claims being lodged for stress and burnout. The requirement for significant workforce growth in our sectors requires an urgent and meaningful investment in training, attraction and retention strategies, prevention of and early intervention of psychological injuries, to ensure the workforce is capable, confident, well-remunerated and well-supported.

To wind back services for healthcare workers when they need it most is unfair, unreasonable, and most importantly, unsafe.



In solidarity,

**Paul Healey (HACSU)**  
Branch Secretary

**Craig McGregor (VAHPA)**  
Branch Secretary

**Matt Hammond (MSAV & AHP)**  
Branch Secretary

**Lisa Alcock (MSAV VPA)**  
Assistant Branch Secretary

**Kate Marshall (HACSU)**  
Assistant Branch Secretary

**John Ryan (VAHPA)**  
Assistant Branch Secretary

**David Eden (HWU)**  
Assistant Branch Secretary