



# PSA Submission

## COVID-19 Psychosocial and Mental Wellbeing Recovery Plan

June 2020

## About the PSA

The New Zealand Public Service Association Te Pūkenga Here Tikanga Mahi (the PSA) is the largest trade union in New Zealand with over 76,000 members. We are a democratic organisation representing members in the public service, the wider state sector (the district health boards, crown research institutes and other crown entities), state owned enterprises, local government, tertiary education institutions and non-governmental organisations working in the health, social services and community sectors.

The PSA has been advocating for strong, innovative and effective public and community services since our establishment in 1913. People join the PSA to negotiate their terms of employment collectively, to have a voice within their workplace and to have an independent public voice on the quality of public and community services and how they're delivered.

Extensive feedback was received from the PSA Deaf and Disabled Members Network as well as from our Mental Health and Addiction Committee, which is made up of members employed in district health boards (DHB) and in the community public services covering mental health, disability, home support and social services.

The PSA is an affiliate of the New Zealand Council of Trade Unions Te Kauae Kaimahi (CTU).

## The PSA's position

The PSA welcomes the invitation to comment on **Kia Kaha, Kia Māia, Kia Ora Aotearoa: Psychosocial and Mental Wellbeing Recovery Plan**.

The PSA supports prevention and early intervention to deal with the range of responses and severity of distress caused by COVID-19 and associated disruption and uncertainty. The PSA strongly supports the recognition that psychosocial support can only be effective if support spans mental health and social interventions. Our members also strongly support that He Ara Oranga and its implementation is vital to protect and enhance people's mental wellbeing. The guiding principles of the recovery framework should guide what we do strategically and should guide our day to day work.

The PSA wishes to proactively engage with the design and implementation of the following focus areas of the recovery framework:

- Support for specialist services
- Strengthen primary mental health and addiction support in communities
- Collectively build the social and economic foundation for psychosocial and mental wellbeing

The PSA believes that our members can make a viable and constructive contribution to realise and sustain the government's priority to improve the wellbeing of New Zealanders and their families.

## Recommendations

In order to ensure success of the framework the PSA wishes to make the following recommendations.

### Union involvement and decent working conditions

While the PSA supports the recovery framework some of the principles and actions need to be specified further. Empowering communities to discuss, design, create and deliver responses is crucial. Unions are an important collective voice within our communities and should be involved in community led recovery activities as well as national or sector wide activities.

The PSA represents workers who provide health and community support services and holds a deep understanding of the shortcomings as well as strengths of existing services. Drawing on workers' experiences, expertise and ideas is an integral component for providing services that are of high-quality and serve the needs of those using the services.

Working in health and support services can be challenging. These challenges were exacerbated during the lockdown period. The immense work intensity, insecurity of work, uncertainty around personal protective equipment (PPE) and concerns about patients and clients, loved ones and one's own health increased the psychosocial risks for our members. The report mentions that workplaces that prioritise mental wellbeing are crucial to creating environments in which whanau and

communities can thrive. The most effective mechanism to ensure workplaces prioritise mental wellbeing is by increasing the **participation of workers** in discussions and decision-making processes. Creating integrated, regular and trust-based worker participation mechanisms would be a concrete activity to empower people to participate and contribute to decisions on the best possible solutions.

For workers to participate and to deliver high-quality services **safe staffing, health and safety, continuous training and development and valuing essential health services** are crucial. Safe staffing, appropriate health and safety policies and their implementation, as well as training and development, are enablers for health and support workers to provide high-quality services and for them to feel safe, protected and secure at work, thereby reducing stress and fatigue levels.

Now is also the time to recognise the work of health and community support workers (including administrative and clerical workers) financially thereby supporting not only the worker but also whānau and families and communities. Equal pay and better pay should be funded appropriately to ensure people are recognised for the true value of their work.

The PSA recommends that the recovery framework recognises the voice of workers as an important vehicle to discuss, design and deliver the services that are needed.

The PSA also recommends including a specific point under 'Workforce capacity and capability':

- Increase the participation of workers and their unions for improving the workforce's capacity and capability
- Respond to mental health and addiction workforce needs during COVID-19 response and recovery. This includes safe staffing numbers.

### Protection of human rights

The PSA supports the protection of human rights. By becoming a party to international treaties, NZ assumes obligations and duties under international law to **respect, to protect and to fulfil human rights**. This means the NZ government has the obligation to respect, protect and fulfil the human right to health of all its citizens. This includes taking positive action to facilitate the enjoyment of human rights related to people's psychosocial and mental wellbeing.

The PSA also suggests referencing the **Sustainable Development Goals** as a coherent framework for ensuring health and wellbeing of people living in NZ into the future.

In addition, the **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women** (CEDAW) should be included in the list of international conventions the government abides by.

### Psychosocial and mental wellbeing of our deaf and disabled community

While most of the PSA members who are engaged with the Deaf and Disabled Network welcome the recovery plan, they wish to highlight the importance of recognising the hardship and disproportionate mental distress of **people at intersectional risk**. Disabled people belong to this group and face multiple risks including a greater risk of losing their job, fear for their own health and that of their loved ones, and continued exclusion from social and cultural activities etc.

People with lived experience of disability and serious underlying medical conditions are absent from the document. For the recovery framework to be inclusive and effective in reaching its goal to protect and enhance everyone's psychosocial and mental wellbeing people at intersectional risk should be recognised in a distinct section of the plan. Services need to be more targeted for these groups as generic services may worsen their wellbeing. One of our members of the Deaf and Disabled Network told us:

*In essence as a disabled person I feel the recovery plan has not recognised how difficult it has been for those of us with serious underlying health conditions. As someone who has significant underlying respiratory issues it was hard to take day in and day out. All the mental health websites and even phone helplines offered only very generic advice geared up for non-disabled people. I did not find any of them useful at a time when I felt grief, (I was not looking for meaningless reassurance that I would not die), rather acknowledgement that I may indeed die from it and the unfairness of potentially dying this way... this was beyond what the generic government funded sites could offer me.*

A major point of critique was the **inaccessibility of the document to our Deaf and Disabled communities**. The PSA recommends producing a translation in sign language and easy read versions for this document and associated documents in the future. Allowing all communities to equally participate in discussions is a precondition to finding the best possible solutions for achieving equity and the realisation of human rights for all.

The critical factors to ensure success of the recovery plan especially for disabled people are linked to the need for a full review of our health and disability system as **equitable access** remains a significant challenge. Welfare reforms are also overdue to adequately support those in need. Without equitable access to health, disability and welfare services physical, mental and social wellbeing cannot be realised.

The education system should also be fully accessible to all to ensure mental wellbeing of all our communities. A member told us:

*Schools need the resources/support/encouragement/enforcement to take an active and leading role in providing mental health support for children in their care. My personal experience I have seen a teen over 16 with a hearing impairment (also Maori) encouraged to leave school by the school rather than they (the school) take up the bat and provide support and resources required to allow this student to get the education that they desire (they would like to attend university in the future).*

One of our members thought that a **positive example** of workplace wellbeing promotion is the use of the app Mentemia. The app is located on work computer monitor screen savers. Therefore, it is very easy to access without the need to actively search for or read articles etc (no active step required to find it). It puts it right under the nose of people who may need some help, at a time when they may not even realise, they need it yet.

Thank you for considering our submission.

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