



State Budget Submission

2021-2022

A. About the Health Services Union of WA

HSUWA is a specialised union of health workers in Western Australia with more than 6000 members.

Our members work in Hospitals and Health Services, Aged Care, Disabilities, Imaging, Pathology, Private Practices and Allied Health. Their jobs make up a significant part of the health workforce, for example Pharmacists, Clinical Psychologists, Physiotherapists, Medical Scientists and Researchers, Medical Imaging Technicians, Laboratory Technicians and Administrators. We cover the many jobs and varied expertise needed to care for the community and run a health system.

We are a trusted and influential union of Western Australian health workers, collectively achieving stronger, fairer working conditions and a better health system. We are dedicated to our purpose - to empower our members to advance their collective interests through organising, support, advocacy and influence. HSUWA is a growing union, organising and campaigning for better pay, conditions and careers for our members.

B. COVID-19 and the current situation

The pandemic has revealed, like no other experience in living memory, the importance of a strongly resourced health care system and a well-trained, responsive and resilient health workforce.

HSUWA members are on the front lines of the COVID-19 response. Over the last eighteen months, Allied Health and Health Professionals, Administrators, Managers, Medical Scientists, Technicians and Assistants have all demonstrated their immense dedication to the health system, as well as the community of Western Australia. HSUWA members continue to perform their roles professionally and with dedication in the face of significant concerns for their own welfare and the welfare of their families.

The work of HSUWA members in delivering high-quality health care has been led by the McGowan Government's dedication to providing determined and clear leadership to the people of Western Australia during the pandemic. We congratulate the McGowan Government on its re-election and are pleased the government has made some significant health funding announcements under election and pre-budget commitments, as well as the Covid Recovery Plan.

However, we believe the government must continue to focus on improving investment in our health workforce and their wellbeing. The McGowan Government's excellent stewardship and managing of the pandemic stands alongside the growing toll that our members have suffered due to workload pressures from increasing levels of demand. Frontline health workers are currently experiencing high levels of frustration, fatigue and burn out.

We support the McGowan Government in a very careful and cautious approach to opening state borders based on vaccination targets spruiked by the Morrison Government, especially those that do not include children. The WA health system would not cope with a sustained outbreak, it is already under huge strain without COVID-19 community transmission. Any premature easing of restrictions could be disastrous and cause unnecessary illness and suffering. There needs to be significant investment and planning across our system to be properly prepared for any opening up of the State in 2022 and beyond. We note the pre-election announcement of an additional \$487 million towards

COVID-19 preparedness and look forward to consultation with union members to better understand how this money will be used to best prepare.

Last December, HSUWA wrote to the State Government about the priorities for our members if the Labor Party was re-elected to form government for a second term in 2021. Our budget submission 2021-2022 is consistent with those priorities and they form the basis of HSUWA's current campaigning, as we navigate the pandemic and aim to protect and improve our robust, high quality and proudly public health care system in WA.

The return on investment in health is stronger than ever and we trust the McGowan Government will not lose sight of that amongst the many competing interests the government must weigh. Health must come first.

C. Fair Pay

In 2017 HSUWA members reluctantly accepted a wage increase capped at \$1,000 per year for the purposes of budget repair, despite it being a break from Labor's 2016 election commitments.

The wage cap has continued for four consecutive years for all public sector workers. Recently the State Government announced that this policy setting will continue for a further two years with an economic review to follow. This would mean that HSUWA members would not see an increase above the cap until at least 1 July 2024.

Entrenching such limited wage growth devalues the contribution of health workers who have endured the pandemic and a health system operating at, or near capacity. Public sector workers have also borne the brunt of budget repair. Now the State Government is asking them to continue to do the heavy lifting for another two years.

The desire to lock in low wage growth for another two years is unfair.

The policy also limits our ability to address other concerns such as equalising shift worker entitlements with other key public sector health workers. It risks a further erosion of trust between our members and the government when the government refuses to recognize the contribution of workers delivering essential health services in the toughest conditions including during unsociable hours. It presents a significant problem in the attraction and retention of staff amidst a growing shortage of skilled workers across health services. Most importantly, it risks disempowering the most critical workforce in the State.

The current policy also ignores the benefits of economic stimulus for fellow Western Australians that follows meaningful public sector wage growth and its negative flow on to wages in the private sector, effectively dragging down the whole local economy.

We seek good faith bargaining for health workers on both wages and conditions by dispensing with the state wages cap. Now is the time to allow meaningful bargaining given the commitment and dedication shown by health workforce members, and the value of their work.

Recommendation One:

Scrap the public sector state wages cap of \$1,000 per year

D. A Sustainable Health System

Previous governments have overlooked opportunities to improve outcomes in health over many years. In simple terms, the WA health system is now under huge strain because the pandemic has coincided with a system already under stress due to decades of underinvestment and poor planning. The geography of the state, the complexities of the state/federal government funding arrangements and responsibilities in health (and the areas that intersect with health such as the aged care sector, the NDIS and housing), and the current governance structures of state public health are also critical factors.

The Sustainable Health Review Final Report in 2019, a comprehensive review of the system commissioned by the incoming Labor State Government in 2018, clearly set out the challenges facing the health system and a roadmap forward. This included a shift away from being medico-centric and a re-investment in public health care. The findings were encouraging, and members strongly supported the government's commitment to implement all 30 recommendations.

We are heartened by the progress of some recommendations, and we acknowledge some encouraging steps have been made. For example, the work to introduce a new payroll and roster system to replace the outdated and costly to run patchwork of systems relied on currently.

However, there is little transparency on what overall progress has been made in implementing the recommendations of the Sustainable Health Review Final Report and what is being prioritised.

Amidst the clear and determined leadership of this government during the pandemic to date, our members report the challenges in the health system, so clearly identified in the Sustainable Health Review Final Report, have increased – to a crisis point in various parts of the system.

In our view, there are no short cuts to the significant investment initially needed to implement the 30 recommendations of the Sustainable Health Review Final Report. Waiting further to implement the broad range of changes identified will only see us move further away from a sustainable health system and towards a situation where we are unable to meet our community's needs during public health emergencies.

We note that the further recommendations in our submission link back to recommendations covered off in the Sustainable Health Review Final Report.

Recommendation Two:

- a) Commit to a program of funding and transparent process to implement all 30 recommendations of Sustainable Health Review Final Report 2019**
- b) Ensure funding for the actions under recommendation 30 – designed to support and track implementation of the recommendations 1 to 29**

E. Health Workforce

The pandemic has revealed, like no other experience in recent memory, the critical need to plan for our health workforce. Right now, there are growing staff shortages in Western Australia health services, which are already acute in some areas (especially the regions), and within some specialties. The answer does not lie with immigration alone, although HSUWA recognises in the short term we may need to turn to trained staff from other countries. The path out of crippling staff shortages is to look after the existing workforce and ensure rigorous long term workforce planning. Further, training local workers and providing secure, quality jobs so they can safely deliver the care Western Australians need is essential.

Building capability in workforce planning was identified as a priority under the Sustainable Health Review Final Report (recommendation 26). It is the experience of the HSUWA that the Health Department lacks the capacity to address workforce planning matters proactively and identify future workforce concerns. In the current structure of the WA health system, planning seems to be left to separate health employers rather than be properly coordinated centrally.

Recommendation Three:

- a) Invest in building the Department of Health’s capability to centrally coordinate proper health workforce planning**
- b) Fast track the initiatives under recommendations 26 of the Sustainable Health Review Final Report**

To retain qualified and experienced health staff, in addition to addressing wages, the government should continue to challenge the Health Department to improve job security in public health. Despite the government’s best efforts during its first term, still more than a third of HSUWA covered positions in public health are employed insecurely on either a fixed term or casual basis.

The important initiative of reviewing fixed term and casuals engaged for more than two years under Commissioner’s Instruction No. 23 led to the positive outcome of permanency for some workers, and our *WA Health System – HSUWA -PACTS Industrial Agreement 2020 (Union Agreement 2020)* embedded a similar review process. However, across health there continues to be a significant proportion of employees in insecure jobs, and resistance from health employers to

address the structural reform needed to change a culture and practice that accepts, and, in some cases, even encourages insecure employment.

There is a continued reliance of engaging new employees as fixed term or casuals by public health employers (the Health Service Providers or HSPs). There has also been serious compliance and cultural issues with the review process required under the Union Agreement 2020. In other words, the hiring practices (or the front end) has not significantly changed or improved, while there has been slow progress on the back end that, while improving, is still facing resistance.

Not only because of the negative effects of insecure work on employees, employers and the community, but to simply attract and retain much needed staff, we are at the stage where clear targets need to be set and met, to change ingrained practices of insecure work across public health.

Recommendation Four:

- a) Set targets of 90% permanent employment in each HSP by the end of 2022**
- b) Ensure permanent employment targets and progress towards them are binding on the HSPs by including targets in their Service Agreements with the Chief Executive Officer**

Workplace safety is critical for HSUWA members. We seek a range of existing initiatives to be re-invigorated or actioned, especially in the context of the upcoming commencement date (expected to be early 2022) of the recently passed *Work Health Safety Act (WA)* (**WHS Law**). The passing of this new law, to improve and harmonise our workplace safety laws to the standards of the rest of the country was a significant achievement of the State Government. We look forward to working with employers to ensure safer workplaces across our health system by utilising the structures and standards under the new WHS law and focusing on a transition to a culture of safety, rather than a disengaging, check box compliance approach.

We consider the role of a well-resourced regulator vital to this transition. Our experience is one of delay and denial by some health employers when timely action is needed to respond to safety issues. These can be issues arising from workload, rostering, staff interactions, building design and faults, as well as patients and their families.

There is a pressing need in the interim to refocus on staff safety from violence and aggression and pick up the work commenced in 2019 for a more comprehensive approach to the role and functions of Security Officers. Following the Stop the Violence Summit in 2019, some health employers have been pro-active in implementing Stop the Violence Workforce initiatives, while others have been reluctant to address basic safety issues, putting staff at risk and in some cases, incurring serious injury.

Recommendation Five

- a) Reinvigorate and implement a system-wide Stop the Violence Workforce Strategy, consistent across all health services**
- b) Focus on clarifying and improving hospital security functions by a system-wide plan to ensure the best resourcing, training and equipment for Security Officers**
- c) Increase funding to the regulator WorkSafe, so it can carry out its functions under the new Work Health Safety law**

Ensuring safe and sustainable workloads is vital to attract and retain staff across the health system. Related to workforce planning, there is an absence of information about what this looks like for key occupations in health, especially those under sustained and increasing workload pressure. HSUWA reiterates its specific request to urgently commission and fund research to establish safe and sustainable caseloads for Clinical Psychologists, Occupational Therapists and Social Workers employed in state public sector mental health services. The research would need to consider factors including hospital versus non-hospital settings, case mix and acuity levels.

Recommendation Six:

Commission and fund research to establish safe and sustainable caseloads for Clinical Psychologists, Occupational Therapists and Social Workers employed in public sector mental health services

F. Mental Health

HSUWA is campaigning for S.A.F.E Mental Health Services WA. This means mental health services that are: **S**ustainable and integrated with other services; **A**ccessible in communities and hospitals; **F**ully **F**unded in line with *State Mental Health and Alcohol and Other Drug Services Plan 2015-2025*; and provide, **E**xcellent workplaces and care for the people of WA.

The status of the *State Mental Health and Alcohol and Other Drug Services Plan 2015-2025 (Plan)* is unclear, given the last review was 2018, but it's generally understood the targets outlined to achieve long term system reform have not been met.

We consider the current crisis in our EDs and our mental health services to be directly related to not meeting the targets in the Plan. The entire health system needs the targets to be met. Not doing so means services fall further behind, with the workforce under pressure and facing unsustainable workloads. The cycle of only taking serious action when tragedies occur or the system is in crisis must stop. Our highly trained, experienced and passionate clinicians are not prepared to accept the current status quo. This has been the genesis of the HSUWA S.A.F.E Mental Health Services campaign.

We acknowledge the State Government has in its election commitments and pre-budget media statements taken significant and important steps by announcing a broad range of initiatives to boost mental health services in WA.

At this stage it is unclear what the announcements mean for meeting the targets set out in the Plan. A review of the Plan in 2022 is important to understand how the initiatives are tracking against the targets in the Plan and clarifying what needs to be prioritised.

We particularly welcome the investment towards improving access to treatment for young Western Australians and commend the additional funding of staff at Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (**CAMHS**) and the commencement of the ICA Taskforce process. There is real hope that the announced ICA Taskforce will lead to the promised:

“comprehensive plan for a contemporary, world-class child and adolescent service operating model, incorporating best practice nationally and internationally”

Union members at CAMHS took action this year to advocate for more staff to meet the needs of increasing numbers of seriously unwell children who need treatment from specialised services. Referrals to CAMHS Community Clinics are three times what they were six years ago with the same staffing numbers. There has been a 400% increase in children under 12 presenting at our EDs with self-harm attempts in the last 10 years to 2019 (pre-COVID-19). That is 332 children under 12 in 2019.

The existing workforce has simply been expected to absorb the increased demand. It is very positive news that new staffing positions have been funded and there is a longer-term plan being considered through the ICA Taskforce process.

We remain concerned about the significant continued risks the current system presents to staff and to the vulnerable and at-risk children, adolescents and their families while this important, but lengthy ICA Taskforce process is underway. The announcement of additional staff will go some way to assist, however we look forward to further details about the pre-budget announcements of additional funding for the Mental Health Commission (**MHC**). We look forward to working with the MHC to ensure other measures are implemented to assist with the current crisis, ahead of implementation of the ICA Taskforce recommendations in the next few years.

Recommendation Seven:

- a) Review the progress made of the key priorities under the *State Mental Health, Alcohol and Other Drug Services Plan 2015 – 2025* and commit to the funding injection needed to then catch up to meet the optimal levels of service set out in the Plan by 2025**
- b) Commit to providing the mental health services needed for young Western Australians, including by:**
 - Resourcing current community and hospital-based services in metro and regional areas to ensure timely access to treatment for children and adolescents with severe, complex and persistent emotional, psychological, behavioural, social and/or mental health problems**
 - Agreeing to fully fund and implement the recommendations of the ICA Taskforce as an urgent government priority**
 - Ensure the funding levels are at least proportionate to the funding for adult services**

G. Innovation, Infrastructure and Climate Change

Both the Sustainable Health Review Final Report 2019 and the WA Climate Health Inquiry Final Report 2020 make a range of recommendations to ensure adaptation and mitigation strategies are adopted by public health in response climate change. Regrettably there has been little leadership in this area by the Health Department or coordination across the system, and there is simply no time for further delay. Members are frustrated at the continued waste, navigating the heat islands on hospital grounds (particularly QEII) and continual missed opportunities for change and improvement.

The Sustainable Health Review Final Report found that “innovation is stifled, haphazard and good practice does not spread”. Efforts to better support workforce innovation are still stifled. We consider the continued lack of a fair and simple Intellectual Property Policy to ensure health employees are incentivised to innovate is a case in point. The path forward in relation to any important and potentially transformative innovation in WA public health remains a minefield and commercialisation a pipe dream. Given the government’s stated objectives in this area, the Future Health Research and Innovation Fund and the important work of the government’s recent Climate Health Inquiry, it’s clear that overcoming the longstanding existing barriers to supporting innovation in WA health requires a sustained and well-coordinated approach.

We are very keen to see the Future Health Research and Innovation Fund follow through on a funding stream that will support innovation that is inclusive of the development delivery of new or improved health policies, systems and services and delivery methods that seek to improve people’s health.

In relation to health infrastructure, HSUWA is actively participating in the State Infrastructure Strategy process underway by Infrastructure WA. We welcome this important initiative of the State Government and fully support the critical long-term thinking and planning that the government is working towards. The lack of digital infrastructure (including medical records) in WA health holds back progress and efficiencies. Addressing the significant amount of ageing (in some cases decrepit), physical infrastructure presents a huge challenge to be overcome. Too many of our members work in physical spaces that are too small or poorly designed or unsafe.

Proper and ongoing consultation with the workers who need to work in these buildings, is critical before the building process gets started and throughout the whole build process. This also applies to leasing or purchasing spaces, especially where clinical care is to be provided. This consultation should be standard operating procedure for all projects – upscaled according to the size of the project. We hope this State Government will not repeat the costly health infrastructure mistakes of past State Governments.

We are pleased that the government has been working to begin to address issues with ageing infrastructure and capacity issues, with a broad range of building improvements across Perth and in regional areas underway or announced. We believe there remains significant barriers to do this successfully. We are concerned about the level of internal capacity and 'knowhow' within the Department of Health and a lack of understanding of how the devolved HSP structure, as well as public/private sites, should communicate and coordinate. We believe consideration of the intersection of infrastructure and climate change to be critical to the success of future built infrastructure.

Recommendation Eight:

Commit to improving innovation in health as a priority, including by:

- a) Fully resourcing the establishment of the Sustainable Development Unit and actioning the recommendations of the WA Climate Health Inquiry Final Report**
- b) Implementing a fair and simple Intellectual Property Policy to ensure health employees are incentivised to innovate, providing certainty and clarity to support the medical research and innovation strategies of the State Government**
- c) Ensuring all infrastructure projects involve a worker consultation process as standard operating procedure**

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