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Community services budget initiatives welcome, but sector workers left out

While welcoming the initiatives announced in today's State budget, Victoria's 60,000 community services workers again feel let down, according to the Australian Services Union.

"Yet again, while the announced initiatives are commendable, nothing has been done to address the pressing issue of low pay and conditions of Victoria's community services workers who will be rolling out these initiatives," announced ASU Assistant Branch Secretary Lisa Darmanin.

The Victorian budget announced a range of social welfare initiatives, including funding for a range of important community services, \$22 million to recruit an extra 55 youth workers, increased staff training across areas such as mental health, drug and alcohol services and other family violence programs arising out of the Respect agenda, which is to be delivered by parts of social and community service organisations.

"Community services workers welcome the range of initiatives announced for some of the most disadvantaged in our community. Yet these same services are provided on the back of a dedicated workforce that has been consistently under-paid and working under minimal employment conditions," said Darmanin.

- ◆ Workers employed in the sector under the SACS Award are paid \$40 to \$650 per week less than their counterparts with the same or similar qualifications employed in public health or directly by government;
- ◆ The average wage in the community sector is over \$16,000 per year less than the average Australian wage;
- ◆ Around 65% of sector employers have refused to enter into enterprise bargaining, leaving their staff on the basic award rates of pay and conditions;
- ◆ Staff turnover in the sector is above the national average and increasing, to the concern of both employers and unions.

The ASU's Budget Submission had sought Victorian Government action to address the under-funding of community sector workers, particularly in light of the landmark equal pay test case for these workers that is currently underway.

"We support the government's objectives to deliver a stronger safety net for Victorians. But this is reliant on the government's support for the development of a stable and adequately resourced community services sector workforce. We are concerned that this budget contains no plan to address pay inequity for this dedicated workforce. We expect Fair Work Australia to make a decision on our equal pay application during this budget cycle. Without funding commitments to support this decision, it could mean job losses and program cuts in an already stretched sector."

Ms Darmanin also pointed out that despite many government reviews and studies - and a \$1.5 million commitment in the 2008/09 Victorian Budget to assist its introduction - Victoria's community service workers are still waiting to gain access to a portable long service leave scheme.

"Enough is enough. No more buck-passing on workers conditions in the sector. The ASU and Victoria's community services workers call on the government and the sector to stand behind the workers providing these services."

The ASU and community sector workers are conducting a nation-wide campaign – culminating in a rally on June 10 - to raise awareness and overcome the inadequate working conditions and pay of workers in the sector.

For further information:

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