



**AASW**

**Australian Association  
of Social Workers**

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*Submission to 2019 Climate  
Health WA Inquiry*

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## Introduction

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### Who we are

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the professional body representing more than 12,000 social workers throughout Australia.

We set the benchmark for professional education and practice in social work and have a strong voice on matters of social inclusion, social justice, human rights and issues that impact upon the quality of life of all Australians.

### The social work profession

Social work is a tertiary-qualified profession recognised nationally and internationally that supports individuals, families, groups and communities to improve their wellbeing. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversity are central to the profession and are underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and Indigenous knowledge. Social workers consider the relationship between biological, psychological, social, cultural and spiritual factors and how they impact on a person's health, wellbeing and development. Accordingly, social workers maintain a dual focus in both assisting with and improving human wellbeing and identifying and addressing any external issues (known as systemic or structural issues) that may have a negative impact, such as inequality, injustice and discrimination.

Social workers all over the world work with individuals, groups and communities who are affected by climate change and extreme weather events, including floods heatwaves and bushfires. Social work is about working with people in the context of their social and natural environments and as such we are partners in achieving a more sustainable world.

## Submission Response

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The AASW commends the Western Australian government for taking this initiative and the opportunity to contribute to the 2019 WA Climate Health Inquiry. Our submission will focus on the need for urgent action, and the importance of aligning any policy action to the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals.

The AASW believes that the responsibility of government to create the conditions under which everyone can flourish and thrive encompasses the natural environment as well as the social and economic conditions. The changes confronting Australia's environment as a result of global warming are already profound and extensive, making climate policy an urgent responsibility of the next government. Social workers observe that, although the consequences of climate change are affecting the entire population, the economic and social burden is falling most heavily on already vulnerable people. A clear example is that low income households spend a larger proportion of their budget on energy: the heating and cooling required to cope with increasingly extreme weather. Despite this, the subsidies and benefits to improve energy efficiency target homeowners, with limited availability to people who pay rent.

For social workers, climate change is an environment and social justice issue.

These points are raised as part of the submission made by the Climate and Health Alliance (CAHA), of which the AASW is a member.<sup>1</sup> CAHA is a coalition of health care stakeholders

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.caha.org.au/>

who wish to see the threat to human health from climate change and ecological degradation addressed through prompt policy action. This commitment is based on the understanding that further global warming poses grave risks to human health and biodiversity and, if left unchecked, threatens the future of human civilisation.<sup>2</sup>

We would like to reaffirm key recommendations from the CAHA submission.

### Key Recommendations

- The Western Australian government should develop a state *Climate and Health Policy* drawing on the policy recommendations in CAHA's *Framework for a National Strategy on Climate, Health and Well-being for Australia*.<sup>3</sup>
- The WA Government should work with other States and the Commonwealth to promote and develop a *National Strategy on Climate, Health and Wellbeing* based on the Framework.
- The WA Government should work closely with Indigenous peoples in WA to identify health and climate risks specific to Indigenous communities and co-design a research and policy program to address knowledge and data gaps in relation to the impacts of climate change on the health of Indigenous people in WA, and utilise Indigenous cultural knowledge and practice to inform mitigation and adaptation initiatives in WA.
- The Future Health Research and Innovation Fund should contribute to the establishment of a long-term Climate and Health Research Programme. The Programme should investigate the health impacts of climate change and associated economic costs, community resilience and adaptation responses, emissions reduction in healthcare, climate-smart healthcare, and the health benefits of low-carbon development (e.g. urban planning, transport, energy, etc.), including the economic value of avoided ill-health and productivity gains.
- Hospital and health service Chief Executive Officers should be required to report regularly on climate-related risks to as well the environmental sustainability performance of their hospitals and health services.
- The Department of Health and/or the proposed new Sustainable Health Unit should work with the Department of Environment and Water Regulation, researchers, and civil society to explore the potential of carbon offsets to complement emissions reduction efforts and benefit the health and wellbeing of rural, regional and remote communities.
- The Department of Health should commission research to assess the economic value of health and social benefits associated with a range of strategies to mitigate and adapt to climate change.
- The Inquiry should explore the powers of public health authorities under the Public Health Act 2016, especially the Chief Health Officer, to protect people from the harms posed by fossil fuels, including long-term, intergenerational health risks posed by carbon emissions and climate change.
- Recognising that mounting carbon emissions pose a serious threat to the health and wellbeing of Western Australians, and that the best adaptation strategy is mitigation, CAHA urges the WA Government to reconsider its current position and legislate a renewable energy target and an emissions reduction target of net zero by 2050, consistent with the goals of the Paris Agreement.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.caha.org.au/about>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.caha.org.au/national-strategy-climate-health-wellbeing>

## **The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**

It is the AASW's position that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide an important mechanism through which we can collectively address some of the biggest challenges currently facing Australia, and the world, with a particular focus on climate change, human rights and social justice. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations Member States, including Australia, provides a pathway for collective action in relation to sustainability. The 17 SDGs recognise the interrelated nature of sustainability, and that climate action must go hand in hand with strategies that improve health and education, and reduce inequality. Australia is committed to the 2030 Agenda and therefore is accountable to meeting the 169 targets by 2030. Unfortunately, the current political, social and economic situation highlights how much work is still needed. Continued reports from the United Nations and numerous other organisations emphasise how Australia is failing in providing meaningful actions towards climate change.<sup>4</sup>

The Western Australian government is in a position to demonstrate local and international leadership by incorporating the SDG targets as outcome measures of all their actions, including climate health.

It is the position of the AASW that the Federal Australian government has provided inadequate and poorly coordinated actions to implement the SDGs. Given the lack of policies, strategies, and limited public statements, serious questions are raised in relation to the Australian Government's understanding and appreciation of the SDGs, let alone its commitment to serious action. The lack of understanding at a political level has resulted in lack of leadership and this is evidenced by Australia's continued decline in SDG rankings (from 26<sup>th</sup> to 37<sup>th</sup> in the last twelve months).

*The new index ranks Australia as the worst-performing country in the world on climate action (SDG 13). The measure takes into account greenhouse gas emissions within Australia; emissions embodied in the goods we consume; climate change vulnerability; and exported emissions from fossil fuel shipments to other countries.*

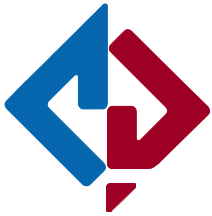
The Conversation, 11 July 2018

Central to the SDGs having meaningful impacts is the need for political leadership. This needs to be driven by all levels of government and primarily focused on the global approach to these goals, rising above local politics and political factions. Leadership in relation to SDGs must initially come from government with the development of a clear implementation plan that is overseen by a central body or commission made up of key stakeholders, experts and representatives from a wide range of relevant contexts, including Indigenous Australians. This is common practice in other member states. Current strategies to address climate change and health tend to be characterised by poor coordination, inadequate communication and lack of accountability.

We believe the SDGs provide an important opportunity to work together under a shared framework towards assuring a sustainable environment. We urge the Western Australian government to show local and international leadership in using the SDGs as parameters for all policy actions.

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<sup>4</sup><http://theconversation.com/australia-falls-further-in-rankings-on-progress-towards-un-sustainable-development-goals-99737>



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