

MEDIA RELEASE

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Older Australians launch campaign to reverse mental health discrimination in aged care

Leading seniors peak COTA Australia today launched a petition as part of a campaign calling on new health minister Greg Hunt to reverse the historic anomaly that prevents older Australians in aged care accessing the same mental health services as everyone else in the community.

COTA Australia CE Ian Yates said over 175,000 older Australians living in residential aged care are ineligible to access Medicare-funded mental health treatment through the *Better Access to Mental Health Care* program.

Launching the petition calling on the government to fix the issue, Mr Yates said the situation was a throw back to a time when people were 'put away' in nursing homes and not seen as part of the community.

"Thankfully, today most older people in residential aged care stay connected to their local communities, and have all the rights of citizenship" Mr Yates said.

"Yet this policy still treats them as though they are institutionalized and without any control over their own lives.

"A person receiving a high level Home Care Package in their own home can make use of the *Better Access to Mental Health Care* program. Yet people living in an aged care home around the corner cannot.

"The theory behind this anomaly is that aged care providers will step in. But this happens far too infrequently, is less well funded, and residents are not in control of the process.

"Only around two per cent of all people in aged care access appropriate mental health services.

"Given the high incidence of depression and other mental health conditions suffered by residents of aged care facilities there is clearly a problem here that needs to be urgently addressed.

"The new Minister for Health needs to make this an urgent and early priority. We are calling on him to take it to Cabinet where the government must agree to reverse this historical anomaly so that nursing home residents have the same access to mental health services as everyone else.

"Older Australians and their families are calling for him to support this; and the mental health community are also championing the need for change.

"Our frailest older Australians deserve the best care we can offer."

The Liberal government's *Better Access to Mental Health Care* initiative was introduced in 2006 and designed to streamline access to mental health services for people in the community. Nursing homes were then seen as institutions and residents were excluded from the program. This was confirmed under the Labor government in 2011.

People can sign the petition at www.healthforolderAustralians.org.au

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