Ms Katy Gallagher
Deputy Chief Minister & Minister for Health
GPO Box 1020
Canberra, ACT 2601

Dear Ms Gallagher

I am writing out of concern that we, as a community, are not taking anything like adequate steps to address the mental health needs of those in our midst and that, whatever else the rest of us should be doing, there is a failure of government policy and resourcing.

Christians for an Ethical Society (CES) organized a recent forum on problems in gaining access to mental health care. The CES decided to publicise the issue because of hardship faced by those suffering from mental health problems and their carers. The specific sub-title, *There're people to help you out but not many to stop you falling in*, came from a young carer of a parent with a mental health problem. That carer is being supported by Anglicare's Litmus program financed by the Commonwealth Government.

We had a speaker from that program, Ms Kat Szakalska and Mr David Crosbie, CEO, of the Mental Health Council of Australia. We were disappointed to learn that for all the money that has been channeled to mental health by Australian governments since the 2005 *Not for Service Report* of the Mental Health Council and Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and the 2006 report of the Senate Select Committee into Mental Health there remains a huge shortfall in unmet need. This fact puts into perspective the welcome increase in funding for mental health services that you announced in the recent budget.

In particular the CES is concerned that the following are not being adequately addressed:

- People are still being turned away from care: effectively a policy of denying treatment until the condition becomes a crisis;

- There is little or no coordination of policies relevant to all the known high risk factors that lead to mental illness, including those in the areas of stable housing, secure income and meaningful engagement in the community;

- A review of why we are filling our prison with people who have mental health problems, the stresses of which more than offset the benefits that they may receive from the costly crisis mental health care that we are obliged to provide there;

- The continuing prejudice that surrounds those who suffer from a mental health problem that serves as a barrier to their participation in society including gaining employment;

- The reluctance to measure accurately the effectiveness of our current interventions as demonstrated by insisting on measuring inputs rather than determining whether those inputs are proving to be effective in preventing mental illness or making people better.

We appreciate that all of us in the community, as well as government, bear responsibility for the current state of affairs. Unavoidably, though, government has a principal role given its capacity to set policy in the wide range of areas that bear upon mental health and in its control of the dispersal of the public resources that are entrusted to it. We should not tolerate the widespread suffering that is arising from mental health problems.

I request that you give serious consideration to the issues I raise.

Yours sincerely

Heather McLaren
Chair
Christians for an Ethical Society

26 May 2009