



THE VALUE OF RURAL ALLIED HEALTH - POSITION PAPER

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The Rural Workforce Agency Victoria (RWAV) recognises the critical value of allied health care and allied health professionals to rural communities.

RWAV's positions

1. Allied health is a vital component of the healthcare system and every available funding and policy lever should be used to give people living in rural Victoria greater access to affordable allied health care.
2. Current funding models that traditionally focus on supporting general practitioners and other medical specialties should increasingly expand to offer more support to the allied health workforce. This will contribute towards overcoming systemic challenges facing people living in rural Victoria from accessing care by increasing the holistic management of their health needs.
3. Health professional training, education and credentialing should be accessible and equitable across health professions. Funding and policy leavers should reflect that teaching, supervision and mentoring is a skill that requires development and investment of time and of resources.
4. Allied health professionals should be engaged and supported at all stages of their professional life cycle (exploring career options, during training, as new graduates, as established professionals and as businesses). Allied health professionals should be supported through structured development, career advancement and exposure to multiple rural clinical settings.
5. Sustainable rural positions can be created by leveraging the range of financial, clinical, training and support available to allied health professionals. These would be supported by innovative workforce models.
6. Positions supported by workforce solutions should be place-based, by engaging local people from different sectors as active participants, and focusing on local needs and local solutions.
7. Multidisciplinary care is best practice and should be fostered. Multidisciplinary health teams should be supported to sustain the investment of time and resources required to undertake coordinated care management.

Context

Allied health professionals play a vital role in the rural health workforce from diagnosis, early intervention and education, to facilitating ongoing lifestyle change. They also facilitate effective discharge and rehabilitation planning. The range of allied health disciplines provides the capacity to deliver evidence-based interventions to meet the multifaceted healthcare needs of people living in rural communities. Allied health intervention increases patients' ability to self-manage their care. They do this by increasing patients' capacity to live independently in their own homes, long-term behavioural change, and reducing the likelihood of disease complications. These, in turn, reduce reliance on acute care and ongoing strain on the healthcare system.¹

However, there remains enduring barriers to connecting allied health professionals with the rural communities that could benefit most from their services. Social, professional and infrastructure barriers combine with underrepresentation in decision-making and a historical lack of recognition. This is despite an enthusiastic and dedicated workforce delivering high-value services to communities that want and need them.

While the allied health industry includes over 23 professions, with more than 42,500 professionals in Victoria, the distribution of allied health professionals does not favour rural and remote communities.² For every 100,000 people in major cities in 2020, there were 531 full-time equivalent (FTE) allied health professionals.³ But this figure drops sharply to 414 FTE for outer regional communities, and again to 382 FTE for very remote communities, despite the greater need in these locations.⁴ Furthermore, allied health professionals are twice as likely to leave a rural or remote position than their medical and nursing counterparts.⁵

In the rural context Allied health professionals support broad geographic catchments and deliver an extensive scope of appropriate services to diverse population groups across the age spectrum. This is often done with limited resources. Allied health professionals are making a significant difference in rural communities, and are deserving of increased workforce support.

RWAV advocates for a future where:

- effective and appropriate rural allied health workforce supports are readily available for rural allied health professionals.
- opportunities for allied health professionals to go and remain working in rural communities are increased and supported.
- the visibility and value of rural allied health professionals are amplified with greater recognition across the sector.

¹ Buchan J, & Law D, A review of allied health workforce models and structures. A report to the Victorian Ministerial Advisory Committee for Allied Health, Allied Health Professions Australia, 'Strategic Plan for the Allied Health Sector' 2015

² Victorian Government. Department of Health. (2023). Allied health professions.

Retrieved from <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/allied-health-workforce/allied-health-professions>

³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2022). Health workforce.

Retrieved from <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/workforce/health-workforce>.

⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2022). Health workforce.

Retrieved from <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/workforce/health-workforce>

⁵ Cosgrave C, Maple M, Hussain R. An explanation of turnover intention among early-career nursing and allied health professionals working in rural and remote Australia – findings from a grounded theory study, *Rural Remote Health*, 2018.

Commitments and advocacy

RWAV remains committed to realising the value of rural allied health care, by supporting and fostering the positions discussed in this position Paper.

RWAV has engaged and supported the allied health sector for many years. The RWAV Allied Health Strategy seeks to provide a blueprint for RWAV's engagement and support with the allied health industry across rural Victoria. The strategy will be underpinned by RWAV's vision of 'All Victorian communities ... supported with equitable access to a high-quality health workforce that promotes positive health outcomes.

RWAV is leveraging further opportunities to incorporate allied health into the business' core undertakings through long-term resourcing and coordinated planning. By doing this, RWAV aims to increase collective capacity.

To inform RWAV's strategy implementation and decision-making around allied health support, engagement and advocacy, RWAV has implemented the RWAV Allied Health Stakeholder Group. This group brings the allied health sector together to identify barriers and enablers for addressing allied health workforce needs and other issues. It also explores solutions and opportunities for advocacy.

RWAV looks forward to advocating our stance on the allied health workforce in collaboration with others throughout the health sector. We welcome opportunities to partner with like-minded organisations to advocate for allied health reform that supports quality access to healthcare for rural communities.

To discuss the content of this Position Paper, please contact RWAV via:

Gabriela Gauthier

Allied Health Project Coordinator

alliedhealth@rwav.com.au

03 9349 7800 (Option 4)



About RWAV

RWAV improves access to quality primary care health services and other health services for rural, regional and First Nations communities across Victoria. We improve health outcomes through effective and customised health workforce solutions that are informed through partnerships, workforce and population health data, and collaboration with communities.