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Place-based investment needed to address rural healthcare challenges

In its latest 2024 State of Australia's Regions report, the Government has recognised some major issues experienced by rural Australia and the National Rural Health Alliance (the Alliance) is pleased that some good measures are in place. However, while the government has recognised the need for place-based investment, this is not happening as it needs to in rural health, aged and disability care.

The report has echoed the Alliance's concerns that people living in rural areas continue to have shorter life expectancy than those in capital cities with higher levels of disease and injury, reiterating that accessibility to high-quality health and community services across regions is an ongoing challenge with increasing remoteness.

"Place-based contemporary investment is urgently required to address the unique health challenges of the 7 million people in rural Australia," said the Alliance Chief Executive Susi Tegen.

"Given the health spending deficits identified by the report, '[Evidence base for additional investment in rural health in Australia](#),' commissioned by the Alliance last year showing a deficit of \$6.55 billion annually, funding needs to be directed for place-based responses for medical, allied health, nursing, dental and pharmacies who are currently underserved, under-supported and not able to meet the minimum level of primary health care compared to urban Australia," Ms Tegen added.

"Current funding models still don't reach the grassroots, resulting in the worst health conditions for rural Australians. Medicare is not covering costs of delivery of services in rural Australia, with bulk billing never developed to cover the whole of delivery cost of service to patients," said Ms Tegen.

Given that people with disability are impacted by limited providers and limited specialised healthcare services, the Alliance calls for innovative and flexible options to be made available for them with solutions that work in regions where they live.

Innovative options also need to encourage retraining and disability service providers to work in rural locations so that people with disabilities do not have to rely on telehealth which should only be an aspect of care delivery, not instead of, from metropolitan centres, at exorbitant cost.

The Alliance looks forward to working with the Minister for Health and Aged Care, the Hon Mark Butler MP, Minister for Regional Development, Local Government and Territories, the Hon Kristy McBain MP, and Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, the Hon Catherine King MP on achieving the Regional Investment Framework. Without housing, education, health and infrastructure working together, rural Australia would be at a greater disadvantage, socially and economically.

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