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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Clients at increased risk as psychologists' home visits cut

Mental health clients are increasingly at risk as a result of Medicare excluding its out of office consultation item numbers for psychologists.

The Australian Association of Psychologists Inc (AAPi) said the exclusion of the out of office item numbers was preventing psychologists from conducting ongoing home (and often school) visits, at the expense of the community's well being.

In October 2020, access to an additional 10 sessions were announced to support Australians in response to the mental health crisis brought about by COVID-19 and the bushfire crisis. While the first 10 sessions included 'out of office' item numbers, the additional 10 do not, leaving patients to rely on in-office or telehealth consultations with their psychologist.

AAPi Executive Director Tegan Carrison said four months on, the impact of this decision on the community was now coming to light.

Services Australia figures show 77,603 out of office consultations with a registered psychologist occurred in 2020 (this figure applies to 70% of all psychologists in the country).

"Although face to face appointments at the practice, or by telehealth, remain available under the 'additional 10 COVID-19 item numbers, these options are simply not appropriate for some of our most vulnerable clients," said Ms Carrison.

"Home visits, or in the case of a child - school visits - are absolutely vital in order for ongoing assessment and treatment of a patient's mental health. Telehealth is not an option for every Australian, and there are many reasons why it is not possible for all patients to see their psychologist in their clinic.

"When there are concerns of abuse or a poor living environment at home, a psychologist will often arrange for a home visit. You can glean so much more information from a home visit than a telehealth appointment, including the state of the home, signs of violence, who they live with and you're able to monitor their health more closely due to regular visits."

Psychologists often needed to see children in their school environment to help with assessment or because their parents were unable to drive them to an appointment. Sometimes, a patient who had suffered trauma in a specific location might return to

that location with the psychologist to help overcome their fear (this is known as exposure-based therapy).