

HEALTH GROUP'S FUTURE UNCLEAR

CHALPAT SONTI

AN organisation heavily involved with Portland's award-winning SEA Change initiative, as well as a host of other preventative health programs, says its future is uncertain after being left in limbo by a lack of certainty over State Government funding. Southern Grampians, Glenelg Primary Care Partnership (SGGPCP) and 27 other organisations like it around the state are facing an uncertain future, with their funding uncertain.

The State Government has yet to commit to funding the partnerships beyond the end of the year, and while it said it would conduct a review of the partnerships, the group representing them has yet to see the results.

There were plenty of mixed messages in parliament last week, but Health Minister

Jenny Mikakos said on Thursday that "there has been no decision made about primary care partnerships".

SGGPCP executive officer Janette Lowe said the uncertainty was unsettling.

"We're in a bit of limbo land at the moment," she said.

"The Minister can't commit to future funding and no decision's been made."

SGGPCP, which has headquarters in Hamilton, was "about keeping well before (people) get sick".

It partnered with many community organisations across Glenelg Shire, including with Portland District Health the SEA Change initiative that promoted healthy choices, especially among children, and which, along with a similar grouping in Hamilton won the Supporting Healthy Populations category at the Department of Health and Human Services'

Victorian Public Healthcare awards in October last year.

It was also highlighted in a federal inquiry into the national obesity epidemic.

"Eleven months ago we were winning state awards and now they can't commit funding," Ms Lowe said.

"The whole conversation's been challenging for us. Australia's already behind other developed countries as far as prevention goes, it's less than one per cent of the (health) budget. "There's a need for prevention, but it seems easier to have conversations around when people are sick."

Other organisations SGGPCP partnered with included Glenelg Shire Council, Dhauwurd Wurrung Elderly and Community Health Service, Kyeema, Portland Neighbourhood House, South West Healthcare, Heywood Rural Health, Winda Mara Aboriginal Corporation

and Dartmoor and District Bush Nursing Centre.

Victorian Primary Care Partnerships chairman Kevin Feeney told the *Observer* that the government funded the operational costs of the partnerships each year, about \$10 million across the state – which includes about \$340,000 for SGGPCP.

Their main role was to form partnerships with other service providers and act as a facilitator in building primary care services in an area by bringing various groups together.

Mr Feeney said the partnerships understood the government needed to be comfortable that public money needed to be well spent.

"But I think it is and we welcome an opportunity to prove that it is," he said.

"It's a very modest contribution for quite a significant outcome for the government.

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That was because the partnerships also secured separate funding for initiatives that paid for themselves several times over.

"It's a very inexpensive service," Mr Feeney said.

"We understand the need for reviews and we welcome scrutiny but we haven't been approached for the review.

"We have been trying to get clarity through the department as to what's happened to the review."

State Member for South-West Coast Roma Britnell said the government "had let the community down" by failing to provide funds for SGGPCP.

"(SGGPCP) has had a particular focus on mental health – when we have such a crisis in this space its unfathomable the Labor government is cutting funding."