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New South Wales Parliament Legislative Assembly

Domestic Violence Services

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Tonight I discuss some of the issues that came out of a domestic violence roundtable that I held recently in my electorate.

Before I do that, I acknowledge that people on all sides of politics and across the spectrum are concerned about this issue and want to do the very best they can for those in their electorates. I also welcome Jenny Aitchison to the shadow ministry as the shadow Minister for the Prevention of Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault. I have recently discussed with her some of the issues that arose at the roundtable.

I invited some of the workers, who do their level best at the coalface in this difficult area of domestic violence, to sit around the table and discuss where the gaps are in service delivery and what the problems are.

We discussed some of the success stories as well and the hopes that we hold onto as we make changes.

Fifty local workers from specialist women's services, health services and community welfare services attended this domestic violence roundtable consultation.

I was fortunate to learn from some of the most experienced and skilled workers from the sector.

Having a range of services represented meant that we were able to take a holistic view of the problem of domestic violence and look at what needs to happen to make sure women and children's safety is at the centre of decision-making.

The keynote speakers were Roxanne McMurray from Save Our Services and Natasha Ley from Youth Action.

At the roundtable we heard about how women's refuges in this State have, sadly, been reduced from 83 specialist services to 14. This is not a good state of affairs.

There has been a refusal to acknowledge that this was a mistake and that it places women and children at risk across the State.

In my electorate of the Blue Mountains we lost Blue Gum Women's Housing. Blue Gum provided exit housing for women and children who required medium-term housing once they moved on from the crisis accommodation provided by the local women's refuge.

We heard about how the main problem facing domestic violence services is the issue of capacity.

There are simply not enough specialist services and dedicated beds for women and children who have taken the first steps to escape domestic violence. Refuges are forced to turn women away.

It is estimated that only one out of every two women requiring safety finds a place to stay. Anecdotally we know that many women, having been turned away, give up and return to the perpetrator rather than face homelessness with their children. Many sleep in their cars with their kids.

Domestic violence is on the national agenda like never before and it is also getting greater coverage in the media, yet many of the basic elements of an effective domestic violence system are not yet in place.

So in the new order, known as Going Home Staying Home, only 33 out of the 78 homelessness services have 24-hour on-call staff. This Government believes that a 24-hour phone line is enough. Try telling that to a woman who, in the middle of the night, must find a safe place to stay rather than put up with one more night of violence at the hands of her partner.

When a woman and her children are turned away from a refuge, the solution, according to the Government, is temporary emergency accommodation.

There is a massive over-reliance on temporary emergency accommodation. Whilst this does provide a roof over some heads it does nothing in respect of providing advocacy, legal support, crisis counselling, assistance to secure future housing, support for traumatised children and referrals to other services—all the things that the specialist women's refuges did for women and children who accessed their services.

The existing domestic violence services have been inundated by requests for assistance.

It seems that the Link2home telephone service does not have adequate knowledge of what services on the ground actually do, the location of services and distances.

Women are being referred to services that may be 100 kilometres away, yet they have no transport to get there. What happens to a woman and her children once she is out of the crisis stage? Where does she go? We are all aware of the housing crisis in this State. For women leaving domestic violence this is a major barrier to being housed in a private tenancy.

There are a few urgent things that we must focus on: the immediate review of the impact of Going Home Staying Home on women and children escaping domestic violence; the separation of domestic violence services from homelessness services; and ensuring that funding is prioritised, as promised, for the 24/7 access issue.

We need staff and bed resources, not just a few telephone lines.