

Women's Refuges under *Going Home Staying Home*, September, 2014 – Jozefa Sobski for WEL NSW

Background

Women's refuges were part of a system of support for women and/or their children fleeing domestic violence. There may have been as many as 90 women's refuges and related women's specific services across NSW. An estimated 700 Housing properties were allocated to them as crisis and transitional accommodation. The women's refuges arose out of community need and were embedded in their communities using a network of services and support. The ***Going Home Staying Home*** reforms have destroyed this system rather than building on its strengths and improving its capacity and capability. They were not just services for homeless women and/or their children.

The first women's refuge was established in March, 1974 in Westmoreland Street, Glebe. Elsie Women's Refuge was a response to the needs identified by women at a forum: *Women Against a Violent Society* held on 10th March that year in Sydney.

Since that time women's refuges have grown in number and the service and support provided by them and their geographical reach has significantly expanded from crisis accommodation and support to counselling, needs and risk assessment, referral and longer term housing assistance. Models of service have varied from one organisation to another in different locations responding to local needs and priorities. No doubt there have been capacity and quality differences in services depending on resources, governance, ethos, experience and local conditions.

There is accommodation support listed on the web for women with and without children, for pregnant women, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, for women escaping domestic violence, for women with drug and alcohol issues, for NESB and CALD women as well as women with a mental illness or physical disabilities.

The NSW Women's Refuge Movement (WRM) in 2010 represented some 54 (a more recent number is not available) women's refuges across NSW, 18 of these were in Sydney. This list does not include services for women with drug and alcohol dependency, mental health illness, women leaving custody and/or childhood sexual abuse and girls-only refuges. Most of these provided crisis accommodation for women experiencing domestic and family violence. (See **Domestic and Family Violence. Housing NSW Policy Statement**, June 2013). It is not possible from available information to identify how many of these were operating within a feminist framework with the major aim to empower women and children fleeing domestic violence through providing a safe and supported environment. This was stated as the aim on the old WRM website and the one WEL NSW assumes was universally accepted in the sector. These refuges were funded through the *Supported Accommodation Assistance Program* (SAAP) which became the *Specialist Homelessness Services Program* (SHSP) from July, 2011 in NSW under the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA) of 2009.

NAHA led to a process of reform across most state and territory jurisdictions to homelessness services and the domestic and family violence sectors. *Homelessness Australia* in a paper (undated) on SAAP reform acknowledged that there would be “teething” problems due to the competitive nature of tendering processes as there would be “winners and losers”. The paper pointed to the concerns from the sector about competitive tendering arrangements which “do not encourage providers to share information and resources or work collaboratively together.” (**SAAP Reform: The National Affordable Housing Agreement and funding arrangements for Specialist Homelessness Services. An Evidence-Based Paper**, p16.) Indeed competitive tendering sets organizations against each other for available resources in an environment where secrecy is the norm and information about provider intentions is not shared or circulated. Often such information is regarded as commercial-in-confidence even though most providers are not for profit and their missions oriented towards community service and support. Such competition divides a sector and politically dis-empowers it. Peak bodies, supported by government funding, are constrained in their ability to represent the sector by their role in negotiating with government and are often forced into compromise. They take on board the concerns of their member organizations about the impact of reform, but they may often have to sacrifice elements of a “log of claims” in the interests of a perceived greater good. There is no solidarity or unity possible in such an environment. This suits government as radical change or “reform” always attracts controversy and criticism and disrupts the delivery of services.

National Data Collection

There is a national data collection for Specialist Homelessness Services undertaken by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. In its 2011-2012 report, the Institute acknowledges that family and domestic violence is a major risk factor for homelessness in Australia and that the majority of these clients were female (78%) and there were large numbers of children, boys and girls in equal proportion who fled domestic violence situations. The Northern Territory had the highest rate of clients who had experienced domestic and family violence, 127 per 10,000 people. NSW had 25 per 10,000 people in the year of collection. PwC provided a statistical breakdown for Family and Community Services (FACS) by region of the population distribution of clients receiving homelessness services and domestic violence trends from 2005-2010 as a background paper to inform decisions for GSHS.

Reform in NSW

In July 2012, Pru Goward, NSW Minister for Family and Community Services announced reforms to Specialist Homelessness Services. The **NSW Women’s Refuge Movement Working Party Inc (WRM)** became **Domestic Violence NSW (DV NSW)** funded in part by the government to assist women’s refuges to transition to the proposed new model. DV NSW was to build the sector’s capacity to compete for the homelessness services against other providers. WEL does not have much information on the adequacy of the funding and the process for building capability for change and its outcomes.

A new model for seeking and approving funding from July, 2014 was also announced. It was to be a contracting model consisting of a register of eligible not for profit organizations (preferred providers) which could participate in the tendering process. This was Prequalification followed

by a tender process. The tender process was to be a select tendering process so not all organizations on the prequalification list were invited to submit a tender. In the time leading to implementation, the three peak bodies, **Homelessness NSW, DV NSW and Yfoundations** advocated around a range of issues and raised concerns about the contracting process. There is conflicting information about how effectively the peak bodies played their roles in representing the interests and concerns of their member organizations. Some women's services reported that they received little or no information and were simply re-assured that all would be well.

Tenders issued in November, 2013 excluded women-only services from tendering as they operated at that time irrespective of how effective they were or for how long they had existed in their communities. Tender packages included *NSW Land and Housing Corporation (LAHC)* buildings in the relevant region. This placed many services under enormous pressure and some sought professional assistance with their tenders. It is not known how many and which services decided not to tender at all under the conditions being imposed. It is important to note here that the reform was led by *Housing, NSW* and it was as much about housing stock and premises leased or allocated to many current providers as it was about a new model of service delivery. Redistribution was obviously an unstated aim. Where providers were large, and had their own premises or could at some point afford to purchase them, they had a distinct advantage.

Going Home Staying Home

Branded ***Going Home Staying Home (GSHH)*** the reform has a number of objectives which are related to the aim of increasing the focus of the service system on prevention and long-term accommodation and support, rather than crisis intervention with the over-riding aim of reducing homelessness and repeat homelessness by tackling its causes. The reformed providers will contain a mixture of services including: prevention and early intervention, rapid re-housing, crisis and transition response and intensive support for clients with complex needs. These services are supported by other programs like ***Start Safely and Staying Home Leaving Violence (SHLV)***. This latter initiative aims to increase victims' safety and prevent homelessness by "providing tailored strategies to enable the victim and children to remain in their home. The service model includes outreach support, risk assessment, safety planning, security equipment, court support and casework and advocacy."

Three major administrative aims of ***GSHH*** include service consolidation or rationalization to reduce the number of providers and hence release *LAHC* premises for possible sale; a move from grants to competitive tendering to increase efficiency and quality and to regionalize services and move to regional control. Reduction in the number of services was a clear aim of the reform, but most feminist and women's organizations outside the sector were not aware of the scale of the reform and its impact on local providers. The *Save Our Women's Services (SOS)* campaign drew this to the attention of WEL NSW. (In relation to the possible sale of housing stock, the current Minister, Gabrielle Upton in a letter to the SMH 5-6 July, 2014 writes that "there are 1300 government owned properties used for homelessness services in NSW. None of them will close.")

Some 190 organisations pre-qualified to tender for new service packages under ***GSHH***. This list is a mixture of small and large organizations such as St Vincent de Paul Society, Anglicare,

Catholic Care, Mission Australia and smaller single purpose specialist services. There are 60 (number still to be confirmed) specialist women's services on the Pre-qualification list. Not all of these were refuges, some were specialist accommodation or women's housing services. Not all on the list were invited to tender.

The tender assessment criteria published on the *Housing NSW* website (Fact Sheet May, 2014) speak generally of client groups. The criteria are grouped into four sections: capacity to contribute to the Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) program outcomes; capacity to deliver a service model; capacity to manage the transition from the current state to the future service delivery approach and value for money. Larger organizations with a developed or mature administrative infrastructure would have in most cases the advantage over smaller local providers with limited resources and an emphasis on direct service delivery.

Tender Packages

Tender packages were sent to certain services, but not to all on the Prequalification List. There were fifteen districts, each with a number of Service Packages covering a range of suburbs in a district. Some services may have been overlooked, but others would have been judged as too small or too specialist to respond appropriately to a tender package. The process of decision-making at this point is not clear: Who or what was deciding that a service should be sent a particular tender package?

An examination of a sample of tender packages highlights some of the difficulties with which small and specialist organizations were confronted and why the reform favoured larger providers or consortia which had a range of services targeting different homelessness groups. Four program outcomes are stated in general terms. They must contribute to the achievement of support to remain in their existing housing or to secure housing; must be rapidly re-housed; must be provided with safe and secure accommodation and supported to access stable housing or must be re-housed after becoming homeless and supported to stay housed. Categories of people being targeted: people who are at imminent risk; people who experience homelessness; people who are in crisis and people who are re-housed. Then there is a section on Service Requirements which contains general and specific requirements. The specific requirements are quite broad. Multidisciplinary teams of staff with relevant experience and qualifications in counselling, social work, domestic/family violence, sexual assault, child protection and community welfare. Some services have properties assigned to them, others do not.

Where domestic and family violence was the service focus, there were five responses required:

- 1. Have systems in place to respond effectively to women and children escaping domestic and family violence. For instance, the Service must have robust assessment processes to determine the most appropriate service response whereby client safety is paramount.*
- 2. Recognise that accompanying children may require individual responses which are separate to the responses for their parents/caregivers and would be able to undertake specialized response or facilitate referrals in order to access the appropriate services.*
- 3. Demonstrate an understanding of the stages that women might go through in relation to leaving violence.*

4. *Have an understanding and expertise to implement a range of best practice approaches to women and children experiencing domestic violence within different environments i.e. within a crisis refuge, transitional housing, rapid rehousing, or within the home of the client with the perpetrator removed.*
5. *Understand that the safety of women and children has to be an overarching principle in all service responses. (From an SHS Service Package Description- November, 2013.)*

Tender Outcomes

The Fact Sheet of June, 2014 issued with the tender outcomes published on the *Housing NSW* website includes the budget for services which will grow from \$135mill in 2013/2014 to \$148mill in 2014/2015. There will be a total of 149 new SHSs across NSW, of these 5 are listed for re-tendering. All services have regional coverage or have a regional responsibility, for example, Newcastle Western Suburbs Women and Family Homelessness Support Service. Each of the regional service packages identifies a Lead Agency as the preferred provider. This represents a consolidation of 336 homelessness services into 149.

There are 82 Lead Agencies which include 69 distinct providers, with one or more partners; the others – 62 - stand alone to deliver the service, for example, Catholic Care, Diocese of Broken Bay or the Gender Centre Inc which is the sole provider for the Transgender Homelessness Support Service. Some five areas have been asked to re-tender.

Each preferred provider is listed under the (regional) service package title with LGA, electorate, client categories, budget allocation and partners, where relevant. Client categories include: women, men, women and families, women, men and families, men and families, families, young people and so on with various combinations and sometimes specifying Aboriginal or CALD groups. There is no information on how many beds may be available or can be provided by each service.

There are four (4) women only service packages located on the Central Coast, South Western Sydney, Blacktown/Hills for Single Women and Blacktown Hills for Pregnant Girls and Young Mums, the Lead Agency for this latter service is The Trustee for the Roman Catholic Church for the Diocese of Parramatta. These services are for single women only, but this last run by Parramatta Diocese does imply that babies may be catered for as well. The total allocation for these is \$1.931mill.

There are thirteen (13) women and families services which may be intended to replace women's refuges. Six of these are led by women's specialist agencies, for example, Nova Women's Accommodation Support Inc. or Warrina Women's and Children's Refuge Cooperative Society Ltd, one by DV NSW Service Management and one by Port Macquarie/Hastings Domestic and Family Violence Specialist Service Inc. The remainder, that is seven (7), are led by the following: Central Coast Emergency Accommodation Services Pty Ltd, Samaritans Foundation, Diocese of Newcastle, St Vincent de Paul Society NSW, Uniting Church Australia, Parramatta

Mission and Richmond PRA (the merged Richmond Fellowship of NSW and Psychiatric Rehabilitation, Australia).

The total funding for these seventeen (17) women's (and families) specialist services is \$14.757 mill. Previous funding levels are difficult to estimate so a comparison between those and the new funding has not been attempted.

Of the bulk of the SHSs, **50 more include support for those escaping domestic and family violence among other clients.** In this general category, DV NSW is the lead agency for two service packages and women's specialist services are lead agencies for a further nine other services with Penrith Domestic Violence Services Inc being an additional local DV service, so there are twelve (12) with assumed specialist women's coverage or expertise.

The following twenty six (26), what may be described as Specialist Women's Providers, have survived or succeeded with the competitive tendering process as Lead Agencies and/or Partners based solely on information in the Fact Sheet:

1. DV NSW Service Management
2. South West Sydney Single Women Housing Accommodation Support Service
3. Women's Housing Coop Ltd
4. Women and Girls' Emergency Centre Inc
5. Penrith Domestic Violence Services Inc
6. Jessie Street Domestic Violence Service
7. Nova Women's Accommodation Support Inc
8. Jenny's Place
9. Port Macquarie/Hastings Domestic and family Violence Specialist Service Inc
10. Warrina Women's and Children's Refuge Coop Society
11. Bonnie Support Services Ltd
12. Pam's Place Crisis Accommodation, Resource and Referral Service
13. Carrie's Place Women's and Children's Services Inc
14. Muswellbrook Women's and Children's Refuge Ltd
15. Women's Shelter, Armidale
16. Moree Women's Refuge
17. Wollongong Women's Refuge
18. Warilla Women's Refuge
19. Kulkuna Cottage Women's Refuge
20. Tweed Shire Women's Service
21. Clarence River Women's Refuge and Outreach Services
22. Women Up North Housing Inc
23. Manly Warringah Women's Resource Centre Ltd
24. South East Women's and Children's Services Inc
25. Molonglo Women's and Children's Services
26. Yawarra Meamei Women's Group.

Elsie Women's Refuge does not appear in this list although there is now information that it is a Partner with St Vincent de Paul Society as the Lead Agency in the Inner City. The four large

charities were offered the contracts valued at \$11mil for the Inner City. St Vincent de Paul was one of these. WEL has been informed that the Manager of Elsie Women's Refuge was made redundant by DV Service Management prior to tender outcomes being announced.

An Information Pack issued by FACS in August, 2014 lists 23 women only services surviving across NSW. Our estimate is that there may have been up to 90 women's specific services before the reform and its tendering process. There are no women's specific services in the following districts: Murrumbidgee, Northern Sydney, Southern Sydney, Far West NSW, Southern, NSW. The Canterbury-Bankstown area is subject to a re-tender with Immigrant Women's Speakout and Muslim Women Association involved in this re-tendering process.

The FACS' information reports that a further 60 of the new services with a multi-client group include **"a discrete specialist response for women with or without their children including women experiencing domestic and family violence"**. More detail about the approach to be adopted by multi-client service models to clients experiencing domestic and family violence appears in a Fact Sheet issued by FACS in January, 2014. The adequacy of this advice and to what extent it was applied when assessing the claims of tenderers is not known because the Tender Selection criteria Fact Sheet of May, 2014 makes no reference to the earlier Fact Sheet. Because WEL NSW does not have access to a complete range of Tender Documents, it is not possible to assess what requirements were contained for multi-client services in relation to women and/or their children fleeing domestic violence and whether there is consistency across districts in terms of requirements of tenderers.

Women's Services Closing

At this stage, the following 40 women's specialist services and refuges **have not been successful** in a tender process or chose not to tender or have been absorbed into a more generalist service. This list is still under review as the future shape of surviving services is still evolving. WEL NSW is participating in a cross-state review to determine where there are gaps and is still establishing whether the claims made by FACS in its August, 2014 Information Pack on SHS responses for women that the new services will "help more women and more families (which include women with children)" are supported by the evidence in the field. WEL is aware that 24/7 support will no longer be the norm.

1. Adele Dundas Inc
2. Albury Wodonga Community Network Inc (AWCN)
3. Alices Cottages Incorporated
4. Armidale Womens Housing Group Inc
5. B Miles Womens Foundation Incorporated
6. Bathurst Womens Housing Program Incorporated
7. Bourke Women and Children's Safe House*
8. Brewarrina Women and Children's Safehouse*
9. DAWN
10. Delores Women's Refuge
11. Delvena Women's Refuge
12. **Detour House Inc (This organization has been in negotiation with FACS)**

13. Eastlakes Womens and Childrens Refuge Inc
14. Erin's Place Inc
15. Essie's Refuge
16. Guthrie House Co-operative
- 17. Immigrant Women's Speakout Association of NSW Inc (This organization is re-tendering in partnership with others)**
18. Innari Housing Inc
19. Inverell Refuge Centre Inc
20. Joan Harrison Support Services for Women Inc
21. Judge Rainbow Memorial Fund Inc
22. Kamira Alcohol and Other Drug Treatment Services Inc
23. Katakudu Womens Housing Inc
24. Killara Womens Refuge Inc
25. Lillian's Place (The Lillian Howell Project)
26. Marcia Womens Refuge
27. Moruya Women and Children's Service Inc
- 28. Muslim Women Association (this organization has been requested to retender)**
29. N.E.S.H Women's Scheme Inc
30. Northern Rivers Women's and Children's Services
31. Shoalhaven Womens Resource Group Ltd
32. South West Womens Housing Inc
33. St George Womens Housing Inc
34. Toukley Women's Refuge Inc
35. Tweed Shire Women's Service Inc
36. Wilcannia Safe Houses
37. Wollongong Women's Housing Inc
38. Women's Community Shelters Limited
39. Yaaaarra-Mea-Mea
40. Young People's Refuge (girl only refuge)

The closure of these services is a tragedy for their communities and a real loss of support for women facing domestic and family violence. In many cases, the services have been operating for years and have built important relationships with complementary and culturally-sensitive services in their communities. The fairness of the process which led to their closure or absorption into larger entities must be challenged. The adequacy of the community consultation must be questioned. The move from a grants program to competitive tendering in a very unequal service environment cannot be readily justified.

The Lead Agencies which secured the greatest number of service packages for Specialist Homelessness Services are: Mission Australia – 18, St Vincent de Paul Society – 13, Uniting Care NSW/ACT – 5, Uniting Church in Australia Property Trust through Wesley Mission – 7, Samaritans Foundation, Newcastle Diocese – 4, Central Coast Emergency Accommodation Services Pty Ltd – 4, The Trustees of the Roman Catholic Church for the Diocese of Wilcannia/Forbes – 4. All other organizations have won three (3) or fewer tenders. There will be over 60 Specialist Homelessness Services across NSW run by faith-based organizations.

To assist those current providers which will have to close, there is a Service Support Fund. To be eligible to apply, a provider must not be in receipt of any SHS program funding after November, 2014. There are other conditions and the funding is designed to assist providers in the transition or handover of their responsibilities to successful new providers. Current clients must sign transfer agreements to new providers.

How the new system will work is still evolving, but there are Program, Practice and Transition Guidelines for SHS. There are 13 attachments to the Transition Guidelines and a second version of Practice Guidelines. There are a complex array of documents and processes to navigate while clients fill in transfer documents often reluctantly and sometimes refusing to agree to a handover to a new provider.

The minimum standards which will apply to services offering support to women and/or families escaping domestic violence have not yet been developed. There is no accreditation process. The application of a feminist framework to the new services cannot at this stage be assured. There will be many fewer women's refuges and how the surviving lead or partner women's services will operate under the reform is not yet known and will need to be tested against future experience and past practice. What will be the performance standards and what role will the local community have in setting these standards or commenting on any draft standards? What will be the role of peak bodies for the future in monitoring the effectiveness of the reforms?

There is no information available about the process of selection of successful Lead Agency tenders except that it may have been the responsibility of FACS regional staff. WEL NSW will continue to seek information on the decision-making process; the guidelines or criteria which may have been followed; the budget allocations made to each region and who or what agency was the final arbiter for the tender selection. We wish to identify the gaps and whether there has been a real diminution in appropriate support for women and/or their children experiencing domestic violence.

An announcement was made about a monitoring and evaluation strategy negotiated by FACS with peak bodies in early August, 2014. This emerged from consultation with the GHSH Sector Reference group and Panel of Experts. There was an agreement to establish and independently chaired GHSH Monitoring and Advisory Group to oversight a post implementation review. FACS has now released information on this *independent* advisory group.

This group **is not independent** and its Chair, Eileen Baldry is compromised by her involvement in the Panel of Experts supporting the reform. She is implicated as is NCOSS in the decision-making. The NSW Ombudsman is the only independent observer. It is predominantly a group representing government departments and the peak bodies with NCOSS, whose Director is Tracy Howe, formerly the CEO of DV NSW who presided over the period of reform preparation. There is reference to consumer representatives, but these are not identified. There are no independent community or women's representatives on the Group. It is heavily biased with three government representatives.

WEL is writing again to the Minister to protest the composition of this Group and to challenge the notion that it is in any way independent. The challenge to this reform and its consequences

for women's refuges will continue. Women's health, safety and security are at stake. WEL NSW will continue its campaign for the restoration of 24/7 women's specific services run by women for women within standards and agreed frameworks based on evidence and experience and not economy and expediency.

NB: This paper is still being revised as new or better information becomes available.