Thank you Wendy.

I would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation and their custodianship of country.

We want to thank Members for being here this morning, others have said they’ll be popping in and out as they can.

I also would like to thank those members who have said they can’t be here, but look forward to meeting with them separately.

Many Members in areas other than inner Sydney will have received representations from their constituents about aspects of the Going Home Staying Home reform tenders.

Since we started our efforts we’ve been contacted by refuges from outside Sydney and right across NSW facing the same issues and saying they are closing down. We share their concerns and we’re monitoring the situation.

We are aware there are women’s refuges in places such as Campbelltown, Wollongong, Nowra, Randwick and Ryde that have said they are closing on the 30th June because the tenders they were offered were so unsuitable, their organisations made the hard decision to close because they could not apply for funding.

**However, the reason we are here today is to let you know about the situation unfolding right now for homeless women and children in inner Sydney.**

There are approximately 20 women-only specialist services in and around inner Sydney, providing accommodation and care for **2000 homeless women a year**, most of whom are highly vulnerable and have complex problems. For many, their history of abuse has led them into homelessness.

Women’s specialist homeless services in and around inner Sydney are **refuges and integrated day programs** for women who are homeless and at risk of homelessness due to mental illness, drug and alcohol dependency, child sexual abuse, domestic and family violence and leaving custody.

The Housing NSW/Family and Community Services ‘Going Home Staying Home’ reform tenders issued last November excluded women-only services from tendering as they currently exist.

In terms of inner Sydney - On the 19th March, nine tender packages totalling just under $16 million dollars were released. This was a reduction of $6 million which has been re-distributed across the state.

$11 million was directly provided to four large charities – Mission Australia, Wesley Mission, St Vincent de Paul and The Salvation Army through a single, invite-only tender system. And I want to make it clear here that we are not disparaging the charities for the excellent work they do.

The remaining **$5 million** was divided into **5 tender packages** and offered to the **26 remaining organisations** within the inner city.

Only **one** was for women and women with children with a focus on domestic violence. It provides for only 505 women and children a year. That’s not even close enough.
There is also a **drastic reduction** in the number of high-need beds for women.

The other four tender packages are for services with case-mix models of men, women, families, children and young people and varying degrees of low, medium and high need.

**There were no tender packages specifically for women who are homeless or at risk of homelessness due to mental illness, drug and alcohol dependency, child sexual abuse or leaving custody.**

**At Leichhardt Women’s we have clients from these services.**

Some cannot be in the same room as a man. We aim that within about 2 years, they can be, but it’s a slow process of establishing trust in a safe environment and helping them with their self esteem.

There are women who have a gripping fear of dentists because of the **type** of abuse they experienced as a child, that triggers painful memories and panic.

One woman could not stand still or sit down when she first came to us from one of these women-only services. She was so highly anxious from the sexual abuse she had experienced from the age of 4 until 16 by her father and her brother, and a later rape, that she was constantly moving and stuttering.

The work with these women has to be **women-only, highly skilled and non-threatening**. It has to be expert and **the ‘women-only’ environment is critical.**

**The model has been working.**

It takes time, but together with their refuge, they get to the dentist.

The woman who couldn’t stand still is now in part-time employment and her aim is to go from 2 days a week to 4. She’s on the move in another way!

**Many of the women’s specialist services have submitted tenders, but they have said that even if they are successful in the tenders, there will be loss because they will be closing and re-opening as a new service.**

They would be changing to the small domestic violence service or they would be a generalist homeless service for men and women.

**The Going Home Staying Home reform tenders are not all bad.**

There is no reduction in funding for homeless services overall.

**The Department** has said they have tried to have resources put in areas of need, and we don’t doubt some areas will benefit from new services.

**The Department has said** the reforms increase attention to early intervention - to prevent homelessness where possible.

**They have said** women will be able to access most of the services in NSW.

**They have said** that they want to stop ‘inner city drift’ where, they say, people come to the city to find services, it is better they access services close to home.

They have also said they want **all** of the 140 homeless services in NSW to be specialist. ‘No wrong door.’
However we say there is a huge difference between women being able to ‘access’ services and ‘women’s services’.

We say it is not possible for everyone to be a specialist. If everyone could be a specialist there would be no need for Westmead Children’s Hospital. RPA wouldn’t be known for its cancer treatment....

We say, in the case of women, the inner city drift issue does not quite fit. People have been coming to the City since the beginning of urban settlement - long before there were services in the cities. They’re in the city because that’s where they’re from (because it has the highest population), or they come to the city to escape, to start a new life, to find employment or ... to hide. This is particularly so for women trying to get away from their abusers or the old networks encouraging drug use, for example.

Shutting women’s refuges won’t stop inner city drift.

For highly vulnerable homeless women, it’s too late for early intervention. In most cases their problems started a long time ago with childhood abuse and neglect.

The women’s specialist services work within a network of collaborative casework and trauma-informed expertise developed over decades.

Under the Going Home Staying Home tenders in inner Sydney, it has become clear that many long-established, well-regarded specialist services will be closing:

Detour House - celebrating its 30th anniversary later this year as one of the first safe houses for women discharged from drug and alcohol rehabs.

The award-winning B Miles for women homeless due to mental illness.

Stepping Out Housing Program – the only program of its kind in Australia for women who are homeless due to childhood sexual assault.

The Young People’s Refuge - one of the first and only remaining ‘girl’ only refuges for 13-17 year olds.

There are others.

We want you to know this is happening now.

That the tenders have excluded women’s specialist services from continuing and that the loss of these services will be too great to bear.

The lives of up to 2000 women a year, and their children, are seriously at risk unless a way is found to keep many of these specialist services.

We’ve wanted you to understand the issues. And on behalf of the 2000 women a year needing these services, we’re asking for your help.

We are asking the Government to reconsider aspects of the ‘reform’ process and we’re very open to looking at ways to solve this problem.

Roxanne McMurray
Manager, Leichhardt Women’s Community Health Centre
SOS Save Women’s Services