Additional Information on the Loss of Women’s Specialist Services

The Housing NSW/Family and Community Services ‘Going Home Staying Home’ reform tender process has not incorporated the needs of the highly vulnerable women who are the focus of Sydney’s independent women’s specialist homeless services.

The reform tenders will result in the closure of many of Sydney’s specialist women’s services and create a serious gap in service provision placing at risk the lives of around 2,000 vulnerable women a year.

- There is a loss of over $6 million of funding for Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) in Sydney (Sydney and SE Sydney Districts). This loss will see FACS closing down women-only services and women’s refuges from July onwards.

- Women-only services were not permitted to tender as a women-only service in the Sydney tender service packages. There were no women-only tenders and they had to either partner with generic or men’s services or choose to become generic themselves and take men into their service. The size of the service packages was also geared towards large organisations or consortia, disadvantaging small independent specialist services.

- Just one women-only package for the Inner City was finally released on 19 March, however it is severely underfunded with a total budget of $1.1 million and 505 clients (women and children). It also has low numbers of high need clients (60 high-need women clients out of a total of 374) which are the clients most women-only services specialise in.

- Women often can’t go back “home”. The removal of $6 million from Sydney/SE Sydney districts is based on the premise that homeless people drifting to the city should be encouraged to “go back to where they came from.” For women escaping the perpetrators of their childhood sexual abuse or domestic violence, women escaping family violence, women who have a history of drug and alcohol addictions or not coping with mental illness, women coming out of prison (all often the result of childhood abuse) some may want to stay where they are, but many other women prefer, or need, to leave. They want to move to the relative safety of anonymity in a large city – away from perpetrators, away from their lives and away from negative environments which enabled abuse, violence and addictions to occur. One size does not fit all – particularly for women.

- It could put women’s lives at risk, affect child safety, place pressure on police and increase hospital admissions. It only costs $10-15 each day for women using specialist women’s refuges. That’s compared to around $750 a day for a hospital mental health patient, $1700 for someone admitted to hospital by ambulance or more than $200 for someone in prison.

- Currently there are at least 150 women-only services in NSW, approximately 96 of which are women’s refuges. The results of the Housing NSW/Family and Community Services competitive tendering funding will force many small and medium sized, independent, not-for-profit women-only services to close.

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SOS Women’s Services - a coalition of women and women’s services protecting the rights of homeless women and children in NSW.
Women’s homelessness is more hidden and consistently gets underfunded (women are less likely to rough sleep but will couch surf / sleep in unsafe accommodation / stay with perpetrators etc.). The Inner Sydney service packages, for example, identify a total of 1545 male clients of which 833 are high needs while it identifies 907 women clients of which 374 are high needs. This does not reflect the real situation for women who may not be sleeping rough on the street but are nevertheless “homeless.”

Homelessness figures continue to rise in Sydney but funding is being funnelled out of the city and into regional and rural areas. There should be more money for specialist homelessness services, not less.

It appears likely the tenders will lead to a decrease in pay and conditions for workers in the sector (who are mainly women). The tenders specifically ask those tendering to deliver as much as they can and to indicate if they will work with more clients than are in the tender document, encouraging a culture of paying staff at lower classifications and therefore the minimum level to work with the highest number of clients. In addition, analysis of the tenders shows that the amounts allocated to clients is significantly less than that which is currently spent per client. It should also be noted that this sector is notorious for burnout and conditions of work should ensure that organisations are properly protecting their workers, as well as clients.

Housing NSW has removed all the properties (including all women’s crisis accommodation, transitional housing and women’s refuges) from the organisations which have managed and run their services from these properties for years and has ‘reallocated’ these services’ properties into tender packages. In many cases the services which have managed properties and run their services out of these properties for years have not been able to tender for the packages containing their properties – effectively ending their service as it currently exists.

The tender process has experienced many delays, inadequate communication and mistakes, and has been strongly skewed in favour of large organisations and against smaller ones. The flawed tendering process – full of errors, changing the dates, the information helpline taking up to two weeks for queries, inconsistent answers - has been distressing for many people in the sector. Tendering opened on 27 November, however, a number of services didn’t hear until several days after that and some were invited to tender for services that bear no resemblance to the services they currently provide. Information was not provided on some packages until late December / January for tenders which closed in January, giving services little time.

Some women-only services and women’s refuges are closing down already. Their management committees made the difficult to decision to close after many years of effective work in communities of high need, because the tenders they were offered were so inappropriate for their expertise and / or required them to work with men or to rush into partnerships with organisations for the sole purpose of tendering. Imminent closures of women’s services include the communities of Ryde, Randwick, Campbelltown and the South Coast. Once gone, these services are gone forever.

We need to acknowledge, protect and grow small specialist women-only services and refuges in Sydney, not stand to one side while they are closed down by Housing NSW and Family and Community Services.

There is a need for a mix of different kinds of service provision. For many clients with complex needs, specialisation and a smaller service model is more appropriate and effective. The clients of inner Sydney’s specialist women’s services are high-need and complex, often with a background of abuse and trauma. The smaller service model, and women-only environment is critical to achieving positive outcomes for clients. The specialist women-only services work with smaller numbers of clients but use a more intensive case-work model that is reliant on workers being skilled enough to ‘hold’ clients confidently, rather than referring on.

Specialist women’s services were established by grass-roots action after the need was identified. They have developed expertise over decades and a culture that enables powerful work to take place. This is irreplaceable.

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Inner Sydney Women’s Specialist Services include:

**B Miles** (achieving positive outcomes for women who are homeless and at risk of homelessness due to mental illness)

**Detour House** (achieving positive outcomes for women who are homeless and at risk of homelessness due to drug and alcohol dependency – often with an underlying experience of abuse and trauma)

**Young People’s Refuge** (one of the first and only remaining, refuges in NSW for teenage girls. It achieves positive outcomes for 13-17 year old and is girls-only)

**Stepping Out Housing Program** (the only known service in Australia specifically for women who are homeless and at risk of homelessness due to the effects of child sexual abuse)

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