A STATEMENT FROM SOS WOMEN’S SERVICES
25 March 2015

On Saturday, the people of NSW will elect a Government to lead them for the next four years. All of the polls indicate a Coalition win.

When the Premier Mike Baird became leader in April last year, he said one of his three key commitments was protecting the vulnerable. Unfortunately, the devastation of women’s services in NSW has failed to live up to that commitment.

Before the Going Home Staying Home reforms were introduced, there were more than 100 women’s services run by women’s organisations. Now, there are fewer than 20.

For more than 40 years, Governments in NSW, both Liberal and Labor, did not challenge their expertise or threaten their funding.

SOS was formed because women’s refuges in inner Sydney could see that under the tenders women’s services in the city would be wiped out and thousands of women and girls with serious issues would not be able to receive the attention they needed – with likely disastrous consequences. It was inconceivable that women’s refuges in inner Sydney would disappear, but that had been the Government’s intention. Thankfully the Family and Community Services Minister Gabrielle Upton listened and reversed this decision.

However as a consequence of the reforms, women’s refuges across NSW, including domestic violence refuges that operated independently for decades, are now being managed by mainstream providers such as Wesley Mission, Salvation Army and the Samaritans, with many well-regarded, long-established services now closed and others losing critical transitional housing for women and their children.

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Just this month former Community Services Minister Pru Goward said “there has been not one government funded property that provides a women’s shelter in this state close down … this is an outrageous suggestion… it is just another desperate lie.”

But it is true. Some were taken over by other organisations, others closed altogether. But to describe a refuge shutting its doors, losing all its staff and being operated by a major charity with little experience as a non-closure is hard to believe.

Faith-based organisations do a lot of important work but women’s refuges were set up separately from church-based organisations more than 40 years ago to provide choice in the system, and gendered expertise. SOS has heard repeated complaints about refuges now being run by major charities in places such as Taree and Kempsey. Some are reported to be virtually empty, which was previously unheard of.

A couple of weeks ago the Salvation Army was forced to apologise after its manager at Broken Hill said women should not “use and abuse” refuges and that they were refusing entry to women who couldn’t pay a fee.

"It's not just a free service that they can just come in and go as they want," Lieutenant Phillip Sutcliffe told the ABC. "It's not just a use and abuse type service.” Not surprisingly, it was reported to be empty as well.

The male operator of the refuge in Dubbo was allowing general homeless women, who often experience drug problems or have mental health issues, to stay in the refuge with women and young children escaping domestic violence. In one incident, a woman and child were forced to lock themselves in their room out of fear of another resident. The manager also recently installed cameras inside the refuge to monitor women and children. Women have often experienced control and surveillance by their partners and should not be subjected to this unacceptable intrusion.
One of the other devastating aspects of these reforms has been the silence from the peak bodies on the biggest shake up of the sector in a generation. SOS started because peak bodies for the women’s services in the city weren’t responding to our requests for advocacy and we decided we had to speak up for our clients. DV NSW, the peak body for refuges in NSW, has still not made a critical statement about the loss of services or loss of staff.

SOS also saved five inner city refuges after months of intense lobbying of Government and we recently had funding extended to a number of other refuges across NSW.

Violence against women is on the national agenda like never before. Australian of the Year Rosie Batty recently described it as an epidemic. The Minister Assisting the Prime Minister on Women, Michaela Cash, agreed with that assessment.

Every week on average, one women in Australia is killed by a current or former partner. Already for 2015, it’s up to two a week.

Last year, there were more than 29,000 domestic violence assaults reported to police in NSW alone, it’s the reason behind more than 30 per cent of all homicide cases in New South Wales. And police estimate they only get called to 40 to 50 percent of cases.

The NSW Government could not have chosen a worse time to introduce these “reforms.”

We’ve also been very concerned about the dismantling of long standing relationships that refuges have with local services, including local police. Previously, local police were on first name terms with refuge operators and could call them in the middle of the night through relationships built up over years. That network has now been greatly damaged.

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In a recent article in *The Monthly*, Assistant NSW Police Commissioner Mark Murdoch confirmed this when he said police received no prior warning about which shelters were going to close.

“It’s like, ‘OK, we were making good use of that shelter, now we’ve got to find somewhere else to refer victims to. If they were going to close or withdraw funding from shelters, it would have been nice to know in advance.’”

For women and police, another big problem has been the substantial loss of 24/7 services.

Just this week, the Federal Government has announced $230 million to be shared between the states for homelessness services. The Baird Government has also announced it will appoint a Minister for Family and Domestic Violence if elected, a very positive initiative. But funding and appointments are meaningless without adequate crisis refuges that women and girls will go to. In the sector, people are talking about the gaps. A senior manager of a community service has expressed alarm that women placed in her local refuge (south-west Sydney) have often not seen staff for a couple of days because the refuge is only staffed part time.

Over the last year of our advocacy, some people have called for the tenders to be torn up, something we haven’t agreed with or suggested. The damage is done and can’t be reversed. The devastation of the system will take years to rebuild. Hundreds of experienced staff left in shock over their treatment and the complete fallacy that the tenders were awarded to the “best providers.” Staff remaining at refuges are too scared to speak out about what’s really going on because they’re afraid they’ll lose their jobs.

There has been no proper oversight of these huge reforms. An inquiry by the Ombudsman was surprisingly cancelled last year. A parliamentary inquiry is warranted and its role would be to examine the impact of these changes and competitive tendering on community services, because next on the list are health non-government organisations, neighbourhood centres and youth services.
Community-based services need to be protected and specialisation has an important place in every service system. Competitive tendering is fine for profit based industries like mining, but it’s not good for small community services which are being forced to compete with large ‘for profit’ providers.

These reforms have turned back the clock more than 40 years. They’re not a success. While a few women’s services have survived the reforms, for others, refuges haven’t been handed over to the best operators or the people with the most experience. A former long-time State Government bureaucrat described it as ‘the most devastating policy’ she has ever witnessed.

We will continue to work with all parties in the next Parliament for the best possible outcomes for women and children who need specialist services.

These reforms were about saving money and nothing else. But they could end up costing lives.

**We will be seeking support for:**

1. A Parliamentary Inquiry to be held into the impact of *Going Home Staying Home* on women and children
2. All refuges to be funded appropriately to have a mandatory staff member on site or on call 24/7
3. Youth refuges and Service Support Fund Services to receive the funding necessary to cover their operating costs, ie. Indexation and mandatory Award pay increases
4. Contracts to be extended to five years instead of three
5. Community services should not be put out to competitive tender in future.

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