THE NSW GOVERNMENT’S GOING HOME STAYING HOME REFORMS
End of year update

During October SOS Women’s Services contacted every refuge in NSW – government and non-government, those run by major charities and other organisations. Things have definitely improved, but there are still some key messages coming through.

Key messages:

There was almost unanimous agreement from refuges that contracts should be continued for another three years to give the sector time to rebuild after the devastation of the previous tender process. As we know, an evaluation by KPMG of the tender process described it as “rushed” and lacking transparency.

Around half of the refuges are trying to operate 24 hours on-call but some can only do it for existing clients. We received strong feedback from almost all refuge managers that they consider 24 hour on-call access an essential part of their operations. SOS is seeking support from the Government for every refuge to be adequately funded to take in clients around the clock.

Most refuges are now generalist services – mixing homeless and substance dependent women or those with mental health issues with women and children escaping domestic violence.

In fact, in NSW there are only 14 specialist domestic violence refuges left out of 78.

Some managers reported their refuges are coping better with the reforms but many feel they’re not able to provide the specialised and effective care to women and children they once did, especially with the loss of court advocacy, specialist child support workers and other programs due to funding cuts. They have less time for case managing domestic violence clients while they find appropriate services and accommodation for homeless clients who are not suitable for the refuge.

Unfortunately, feedback about local FACS staff is still consistently negative, with most people saying complaints about the way the system is affecting their clients are not addressed or resolved.

There are also cases of Joint Working Agreements with lead agencies not working well.

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At a time when domestic violence is on the national agenda like never before – it’s simply not good enough.

On the positive side, there are substantial improvements with the Link2Home hotline and in problem areas like Bega, Taree, Kempsey and Campbelltown, and to their great credit St Vincent De Paul has retained Elsie’s, Dolores and Killara as dedicated domestic violence refuges.

There’s also a new refuge called Kelly’s Cottage in Western Sydney which is very welcome news.

We acknowledge the efforts the Government has made by implementing changes and improving problem areas raised by SOS earlier this year.

**Other issues:**

- All refuges except a handful are reporting full capacity nearly every day
- Areas with major capacity problems include the Central Coast, Northern Rivers/Taree, Wollongong, Nowra, Newcastle, Bourke and western Sydney particularly around Blacktown
- Because services are at capacity, there is an over-reliance on referring vulnerable women and children to caravan parks and motels instead of the specialist care provided by refuges
- Many motels are reluctant to take clients as they’re unsympathetic and “don’t want trouble” particularly in regional and holiday areas
- Services are reporting increased an increase in the severity of domestic violence and complex needs, including Sydney’s girls’ refuges.

**What needs to happen:**

- A moratorium should be called on the next round of tenders to give services more time to settle down and to prevent the loss of staff who are extremely concerned about another tender process
- All refuges to be funded appropriately to have a mandatory staff member on site or on call 24/7 for intake as well as assisting existing clients
- A robust review of the Joint Working Agreement model in line with the request from peak bodies Homelessness NSW, Y Foundations and DV NSW
- FACS to facilitate better contact between refuge managers in the same area
- The Government to match community funding for a new refuge in Forster, and consult locally about refuges in the Hawkesbury and Goulburn
- Reverse the funding cuts to Sydney’s girls refuges
- Guarantee that inner-city services will be funded beyond 2017.

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