

"Women's Refuges, Shelters, Outreach and Support Services in Australia: from Sydney squat to complex services challenging domestic and family violence"

Executive Summary

This report provides an assessment of the progress that has been made in expanding accommodation and support options available to women experiencing, or escaping, domestic violence and what options or directions might be pursued in the future. The research documented in this report measured progress through a national survey of services; a survey of 'key informants' from all States and Territories; special data analysis by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare; consultations with women in each State and Territory; and visits to services. The emerging picture, as a result of this 2003 survey of 137 crisis accommodation, outreach, information, support and advocacy services is of complex domestic and family violence services, responding to high demand.

Models of services

The Australian domestic and family violence services are a service system of complex service delivery organisations. The addition of extra crisis, transitional and targeted properties, along with the variety of support programs these organisations offer, have enabled increased service delivery capacity, as well as more flexible and responsive programs to meet the needs of diverse groups of women and children escaping or experiencing domestic or family violence. The models of domestic and family violence services in Australia are diverse. They range from single communal shelters to multi-building cluster models of self-contained units with counselling rooms, children's resource buildings, playgrounds, and group or training rooms, to shopfronts in busy shopping centres servicing dispersed houses throughout

the community, to large purpose built facilities in remote areas, to lone outreach workers working out of other organisations. There are commonalities as a result of the common service delivery issues faced within the service system throughout the country, yet there are also differences in how services organise their programs and staffing. This is particularly so across States and Territories and between regional areas, often dependent on available resources. Programs have emerged and developed historically over time within the influence of their particular jurisdiction, and as services respond specifically to their local communities with what resources they have available to them.

Measuring Progress

Of the 71 relevant recommendations from previous PADV (Partnerships Against Domestic Violence) reports, more than

half were reported as showing progress in implementation. However a significant number of key informants saw continuing need for attention, and relevance of the recommendations. In total, 51 recommendations from PADV research reports published between 1998 and 2000 remain relevant and urgent. These are documented and referenced later in the full report. The key areas are:

- Increasing the range of types of services available for women;
- Improving accessibility and responsiveness of services;

- Improvements in the criminal justice system; and
- Improvements in availability of services

In addition, the present research identified the following barriers and issues to effective service delivery:

- The increase in, and socio-emotional impacts of, domestic and family violence;
- Addressing the increasing needs of Indigenous women;
- The persistently high number of women seeking SAAP-funded services, including the increase in numbers of accompanying children;
- Lack of funding and resource issues;
- Remote area issues and service shortages;
- The housing crisis and difficulties obtaining access to affordable long-term housing;
- Specific services and program gaps;
- Workplace issues for services and workers;
- State and Territory priorities and variations;
- State and territory model variations;
- Lack of culturally relevant models;
- Lack of knowledge of the Centrelink crisis payment;
- Increasing knowledge about domestic and family violence services; and
- Provision for funding of a peak body for the domestic and family violence services to facilitate sharing and collaboration

The extent and nature of 'progress' over the past decade

Progress over the past decade has been impressive, with a considerable diversification of service models noted. In addition, progress was noted in the significant number of regional key stakeholder networks, which meet regularly to improve the service system, develop protocols, and work together more effectively. Protocol development, between services and police and services, is reported to show considerable progress. Services are very active in collaborative initiatives, preventive programs, and contributing to community and professional education and policy development. The majority also prepare educational resource materials, from specific topic brochures, to manuals, to educational videos.

Other signs of progress were police education, the introduction of fax-back systems to the services from police, and court support programs.

Factors and resources facilitating developments

Clear policy development, long-serving and experienced leadership, committed and supportive organisational committees, and hard-working staff have facilitated developments. In those States/Territories where the Housing Departments have made available more housing, there is greater progress. SAAP (Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program) is an essential and internationally recognised policy and funding program which is key to the safety of women and children escaping violence. Human and Community Services Departments who contribute to

funding for programs, and the Offices of Women's Policy (or equivalent) who have articulated State/Territory policy frameworks are to be congratulated for their actions. The SAAP program was evaluated during 2003/4 and many of the issues raised in this research were also raised and documented in the SAAP IV evaluation.

Alternative, creative or innovative models

In our view, the funding and introduction of more dispersed and cluster models, more independent units, transitional and medium term housing are essential, in addition to opening up pathways into longer term affordable housing. Women's and children's support and healing programs, and programs of court support require expansion, although some services are already active in this area. Outreach programs, systematically funded and developed are important in all States and Territories, in particular to assist women to stay in their own homes. It is urgent to open the way for other government portfolios to fund additional positions in SAAP- funded services, for example, health workers, children's workers and counsellors for follow-up.

In addition, special bilingual/bicultural programs, services for young women, lesbian women and women with disabilities were identified as urgently requiring expansion.

Strengths and limitations of the models available

The strengths of women's services are many: complex and sophisticated services providing a range of programs, with committed, hard-working and experienced staff. The services work within carefully articulated frameworks, have well developed principles and standards of practice. They are familiar with the needs of their service users and work hard to meet them.

The overall limitation is the fact that demand is higher than services can meet. Services report waiting lists, high work pressure, and resorting to less desirable accommodation options, such as hotels and motels, to respond to excess demand. Scarcity of resources, especially in rural and remote areas, and the provision of outreach programs and more resources for children are urgent matters.

The need and potential for expanding accommodation and support options for women

Newer models of service delivery complement and supplement earlier provisions. For a system in overload, duplication is not an issue. Demand continues to be high. There was no sense in this research that earlier models have outlived their usefulness. However, options for the future should ensure women are able to access the type of service they prefer rather than be allocated whatever spare bed is available (if there is one).

Preferred Models of Service

A comprehensive service system, and preferred models, requires policy frameworks supported and funded by governments, program guidelines, principles for practice and practice standards.

Further research

Several areas for further research stand out from the findings. In particular, there is a scarcity of detailed and in-depth research into outreach programs: detailed accounts of its extent and nature; who, if anyone, is paying for it; where does it occur; and what are the particular practice challenges. Research is needed into safe houses: the range of circumstances in which they operate, their preferred approaches and processes, and documentation of the resources needed to increase their effectiveness for Indigenous communities.

There is a scarcity of funded service and practice evaluations, which might document the detail of successful and innovative programs and approaches, especially those that draw on the experience of service-users. Similarly there is little documentation of the practices and processes of successful crisis accommodation work.

Conclusion

This research has provided rich data for the further development of services for women, and their children, experiencing and escaping violence. The extent of State and Territory variations is considerable, and the report has attempted to include the range of responses. The needs and issues are, however, surprisingly similar as the recommendations following this Executive Summary show. In conclusion, five issues stand out as most urgent and requiring critical attention as a result of the research findings.

First, in view of the extent of accompanying children with women seeking SAAP funded services from 1996-2002, and the fact of the funding being for 'adults', it is urgent that SAAP funding covers the costs of the full clientele of refuges and shelters, that is, including accompanying children aged from birth to 18 years. This would assist with the present underfunding of the crisis accommodation services.

Second, demand for services exceeds availability. Additional funding is necessary for crisis accommodation, outreach services, safe houses and medium-term transitional accommodation if women and children are to be able to move to safety from domestic and family violence.

Third, the severe shortage of affordable, safe long-term housing was reported in all States and Territories. This provides enormous pressure on women's attempts to move on from refuge, called by workers a crisis of 'exit points'. The increased provision of affordable public and community housing is an urgent need identified for women and children escaping violence.

Fourth, the practice of placing women and children escaping violence in hotels, motels and caravan parks because there are no available refuge beds, verges on system neglect. This is a totally inadequate service response to women and children suffering the socio-emotional impact of the experience of domestic and family violence. In the short-term, funding is urgently needed to provide daily staff support to women and children in such facilities. In the longer-term, this practice should be abolished.

Fifth, the shortages of services accessible to women and children, who are experiencing violence, and living in remote, and some rural, areas, is a major social concern. In remote areas, the majority of these residents are Indigenous, which exacerbates the difficulties faced by Indigenous women and children.

Finally, challenging and preventing violence against women and children must remain a primary goal of governments and communities to ensure no more lives are lost or women and children experience no more suffering from violence in their homes, families and communities. We urge you to read the full report.

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