



## **Australian Domestic & Family Violence Clearinghouse response to:**

### ***2008, Which Way Home? A new approach to homelessness, Australian Government Green Paper***

The Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse (ADFVC) is a national organisation, funded by the Commonwealth Office for Women, providing high quality information about domestic and family violence issues and practice. The primary goal of the Clearinghouse is to prevent domestic and family violence. We do this by supporting specialist and generalist service providers, government agencies, researchers, advocates and activists in their efforts, through the dissemination of information and research, and through facilitating discussion.

The ADFVC advocates that women and children experiencing violent relationships have a range of excellent support options available to them. Women may choose to stay in a violent relationship and should be supported to do so in the safest way possible, they have the right to stay safely and sustainably in their own home and have the perpetrator removed if they choose and, as a last resort, they have the right to leave their home and be accommodated by a crisis service. We believe that a good practice National Homelessness Policy should prevent homelessness where possible and provide a range of options in a non-judgmental, skilled and supportive way.



## Summary

The ADFVC acknowledges the broader issues of homelessness, but due to our area of expertise our submission concentrates on the necessary processes to introduce good practice integrated models across Australia. The evidence demonstrates that good practice domestic and family violence integrated systems across states and territories can reduce homelessness by supporting women to stay in their homes, enhancing victim safety, reducing secondary victimization (by services) and holding abuser's accountable for their violence (Mulroney 2003). The Clearinghouse believes that the evidence that integrated programs can provide safety for women experiencing family violence to remain in their homes is compelling.

Data from the ACT Family Violence Intervention Program show that after a visit from the police and Domestic Violence Crisis Service, the majority of those women subjected to domestic and family violence remain in their homes and from 2000 to 2006 refuge intake fell (Holder 2006). Since the introduction of the Safe at Home Program in Tasmania, refuge workers report a change in the pattern of refuge use, with women escaping domestic and family violence leaving quickly to return to their secured homes, and support to women with complex needs increasing (McFerran 2007). Two NSW Staying Home Leaving Violence (SHLV) Pilots successfully supported women and children to stay in their homes, testing the necessary tools and supports. NSW is now rolling out a SHLV program.

Integrated systems lock in the support of all the key agencies required to protect women in their own homes. The Clearinghouse believes that the same principles will apply to an integrated system to reduce homelessness for all Australians. To achieve this end, agreement is essential on what constitutes a good practice integrated system.

According to Wilcox, good practice integrated models can be distinguished by the extent to which they sacrifice organisational autonomy for case-focused unity (2008). The opportunity now exists for the Commonwealth to work with the States and Territories to develop agreed standards and benchmarks for a national homelessness prevention integrated system, introduced over a timeframe with funding incentives linked to performance outcomes.

In this context, the Clearinghouse recommends that the impact on existing homelessness services be constantly reviewed. The long and complex process of introducing a good practice integrated system convinces the Clearinghouse that SAAP should be maintained as a distinct program, to provide necessary stability in homelessness responses, but assessed as the process of integration



progresses. The evidence suggests that the introduction of integrated systems leads to a shift to regionally-based, multi-purpose services that increasingly respond to clients with complex needs. The impact of this shift and the location of prevention and early intervention responses are some of the questions which need further discussion.

We urge the Commonwealth to draw the links between the development of a national Homelessness Policy, the National Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women and Children, the National Child Protection Strategy and a National Social Inclusion Agenda in order to prevent duplication, such as multiple consultations and the very real possibility that important policy developments will fall between the policies.

The Clearinghouse considers that the effectiveness of a national homelessness prevention integrated system is best measured by how well it delivers outcomes to the most disadvantaged in our community, and that these should be excellent outcomes. The Clearinghouse proposes that benchmarks be set which measure the performance of the national homelessness prevention integrated system against the outcomes of the most disadvantaged.

The prevention of homelessness must be placed within a human rights framework that provides homeless people with a right of protection through the creation of a Homeless Persons Ombudsperson and the basic right to a standard set of charges for standard service.

## 1 Goals for a national homelessness prevention integrated system

- good outcomes for the most disadvantaged groups of women and children, those with disabilities, from Indigenous communities and those without visas and the full legal protection as citizens, are the benchmarks for a National Homelessness Strategy
- by 2013, the majority of women and children experiencing domestic and family violence are able to stay safely and sustainably in their own homes
- by 2016, women and children are not driven by economic disadvantage into homelessness
- by 2018, all Australian States and Territories have world-class, integrated, mainstream and community service systems to ensure the above goals are achievable



## 2 Targets for a national homelessness prevention integrated system

- the Commonwealth, States and Territories to identify performance indicators of best practice in integrated services systems
- COAG Agreements to lock in the goals, principles and strategies of a national homelessness prevention integrated system
- a measurable shift in public perception and service priorities to produce an increase in the numbers offenders removed from the home and an increase in the number of women and children staying safely in their homes
- new policies, legislation and strategies that ensure sustainable housing for women and children staying in their homes. While the evidence shows that even in the short term, staying in their home assists women to plan and make more considered choices about their futures, the target must be to maintain the home as a long-term and sustainable option
- the engagement of business and unions in creating safe and supportive workplace practices and strategies to raise the issue of family violence, to assist working women to stay safely in their homes and challenge the behavior of offenders. Evidence shows that workplaces can be active agencies in providing practical support to working women choosing to stay in their homes (Bega 2007)
- the targeting of prevention and early intervention strategies to prevent domestic and family violence becoming a crisis
- zero tolerance of discharge from mainstream services into homelessness services.

## 3 Measuring targets

The Clearinghouse recommends a spread of data tools as part of the National Homelessness Strategy:

- national targeted quantitative data that records a reduced but core set of homelessness demographic information and individual client needs information
- an increase in Snapshot or thematic studies
- the introduction of longitudinal studies, for example, on the long-term impact of domestic and family violence offender programs and housing sustainability for women staying in their homes. To achieve this target measure, Australia needs to begin to collect national police and courts data
- the introduction of qualitative research, which includes in depth interviews with clients



- as a model, we recommend the process of ongoing evaluations such as those conducted by the ACT Family Intervention Program, which includes in depth feedback from clients.

As an overarching measure of targets we propose:

- increased use of domestic and family violence services by the most disadvantaged groups of women, high levels of satisfaction expressed by these women with the service received (recorded by qualitative research), and a recorded reduction in violence experienced by women and children in these groups
- to measure targets, we recommend a network of funded national and state bodies of family violence research and service development
- the achievement of agreed and measurable benchmarks agreed by the Commonwealth, States and Territories in introducing best practice integrated systems in all States and Territories
- the retention of highly skilled staff in the homelessness sector, able to provide excellent support and outcomes to the most disadvantaged.

## 4 Research Priorities

The Clearinghouse recommends a number of areas for research priorities:

- Research of Australian and international domestic and family violence and homelessness integrated models, in order to document best practice elements and benchmarks. These elements/benchmarks will include risk assessment, accountability, codes of practice and systems of information sharing.
- Research of strategies to make the home safe for women and children to document best practice security strategies in Australia and internationally: including Sanctuary Schemes in England, satellite tracking of family violence offenders to monitor their compliance with exclusion orders, risk assessment and safety planning strategies.
- Research to set benchmarks for achieving best practice outcomes for the most disadvantaged groups throughout the integrated systems.



## 5 Principles

The Clearinghouse proposes that the following principles underpin the national homelessness strategy:

- That the most disadvantaged in the community are guaranteed best practice outcomes from a national homelessness integrated system
- The national homelessness integrated system prioritises the safety of women and children in their own home and prevents them becoming homeless as a first resort. This principle also commits Australia to providing sustainable and long-term housing security to women and children.
- The prevention of homelessness is placed within a human rights framework that provides homelessness people with a right of protection through the creation of a Homeless Persons Ombudsperson and the basic right to a standard set of charges for standard service.

## 6 & 7 Business and Community Engagement

- Providing safe, secure and sustainable options to women and children in their own homes requires the support of their families, friends, workplaces and communities. This is a new message, as for thirty years community education campaigns have stated that the home is not safe and that women experiencing domestic and family violence must flee.

Campaigns which engage the community in supporting women and children to stay in their homes are necessary and have proven to be highly effective. Evidence from VicHealth (2006) community attitudes survey and the Bega SHLV Pilot demonstrates high levels of community support for women and children to be supported in their homes. A random sample of Victorians found that 91% thought the violent partner should leave. Providing safety nets round families will provide the community with a valuable investment in these new prevention strategies.

- The involvement of businesses and unions in developing safe workplace strategies and policies for working women experiencing family violence will be a key element in preventing homelessness. Evidence shows that loss of staff and performance due to domestic and family violence costs Australian business dearly. Being in employment empowers women to leave violent relationships and to demand the right to stay safely in their own homes. Workplaces can be key players providing practical support to their staff.



- Past research has indicated that less than 5% of women experiencing domestic and family violence access crisis services (ABS 1996). We know that certain groups of women, such as those with disabilities, report experiencing violence at much higher rates than the rest of the community but are not concomitantly high users of crisis services. Targeted support needs to be developed in collaboration with marginalised communities that are at greatest risk, to ensure that the most disadvantaged are being supported.

## 8 Barriers to transforming SAAP

- According to the Green Paper, SAAP has not been supported by mainstream agencies in preventing homelessness and consequently has struggled to move beyond a crisis focus. The SAAP family violence sector can demonstrate some excellent models, such as the Victorian Domestic Violence Outreach Program, and some real innovation, such as Brenda House, a Victorian shelter which supports 25% of residents to return safely to their homes every year after developing safety plans and installing security upgrades.

Nevertheless, the Clearinghouse detects a level of suspicion within the sector nationally to Government's enthusiasm for policies to support women staying in their own homes, suspecting them of preferring cheaper options to crisis services. There is further unease about introducing staying home programs in the absence of a tested statewide integrated family violence system. The fundamental question is always about attempting to ensure that key agencies are locked into supporting the woman in her choice.

These concerns may undermine the capacity of the SAAP family violence sector to embrace programs of early intervention, which may be opportunities taken up by other service systems. Many departments and programs are now actively involved in family violence early intervention and prevention and, in an integrated system, would work closely with SAAP services. It is arguable that programs other than SAAP are more appropriate to provide early intervention and prevention.

- The process of introducing an integrated system statewide is complex and requires demanding new practices from all participants. The Victorian family violence integrated model, for example, has led to the creation of regionally based, multi-purpose service collaborations able to provide a broad range of packages to clients across the spectrum of need.



We are concerned that in this complex and competitive environment, the quality of community-based service delivery with a gendered analysis needs to be protected. It is the quality of community service which has provided such strong and effective advocacy for women and children experiencing family violence since the mid-1970s.

We recommend the funding of domestic/family violence resource centers in all states and territories to resource and build the capacity of their independent domestic and family violence sector in good governance, improved standards and accreditation, and skills in integrated working with mainstream agencies. We recommend the peak advocacy organisation, Domestic Violence Victoria, as a good practice model.

- A major barrier to the transformation of SAAP is the low wage rates and the lack of career paths for SAAP funded workers. SAAP is poorly equipped to undergo a major transformation when it is struggling to recruit and retain talented and committed staff, due to the historically low funding levels. In an integrated system, homelessness sector staff will need to be highly skilled in responding to complex needs and skilled at collaborative work with mainstream agencies. These skills must be recognised and rewarded, with career paths built into the sector to avoid stagnation.

Certain challenges will be faced in the context of a successful reduction in the homeless numbers and a greater concentration of clients with complex and chronic homelessness needs in crisis services. Will all SAAP staff require advanced multiple support skills to meet the increasingly complex needs, or will mainstream services need to increase their provision of specialist accommodation services?

- A Human Rights Framework overseen by a Homelessness Person's Ombudsperson is necessary to protect the rights of SAAP clients. One fundamental right of all Australian consumers is set prices for services rendered. Most SAAP crisis services charge residents for accommodation and service. There are no enforced standardised charge schedules in SAAP. There are no caps set on the levels of charges and no accountability for the services the charges are buying.

SAAP services may argue that paying charges helps residents develop skills in budgeting and saving. But this confuses two issues. In reality, charging clients was introduced by SAAP services to supplement their funding. One consequence of under funding is that costs are passed on to some of the most economically disadvantaged people in Australia. An appropriate program of skills learning to save and budget would return the money to the resident, perhaps in the form of needed goods, such as furniture for their new, stable accommodation. But this is legally and



morally fraught, as seen with the quarantining of Centrelink payments in the Northern Territory.

Another consequence is that SAAP clients who have a vulnerable immigration status and are not eligible for Centrelink payments may be excluded from entry into SAAP services which are unable to financially support them. As a result, women may find themselves trapped in violent relationships. The ADFVC is conducting a research project into the impact of government policies that promote the economic security and financial independence of women victims of domestic and family violence.

The Clearinghouse recommends openly available information for clients about a standardised charge across similar services, with a standardised list of support to be provided. Further, as homelessness prevention succeeds in Australia and SAAP crisis services increasingly respond to only the most chronic and most disadvantaged groups of the homeless, the Clearinghouse recommends the goal of providing free of charge SAAP crisis accommodation, in conjunction with appropriate programs to assist saving and budgeting.

## Conclusion

The ADFVC applauds the scope and ambition of the Homelessness Green Paper. We believe that the Victorian, Tasmanian and the ACT integrated family violence models demonstrate advanced systems where SAAP services are improving their support for women and children at risk of becoming homeless or actually homeless. We recommend that the Commonwealth takes a lead role in developing national standards and benchmarks for integrated systems for homelessness drawing on the experience in these States and Territory.

## Bold Suggestion

*Benchmarking good outcomes for a National Homelessness Strategy to the outcomes for the most disadvantaged groups of women and children, those with disabilities, from Indigenous communities and those without visas and the full legal protection as citizens.*

We believe that this bottom line benchmarking ensures that the needs of the most disadvantaged are embedded in the framework of the Strategy, rather than consigned to add-on items, and that a Strategy that can produce good outcomes for the most disadvantaged will produce excellent outcomes for the rest.



We have nominated three high risk factors: being disabled, being Indigenous and being without a visa which provides full residential rights. This is not an exercise in rating disadvantage, and we will not attempt a comprehensive summary of the experience of disadvantage and the responses needed, but this is a bid for mainstream and community services to measure their success in reducing homelessness and violence against women by the improved lives of some of the most disadvantaged. Models and strategies that can not be adapted to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged, we suggest, would need to be evaluated for their ongoing suitability. Both mainstream and community services need to constantly seek better ways to improve outcomes for the most disadvantaged.

In the area of disability, for example, there is evidence that despite a number of initiatives since the 1990's, SAAP has failed to adequately respond to the needs of women with disability experiencing family violence or violence from their carers. After discussion with Women with Disabilities Australia, we recommend a number of initiatives that can improve the homelessness response:

- That all SAAP services develop a Disability Action Plan that demonstrates compliance with the newly ratified UN Convention on the Rights of Disabled Persons and the Disability Discrimination Act. That this be tied to accreditation.
- That all staff involved in a National Homelessness Strategy are trained to sophisticated levels of understanding of disadvantage. This would include an understanding of the increased vulnerability women with disability have to all forms of violence. This may include her carer, paid or unpaid.
- That all building stock including public housing is made to universal design principles (appropriate for both able and disabled bodied people)
- That Centrelink crisis payment for family violence are extended to disability related costs; and the payment of carer allowances are fast tracked, as is the transfer of carer allowances to another party where the violent partner is the carer and receiving the allowance
- That State departments with responsibility for disability are included in the integrated system
- That a new crisis payment (for 6 months) is provided to allow for a carer and other necessary support to women with disabilities experiencing family violence to stay safely in own homes.



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