

Contemporary and Future Crime Trends Conference

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Roxanne McMurray, Manager Leichhardt Women's Community Health Centre and
Spokesperson for SOS Women's Services

Session: Family and Domestic Violence and NSW Government reforms impacting women's services.

Thank you for the invitation to speak with you today. I would like to acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation who are the traditional custodians of this land. I would also like to pay respect to the elders past and present of the Eora nation and extend that respect to other Aboriginal people present.

From July last year to June this year there were nearly 29,000 (28,939) domestic violence related assaults in NSW alone – around 80 assaults each day.¹

Community meetings have been held across the state this year with concerned residents and police talking about the huge resources it's taking to deal with the problem.

The Superintendent of the Manning Great Lakes Local Area Command in northern NSW, Detective Inspector Peter McKenna, told a community meeting earlier this year, that **local police had attended 900 domestic violence calls in the past year in their area alone and its last four homicides were domestic violence related.**

¹ BOCSAR, NSW Recorded Crime Statistics, July 2014 – June 2015

That's around 17 incidents a day in a small coastal area.

He said *"It is talked about every morning, at every briefing. We are constantly reviewing all actions on it."*²

This year on average, one to two women a week have been killed by a current or former partner – an absolutely shocking figure.

As the former Chief of Army David Morrison told a White Ribbon launch:

*"If we lost someone to a shark every single week, there would be, as there already are, laws to do something about it."*³

Many people have compared the action on domestic violence – or inaction – to the strong decisions made as a result of two young men being tragically killed in random acts of violence in Sydney, which saw the introduction of so-called "coward's punch" laws in NSW within a matter of weeks of the incidents happening.

But things are changing and these shocking domestic violence related deaths, as well as the advocacy of people like Rosie Batty, have placed domestic violence front and centre of the national agenda like never before. It's being reported differently, it's no longer considered a "private" issue and the media is demanding action from our leaders.

Thankfully, they seem to be listening. One of the first acts of the Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull was to announce \$100 million in funding for domestic violence, mainly for new technology such as mobile phones, alarm systems and other security measures.

² *Shocking domestic violence stats revealed at public meeting*, Great Lakes Advocate, 15 April 2015.

³ White Ribbon launch, November 2014. *The Numbers that will shock you to tears*, news.com.au, Nov 25, 2014.

And a couple of weeks ago, the NSW Government announced a \$60 million package mainly targeting perpetrators of domestic violence. Possibly even more important than the actual details of the announcements was the strong language that both the Prime Minister and the Premier used during the announcements. Announcing the package, the NSW Premier Mike Baird described domestic violence as an “epidemic that needs to be eradicated,” and strong measures supporting new police squads to tackle repeat and serious offenders, as well as calling them exactly what they are – serious criminals – sends the right message loud and clear.

All of this is much needed and very welcome, but NSW is actually papering over some devastating reforms which have seen women’s refuges that operated for as many as 40 years dismantled and the buildings handed over to new providers, often major charities.

There is absolutely no doubt about the important work charities do and how they are relied on as a part of the system but the extensive network of refuges that had been built up over decades, where managers were on first name terms with local police, was virtually wiped out overnight.

NSW police were blindsided by it as well. Assistant NSW Police Commissioner Mark Murdoch confirmed this in an interview earlier this year, when he said police received no prior warning about which shelters were going to close and didn’t know where to refer victims to, which is a glaring oversight when police are on the absolute frontline of domestic violence.

Assistant Police Commissioner Mark Murdoch said at the time *“If they were going to close or withdraw funding from shelters, it would have been nice to know in advance.”*⁴

⁴ *Home Truths: the costs and causes of domestic violence*, The Monthly Essays, 9 March 2015.

The process was so devastating that many staff - some with 20-30 years' experience - resigned or lost their jobs, and we were left with a system struggling to rebuild and often staffed by people with little or no experience. And in this area of work, expertise is critical.

Under the State Government's reforms, of which a central policy platform they describe as "No Wrong Door," most refuges now mix homeless women with women and children escaping domestic violence, which is not always appropriate (it often lets everyone down) and is placing enormous strain on an already stretched system. Mixing women and children with homeless women who are experiencing drug/alcohol problems or mental illness is not ideal, they have their own critical issues and also require special consideration. Women escaping domestic violence don't usually regard themselves as homeless, and they have very particular needs, usually starting with safety. They also don't like being referred to the Government's homeless line for assistance, Link2Home, where traumatised women have to undergo a questionnaire usually resulting in them being farmed out to a motel room with minimal or no support or put on a conveyer belt of referrals.

Most refuge managers say they are very uncomfortable sending women to motels and, even if they have outreach workers, they don't feel it's a safe environment for staff or clients. Most motels are unsympathetic and "don't want trouble," particularly in regional and holiday areas, and women in regional areas are too frightened to use motels as it's too easy for them to be tracked down by the very person they're trying to escape. As one manager told us - these men are "wizards" at finding them.

We've heard many reports of women with young children not feeling safe and leaving services to sleep in their cars or return home, because the environment in the actual homeless service is not as safe as it should be or the process of getting in is just too difficult. As it is, women can usually only get a few nights of temporary accommodation in these motels or caravan parks so if there are no vacancies at the refuge they usually have no option but to go home or stay home in the first place.

During October this year, our organisation spoke to every refuge in NSW and most are relying on motels and caravan parks because of the requirement they now take in homeless women as well as women escaping domestic violence.

As the *Sun Herald* reported in July, the Government spent almost \$14 million this financial year on housing people in motels and caravan parks. It also reported “multiple anecdotes of women being bashed at motels after their partners tracked them down.”⁵ We believe properly resourced women’s refuges would be a more effective and cost efficient way of providing services than ad hoc and costly accommodation in motels which should only be used as a back-up.

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. All but three refuges reported full capacity nearly every day of the week. One refuge on the Central Coast had to turn away five victims of domestic violence on the afternoon we spoke to them.

Another major problem is the loss of 24 hour access. Approximately 33 of the 78 refuges (funded by the government and also those not receiving government funding) have 24 hour on-call, but some are only able to provide it for existing clients, not to ensure access for new women seeking to be taken in during the night. Almost all managers believe 24/7 access should be an essential part of their service. **SOS believes 24 hour on-call at every refuge is necessary.**

Out of hours, refuge staff are much more effective and appropriate to speak to than the hotline that is being relied on and returning 24/7 to refuges would give police a permanent point of contact so they can rebuild local relationships. **Domestic violence is not confined to business hours - it’s a 24 hour crime.** Ensuring all refuges are operating 24 hours is a moderate, affordable and essential measure to

⁵ Domestic violence victims turn to motels with few after-hours refuges left, Sun Herald, July 12 2015.

help reduce incidents and we have recommended it be implemented in the remaining refuges in NSW.

We're still yet to hear a good explanation as to how this new system was meant to work more effectively, but the Government has been making efforts to improve problems raised by organisations such as SOS.

The Government has softened some of the worst impact of the reforms. In response to our advocacy it has restored funding to specialist women's refuges in the inner city (\$8 million a year in total, just over \$2 million going to the restored women's refuges), temporarily funded a further 16 women's services saving them from closure and then extended that funding to women's services in Cooma, Campbelltown, Marrickville, Port Stephens and Rockdale (which was extended to all temporary services - \$8.6 million). It has ensured that some of the refuges that have been closed for various reasons such as renovation have opened and has adopted recommendations for training of inexperienced staff.

Also to its credit the State Government announced the recent \$60 million package to assist police.

But the Government is still doing its best to defend the reforms and its key defence is to keep saying *not one refuge has closed in NSW*. It's true that **none of the *buildings* have closed, but just because the same buildings are being used doesn't mean it's the same thing**. In fact – out of the total of 78 refuges in NSW, those funded by the government and also those not funded, **only 14 are specialist domestic violence refuges**. That's a staggering reduction by anyone's measure.

Refuge managers have been very open with us about their frustration that the Government continues with this assertion about the refuges, especially when the demand from homeless clients means essential preventative and life-saving domestic violence programs like Love Bites (which is an educative program delivered in

schools for 14-16 year olds), court support, child support workers and 24/7 have been cut.

Strong police measures are necessary and welcome and the recent funding from the state and federal governments all helps. But there is a fundamental problem being overlooked and the area that continually misses out on funding is the refuges themselves, and **if women have nowhere safe to go or it's made too difficult for them to leave, they won't.**

A major report release last month by ANROWS – Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety – is being described as the most comprehensive study of interpersonal violence in Australia because it analysed data from 17,000 male and female respondents.

- It found a man was most likely to experience violence in a place of entertainment and a woman was most likely to experience violence in her home.
- Close to three million women, or one in three women in Australia experienced violence by a male who they knew
- Close to 2.2 million women or 25 percent have experienced at least one incident of violence by a male partner
- For women who were in a relationship at the time of the survey, two thirds had experienced more than one incident of abuse
- And one in 12 women indicated that one of the reasons they returned to their partner was because they had nowhere to go.⁶

Even though we would all like all women and children to stay at home and have the perpetrator leave, the fact is that often this is not practical or possible. The very nature of domestic violence often means that the victim needs to get away from the

⁶ Horizons Research Report, October 2015. Violence against women: Additional analysis of the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Personal Safety Survey, 2012, ANROWS.

perpetrator. The ability to leave a violent situation and find new housing is a key factor in women not returning home to repeated incidents of violence.

The devastating impact that recent reforms have had on women's refuges are not in isolation. There have been cuts in programs funded by the Commonwealth under the Department of Social Services and community legal centres are under great funding pressure with cuts foreshadowed for 2017. Make no mistake these threats to free and affordable legal representation and advice are one of the greatest threats to human rights and women's safety.

And back in NSW there are rumblings of wariness about the reform to Targeted Early Intervention programs that are now underway. These are programs for parenting, children, young people and families, Aboriginal people and to assist those women experiencing violence who are in situations where they can stay home.

However there is some indication of government recognising reforms need to be more attuned to knowing what they may lose when trying to reform or streamline and the potential for irreparable harm. There are 17 specialist multidisciplinary women's health centres in NSW and four specific purpose services. They provide trauma informed health care and are hubs for a range of specialist programs for women, including women in the throws of, and dealing with the after effects of, domestic violence, child sexual abuse and adult rape. Earlier this year Health Minister Jillian Skinner pledged that the core funding women's health centres receive would not be subject to competitive tendering under the re-elected Baird Government when the Health reforms are rolled out over the next couple of years. However other areas of health being delivered to vulnerable people with complex needs such as mental health, drug and alcohol, HIV and STIs will all also be reformed and are likely to be subject to contestability.

While there is definitely more interest in improving responses and care for victims of violence, the bits and pieces that are going to domestic violence have not yet

undone the damage. Domestic violence is deadly serious. Women's refuges do homicide prevention.

It won't matter how many resources the police are given, how many laws are passed, how much money is given to hotlines or education programs, **if women have nowhere safe to go they will stay in those dangerous situations**, these terrible statistics will not go down and the shocking deaths that we're seeing all too often in the news will sadly continue.