



# the women's centre

North Queensland Combined Women's Services Inc.

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Dear Senators

Following our discussion at the inquiry on the 23 April 2012 I am writing to you to inform you of the implications of the Specialist Homelessness Service outputs based service agreement dated 1 October 2011. The Women's Centre is transitioning to meet the case management and mobile based work with women required by it's new service agreement with Department of Communities and is pleased to be provided the capacity to work intensively and flexibly with homeless women.

As you are aware the Women's Centre functions as a hub and a drop-in-centre with other homelessness services providing services to women who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. This service has operated as a safe environment for all women and applies a feminist and strength-based model to assist women to make appropriate choices about their lives. The Women's Centre has three major service agreements with the Department of Communities and responds to the need of women in crisis. The informal nature of the drop in centre allows women to use the Women's Centre in a way that best meets their needs, sourced from feedback and user involvement.

There is a large component of services provided by North Queensland Combined Women's Service (NQCWS) accessed by vulnerable women who do not meet the service agreement criteria classification homeless or at imminent risk of homelessness. There are also a great number of women who do meet these criteria but do not want to be case managed or if we are to adhere to hours and numbers specified in the service agreement will not receive a service. The Department of Communities has requested further documentation regarding the nature of the services we have historically provided under Department of Communities funding and evidence the need and outcomes achieved. It is our understanding this is service delivery that the Department of Communities now considers to be unfunded.

NQCWS acknowledges that capturing the output of this type of service with vulnerable women is important and does require a suitable methodology; as outputs are not simply measurable in terms of 'contact hours'; but may need to include measures such as 'the provision of safe space for women to make plans and develop supportive relationships'. The delivery of this service to vulnerable women is early intervention. Indeed, we consider that women who may have been supported in much earlier stages of disconnection through early intervention will, without this service, become the unmet demand for the intense support for homeless and imminently homeless women that the Service Agreement does recognise.



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Failure to fund the early intervention component of our integrated service is a short sighted option and counterproductive to decreasing homelessness in Townsville.

NQCWS has identified that to meet the requirements of the new output based service agreement the Women's Centre will need to cease its current type of service. As we are a well established organisation in the community with a long history of providing a seamless and ongoing service to women based on need presented by the most vulnerable women in the community it is difficult to cease this operation and begin another when the need continues to exist. NQCWS has formed a "can do, no barriers to service delivery" reputation and a significant amount of its network of referrers for both informal and formal referrals, continue to expect our type of service to be provided to women.

In order to cope with this demand from the community and provide a seamless service to women NQCWS has established an integrated service delivery across its funded programmes. Prior to Department of Communities redefining funding for this service the Women's Centre had requested funding for two more workers to provide an extension to our homelessness service and to work with the significant increase in demand. (Refer to previous reports sent to the Department of Communities dated May 2011, March 2010 and August 2009 and past performance reports). The number of women accessing this service has doubled over six years; there being 12,500 women and children presenting in 2010/2011. (Annual Report)

The daily crisis response/ intake service and the drop in services have significant pressures and consume significant resources, however, traditionally these services have provided an access and referral point to many other services. They provide a timely response to the immediate need and safety of women as well as offer an introduction to services and programmes at the Women's Centre. As per the Townsville Homelessness and Public Intoxication Service System Review we are the only identified access and identification service for medium to low complexity homelessness. The ethnic breakdown of the women accessed in the drop in and crisis response/ intake service is:

- Aboriginal and /or Torres Strait Islander – 239 / 28%
- Culturally and Linguistic Diverse – 62 / 7%
- South Sea Islander – 2 / .2%
- Other - 559 / 65%

The Women's Centre recognize that homeless women and children often lead itinerant and erratic lives which can leave them feeling suspicious and distrusting of people and agencies. The Women's Centre 'trauma-informed' drop-in service is a safe and non-confrontational way for women to 'check-out' our service without having to first commit to engaging in a particular program, intake, case management, group work or counselling service. Drop In service had 6,000 contacts for the year 2010-2011.

Intake and Crisis Response Service:



Our data from 1 July 2011 to 31 January 2012 records **851** unique women were seen in the intake/crisis response service and 1308 sessions were conducted. Of these 1308 sessions with women numbers of different issues presented and women presented with more than one issue most of the time. Therefore, issue numbers are far higher than the number of women and service delineation is difficult due to the different presentations. However, identifying homelessness, imminent risk of homelessness, financial hardship, and domestic and/or family violence regardless of any other issue presented immediately defines a vulnerable woman who is on the continuum for homelessness or at imminent risk of homelessness.

Of the **851** women seen in the crisis response and intake service

- 225 were homeless or at imminent risk of homeless
- 186 were experiencing domestic violence, 99 of these women were not homeless or at imminent risk of homelessness therefore unfunded work defined by the Department of Communities
- 310 women had financial difficulty (no other presenting issue) – unfunded work

Since the signing of the Outputs Based Specialist Homelessness Service agreement between NQCWS and the Department of Communities 1 October 2011 there has been the cessation of the 24hr telephone service, redundancy of two workers, a change in the role of four workers and the employment of another homelessness worker. The integrated service delivery model has been diminished and a silo service delivery response is developing, alongside the development of processes that create barriers to vulnerable women in an attempt to decrease the numbers of women choosing to use services at NQCWS. The implication of further changes is that there will not be a crisis response. The intake service will be structured and formal eliminating access and equity that NQCWS has achieved, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island women.

Alongside, this significant service agreement change and the resulting closure and change of services there has been wage increases that have resulted in a decreased staff and a budget deficit for the last two years across all programmes that is not maintainable.

NQCWS requests that further funding be provided to enable the continuation of the crisis response inclusive of drop in centre services for women and children who are vulnerable, homeless and escaping domestic violence. NQCWS would appreciate any opportunity to discuss funding options.

Yours Sincerely

Cathy Crawford

Coordinator

