

Committee Secretary
Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts
References Committee
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

16 June 2005

Dear Sir/ Madam,

Re: Inquiry into women in sport and recreation in Australia

Women's Centre for Health Matters Inc (WCHM) is a not for profit organisation managed by women, for women. We seek to advocate resource and empower women and women's organisations working within the social determinates of a health framework.

The Centre seeks to identify women's unmet needs in the community and to develop collaboratively responsive strategies and programs. We take an advocacy role to inform government of these needs and to identify potential opportunities for government, business and the community to collaborate and deliver better health and well being outcomes for ACT women. In recent years the Centre has paid particular attention to building social inclusion and community participation for women from all walks of life, particularly those who are isolated and marginalised.

We welcome the opportunity to provide comment to the Senate Committee for in regards to the inquiry into women in sport and recreation in Australia.

Last year, WCHM engaged in a highly successful community development project. *Well and Able* was designed to promote health and wellbeing for women with disabilities in the ACT. This program was recognised by the ACT Government as an innovative and creative response to providing women with disabilities access to fitness programs and building social inclusion. WCHM was awarded the Chief Minister's Excellence in Inclusion award as well as receiving an Excellence in Inclusion award by a community organization.

This submission seeks to provide a brief overview of the project and its initial findings. A comprehensive report on the *Well and Able* project is in draft form and will be made available to the Committee as soon as possible.

The *Well and Able* project is particularly relevant to the following terms of reference:

- a) *the accessibility for women of all ages to participate in organised sport, fitness and recreation activities, with additional reference to state and federal programs,*
- ii. *including characteristics of women not participating in organised sport, fitness and recreation activities (including, for example, socio-economic strata, age, women with a disability, Indigenous or Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) women);*
- iii. *constraints, including strategies to overcome the constraints that may prevent these women from participating;*

Project Overview

The *Well and Able* project was conceived of by ACT Women with Disabilities and the Women's Centre for Health Matters (WCHM) and supported by the YMCA. WCHM took on the role of lead agency for the project, co-coordinating staff, resources and participants. WCHM also made the decision to support the *Well and Able* project financially over and above the initial budget approved.

Well and Able was a community development project, with its primary focus – to facilitate an inclusive, sustainable, exercise, lifestyle program for women with impaired mobility.

We addressed these aspects by running dual exercises classes for women with impaired mobility, and able-bodied women. The group met together, weekly from May to November 2005.

Due to the unexpectedly high number of women who joined, and their enormous variations in physical capacity, we needed to use 2 adjacent halls within Pearce Community Centre. Some women tried the session in each room to find the 'best fit' for them. The women also had some warm ups and warm downs, and visualisation sessions altogether, in the larger of the 2 rooms.

A physiotherapist initially assessed all the women in the 'impaired mobility' subgroup, so that the YMCA instructors were able to tailor an exercise circuit or plan, which allowed for each woman's capacity.

The *Well and Able* class was the first activity of its kind for many of the women experiencing a disability. Through a combination of factors including transport, access and information, many of these women had never attended such a social activity group before. This was as similar experience for many of the able bodied women in the group.

Approximately 30 women met weekly at the Pearce Community Centre for an hour long exercise class.

After the exercise class they met together to share lunch and hear from a guest speaker. The lunches were an excellent way for the women to overcome physical barriers and engage with one another.

The project also saw participation of Fitness Training students, and a fluctuating number of volunteer helpers. Some weeks we were fortunate to have enough helpers to have one on one care with each woman – this was ideal.

We were also fortunate to have an occupational therapist, from MS House, work individually with a participant who has quite advanced MS and is confined to an electronic wheelchair. Without this assistance, this woman would not have been able to participate.

The Canberra Blind Society also provided assistance, giving us a trained voluntary companion for a vision-impaired member of the group each week- allowing this blind woman to join in the activities.

Some members of the group, who may have been somewhat reticent about joining, blossomed into smiling, welcoming members of the group. So too the kindness of the women as they assisted some others in the group by feeding, or simply making a cup of tea for someone else who's mobility was impaired.

The greatest challenges for the project were: accessing transport and reaching out for volunteers.

The transport 'challenges' were enormous. The group had a number of participants who lived on the boundaries of community transport zones, thus falling outside any one organisation's responsibility.

WCHM subsidised a number of women who were collected from their front door by a driver from CBD Transport, who also walked them to their door on returning home. By providing professional, courteous and reliable transport a significant difference was noted in the women.

Evaluation

The evaluation of the project was designed to ensure inclusion. With at least two women in the group unable to engage in written communication, verbal feedback sessions were planned in small group environments, so as to ensure maximum participation. A World Café evaluation process was deemed the primary group evaluation method, as it allowed all participants to participate autonomously and if necessary anonymously.

The entire operation of the Well and Able program was driven by people with disabilities and had a very strong consultation process. By having an Advisory Group overseeing the development and implementation of the project which included two women with disabilities, at all times the project was very focused on building inclusion at all levels, albeit fitness, social, transport, emotional and mental.

Initial findings

Regular exercise brings well documented benefits for health and well being. Women with Disabilities ACT and the women who participated in the program were well aware of the barriers women with disabilities face in gaining access to fitness and exercise programs.

Gyms and exercise programs are usually designed for people without disabilities and their cultures often place an emphasis on body image. Prohibitive costs and access to transport can make participation difficult. Women with disabilities need programs tailored to their particular abilities and goals. Depending on the nature of their disability, women may also require assistance to take part in exercise activities.

These barriers, in addition to other forms of discrimination, can lead to women being socially isolated. That has an enormous impact on self confidence and women's perception of themselves as active people. Given all these factors, it is not surprising that many women with disabilities are not able to exercise regularly and consequently miss out on the benefits that exercise can bring.

Concluding Comments

The *Well and Able* pilot project report is in the final draft stages and will provide a more detailed overview of the project and an analysis of its project's objectives, along with evaluation of its achievements. The report will also present a modeling plan for developing a successful program and will present recommendations aimed at enabling the project to continue and improving service delivery for isolated and marginalised women participating in excercise programs. disabilities. This report will be forwarded to the committee in the coming weeks.

WCHM would be happy to present further information to the Committee, written and oral at your earliest convenience. Should you wish to discuss our submission further please contact me on 02 6290 2166 or via email on n.knight@wchm.org.au.

Kindest regards

Naomi Knight

Executive Director