

Addressing Homelessness



Supporting SAAP Services

**NSW SAAP Peaks Forum: Issues Kit
State Election 2003**

INTRODUCTION

The NSW Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) Peaks Forum has prepared this document for all candidates in the forthcoming state election.

Our objective is to inform you of the major issues and needs within the SAAP sector in New South Wales.

We are also inviting your feedback to the issues and recommendations contained in this document. A two-page feedback form is attached at the end of this document and candidates are requested to return this to NCOSS by the 3rd of March 2003.

Responses will be distributed to the SAAP Peaks Forum and will be used by these organisations in media comment on election policies.

NSW SAAP Peaks Forum Members

- Immigrant Women's Speakout Association of NSW
- NSW Women's Refuge Movement
- Youth Accommodation Association of NSW
- St Vincent's de Paul Society
- Shelter NSW
- Women's Refuge Resource Centre
- Haymarket Foundation
- Non-English Speaking Housing
- NSW and ACT Association of Homeless Persons Services Inc
- Aids Council of NSW
- Council of Social Service of NSW (NCOSS)

Rural Delegates:

- Women and Children's Safehouse, Wilcannia
- Albury Wodonga Women's Refuge
- Narrabri Homeless Persons Support Team
- Mission Australia, Orange

Questions and Responses may be directed to

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ABOUT SAAP SERVICES

SAAP services provide secure temporary accommodation and support for the most vulnerable members of the community; those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) is a joint program of the Commonwealth and State governments and funds these services. There are 394 non-government organisations in New South Wales funded under this program. Clients of SAAP services include women and children escaping domestic violence, young people, families, single men and single women.

The table below lists the number and percentage of SAAP services by client group in New South Wales.

| Client Group | Number of Services | Percentage of Services |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------|------------------------|
| Youth | 176 | 44.7% |
| Women affected by Domestic Violence | 85 | 21.6% |
| Cross Target * | 49 | 12.4% |
| Single Men | 40 | 10.2% |
| Single Women | 20 | 5.1% |
| Families | 24 | 6.1% |

SAAP National Data Collection Agency (NDCA) Annual Report: 2001-2002

* Provides services to more than one client group

Between June 2001–June 2002 the NSW SAAP program provided services to 26,350 adults and 10,300 accompanying children. As each client can receive support on more than one occasion, the number of support periods for adults (48,650) exceeds the actual number of clients. During this period, the four main reasons for seeking assistance were:

- Domestic Violence (18.1%),
- Relationship/family breakdown (10.9%),
- Financial difficulties (10.6%) and
- Eviction/lack of accommodation (9.6%).

(Source: NDCA, pg 16)

SAAP services are usually crisis accommodation providers that deliver a range of critical services to their clients; the immediate priority needs being accommodation, safety and support.

Some of the **main services provided**, apart from temporary accommodation, include:

- ✓ **Basic Support** e.g. meals, transport assistance,
- ✓ **Financial Support** e.g. accessing/maintaining social security entitlements, material aid,
- ✓ **Counselling** e.g. domestic violence, family/relationship, financial,
- ✓ **Support and advocacy**, e.g. information/referral, legal issues and court support,
- ✓ **Longer term housing** e.g. applications for public housing,
- ✓ **Specialist Services** e.g. drug/alcohol intervention, child support,
- ✓ **Outreach Support** e.g. on-going support once client has left crisis accommodation.

SAAP CLIENTS AND COMPLEXITY OF NEEDS

Multiple High Needs

SAAP clients do not present with one simple need. Most have multiple problems and require intensive support. Apart from being homeless, many SAAP clients have experienced traumatic domestic situations and have no or very limited income support. An increasing proportion of SAAP clients also have mental health and drug and alcohol problems that require specialised services that are beyond the capacity of most SAAP services. In these instances, access to appropriate health services is essential. There is also an increasing trend of people with mental health problems being referred to SAAP services once they are discharged from hospital. Many people with HIV/Aids, who travel to Sydney for specialist treatment, also often require accommodation in a SAAP service after hospital discharge.

Children

Of growing concern is the high number of accompanying children who are clients of SAAP. Of the 10,300 children in SAAP services in 2001-2002, 49.3% were aged 0-4 years. A further 41.7 percentage were aged 5-12 years. These children are most often accompanying their mothers in the SAAP service and have often witnessed, or been victims of, family violence. Unless the needs of these children are properly addressed there will be continuing intergenerational disadvantage for years to come. Apart from the obvious implications this will have for individual children, it will also have long-term financial and social implications for the community as a whole. Domestic violence is also a major child protection issue.

Lack of Income

While the majority of SAAP clients are in receipt of a government benefit or pension (80% in 1999-2000), it is becoming increasingly common for SAAP clients to arrive at services with no income. In 1999/2000 11.1% of people using SAAP services had no income support, this is an increase of 2% from the previous year. While there is no available breakdown of the reasons for the total lack of income, NCOSS is aware through its consultations with services that there are two main groups that fall into this category. The first is people who have been breached by Centrelink and no longer receive any income support, and the second are people waiting for their immigration

status to be determined. Very often those clients, who have been breached and are without income of any kind, also have a mental illness, disability or drug/alcohol problem.

SAAP services play a key role in assisting clients to access their social security entitlements. Prior to receiving support from a SAAP service in 2001-2002 23.3% of clients had no income; after receiving support from the service the figure had dropped to 6.9% (NDCA, p 30).

Indigenous Clients

Although Indigenous Australians comprise less than 2% of the population of New South Wales, during 2001-2002 they represented 16.2% of SAAP clients. The percentage of Indigenous women using SAAP service has risen from 18% in 1999 to 20.3% in 2002.

MAJOR ISSUES AND NEEDS

1. Financial Viability

SAAP services in NSW have not received any overall growth funding for the last 8 years, despite clear evidence of increasing demand. However, it is not simply the volume of people requiring assistance that impacts on services; it is also the growing complexity of needs of the client groups and significant increases in the cost of insurances.

SAAP services are facing a range of serious viability issues. The core funding that agencies receive has not kept pace with the rapidly rising costs of public liability insurance and other compulsory on-costs including compliance with recent privacy legislation. There have been substantial increases in public liability premiums for accommodation services over the last year and in many instances workers compensation insurance has almost doubled during this period.

Critical risk management issues associated with occupational health and safety also have real financial implications that current funding levels do not adequately address. For example one service in the Illawarra region was required to spend thousands of dollars last year to meet the costs of tagging, checking and installing earthing devices for all its electrical items. As access to free interpreter services has become increasingly limited, many services needing to pay for interpreter services to assist their NESB clients are also facing escalating costs.

These issues have become acute as more complex need clients (mental health and drug and alcohol issues) enter the SAAP system. In those situations where a service has a number of high need clients, often with pronounced mental health or drug and alcohol problems, there is often a need to have a higher staff to client ratio for safety reasons. In order to meet these mandatory additional costs, many services have been forced to reduce staff hours or programs and thus reduce the number of clients they are able to assist.

Recommendation

That funding to existing SAAP services is increased by 15% of the total program budget to address inadequate funding levels and the range of financial viability issues associated with the increased cost of meeting legal requirements and servicing high risk, complex need clients.

2. Need for a Substantial Increase in Social Housing

Assisting clients to move from homelessness to housing security is a central aim of the SAAP system. The Supported Accommodation Assistance Act (1994) describes SAAP's overall aim as being 'to provide transitional supported accommodation and related support services, in order to help people who are homeless to achieve the maximum degree of self-reliance and independence'.

In order to achieve greater independence, it is essential that clients leaving or 'exiting' from SAAP services are able to access housing options to meet their medium to long terms needs. Some of the options available to exiting clients include social housing (public, community and Aboriginal housing) and the private rental market. Social housing provides secure accommodation at a rebated rent for those in receipt of a pension of benefit, usually 25% of their incomes. The private rental market provides little security of tenure and the rents are often unsustainable for those on low fixed incomes. This is certainly the case in metropolitan areas. Given that the vast majority of exiting SAAP clients are reliant on government pensions and benefits, affordability is a key issue in terms of housing options. Consequently the private rental market is often the least viable option for these people.

When a client 'exits' from a SAAP service it is often extremely difficult for them to be placed in affordable accommodation because of the long waiting list for public housing and unaffordable private rents. This is one of the key issues for SAAP workers. It is also one of the primary reasons many SAAP clients end up back in SAAP services. Without secure and affordable long term housing for exiting SAAP clients, it will not be possible to effectively address the often cyclical nature of homelessness and disadvantage.

The number of applicants on the public housing waiting list has continued to grow over the past five years and has reached crisis proportions. As the table below demonstrates, in the last 12 months the number of applicants on the waiting list has increased by 3,224.

Number of applicants on the Public Housing Waiting List

| Year | Number on waiting list |
|---------|------------------------|
| 1996-97 | 94,797 |
| 1997-98 | 96,906 |
| 1998-99 | 97,037 |
| 1999-00 | 98,337 |
| 2000-01 | 101,561 |

Sources of Data: Department of Housing Annual Reports 1996/1997 – 1999/2000 & Australian Institute of Health and Welfare: Housing Assistance data briefing No.1, Feb 2002: pg. 10.

While the state government's expenditure on social housing has been predominately funded through the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement, the anticipated decline in the Commonwealth's contribution requires a state government response that moves beyond demand management. There is an urgent need for substantially more capital investment in social housing to meet the very high demand reflected by the numbers on the waiting list.

A sustainable future for the social housing system will require a major injection of additional funds from the state government and a long-term commitment to meeting demand. It will also require a range of strategies that consider a number of revenue streams, (land tax, stamp duty, superannuation funds) and practical incentives for the growth of community housing, including title transfer.

Recommendation

That the State Government double the amount of social housing stock over the next 10 years. In the next 12 months, and on a continuing basis for the next 10 years, this will require a 10% increase in social housing stock or an additional 12,821 units of housing per year.

3. High Complex Needs Clients: Specialist SAAP Units

SAAP services do manage to prioritise people with complex needs, including mental health and drug and alcohol problems. But this term is becoming increasingly relative as the range and degree of client needs continues to expand. High complex need clients cannot be adequately assisted through the vast majority of currently funded SAAP services. Often these clients have chronic mental health or drug and alcohol problems and may be periodically violent. The degree of attention and expertise they require is beyond the resources of general SAAP services and has major implications for organisations duty of care responsibilities. These people with very high needs are unable to access the specific services they require because they do not exist or are under-resourced. Years of deinstitutionalisation and the failure of government to adequately address the community care needs of clients with mental health issues has resulted in many of these clients becoming chronically homeless.

Often these people will also have a cyclical relationship with the correctional system and urgently need access to services provided by NSW Health. Thus far the required whole of government response to the needs of these people has been fragmentary. A small number of specialist units, including one that deals with dual diagnosis, are required to provide more effective and efficient treatment for these clients.

Recommendation

That funding is allocated for at least three specialist SAAP accommodation units for very high complex need clients. These units would each accommodate six clients with mental health, drug and alcohol problems or a dual diagnosis. The units should be a joint initiative of NSW Health, funding the clinical care component, and Department of Community Services, funding the supported accommodation component.

4. Domestic Violence Refuges: Special Needs Groups

a) Indigenous Women and Children in Rural Areas

Between March 2001-March 2002 the number of calls to the Domestic Violence Line from rural NSW rose by 25.5%. The highest rates for recorded domestic violence in 2002 were the Far West and North Western regions (NSW Recorded Crime Statistics, 2001). The SAAP Services for Indigenous women and children in these regions are located at Wilcannia, Bourke, Brewarrina, Walgett and Lightning Ridge and are based on a model known as the 'safehouse'. These services are now confronted with unprecedented demand from Indigenous women and children in need of refuge and support. It is not unusual for the number of children in these services to exceed the number of adult victims. It is not possible to meet the degree of need from victims of domestic violence with existing levels of annual funding (approximately \$120,000 per service). A substantial injection of extra funding is required to employ additional staff, including child support workers.

Recommendation

That existing services based in Wilcannia, Bourke, Brewarrina, Walgett and Lightning Ridge receive increased funding to meet the high demand from Indigenous victims of domestic violence.

b) Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) and Refugee Women.

NESB and refugee women who are victims of domestic violence often face additional barriers in accessing the resources and support they need. Apart from language difficulties and lack of understanding of the local system, many of these women are without any income support because of immigration regulations. This is often the case for women waiting for their permanent residency to be granted. Many NESB women who experience domestic violence are without income support because of immigration issues and visa category classifications.

While existing domestic violence refuges work hard to accommodate the needs of these women, there is a need for more specialised refuges to meet the particular needs of NESB and refugee women. Such services should be adequately funded to enable them to assist women without income support, provide culturally relevant services and assist with immigration issues. It is also essential that these services have substantial access to free interpreter services.

Recommendation

That at least two specialist domestic violence SAAP services be funded specifically for NESB women and children escaping domestic violence without income support.

c) Children in SAAP services

During 2001-2002 there were 10,300 children in SAAP services in New South Wales and almost 50% of these children were aged 0-4 years. The vast majority of these children were accompanying their mothers and accommodated in domestic violence refuges.

Domestic violence is clearly also a child protection issue. Like their mothers, these children are also homeless and often traumatised. They require specialised support that is suitable to their developmental age and addresses their particular high needs. Those who work with the children in domestic violence refuges consistently observe high levels of distress, depression and behavioural problems.

While there are a few funded child support workers employed in domestic violence refuges, they are insufficient to meet the existing and growing need. Additional resources are needed to ensure at least one child support position in each refuge that accommodates children. As Indigenous children, like Indigenous women, are over represented in SAAP services, Indigenous child support workers, particularly in rural and remote areas of the state, should receive priority.

Recommendation

That the NSW Government funds a child support worker position for each domestic violence refuge that accommodates children.

Thank-you for taking the time to read this document.

STATE ELECTION 2003

THE NSW SAAP PEAKS FORUM

CANDIDATE FEEDBACK FORM

| | |
|------------------------|--|
| Candidate Name: | |
| For Seat of: | |
| Party: | |

1. Which of the recommendations in this document do you support?

| Recommendations for | Yes | No | Why? |
|---|-----|----|------|
| 1. Financial Viability | | | |
| 2. Increase in Social Housing | | | |
| 3. High Complex Needs Clients: Specialist SAAP Units | | | |
| 4. Domestic Violence Refuges Special Needs Groups | | | |
| a) Indigenous Women and Children in Rural Areas | | | |
| b) Non-English Speaking Background and Refugee Women | | | |
| c) Children in SAAP Services | | | |

