



McAuley Community Services for Women

A ministry of the Sisters of Mercy

McAuley Community Service for Women

Federal Budget Submission 2015-2016

McAuley Community Services for Women welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Federal Budget 2015- 2016 conversation.

McAuley Community Services for Women provides much needed services for women and their children who are escaping family violence, and for women who are homeless.

Each year we help around 650 women and children to rebuild their lives, supporting them on their journey towards independence and safer futures. McAuley Community Services for Women is a ministry of the Sisters of Mercy. We run three vital services that are holistic in approach, providing a joined-up service for women leaving family violence through to providing them with help to secure employment:

- McAuley Care: Victoria's only round-the clock, 365 days of the year crisis accommodation and support for women escaping domestic violence, as well as a refuge program.
- McAuley House that provides accommodation and support for women who are either homeless or at risk of homelessness, many with a poor physical and mental health.
- McAuley Works is an intensive employment program that assists women who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, primarily as a result of family violence and mental health issues, to secure meaningful employment and increases their ability to support themselves financially.

We also run Engage to Change, a primary prevention program aimed at educating employers and workforces about what family violence is, how to recognise it, help women who are experiencing family violence by referring them to further help.

Overview

The Federal Government faces a choice in its 2015 – 2016 Budget. It can continue to impose a heavy burden on the most vulnerable and disadvantaged people in Australia and community services or it can commit to a fairer, more equitable budget that sees restoration of funding to essential programs and support services and an ongoing and increased commitment to programs including family violence, homelessness and affordable housing, mental health and to increase individual participation in education, training and employment.

We support the National foundation for Australian Women's Budget Statement 2014/15 – A Gender Lens which remains relevant today (www.nfaw.org)

Priority One: Family Violence

As noted above, McAuley Community Services for Women runs Victoria's only 24/7 safe home for women and children escaping family violence and a refuge program. This service is vital in today's society which sees a steady increase in family violence reports at a rate of around 20 per cent each year. Last year across Australia there were 81 deaths due to family violence, including the son of the 2015 Australian of the Year, Rosie Batty. This year alone, there have been nine deaths.

McAuley Community Services for Women also runs prevention programs – McAuley Works aimed at assisting women affected by family violence to retain the jobs or to return to the workforce or gain training.

It also runs Engage to Change, a highly effective social enterprise aimed at assisting employers recognise, refer and resource women affected by family violence.

Family violence is a significantly complex and persistent issue within Australia and internationally. In addition to the personal and family costs, family violence also results in significant economic costs to individuals, business and the governments. In 2004, Access Economics estimated that the annual cost of lost productivity for Australian businesses due to family violence was \$484 million.

The National Council to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children has projected that, without appropriate action, three quarters of a million Australian women will experience and report violence in the period of 2021-22, costing the Australian economy \$15.6 billion.

While we note the establishment of a COAG advisory committee to assist on family violence matters, we note and are dismayed by the Federal Government cuts to family violence programs and services.

Recommendations

We call on the Federal Government to commit to the following:

- To increased funding and roll out of a financial and economic model of prevention and response funding against the projected costs of \$15.6 billion outlined in the first National Action Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women. This should address the issue of - if reporting continues increasing at this rate for the next decade, what will be the cost to fund programs and services until demand starts to decrease?

- To restore and increase the level of funding to respond to the increased reporting of family violence, inclusive of legal assistance, housing, police, courts and counselling.
- To fully fund a national 'safe at home' program complete with technological safety mechanisms for women and children
- To increase funding for homelessness services assisting women and children who are escaping family violence, including capital funds for the provision of more emergency accommodation and housing to meet demand.
- To take a leadership role in supporting activities that change the cultural and behavioural attitudes which enable violence against women and children to occur and continue.

Specifically on prevention programs

- To introduce federal funding for family violence training to GPs, lawyers and other mainstream services involved in working with women and children affected by family violence.
- To provide funding to incorporate respectful relations education programs into **all** schools' curricula from kindergarten through to Year 12.
- To fully fund community legal centres to support women through the continuum of their legal proceedings from gaining an intervention order, to property settlement and family court.

Research and evaluation

- McAuley Community Services for Women would welcome further investment into ANROWS to capture research, analysis and evaluation into family violence and associated programs with an eye to prevent duplication and red tape. In particular, funding for research should be made available to:
 - Explore children's views of remaining at home
 - Measuring and reporting on the breach rate of intervention orders with especial attention paid to inconsistencies in the way that breaches are handled.
 - Continue a national enquiry into family violence related deaths
 - Make financial abuse in the context of family violence a priority area for family violence research, including the development of a diagnostic screening tool for use by key service providers, aimed at prevention, early intervention and later stage intervention strategies for combating financial abuse.

Priority Two: Homelessness and Housing

The link between family violence and homelessness is evident from McAuley Community Services for Women's data. Women and their children who escape family violence generally find themselves homeless as a consequence. The majority of women and children who leave our safe house find themselves living with family and friends or in a car or in other refuges. Few transition into public housing, transitional housing or private renting. Some return to home under the Safe At Home program while more return to their home with the perpetrator in situ because they have no other options.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2013) reported a 3% increase in people accessing specialist homelessness services. The report showed that of those who were homeless when presenting, 22% had no shelter or were staying in improvised dwellings, and 35% were in short-term accommodation. More specifically, AIHW reported a 26% increase (from 2011-2012) in the number of clients who had been 'couch surfing' or otherwise living without tenure.

Our data reflects the data in the AIHW report which showed that family violence remains a leading cause of homelessness for women, with 32% of all clients receiving assistance from homelessness agencies reporting that they were escaping domestic or family violence.

Specialist homelessness services, such as McAuley Community Services for Women, provide the bulk of the service response for homelessness in Australia, providing both safety net responses as well as longer-term approaches to address issues that may exacerbate homelessness.

We are concerned that current funding measures and funding indexation, however, is not adequate to enable services to meet demand or cover the real costs of service delivery currently and into the future.

McAuley Community Services for Women supports a comprehensive affordable housing strategy which includes reform of housing taxation; direct investment in the growth of affordable housing stock and incentives for private sector and institutional investment in affordable housing; an increase in financial support to low income renters; and sustained support for homelessness services.

We call on the Federal Government as a matter of urgency to:

- Commit to an increased funding from 2015 for three years to the National Partnerships Agreement on Homelessness: this would see support mechanisms, services that focus on the prevention and early intervention to prevent homelessness and the reduction of homelessness.
- Fund a review of existing homelessness and housing priorities with a gender lens with the view to the development of efficient and effective models to tackle homelessness and pathways to housing and training and employment.
- Consider changes to the current tax system and tax transfer system to ensure it is equitable, just and appropriately targeted towards housing availability and affordability for low and moderate income earners and those who are marginalised and disadvantaged within our community.
- Fund and expand the Home Advice Program, which has proven to be a successful, early intervention model of homelessness and housing assistance.

Improve access to affordable housing and grow affordable stock

High housing costs are the biggest source of financial stress in many households, particularly those on low incomes. Nationally in 2011, four in five private rental households in the lowest 20% are in unaffordable housing (paying more than 30% of income in rent) with more than 30% of the second lowest quintile experience housing stress.

A scheduled review of the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA) has not taken place. The National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness, extended for 12 months, is due to expire in June 2015 with no certainty about ongoing funding under that agreement. The future of the National Rental Affordability Scheme is also unclear. The McClure Welfare Review's final report is yet to be released and is likely to include recommendations for reform of Commonwealth Rent Assistance.

We urge the Government to:

- Establish an Affordable Housing Growth Fund to increase the supply of affordable housing, through direct Government investment. Current funding under the rolling NAHA should be indexed appropriately to ensure future adequacy. The NAHA should be continued.
- Encourage private sector and institutional investment in affordable housing stock, by maintaining and expanding a revised NRAS or similar incentive program into the future and exploring other innovative models to leverage private investment (e.g. housing bonds).
- Increase financial assistance to low income renters. Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA) has failed to keep pace with steep rental inflation, leaving many struggling to cope with high private rental costs. The McClure Welfare Review interim report recommended that CRA be reviewed to determine appropriate levels of assistance and the best mechanism for adjusting the value of payments over time.

Priority Three: Adequate Income Support

Women's financial hardship and insecurity, caused by financial abuse in the context of family violence, is a serious concern. Financial abuse in intimate relationships is widespread and common but it is often hidden and unrecognised, even by women who experience it. Financial abuse involves behaviours that control a woman's ability to acquire, use and maintain economic resources, threatening her economic security and potential for self-sufficiency.

Financial abuse is one of the main reasons why women who are experiencing family violence do not leave: they cannot afford to.

McAuley Community Services for Women urges the Federal Government to use the welfare review program to:

- Increase the basic rate of social security allowance payments by a minimum of \$50 per week.
- Ensure that the tax and tax transfer system is equitable, just and appropriately targeted, with particular emphasis on low income families and those who are marginalised and disadvantaged within our community

- Recognise the significant role and financial input provided by charitable and not-for-profit organisations in the provision of emergency relief to individuals and families.

We also call for:

- The expansion of the number of rebates (up to 20) per calendar year available for individual services through the Better Access to Mental Health Care program for women who have experienced family violence, to increase access to free or low cost personal counselling services.
- The introduction of relevant tax legislation to prevent the use of family trusts, businesses and other income minimisation strategies to avoid child support payments.
- An increase in the powers of the Australian Taxation Office to investigate cases of income minimisation or avoidance in relation to child support payments.

Priority Four: Marginalised Job Seekers

McAuley Community Services for Women sees employment as a way of assisting women who are homeless or experiencing family violence out of poverty and on a journey towards wellbeing and independence.

We do not support measures that provide little work value, little to limited work based training, or that are paternalistic.

McAuley Community Services for Women runs McAuley Works, a program aimed at assisting women affected by family violence or homelessness gain training or retain/ gain employment. The program costs around \$100,000 a year to run. It is funded entirely by us despite its success rate.

In 2014, McAuley Community Services for Women worked with 97 women. These women are highly vulnerable and would not be 'touched' by job support services. Of these, half were homeless, at risk of homelessness and had or were experiencing family violence.

We call on the Federal Government to:

- Increase the level of funding specifically to specialist employment services to assist the socially disadvantaged and people experiencing homelessness or housing instability to enter and remain attached to the job market.

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