

McAuley Community Service for Women Victorian Government Budget Submission 2016-2017

McAuley Community Services for Women welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Victorian Budget 2016- 2017 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.

In 2015, we assisted 1,000 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 family violence and homelessness 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 24/7 safe, accessible crisis accommodation and support for women escaping family 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.

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

Family violence is experienced across all cultural, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Family violence is the biggest contributing factor to ill health, disability and death in Victorian women aged 15–44. It is also the main reason why women and children access homeless services.

The Victorian Government's 2016/17 Budget has to reflect and respond to women and children affected by family violence and homelessness. Its Budget should respond to the recommendations to be handed down by the Royal Commission into Family Violence on 29 March 2016.

This Budget submission draws on the recommendations outlined in our submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence in which we spell out seven key initiatives that we believe would have a substantial impact on outcomes for women and children facing family violence, and which could form a foundation for change across the state.

McAuley Community Services for Women welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the budget process.

Prevent, identify and respond to family violence

The Royal Commission into family violence

Tackling family violence requires a whole-of-government and whole-of-community approach, including collaboration with the community sector. The imminent findings of the Royal Commission should provide clear guidance for investment to generate further long-term cultural and structural change.

We call on the Victorian Government to commit to and honour its pledge to fund and implement all of the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Family Violence.

In addition, we highlight these policy areas that require funding:

Access to early support

In the community

Ensuring that women experiencing family violence are able to access the support they need, when they need it. Too many women are told to come back when they are in imminent danger and are therefore unable to plan for their safety. This includes enabling workers and volunteers who are in daily contact with women (including neighbourhood houses, playgroups and so on) to recognise and respond to signs of family violence.

The Common Risk Assessment Framework needs to be modified in line with current research, which informs us about the prevalence, patterns and emergence of dangerous behaviour.

Recommendation

We support the Domestic Violence Resource Centre Submission (February 2016) which says that more resources which are needed to encourage early identification and appropriate family violence referrals and responses across the community.

In business

The Victorian Government is to be congratulated for introducing leave for people experiencing family violence. It, along with many other businesses, is serious about trying to change the status quo.

McAuley Community Services for Women runs Engage to Change, a prevention program designed to help employers and employees understand the impact that family violence has on the workforce. The program assists employers to recognise family violence and to respond appropriately.

Analysis of a recent survey of 200 employers and employees who have taken part in Engage to Change has found that awareness of family violence is increasing, but knowing how to respond is still a challenge. Supporting workplaces to better respond to family violence issues is core work of Engage to Change;

Recommendation

- That McAuley Community Services for Women is funded to run Engage to Change through Victoria for all Government departments. This specialist employer education program will help employers and employees better understand the prevalence and impact of family violence on staff and themselves.

Provide specialist children's programs within family violence responses.

The family violence system is unable to respond adequately to Children and young people's needs. Children are present at about one third of family violence incidents report to Victoria Police. (Victoria Police, *Family Incident Reports*, 2009/10 – 2013/14.)

From our direct experience of providing children-specific programs at our family violence service, and from pioneering Victoria's first Court Support Program for Children, we have first-hand experience of the needs of children, the gaps in service provision, and the lack of funds available for this highly vulnerable group.

Recommendations

- Funding is provided to apply the latest research emanating from ANROWS State of Knowledge Papers to develop benchmark training to support professionals to identify and respond to the needs of women and children experiencing or at risk of family violence.
- Funding is provided across the family violence service sector for case management for children in all refuges, with a focus on the individual child as well as repairing family trust and maternal/ child bond.
- Fund McAuley Community Services for Women to roll out its pioneering Court Support Program for Children across Victoria, including regular evaluation of the program.

Educate and resource the legal system, including additional support for women and children during court processes.

The inquest into the death of Luke Batty revealed a number of gaps and flaws to address in criminal justice and family violence processes and systems. Coroner Ian Gray made 29 recommendations to improve the family violence prevention and response system, including holding perpetrators to account, improving collaboration and information sharing between different agencies within the system, and funding family violence advocacy positions.

While reform has occurred in recent years of both the legal and police systems,

there are gaps in the system. We acknowledge the increasing workload of police and court networks. We also acknowledge the very high breach rate of intervention orders. We are also concerned about the lack of childcare and support for children in the court environment, which is why we introduced our Court Support for Children program.

Recommendations

- Fund all 29 recommendations outlined by the Coroner.
- Fund McAuley Community Services for Women's Court Support for Children's program across Victoria to ensure that women are assisted at the point of contact with the court system and to ensure that accompanying children are properly cared for.
- Provide funding for women's legal services to offer all women attending court access to a duty lawyer to support legal rights to safety.
- Fund additional resourcing for Magistrates and Court support networks, including education and training.
- Audit courts for safety of women and children.
- Alter legislation to enable police to seek Intervention Orders for up to 12 months without (women) having to attend court.
- Fund continuous education for police on family violence, especially around patterns of controlling behavior..

Provide long-term financial security and independence through specialist job-ready programs for women affected by family violence and greater support in the workplace.

Lack of adequate income and financial insecurity keeps many women trapped in violent relationships, and prevents them from successfully establishing a new home/ life once they leave. McAuley Works, a tailored, specialist employment program had a successful track record for assisting women find meaningful jobs. The program was funded through philanthropic trusts and short-term government contracts. It has been suspended due to lack of funding.

Recommendations

- That McAuley Community Services for Women is funded to deliver its McAuley Works tailored employment program across Victoria in order to assist women experiencing family violence retain their employment.

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Support community campaigns and initiatives at a local as well as state wide level in order to change our cultural acceptance of violence.

Rather than fund advertising and promotional campaigns on family violence at the expense of service delivery, McAuley Community Services for Women urges the Victorian Government to support best practice grassroots and business engagement programs that exist across Victoria.

The Victorian government has recently announced plans to better embed gender equity and family violence prevention within the education system, and resources and implementation of this should be a priority.

Priority: Prevent and respond to homelessness

Keep women and children safe in their own homes.

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.

Our findings are supported by a recent study by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2015), which showed that more than a third of the 520,000 Australians who sought help from homelessness services between 2011 and 2014, did so because of family violence.

Our monthly reports show that the majority of women and children who leave our crisis service find themselves living with family and friends or in other refuges. Few transition into public housing, transitional housing or private renting. Less than 2% currently return home under the Safe At Home program and around 5% return to their home with the perpetrator in situ because they feel they have no other choices.

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.

'Safe at Home' programs are run successfully in Tasmania and internationally, including the UK. The programs include enhanced family violence crisis and outreach support, partnerships and protocols developed between services, intensive coordination of police and specialist service responses, installation of security and alarm systems and the provision of dedicated emergency mobile phones.

Currently Victoria does not have a comprehensive, fully resourced Safe at Home service. Trials like the successful Bsafe pilot project run through Women's Health Goulburn North East have not received future funding.

Recommendations

- Fund a comprehensive and properly resourced Safe at Home service across Victoria, based on best practices, that enable women to stay at home if that is their preferred choice.
- See earlier recommendation to Fund McAuley Community Services for Women to deliver its McAuley Works tailored employment program across Victoria in order to assist women experiencing family violence retain their employment and housing.

Provide cost-effective crisis accommodation and better outcomes for those forced to leave.

The current response to women and children in crisis is to place them in motel accommodation. Research shows that between 37 to 50% of women and children leave the motel to return home to a violent partner.

Additional crisis accommodation is a more effective solution in terms of cost and results.

Recommendations

- Fund additional crisis beds with 24-hour support as a more effective alternative to motel beds.
- Resource crisis services, such as McAuley Care, to move families either back into their own homes through a Safe at Home program or safe accommodation that can be accessed when women need it (i.e.: before they are at imminent risk).

Provide a range of appropriate housing options for women who choose or are forced to leave their family home (including supported accommodation).

The state government should use its leadership to develop the Charter of Human Rights to include social and economic rights which can be used as a platform for developing safe, affordable and secure accommodation for all Victorian citizens

We agree with the Council to Homeless Persons' view that the Victorian Government could help halve the number of people facing homelessness by 2025 by investing in a rapid rehousing program. We add Safe at Home into the mix, together with properly resourced outreach support systems for women who have been homeless.

Our experience shows that women with a long history of homelessness and with complicated physical and medical needs, require specialist, long-term support to maintain housing. This includes assistance with finding permanent housing options, such as public or supported housing, social housing, and as needs support to manage complex difficulties such as trauma, mental health difficulties, substance use, disability and living skills. McAuley House, our hub and spokes model, consistently demonstrates that housing combined with support services prevents recurring homelessness and helps women remain in housing with improved health and wellbeing. It is Victoria's only women specific homelessness service.

Our experience with older women who are homeless shows that their needs are specific and that services should be tailored specifically. Older women are increasingly at risk of homelessness as a consequence of compounding gender related issues such as the pay gap.

Recommendations

- The Victorian government should establish a social & public housing growth fund to expand social housing options for women and children who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.
- That McAuley Community Services for Women's homelessness service is properly funded to embrace outreach services (which are currently not funded) especially in light of last years cuts to SHASP and the Private Rental Brokerage Program.
- That all housing and homelessness strategies and services consider the specific needs of specific groups, such as older women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, and women without permanent residencies And women with disabilities.