Responding to Domestic and Family Violence Driven Homelessness: Opportunities and Risks in the New South Wales Reforms of Specialist Homelessness Services
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The NSW Government Going Home Staying Home (GHSH) Reform Plan for Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) was released in February of this year and includes five broad strategies aimed at improving the responsiveness and flexibility of the service system; increasing the focus on intervening early to prevent homelessness; making it easier for clients to access the right service; better matching supply and demand; developing the industry and workforce; strengthening quality and performance; and reducing red tape and administration (1).

GHSH reforms are due to be finalised by June 2014 and are supported through a governance structure that includes; A Department of Family and Community Services Project Board; a Sector Reference Group, with representatives of the three SHS Peaks and three other peaks (Shelter NSW, the NSW Federation of Housing Associations and NCOS), and a Panel of Experts. Each of the strategies has a Working Group providing advice to the FACS Reform Team and Sector Reference Group, an additional Working group has been developed on improving linkages and access to mainstream services (2).

The five broad strategies are explained briefly below:

1. **Service System Design** – A new Service Delivery Framework will be developed which incorporates four core service responses: Prevention and Early Intervention; Rapid Re-housing; Crisis and Transitional Accommodation; and Intensive Responses for complex needs clients (Housing First for example models). The Framework will be supported by the development of Practice Guidelines, an Innovation Fund to assist services to transition revised service designs. Additionally, to improve access to other service systems a GHSH Linkages Working Group will be established. (3)

2. **Streamlined Access** – Under this strategy a streamlined access system will be pursued which, will aim to enable clients to access consistent information and assessment through a ‘no wrong door approach’. This strategy will be supported through the development of a no wrong door protocol; a state-wide information and referral telephone line; a SHS assessment tool to enable consistent assessment and response at initial entry points; referral protocols; SHS vacancy management system; improved and up to date service directories and a Client Information Management System. (4)

3. **Better planning and Resource Allocation** – Currently SHS is funded according to historical allocations and has not taken into consideration current needs within regions. This strategy will aim to equitably distribute resources according to clients’ current and changing needs, preferred approaches, government targets and regional circumstances. To implement the strategy the following will be delivered: A SHS Resource Allocation Model will be developed, the model is intended to identify service gaps by analysis of data on at-risk population groups and existing SHS data; a number of service pricing approaches will be considered (outputs based; outcomes; a mix of outputs and outcomes based funding and individualised
funding), although the Reform Plan notes that individualised funding is largely untested in the homelessness sector; and Regional Specialist Homelessness Services Planning through existing Regional Homelessness Committees. (5)

4. **Industry and workforce development** - The strategy aims to ensure the sector has the business models, governance and infrastructure arrangements in place to achieve client outcomes. Deliverables in this strategy include. (6)

Development of an Industry Development Strategy – the five year strategy will be developed and implemented in two stages firstly, it will map and identify short term priorities and secondly, build on stage one initiatives and identify longer term priorities. To facilitate this process an industry partnership has been formed, between the three SHS peaks with NSW WRM, Homelessness NSW and Yfoundations to develop the strategy and disburse the Industry Development Fund. This fund will be used to implement priorities identified in the strategy: Activities that may be funded include:

- Developing industry partnerships – joint partnerships and consortia for contracting purposes
- Structural adjustments to support providers to transition to different business models
- Support to strengthen governance and strategic planning capacity
- SHS Workforce Development Alliance
- FACS and the SHS peak bodies will form the alliance to ‘equip the workforce with the skills required to undertake increasingly complex work. (7)

5. **Quality, contracting and continuous improvement** - This strategy will streamline contracting arrangements reflecting new priorities, pricing, quality standards and assurance mechanisms. SHS Quality Assurance mechanisms will build on the proposed SHS National Quality Framework. Contracting will occur through a new procurement strategy for 2014 procurement options to be considered will be an open tender process, select tendering, negotiations with existing providers or a combination of all of these. Service specifications will be amended to align with the service delivery framework and are intended to enable more focus on client centred responses and to reduce the amount of contracts and contract duplication for service providers (8). Additionally, a SHS Evaluation Strategy will be developed to regularly review the overall SHS program against agreed client outcomes. (9)

There are a vast number of interdependencies across the five strategies and considerable work to be done prior to June 2014. What must continue to be acknowledged is that the success of GHSH is also interdependent with broader reforms and strategies aimed at increasing access to safe and affordable housing whether this be through the private rental market, affordable or social housing.

Additionally, improving responses to homeless people and those at risk, including women and children experiencing domestic and family violence by a diverse range of mainstream services and other specialist services not funded through SHS.
The NSW Women’s Refuge Movement agrees with the NSW Government that the service system must have capacity to respond to changing client needs and emerging client groups, the Reform Plan refers to older women as one example. However, what must be remembered is that the impact of domestic and family violence on homelessness for women, children and young people is pervasive and does not only relate to women and children accessing specialist homelessness services, specifically targeting women escaping domestic and family violence.

In 2011/12, 77,178 people escaping domestic and family violence sought assistance from Specialist homelessness Services (SHS), accounting for 34 per cent of all SHS clients (10). People escaping domestic and family violence (including children) were predominantly female (78 per cent). Of the clients escaping domestic and family violence 63 per cent were women between the ages of 18 and 44, children under the age of 10 accounted for 21 per cent, a further 7 per cent were children between the ages of 10- 14. Of the remaining 9 per cent, women over the age of 45 accounted for a large proportion. (11)

Furthermore a 2008 report from the AIHW SAAP High and Complex Needs Census (NSW) found that domestic and family violence was recorded as a the most common circumstance for clients accessing SHS services targeting women and children escaping domestic violence and single women’s services. It was also notably, the second most common circumstance for SHS agencies targeting families (40 per cent) and was recorded as a circumstance for 32 per cent of young people accessing youth SHS services. (12)

We caution against too much reliance on the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Homelessness Count, in the ongoing development and use of the Resource Allocation Model and the use of ABS data by Regional Homelessness Committees. The ABS itself has acknowledged that women who are homeless due to domestic and family violence would be underestimated in the Homeless Census Count and furthermore they do not capture on who are risk of homelessness due to experiencing domestic and family violence. (13)

Another risk in this significant reform process is that the reforms disrupt existing good practices and partnerships within regions. The SHS system is diverse it must be remembered that our members, and some other specialist homelessness services are also specialist domestic and family violence services and therefore, an important part of the service system response to domestic and family violence in NSW. There are many examples of good practice across the sector where services have developed prevention, early intervention, post crisis responses and integrated responses to domestic and family violence. In many cases SHS’s are delivering far more services than what they are contracted to provide. GHSH needs to build upon existing strengths and expertise within SHS – this point, in our view is absolutely critical. The need for GHSH to be coordinated with other reforms, particularly the development and implementation of the NSW Domestic and Family Violence Framework, is essential also.

It is also important through the reforms that the emphasis on the development of industry partnerships, and the desire to reduce the number of contracts does not create diseconomies of scale. There is some concern in the SHS that the implementation of GHSH may result in a situation where service providers are funded across diverse service streams
where they may not have the diverse range of skills, expertise, knowledge, links with other service systems and services necessary to develop an integrated service responses for the diverse and complex drivers and experiences of homelessness.

Footnotes
2. Ibid, p.27.
8. Ibid, pp.24-25.