

Support for women and children experiencing domestic and family violence: Summary of Homelessness Action Plan evaluation findings

The Homelessness Action Plan (HAP) Evaluation Strategy captured evidence of the effectiveness of the different service approaches used by HAP Projects across NSW. This evidence note is a summary of the evaluation findings for projects that supported women and children escaping domestic and family violence.

Key points

- Domestic and family violence, combined with a lack of available affordable housing, is one of the main causes of homelessness for women.
- As part of any response to domestic violence the needs of the children need to be considered.
- The successful introduction of the Start Safely private rental subsidy two years ago has helped many women to leave a violent home and move their family to a safe and stable environment.
- Intensive client support for 12 months or more enabled women to remain separate from the perpetrator and develop independent living skills and support networks.
- Multi-agency case planning ensured that the most suitable service provider took the lead for case management and built the capacity of all involved to understand and respond to domestic violence.
- Flexible brokerage funds enabled a holistic and tailored response to the needs of women and their children escaping domestic violence.

Description of service approaches

The three Homelessness Action Plan (HAP) Domestic Violence (DV) projects are located in Greater Western Sydney (GWS), the Hunter and Illawarra Regions. Women that met the criteria to receive social housing assistance were eligible for assistance under these projects.

The projects shared the common elements of case management support, flexible brokerage funding and the establishment of local multi-agency coordination groups.

The multi-agency coordination groups function differently in each region to ensure they can respond to local needs. For example the Illawarra has one coordination group while GWS has five groups consisting of more than forty services.

Other HAP projects, particularly those with a focus on sustaining tenancies, also provided case management and brokerage funding support for women and children escaping domestic and family violence.

The issues

The research confirms that domestic and/or family violence continues to be the main reason women seek support and assistance from specialist homelessness services (SHS).

The potential impacts of DV include undermining the victim's financial security and their capacity to sustain suitable housing as well as a range of psychological, physical and material difficulties for women and children which can result in the need for long-term support.

The unpredictable long-term influence of a perpetrator's tactics even after a woman has left a violent relationship can create challenges for support services. It can also lead to the breakdown of a woman's tenancy and the need for additional assistance to secure safe accommodation.

Aboriginal women experience higher rates of domestic and family violence and a range of researchers have called for intervention schemes, including homelessness programs that are culturally appropriate and involve Aboriginal services in their design.

The short and long-term effects of violence on women and their children are complex and require individualised, multi-agency responses that draw together relevant expertise from housing, DV and other generalist and specialist services.

Findings

Approximately 416 women and 660 accompanying children were supported across the HAP DV projects during 2011/12.

Success factors

The evaluation showed that the best housing outcomes occurred when there was a combination of inter-related program elements including:

- access to safe and affordable housing
- flexible support underpinned by an individually tailored and coordinated case plan
- brokerage dollars to fund goods and services that could not be provided through the local service system but helped sustain the family's tenancy.

While each factor alone was important in the response to women experiencing DV, the service model was significantly strengthened when all elements were present.

In addition to these factors, other elements that contributed to successful outcomes included:

- The capacity to provide intensive case management support for up to 12 months, as well as the flexibility to adjust the level of support provided. This enabled the complexity of issues to be better addressed, ensuring a long-term positive outcome for the family
- Coordination structures that improved the knowledge of DV and homelessness, enhanced the integration of services and identified access pathways between generalist and specialist services
- Mid and Far North Coast projects that were seeking to prevent evictions, reported positive outcomes where DV specialist homelessness services were core members. This involved the Tenancy Support Services and specialist homelessness services working together to support the family and provide the best chance for sustainability
- Partnerships with real estate agents improved access to private rental. In GWS the DV Coordinator actively contacted real estate agents to identify those who would be supportive of the project. This process raised awareness of the linkages between DV and homelessness as well as the availability of the Start Safely rental subsidy.

Key challenges

The key challenges in the implementation of the HAP DV pilot projects were:

- The original costing for the HAP DV projects assumed that clients receiving the Start Safely subsidy would have less complex needs than social housing tenants. However, each of the projects found that the needs of Start Safely clients were sometimes complex and long-term, and often demanded more extensive support than general social housing clients require. Projects applied the funding in a more flexible way to enable more women to be assisted.
- Ensuring coordinated and consistent responses between Housing NSW (assessing eligibility) and the DV services (coordinating support) was a challenge.
- All projects faced housing supply challenges in the social housing and private rental market.
- The non-government auspice agency (managing the DV projects in each region) found the responsibility of dispersing brokerage funding to other local services a challenge in terms of administrative processes and relationship management.

For further information on the HAP Evaluation Strategy please visit www.housing.nsw.gov.au