

**“GOING PUBLIC”:
A SHIFT IN THE
CULTURE OF PRACTICE**

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18 – 22 February 2002, University of Sydney, Australia

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Three years ago the Northern Areas Women's & Children's Shelter relocated all staff from the shelter site that had been its base for more than twenty years, to a high profile location in the northern suburbs of Adelaide.

The decision to “go public” was not taken lightly. Nor was it taken without serious consideration of possible risks to both clients and staff. Rather, it was taken in a spirit of preparedness by Board and Staff to adopt a different approach to providing services for women and children affected by domestic violence. We believed that by having a public presence in the community we would have a very real opportunity to address a number of issues that had been troubling us for some time. Essentially, we wanted to make our service more visible, more accessible and more available to a greater number and wider range of women.

Three years later we can confidently say we made the right choice. None of us can imagine going back to the way we were – locked away behind closed doors at a secret location, working in cramped conditions in a poorly adapted residential building and being frequently interrupted because we were trying to work where our clients were living.

Now that the initial excitement of opening our doors to the public has worn off, we have probably become a bit complacent about the significance of the changes we made. Today, as we go about our work in a business-as-usual kind of way, we are occasionally reminded about the magnitude of what we have done by the reaction of others when they first learn about the way we offer and provide our services.

Last year I attended a workshop in Adelaide convened by the federal Office of the Status of Women. The purpose was to discuss ways of introducing and

managing change in women's organisations. When asked about the changes our organisation had experienced recently, I was amazed when the facilitator said they had "heard about" us in Canberra, that what we have done has "challenged the dominant paradigm" and has "Australia-wide implications". This was when we decided we should spread the word.

The purpose of this presentation therefore is to showcase the Northern Domestic Violence Service's model of service delivery. We saw this conference as providing an ideal opportunity to reach service providers from around Australia who may be interested or perhaps just curious about the model we operate. Our aim is to share information learned from experience over the past three years. We hope it is interesting, thought-provoking and useful.

The Model

The Northern Domestic Violence Service (formerly the Northern Areas Women's and Children's Shelter) employs 9 full time and 3 casual staff and operates from a high profile Service Centre at a shopping complex in the northern suburbs of Adelaide. From this centre we manage an Emergency Accommodation Program, comprising 21 individual properties scattered throughout the surrounding suburbs which are capable of housing 21 women and up to 90 children at any one time. We also manage a comprehensive Outreach Program, providing professional services to clients who do not want or need emergency accommodation, and we offer individually tailored services and group programs for the children of clients from both program areas.

Getting There

It would be satisfying to claim credit not only for conceiving the original concept, but also for single-handedly "delivering the goods". There is something particularly seductive about the image of Board and Staff working against impossible odds to achieve this radical shift in the culture of practice for women and children affected by domestic violence. The reality however was somewhat less romantic!

To initiate change of this magnitude, particularly in the non-government community service sector, requires more than a vision and people with the

motivation to achieve it. It also requires opportunity, and at a much more practical level, it requires money! We were fortunate. In early 1997 when we began thinking about how we could make our service more accessible to more women there were a number of factors working in our favour that helped crystallise our thoughts and contributed significantly to the realisation of our dream. With the benefit of hindsight, the single most influential factor was “timing”. Essentially, we were the right people, in the right place, at the right time.

Right People

Pioneering Spirit

The Northern Areas Women & Children’s Shelter had a well-established reputation for developing innovative approaches to domestic violence services for women and children in South Australia. It also had a proud 20-year history of accomplishments, including:

- 1979 – First women’s shelter in South Australia to employ a dedicated Children’s Worker (with a grant from the Education Department),
- 1993 – Won a high commendation from the Australian Institute of Criminology for our “Spirals Children’s Program”.
- First women’s shelter in South Australia to be involved in the training of Police Cadets at women’s shelters.
- First women’s shelter in South Australia to become involved in graduate training for senior Police,
- 1995 – First SAAP funded service Australia to negotiate and register an Enterprise Agreement,
- 1995 – First women’s shelter in Australia to participate in the design and implementation (1997) of the inter-agency, whole of family “Violence Intervention Program”

Fresh Perspective

As the newly employed Administrator of the Northern Areas Women’s & Children’s Shelter, I brought to my position experience acquired over several years with the SA Department of Family & Community Services (FACS). My work in rural, remote and metropolitan FACS offices had involved dealing with

people in crisis. I regularly encountered women and children affected by domestic violence. Some had sought help, others were brought to the Department's attention through child protection investigations.

Of the many women I'd worked with over the years who had sought help with domestic violence, there was not a single client willing to consider the option of a women's shelter. In spite of encouragement and advice that shelter staff were specialists in their field who could provide professional assistance with a variety of practical matters, including the fast-tracking of housing, *without exception* every one of my domestic violence clients opted for assistance from sources other than shelters. Staying with friends and family until they could find a place of their own was the most common choice.

Therefore, as a professional who had been involved with victims of domestic violence in a different setting, I brought to the organisation an acute awareness that women's shelters had an **image problem**. Women who needed and would have benefited significantly, were not accessing these services. I believe they were frightened - either by preconceived ideas of what shelters and shelter staff were like, or by something they'd read or heard about from others. If the experience of professionals working outside the sector was similar to mine, then it followed that shelters had another serious problem. It was highly probable that the number of women and children currently being assisted by the present system represented just the **tip of the iceberg!**

It was obvious something had to be done. Eventually we came to the inevitable conclusion that a specific strategy and determined effort was necessary to encourage greater use. This would involve improving the image of services. In order to address fears of potential clients and dispel many of the myths and stereotypes, shelter services must become more visible in the community and more open about the services they provide.

Attitude to Change

A common theory found in contemporary Human Resource literature suggests that individuals employed by the same organisation for many years may develop a kind of apathy toward their job which can manifest as resistance to change. This had never been the case with employees of the Northern Areas Women's Shelter and was certainly not the case now. The staff team was an extraordinarily enthusiastic, stable and cohesive unit.

Although the majority had been with the organisation for more than 14 years when I took over as Administrator, all were willing to consider change. They were ready to try something new. This willingness to embrace change is reflected in their list of “firsts” acknowledged above.

Right Place

While we were still considering possible strategies for making our services more accessible to clients, official approval was received for a major upgrade of the shelter. The proposed plan was to transform the dated communal-style shelter into a modern cluster-style complex, providing each client and her children with their own self-contained unit. Preliminary discussions began with the SA Housing Trust (SAHT) in early 1997.

Redeveloping the site to accommodate up to eight independent fully self-contained units, plus office space for 9 staff, required more land. We were given two options. Either identify a suitable site elsewhere or take over the lease of four existing public housing properties in the street behind the shelter. After considerable deliberation we decided to remain where we were. The location was convenient. It was within easy walking distance of shops, doctors and a major public hospital and, after 20 years at this location, the neighbours were used to us. The properties behind the shelter could be demolished and rebuilt, or upgraded to suit our needs. With the rear fences removed and some landscaping work, the large back yards between the existing shelter and the other properties would also provide an ideal common area for children to play and women to socialise. Moving elsewhere would have involved gaining council approval and the acceptance of a new and different group of local residents. Quite simply, it would be too hard.

Remaining where we were however meant a long delay while the SAHT negotiated the relocation of the current tenants in the four properties behind us. Building work could not commence until all four properties had to be acquired. This happened gradually over many months. In the meantime, as we were allocated each property one at a time, we were paying rent for these empty houses. So, while we waited, we began thinking about possible uses for these houses.

Someone suggested using them for outreach client interviews. The Children’s worker believed they would provide a more appropriate environment for one-on-one counselling with children and their mothers than

was currently available in the open-plan Children's Playroom. Someone else suggested using them to interview women referred to us from the Magistrates Court for Counsellor's Reports. This was something we had been struggling with for some time. Women attending the shelter for Counsellor's Reports were frequently driven to their appointment by their partners. Having the perpetrator sitting in the car outside the shelter was not an ideal situation!

Access to space away from the shelter provided endless possibilities. The more we thought about it, the more ideas we came up with. The most important benefit of course was that whatever we decided to do with the properties, their isolation from the shelter meant the safety of clients and the location of the shelter would not be compromised.

Right Time

The opportunity and resources necessary to enable us to establish the new model came about as a direct result of a statewide restructure of SAAP funded women's domestic violence services. The South Australian Government commissioned a review of services in 1996 and the final report and recommendations were released in late January 1997. The recommendations included the regionalisation of women's domestic violence services in South Australia and their expansion to include non-accommodation based "outreach" services for women and their children not wanting or needing crisis or emergency accommodation.

For two metropolitan shelters, regionalisation necessitated the amalgamation of their previously autonomous organisations. For two other shelters, unable to reach agreement about amalgamation, it meant entering into a competitive tendering process. It was a difficult time for the sector, with the funding body setting a tight time frame of 8 weeks to prepare and lodge proposals and a delay of some 9 months before the results were announced.

In the submission lodged by the Northern Areas Women's Shelter, we put forward a proposal that we believed would simultaneously address the two major areas of concern we had identified during the previous twelve months. We proposed relocating our entire staff team to a Service and Administration Centre in a shop-front style facility, where the services we offer would be more visible and more accessible and where we could confidently provide a range of programs without compromising the security of the shelter or shelter clients.

Although this represented a major shift in the nature of service delivery in South Australia, our proposal was successful. And, probably *because* of the new and different approach we had proposed, generous SAAP funding was made available to establish the new service.

In May 1999 the Northern Domestic Violence Service opened its doors to the public.

Advantages of the Model

Although it is still early days, we can confidently say that “going public” has proven highly successful for the Northern Domestic Violence Service’s clients and staff. Determining the long-term implications for other Women’s Domestic Violence Services remains a matter of time. We are the only service in South Australia operating this way and have been doing so for less than three years. Without the resources to fund a major advertising campaign, it takes time for the general community to become aware of new services. Nevertheless the advantages of the model are already evident:

1. Advantages For Clients

The main advantages for clients have been the very things we wanted to achieve by having a public presence:

Increased Awareness & Improved Accessibility

Raising awareness of the existence and nature of services benefits not only potential clients, but also concerned friends or family members. It also provides an identifiable point of referral for a range of community-based professionals, including police, doctors, teachers and hospital staff, who may know of or suspect violence in a relationship.

Our presence in the community has raised awareness of the services available. In addition to pre-arranged duty appointments, we are now currently responding to between 12 to 15 “walk in” requests a month for information, advice or assistance. In the past 12 months there has been a marked increase in the number of walk-ins involving women and children needing to escape a violent situation immediately. They manage to get away from the house while the perpetrator is out and present at reception with nothing but the clothes they are wearing.

Our experience shows that between a third and a half of women presenting for information or advice, subsequently re-present for practical assistance. It may be weeks or even months later. Data to substantiate this is difficult to collect however because we do not want to make women “jump through hoops” in order to provide us with the level of information necessary to accurately verify our figures. Although we keep statistics about the number of “casual clients” receiving a service, we do not record of their names. Walk-in customers may present anonymously if they prefer. Their needs are assessed on an individual basis and in some circumstances the duty worker may decide it would be inappropriate to ask for more information than the woman gives voluntarily. In the case of re-presenting walk in customers we are often forced to rely heavily on the memory of staff. It takes enormous courage for women to come forward and, having got them here, we don't want to scare them off with our statistical data requirements!

Interestingly, we are also responding to up to 4 walk in requests a month from men. Those requesting information to assist female family members or friends are dealt with over the counter by the duty worker. Men presenting as “victims” or perpetrators of domestic violence are advised that we are funded to provide direct services to women only, and politely referred to appropriate services elsewhere.

Public Image - Debunking the Myths

We wanted to help address many of the commonly held popular misconceptions about shelters and shelter staff that have often discouraged or deterred potential first-time users. By offering a service that enables women to walk in off the street, discuss their situation, meet staff and find out what we have to offer *before* making any critical decisions, we are convinced we have helped allay many of the fears of would-be service users. The growing number of walk-ins who later return as clients attests to the success of the model in addressing the image problem shelters and shelter staff had previously.

Challenging the Secrecy

By establishing a presence in the community we are making a public statement about being a legitimate service with a legitimate role. We are telling women “there is an alternative to living with violence”.

We believe that if women's domestic violence services continue to maintain a veil of secrecy about their existence and the nature of their work, they run the risk of inadvertently colluding to keep domestic violence a "private" or "personal" matter. This only reinforces victim's feelings of isolation, embarrassment, shame, betrayal, hopelessness and despair.

Improved Client Safety

The decision to move off-site presented problems with regard to providing a staff presence at the cluster complex. To avoid splitting the staff team, we decided not to proceed with the original cluster concept. Instead, the shelter building was gutted and rebuilt into three separate self-contained units. The houses in the street behind were upgraded, but the fences left intact. A number of additional houses located within a five-kilometre radius of the office were acquired, bringing to 21 the total number of properties in our Emergency Accommodation Program.

This decentralisation of our accommodation has resulted in improved client safety within the Emergency Accommodation Program. Most workers were already aware that someone determined to find the shelter need only ask a local taxi driver. Disbursing the houses across the local area has meant that even if the location of one property becomes known to a perpetrator, the location of the others remains confidential.

2. Advantages for Staff

Improved Staff Morale

The new work environment has had a noticeable impact on staff morale. Each worker has her own fully equipped work-station and the office has a bright, modern and open atmosphere with lots of natural light. Although we are already in need of more interview room space, the new office is a far cry from the dark "rabbit-warren" we used to call home, where useable space was at a premium and many facilities, including computers, were shared between workers. After moving into the new office one member of staff even said she now felt her years at university had been worth it because she felt like a real professional - not a residential care attendant.

Reduction in Sick Leave

Staff absenteeism due to illness has reduced significantly since moving from the shelter. Cross-infection due to exposure of staff on daily basis to an ever-changing client population resulted in frequent absences. Colds and flu were the most common illnesses. Staff was also regularly exposed to head lice and scabies, and the shelter would be quarantined and closed on average once a year due to measles, mumps or chickenpox.

Improved Time Management

Workers no longer experience the frequent interruption of clients “wandering” through the office and are able to plan and manage their time and work load more effectively. Although clients still call at the office unexpectedly, client-worker contact is generally pre-arranged.

More Program Area Opportunities

Separating the Service Centre from the accommodation provides opportunities to deliver a range of services and programs not possible in a traditional setting where the location must remain confidential. Opportunities are limited only by the imagination of staff, availability of space and budget limitations. Some programs and services could even become self-funding and provide additional income for the organisation. A few ideas we have considered include an access hand-over service and domestic violence awareness training for staff from other services and agencies.

Disadvantages of the Model

When considering disadvantages of the model it is probably more appropriate to talk about “potential” disadvantages. Provided staff are aware of any potential for disadvantage, measures can usually be taken to avoid or minimise problems.

As with all services, there will never be a “one size fits all”. Because clients are individuals, with different needs and expectations, what suits one may not suite another. Conversely, some aspect of the model may in fact be an advantage to staff but a potential disadvantage to clients.

Client Isolation

The most obvious disadvantage of the model is the potential for clients to feel or become isolated in their own houses. Communal style shelters had their disadvantages, but they had the advantage of providing women with an opportunity to meet others with similar experiences. Friendships and informal support networks often resulted.

The potential for social isolation makes it imperative to “create” opportunities for clients to meet and for staff to encourage and facilitate their participation. We offer a weekly “women’s group” meeting, with child-care provided. Clients from both program areas get together over coffee to share information and talk about their experiences. This open group follows an eight-week program covering issues relevant to women affected by domestic violence. The atmosphere is informal and the program flexible. Friendships frequently develop between participants. At the conclusion of the eight-week program, participants celebrate with a social outing chosen by the women themselves – sometimes a fishing trip or a visit to the movies. Other regular activities to encourage social interaction between clients include “picnics in the park” during school vacations and the annual Christmas Party.

Slower Client Turnover

The model has resulted in a slower turnover of Accommodation Program clients. This is due mainly to (a) the provision of a better standard of accommodation for clients which affords them more privacy and (b) a longer “down time” between tenancies. It takes more time to clean and prepare a three-bedroom house than one room in a shelter! Also, a significant reduction over the past 4 years in the number of public housing stock available in South Australia, together with increasing discrimination against our client group in the private rental market, has made the 6 to 8 week client turn over required by the funding body increasingly difficult to achieve.

Increased Costs

The model is significantly more expensive to provide. In addition to commercial leasing costs for the Service Centre, more vehicles are required and vehicle-operating expenses are higher. Lost rental income can also result when a client needs to be relocated because her partner has found her

and it is considered unsafe to place another client in that house for a week or two.

The style of accommodation itself is also more expensive to provide and maintain. Basically, it costs “an arm and a leg” to provide and maintain 21 fully furnished, fully equipped and fully maintained properties. Costs associated with cleaning, gardening and the replacement of worn, stolen or missing equipment is prohibitive. Finally, an enormous amount of staff time and energy is absorbed managing the properties and making the system work. Sometimes we feel more like commercial property managers than domestic violence service providers!

Workload

Another potential problem with the model is that, having opened your doors to the public, you can't very well shut them again once you've achieved your client quota for the year! There is no way of knowing how many walk-in clients will present in any one year, but we anticipated the number will continue to increase annually. Unfortunately there is no flexibility within our Service Agreement to address this issue. Steadily increasing requests for service have important implications for the number of staff needed to meet the demand, however funding for salaries and operating costs is predetermined under SAAP. At some time in the not too distant future we know we will have to make some important decisions about client waiting lists which, through careful planning, we have so far managed to avoid.

Difficulties Encountered

Turning the vision into reality wasn't all smooth sailing. Forethought and planning did not preclude a number of unanticipated problems. Preliminary planning centred mainly on staff safety at the office. There may even have been a slight but understandable element of paranoia present around worker security, particularly amongst staff who had been secluded at the shelter for many years. Bollards were placed strategically in front of plate glass windows, a high front counter was installed and panic alarms connecting directly to the police were placed under the front counter and at the back door. Personal alarms to be worn around the neck by staff using the outside bathroom were even provided. Any fear or apprehension soon wore off

however and after the first two “uneventful” weeks in the new office staff had to be reminded to close the access door between the reception area and the office!

Systems Development

By far the most time consuming aspect associated with the new model has been the development of systems. Old practices and procedures, appropriate in a shelter setting, had to be reinvented to meet the different needs and requirements of the model. New practices and procedures were continually trialed and evaluated. For a long time it was very much a work in progress – a case of trial and error. Just when we thought we had it right, we would be presented with a new situation, requiring a new response. At a conservative estimate it probably took the best part of two years to get our systems to where they are today, and we are by no means confident we have it right once and for all. Systems are still being reviewed on a regular basis and adjustments made as the need arises.

Planned Approach to Service Delivery

Because of the small size of the team, the model demands a systematic, coordinated and well-planned approach to service delivery. We may be working with women and children in crisis but we cannot afford to operate in crisis mode! Regular Case-Plan Meetings play a vital role in maintaining a planned approach to service delivery. Held weekly, the meetings are attended by all caseworkers and cover issues including discussion of difficult cases, tenancy issues including forthcoming vacancies and new intakes, client allocation, duty roster and worker caseload. Because this is a shop-front type service it is impossible to pre-plan *all* work for the week ahead, but generally the rostered duty worker is able to deal with most “walk in” situations. When more than one walk-in presents at the same time, who ever is available deals with the other.

The Unknown Client

Accepting clients directly into accommodation with limited prior knowledge of their particular situation posed a number of problems in the first year, particularly where drug dependency or mental health issues later became evident. During that period we became so disheartened by the amount of

theft, property damage and unpaid rent that we questioned the wisdom of our earlier decision not to proceed with the cluster units and having some staff on-site. We even considered reverting to a system of accepting clients into the three units at the former shelter site, then moving them to another house after a preliminary assessment period. We were reluctant to do this however as it would mean not only double handling of clients, causing additional stress and disruption, but would also involve the additional expense of double cleaning costs.

With a few unavoidable exceptions, most of these problems have now been largely overcome. A security bond of four weeks rent is obtained from the SA Housing Trust. Rent is collected using Centrelink's "Centrepay" direct debit system and unfortunately, we have had to remove from the houses many easily disposed of items such as microwaves and video players that we had originally hoped would make the lives of women and their children more comfortable.

Men in Houses & Worker Safety

The temptation of occupying a house to herself and no longer being subjected to the close scrutiny of staff, has resulted in some clients breaching their Conditions of Tenancy by allowing men into the property. The man involved may be the client's original partner, or someone new. Suspicions may be aroused by a client's behaviour – her reluctance to let workers into the house, failure to keep appointments or answer the door when her worker knows she is home, or by neighbours letting us know a man has been seen at the property. So common was the incidence of men hiding in the roof that we have now resorted to padlocking the "man holes" in the ceiling from the inside.

When clients let men into the houses they are placing themselves and our staff at great risk. Any member of staff who suspects a man might be present advises the Senior Worker and two staff attend at the property. Police have often been called to remove the man, but he has usually disappeared by the time police arrive.

Clients breaching their tenancy agreement in this way are advised their behaviour has jeopardised their own safety and the safety of future clients. Under the new model we have tried to keep rules and regulations to a minimum and encourage clients to treat this as their home, but this is one of

the few rules we enforce automatically and consistently without leave to appeal. Because of this, workers ensure that every new client is aware of and clearly understand what will happen if this rule is broken.

We have no option but terminate the tenancy and arrange an appropriate referral elsewhere. As a women's emergency accommodation service we are not in the business of "evicting" women already homeless due to domestic violence and turning them out onto the street. A referral is made to the Domestic Violence Crisis Service (DVCS), the gateway to the shelter system in South Australia. The reason for the referral is discussed with DVCS and the woman may be transferred to another shelter or, if she wants to remain with her partner, referred to a family shelter.

Telephones

Another major problem for some time involved finding the best way of providing clients with access to phones in their houses. Initially, blue coin-operated phones were installed, but were gradually removed and replaced with regular Telstra handsets because of the high cost of frequent repairs or replacement caused by clients trying to steal coins. Now we cover the cost of service and equipment, and issue each new accommodation client with a "Phone Away" card to the value of \$10 to make outgoing calls. Access to enable clients to make outgoing calls without the Phone Away card is blocked, except to numbers "keyed in", such as Police, Crisis Care, Centrelink and the Child Support Agency. Clients can still access the emergency 000 number free of charge. When the \$10 credit on the card we have given the client has expired, new cards are purchased at the client's expense from Post Offices or local retailers.

Vehicles

The move from the shelter means all our work is effectively "outreach" work. In addition to the need for more vehicles, outreach work necessitates effective vehicle management system. Garaging of vehicles after hours became a major problem. Under the old model, vehicles had been left at the shelter over night and on weekends. This was not possible at the new location. There is no secure parking available and the neighbourhood has an unfortunate but well-recognised reputation for theft and vandalism. Leaving our vehicles overnight in client's driveways was also not a safe or appropriate

option. There was no choice but adopt a policy of staff garaging vehicles at home, but this too presented problems. For FBT purposes garaging of vehicles at home is considered “private use”, so not all members of staff wanted to participate in the arrangements. Much time was spent devising a workable solution to providing ready access to a vehicle if required by a rostered after-hours or weekend “on call” worker who did not garage a vehicle at home.

Issues to Consider

For any organisation considering this model, our experience has shown there are a number of important issues to consider. This is not a cheap option to establish or maintain. Commercial rent is expensive and will vary considerably depending on town, suburb, city and state. Similarly, the cost of providing and maintaining a number of separate properties is more expensive than a communal or cluster facility with common outside areas.

The location of the actual “Service Centre” is probably the most important and critical issue to the success of this model. It will determine the level of visibility and accessibility of the service. But this should also be balanced against the need for providing some level of client confidentiality. We chose a site located *between* a shopping centre and the local primary school. Both the shopping centre and the school provide clients who may have difficulty getting away on their own with an excuse and/or opportunity to access the service without raising the partner’s suspicion. The location also provides incidental marketing as many women pass our premises daily, either to shop or take their children to school and pick them up later.

Creative use of signage is also important. We were aware some women might feel exposed entering a building with the words “domestic violence service” emblazoned above the door in big letters. We opted instead to have our initials (NDVS) in bold lettering on the outside of the building for ease of identification, but used smaller signage on the windows to display the full name of the service. This appears to have worked. Of clients surveyed, only one has ever reported feeling exposed coming to the centre.

Other issues to consider when deciding on an appropriate site for the Service Centre include:

- Accessibility to public transport, as the majority of clients have no private transport.
- Reasonable proximity to the accommodation. Clients still drop in to the office and tradespeople undertaking repairs or maintenance have to collect keys to our houses by coming to the office. Some tradespeople objected to this initially, but our regular providers have become used to it. There would be strong objection if the office was more than a few kilometres from the houses and staff would be required to waste time waiting at the properties for tradespeople to attend.

Office Security

While we previously operated under a “secrecy means security” model, in reality most of us were aware that the location would be easy enough to find if someone was really determined. Not having a visible presence in the community does not guarantee client or worker safety.

In all probability it is likely that the general public is unaware the Northern Domestic Violence Service is a “Shelter-Gone-Public”. This has certainly been confirmed when workers are discussing accommodation options with walk in clients or women attending for Counsellor’s Reports. Most continue to refuse the shelter option until they are advised we are a shelter and our housing is separate and independent.

Conclusion

The model developed by the Northern Domestic Violence Service provides a different approach to delivering services to women and children affected by domestic violence. In several separate but closely inter-related areas it challenges the prevailing orthodoxy of the shelter/refuge and outreach services currently operating within Australia and possibly overseas.

With a visible presence in the community, the separation of the Service Centre from the accommodation and the decentralisation of accommodation, the model provides a comprehensive and holistic approach to client service delivery.

At first glance it may appear similar to the model operating in Victoria, where support has been separated from accommodation and is provided by different

organisations. The Northern Domestic Violence Service has not separated support from accommodation. We are not a “stand-alone” outreach service, with “connections” to shelter services. We have only *physically* separated our Support Centre from our accommodation. Maintaining control over accommodation is essential to providing a service that is sympathetic, flexible and responsive to the diversity of women's needs.

High security communal or cluster-style accommodation is still considered necessary for women facing considerable safety risks. According to the Home Safe Home Report “the priority for these women and their children was safety in a location unknown to the perpetrator”. But we believe that “high security” does not necessarily need to entail a fortress-like facility where clients are barricaded inside at a single “secret” location. Even in urban areas secrecy about the location of shelters/refuges cannot be guaranteed. “Safety in a location unknown to the perpetrator” is much more likely to be achieved by distributing individual properties across the district.

The model has provided much more than a physical separation of support from accommodation. It has created a psychological separation that encourages and supports women's independence, enhances their privacy, promotes dignity and better prepares them for independent living. While acknowledging and respecting their heterogeneity, the model provides more scope for de-constructing “women as victims who need protection and seclusion, rather than as citizens with rights which can and should be asserted and enforced” (Home Safe Home Report, 2000).

We believe this model provides a viable alternative that addresses many of the recommendations of the “Home Safe Home” report and one that should be seriously considered in the future.

Reference

Commonwealth of Australia. (2000). *Home safe home: The link between domestic & family violence and women's homelessness*. Commonwealth of Australia.