

Keeping Communities Safe – Western NSW Summary Report

Dubbo Regional Forum Wednesday 22 May 2024

This Summary Report outlines the key issues and insights shared by participants at the Dubbo Regional Forum hosted by NCOSS and local hosts Mission Australia Dubbo. We encourage everyone with an interest in service delivery and social issues in Western NSW to read the full report [found here](#).

Key findings

Keeping kids and communities safe and kids out of jail

- Government agencies need to acknowledge the maturity and expertise of the social service sector and the Aboriginal Community Controlled sector and take the lead from communities to build truly community led initiatives. Social services need to be recognised as essential services.
- Deep reform of funding and commissioning processes is needed to put an end to short-term grant programs; excessive pilots and “trailing” of programs when we know what works; inflexible funding arrangements with line-by-line accountabilities preventing a responsive approach based on community need; onerous and unnecessary accountability requirements; competitive funding that disincentivises collaboration; and inadequate funding that puts communities, services and workers at risk.
- Services are keen to see youth programs that work replicated across the state consistently with long term, ongoing funding – and an end to the current scatter gun approach.
- Services need better information flows and more support for interagencies and other networks. First Nations organisations are eager for data sovereignty to be addressed to enable the building of trust in their communities.
- The continual push in the community for punitive approaches to youth crime needs to be addressed strongly with effective public education campaigns.
- Universal screening of all pre-school and school-aged children is needed to establish access to early intervention health services from an early age. We need to ensure these are available in smaller communities and outreach is developed in a targeted and co-ordinated way in collaboration with local communities.
- Urgent and radical reform to the child protection system is needed to stop kids being taken from their families. This should be done in collaboration with groundbreaking Aboriginal Community Controlled organisations leading the transformation of practice in the sector.

Housing and Homelessness

- Place-based approaches work best. We need to make sure we understand housing need better and build homes in places where people want to live; and are connected in with their communities. Large infrastructure projects such as energy or mining are currently implemented without thought to housing, accommodation, and other stressors to local communities.
- Smaller regional towns need appropriate infrastructure for zoning and development (such as levy banks and storm water drains). Appropriate Crown land (surplus to government needs) needs to be identified and released for social and affordable housing developments – this should be a priority.

'Some Councils are very proactive and buying up vacant land for youth and DFV accommodation, and social and affordable housing.'

- Link2Home has become unworkable, and it impacts on service delivery. Staff can wait for up to 3 hours on the line. There are also no or very few Temporary Accommodation providers and a similar lack of crisis accommodation - for example there is no youth refuge in Dubbo – a town of 43,000 people. We need better housing for young people such as Youth Foyers and other models of supported long term accommodation (Youth Foyers not always appropriate for kids with complex needs).
- Women and children in DFV need a broader range of housing assistance – in small communities the safe houses are not safe because everyone knows where they are. Refuges won't take families with older boys or larger families.

'Women in safe houses are taken off the priority list because they are considered "housed"!'

- The sector is looking at different ways of working – for example, there are some really good developments with Aboriginal Community Housing Providers – this sector should be supported more to grow.
- Tenancy advice services like Murra Mia are vital. They need more resources and better integration across the housing system.

Workforce issues in the sector

- Longer term funding is critical for building up a skilled workforce. The social services sector should be seen as an essential service. Providers are employers and important to community wellbeing and economies.
- Funding needs to be realistic and cover the real cost of service provision. Administration, rent and utility and other costs are increasing but funding is not. There are much higher costs in regional areas due to outreach, time spent on travel, safe travel requirements, mobile coverage.

'Funding changes bring about restructures which then results in staff loss and loss of trust. Relationship is everything in this area.'

- Funding contracts must stop setting pay rates and qualification levels. Services are unable to recruit the staff they know will work best – there needs to be more trust in services and their knowledge, sound judgement, and experience.
- Wages are funded at a level below similar government agency roles. Lack of regular commitment to funding indexation means hours are cut as wages increase. Many workers love their work but just can't afford to stay.
- ACCOs are employing local Aboriginal people to work with Aboriginal people, for Aboriginal people.

'We share knowledge and build each other up.'

- Barriers to First Nations employment need to be addressed:
 - Police checks.
 - Stress of walking in both worlds.
 - Stigma of belonging to a particular community or family group.
 - Lack of supports to deal with drug and alcohol issues.
 - Lack of mental health supports.
 - Lack of appropriate housing.
- Regional NGO workforce development planning needs to be a priority including:
 - Investing in education – TAFE/Uni need to be affordable and suitable.
 - Consideration given to demographics and local context, expertise, culture and staffing.
- There is an unnecessary waste of staff hours on reporting – DEX and other reporting systems should be more compatible, streamlined, and user friendly. Services would like to see an end to the misapplication of outcomes measurement in the sector.

For more information

For more information about this summary report please contact:

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