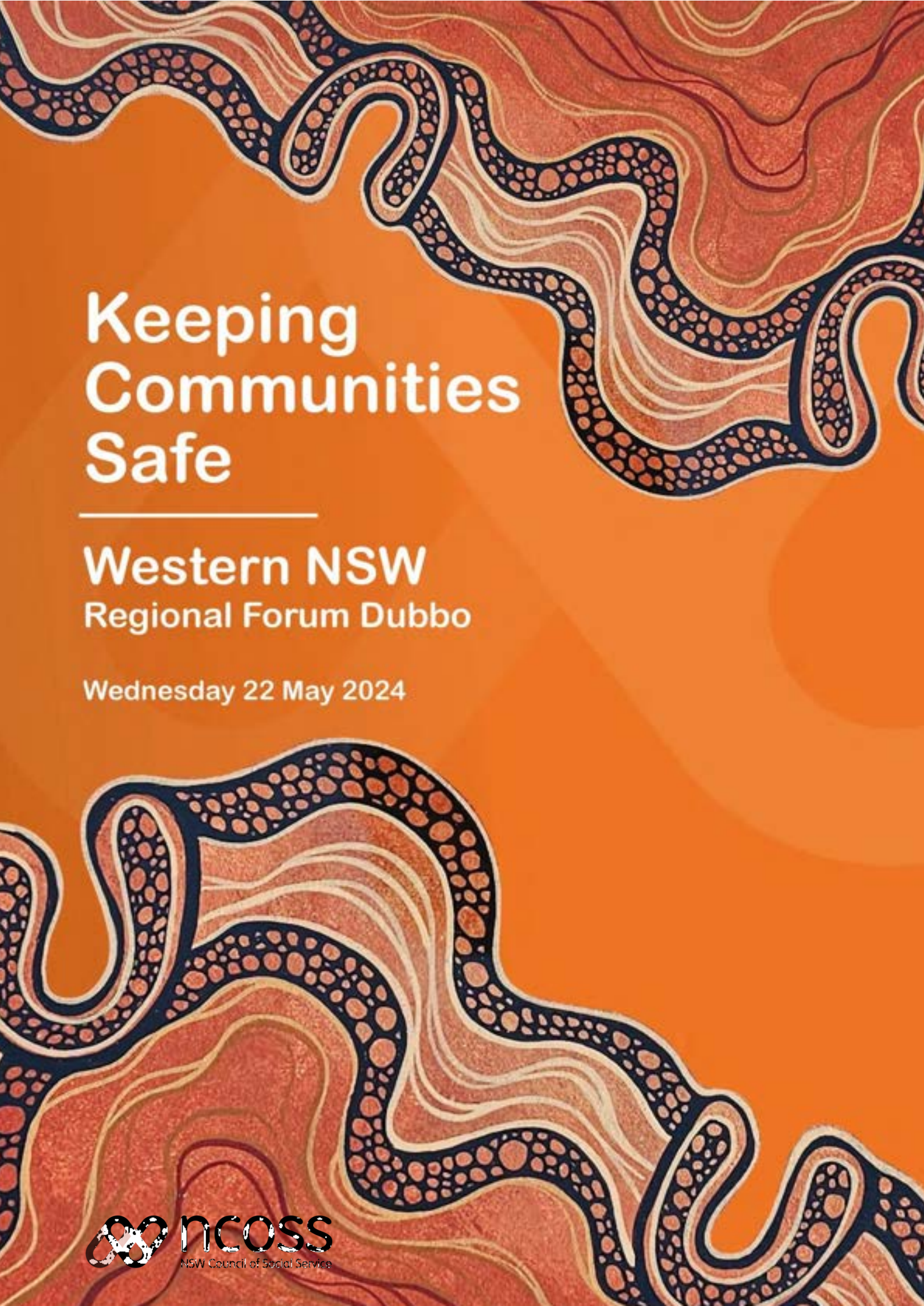




Keeping Communities Safe

Western NSW
Regional Forum Dubbo

Wednesday 22 May 2024

About NCOSS

NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS) is the peak body for non-government organisations in the health and community services sector in NSW. NCOSS works to progress social justice and shape positive change toward a NSW free from inequality and disadvantage. We are an independent voice advocating for the wellbeing of NSW communities. At NCOSS, we believe that a diverse, well-resourced and knowledgeable social service sector is fundamental to reducing economic and social inequality.

Acknowledgement of Country

NCOSS respectfully acknowledges the sovereign Custodians of Gadigal Country and pay our respects to Elders, past, present and emerging. We acknowledge the rich cultures, customs and continued survival of First Nations peoples on Gadigal Country, and on the many diverse First Nations lands and waters across NSW.

We acknowledge the spirit of the Uluru Statement from the Heart and accept the invitation to walk with First Nations peoples in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.



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About the Artwork – Muddy Waters

“Some of my best memories as a kid were spent down by the river with family, friends, and even by myself. There’s something about being close to that muddy water that clears my mind and puts me at ease. The sound of the flowing river, the feel of the cool water, and the simple joy of being in nature always brought a sense of calm and happiness. Whether it was splashing around, skipping stones, or just sitting on the riverbank watching the water flow by, those moments are some of the most cherished from my childhood. The river was more than just a place; it was a sanctuary where I could escape, reflect, and find peace.”

Hayden Wood, Artist

About the Artist – Hayden Wood

Hayden Wood is a proud Gamilaraay man from a small town called Goodooga on Yuwaalaay/Euhalayi Nation Country. His life journey has seen him live on his Ancestral Homelands and now on Wiradjuri country. The Bokhara is the river where Hayden is connected to and is an integral part of his cultural education. It was on the banks of the Bokhara his family and Language Group transferred him knowledge and he feels innately connected to its lesson. Hayden is a narrator through optic, and he practices this and the lessons learnt each day. His dedication to teaching the next generation to practice and preserve this ancient practice is known across Clan groups. Hayden uses his role to support youth development and to transfer the therapeutic benefits that narration through optic provides in a contemporary time. Supporting the next generation, whilst continually evolving his own, to transfer emotion, lesson, and story in optic. More of Hayden’s work can be viewed at <https://www.facebook.com/Bokharadreaming/>



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Background to this Report

NCOSS Regional Members Meetings

As a statewide peak, NCOSS engages with its regional members through Regional Members Meetings. Regional Members Meetings are held 3 to 4 times a year to provide a dynamic platform for conversation and connection, highlighting the experience of disadvantage and the unique challenges faced by people living outside metropolitan Sydney.

Regional Members Meetings provide opportunities:

- to connect with politicians, decision-makers and others to leverage and influence their impact on regional issues
- to inform the NCOSS policy and advocacy agenda from a regional perspective
- for networking, skill-building, information-sharing and partnerships
- to put a spotlight on growing inequalities and issues for diverse regional communities
- to participate in consultations and important sector briefings.

During the early years of the COVID-19 pandemic, these meetings were held online. At a meeting in August in 2023 it was suggested by a member that it was time to start getting back out to regional and rural NSW for face-to-face discussions.

As a result, NCOSS committed to continuing the online Regional Members Meetings and adding two in-person Regional Forums each year. The first meeting was held in Taree, on the NSW Mid North Coast in November 2023. For the meeting in May 2024, we worked with the Regional Members meeting to decide on the next location. The Central West region was chosen, and Mission Australia Dubbo (MA) put up their hand to work with us as the local host.

NCOSS and Local Host Working Together

An informal working group comprising Dale Towns (Area Manager, MA) Megan Boshell (Area Manager, MA) Tanya Molloy (Program Manager, MA), Jess Phelps (Program Manager, MA) Seamus Gibbs (MA) and Francesca Cathie (NCOSS Policy Lead) was set up to discuss local issues and develop an agenda for the meeting.

The working group identified an overarching theme of community safety for the forum including:

- keeping communities safe and kids out of jail
- keeping communities housed
- social sector worker shortages impacting service provision.

Rather than limiting the Forum to NCOSS members, the forum engaged with the broader service sector and extended the invitation to all services, local Councils, and government agencies from the Central West including Bourke, Brewarrina, Cobar, Condobolin, Coonabarabran, Coonamble, Dubbo, Forbes, Gilgandra, Narromine, Nyngan, Parkes, Walgett, and Wellington.





From left to right: David Gbogbo NCOSS, Jess Phelps MA, Megan Boshell MA, Francesca Cathie NCOSS, Tanya Molloy MA, Ben McAlpine NCOSS
In front: Dale Towns MA, Neha Shah NCOSS

Keeping Communities Safe – Western NSW

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the Dubbo Forum. It provides a brief summary of the presentations and captures the participant discussions in full.¹ It identifies the key issues and challenges raised by participants in providing place-based programs, services, and essential social infrastructure to people experiencing inequality, poverty and disadvantage in regional communities. NCOSS uses the findings to inform our policy positions and recommendations to government, and encourages the sector to use them too.

We will use the report in our advocacy to Government officials and elected representatives, so that they can better understand the issues being faced in the Central West and develop sound policy based on research, lived experience, and sector expertise.

¹ Discussions were documented by scribes, summarised and where necessary paraphrased for readability by NCOSS. All effort was made to check with scribes where transcripts were unclear.

Local Host

The Dubbo Forum could not have been delivered without the support of the local host – Mission Australia Dubbo. NCOSS extends its immense gratitude to Mission and, in particular, Dale Towns, Megan Boshell, Tanya Molloy, Jess Phelps and Seamus Gibbs.

Mission Australia Dubbo

Mission Australia is a leading provider of multiple services across the Western and Far West NSW Region, currently delivering programs across a range of services including children and families, mental health, alcohol and other drugs, youth engagement, domestic & family violence, men's behaviour change, education and training and housing and homelessness.

We strengthen families, empower youth, strive to reduce homelessness, advocate for respectful relationships and stand up for people in need. Working with Government, the corporate sector and the wider community, we are determined to support our clients, children and families to enable them to thrive & build an optimistic outlook for our communities.





Keeping Communities Safe

**Western NSW
Regional Forum Dubbo**

Wednesday 22 May 2024

Participants

The forum was held on Wednesday 22 May at the Rhino Lodge in Dubbo, from 10am to 3.30pm. It was chaired by Ben McAlpine Director, Policy and Advocacy, NCOSS. Also attending from NCOSS were Francesca Cathie - Policy Lead, Neha Shah - Policy Lead, Justine Lee – Policy Officer and David Gbobo – Business Support Lead.

Altogether there were 94 people in the room from 46 organisations including:

- Aboriginal Housing Office
- ACHIA NSW
- Association of Children's Welfare Agencies
- Australian Red Cross
- BaptistCare HopeStreet
- Barnardos Australia
- Birribee Housing
- CatholicCare Wilcannia-Forbes
- Central West Family Support Group Inc
- CHIANSW
- Coolah Central School
- NSW Department of Communities and Justice
- Disability Advocacy NSW
- Dubbo Regional Council
- First Peoples Disability Network
- Gilgandra Shire Council
- Homelessness NSW
- Homes NSW
- Housing Plus
- Justice Reform Initiative
- MacKillop Family Services
- Maranguka Limited
- Marathon Health
- Mary MacKillop Today
- Mission Australia
- Multicultural NSW
- Murra Mia Tenant Advice & Advocacy Service - Western
- My Best Life Australia
- National Association for Loss and Grief
- Nationals, Dubbo
- NCOSS
- Neighbourhood Central Family Support
- Office of Roy Butler, Independent, Barwon
- Orana Support Service
- REDIE (Regional Enterprise Development Institute)
- NSW Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development
- Services Australia
- Shelter NSW
- SHINE for Kids
- Synapse
- TAFE
- Uniting
- Warrumbungle Shire Council
- Western NSW Primary Health Network
- WINS Community Centre
- Youth Action NSW



Welcome to Country

The Welcome to Country was given by Aunty Sandra from the Dhubu-Gu Local Aboriginal Land Council.



Introduction from the Hosts

NCOSS - Ben McAlpine

- Second Regional Forum NCOSS has held since the beginning of the pandemic, and the first time that NCOSS has been in Dubbo since that time. It is critical that NCOSS maintains strong relationships with local communities, and we see today as great opportunity to start rebuilding them.
- Apologies from our new CEO, Cara Varian, who is unable to be here today due to illness; I know she was looking forward to being here. She sends her sincere regrets and looks forward to visiting soon.

- NCOSS is an independent voice for people experiencing disadvantage and the organisations that support them. We work with our members across the entirety of the social service sector, including housing, family support, mental health, neighbourhood centres, and domestic and family violence.
- The NCOSS First Nations Partners and Advisors Group guides us in our efforts to be an effective ally for First Nations peoples, and is headed by Uncle Boe Rambaldini, Bundjalung Elder and Heart Research Institute Engagement Lead; and Belinda Field, Wiradjuri woman and CEO of Eleanor Duncan Aboriginal Services. We currently have a focus on advocating for the growth of the Aboriginal Community Controlled sector, supporting the consultation process on treaty in NSW, as well as ongoing advocacy for the 6,600 Aboriginal children that are separated from their families in NSW.
- Two important issues also on our radar – firstly Domestic and Family Violence – following a number of highly publicised events, the NSW Government announced a \$230 million funding package. This includes the Staying Home Leaving Violence program, as well as continued funding for specialist workers for children and young people. We echo the views of the peak body, DVNSW - this is a positive first step, but more is needed. That includes greater investment in housing and homelessness services, additional funding for existing domestic and family violence refuges to ensure that no victim-survivors are turned away, and more transitional housing.

“ I would like to acknowledge that we are on the lands of the Tubba- gah people of the Wiradjuri Nation and give my thanks and respects to Aunty Sandra for her warm welcome, and to her fellow Elders for looking after the beautiful lands and waterways of the three rivers...”

- Secondly, on the challenges around community safety, which is a key topic for the day. We need communities and kids to be safe; this requires a holistic approach, working with communities. NCOS is a member of the Raise the Age Campaign in NSW, and we support their calls for:
 - Significant investment in essential, universal services that prevent crime, such as public health, public education from early childhood and beyond, and community-based child, youth and family services.
 - Funding for targeted services that help kids learn to be accountable, and do better, when they go off track.
 - Far greater resourcing of Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations
 - Follow the evidence when it comes to children and contact with the police and justice system, by raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility from 10 to at least 14 without exception.
- The purpose of today's meeting is connection and learning – capturing the deep local insights you have about the challenges facing your communities and highlighting practices that work on the ground, and understanding what is needed to support your community. We are recording the speeches, and documenting the meeting to ensure that we are able to capture this critical information in a report which will be circulated to you all. It will inform our recommendations and our advocacy to the NSW government in general, but more immediately for the submission to the NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into Community Safety in Regional and Rural Communities due next week.



Mission Australia - Dale Towns

- The conversation for today is focusing on how we as a service sector can support to reduce risks within our regional communities in Western NSW. We know that in order to do this we need a well-supported social services sector with programs available to all who need them, when they need them. Issues with access and demand tells us we need adequate infrastructure within our region to support a stretched & over-burdened homelessness & housing system.
- When we read that “Aboriginal people make up 31% of adult prison populations in NSW” & that “Two- thirds (66.4%) of the youth detention population is now made up of Aboriginal young people, which is also a new record in NSW” we know that investment into Early Intervention is pivotal to changing this narrative.
- I was at forum last week where DJC were presenting and talking about bringing new providers into the Early Intervention space and into our regions - however, DCJ are not committing any new funding within this space – they are manoeuvring funds around a chess board to create the illusion that they are doing something to address the lack of Early Intervention focused programs.
- On leaving the forum I felt quite defeated, we know Early Intervention is an area that is needing a boost, it is one of the most underfunded program areas in our service system. If we want to tackle & prevent problems from occurring or escalating , then FUND the sector appropriately.
- **Find us the Funding** – to properly build the capacity of new providers in our space, stop trying to fund these providers on the smell of an oily rag.
- **Find us the Funding** – to ensure that ALL of our communities in the region have adequate access to program supports, ensuring a commitment to our smaller towns within (each) region.
- **Find us the Funding** – So those children, young people and families get the support they need before their issues escalate & their complexities grow.

“Stop telling us there is no new funding, because we know that you know where to find it when you are pushed, whether it be a pandemic, a flood, a fire or a tragic event in a community.”

- If we turn our minds now to the homelessness and Housing crisis that is affecting each of our communities right now, I read the other day that there has been a 26% increase in people seeking our help for homelessness, and a 50% increase in people who are actually homeless when they seek support. The sad thing is that staff at the frontline cannot help people into housing because there simply isn't any.

- A lot of the communities we service don't have access to crisis accommodation or transitional accommodation, there are no link2home providers and for those communities who are privileged enough to have access to these, they are often full. Families and individuals are living for months in inadequate situations, some in cars, some in motels when they are available, some in tents in parks and backyards, some in overcrowded housing (and often being in overcrowding housing isn't even classed as being homeless), our communities are suffering with the inadequate commitment the government has to building infrastructure within our communities.
- Instead, they also created an illusion that they were doing something, this time it was housing assets that were maneuvered around the chess board with social housing being re-allocated for Housing First, whilst the opportunity to provide wrap around supports for our most vulnerable homeless clients was welcomed, we cannot dispute that our communities in Regional NSW need more assets and access to more housing so that families can stay safe, have a sense of belonging & remain in their communities.
- **Build us the Houses** – so that people, have a safe, stable home that they can afford.
- **Build us the Houses** – so cost-intensive crisis responses can be a thing of the past & the need for these interventions diminishes & is redirected to Early Intervention.
- **Build us the Houses** – so that our smaller communities have the capacity to house and keep our families on Country.
- **Build us the Houses** – so that CHP in the Region can increase their capital & build their capacity to continue to have a positive impact on their tenants & communities.
- The last thing I will touch on today is the Workforce issues in the social service sector within our Region. We know that there is an increased demand for employees within our sector, we also know the challenges we have with attracting, training and retaining skilled staff within our communities.
- It is imperative that as a service sector we build the capacity of our local community members including our young people, so that they can fill the shortfalls that we are having (in the sector) and so they can develop their skills, knowledge and resources in order to reach their full potential. If we provide opportunities for growth our people will be empowered, they will remain in our communities and will become the future leaders within our sector.



Keeping kids and communities safe and kids out of jail

Dr Mindy Sotiri – Executive Director, Justice Reform Initiative

Key Points

- Australia is good at building prisons. In NSW, it costs one million dollars per annum per child to keep them locked up.
- The Justice Reform Initiative has 4 strategies for addressing the issues of incarceration for adults and young people:
 - Political advocacy
 - Public awareness/speaking
 - Media awareness
 - Sector consultation – over 180 organisations/individuals are signed up and onboard.
- JRI's aim is to reduce the number of people in prison by 50%. Australia is far behind the rest of the world in addressing the criminal justice issue.
- We need to build the evidence base. The prison system has been a failure. If not the police and/or prison, what is the solution? There are many effective early intervention programs - more information is available on the [JRI website](#). We know which programs work yet funding is very poor.
- There is no one single reform fix. JRI outlines 4 key areas for reform:
 1. Community sector is the critical piece of the reform. Increased and coordinated resourcing – family, cultural, and mental health services and supports.
 2. We need to get bolder about asking for funding and change the policy settings around where funding is directed including \$300M - \$400M for a breaking the cycle fund.
 3. And we need to bring significant change to the justice system – change to policing and to courts, especially for children. We need to acknowledge how harmful it is for children and young people to be in the court and prison system.
 - 88% of children in Australia in the criminal justice system are on remand before they reach the court. We need a different way to deal with this.
 - Keep the children out of the justice system by utilising and funding other supports.
 4. Legislative reform to change the minimum age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 14.



EXTRACT FROM

Justice Reform Initiative NSW Budget Submission December 2023



Programs that work²

- Early intervention and prevention programs that reduce crime at a population level – in some places by as much as 31%:
 - reduce offending among at-risk populations by 50%
 - significantly improve other health and wellbeing outcomes in children and families and result in significant cost savings including those resulting from reduced criminal justice system contact over time.
- First Nations place-based approaches that have resulted in significant reductions in crime, criminal justice system contact, youth justice contact and significant cost savings, as well as improvements in a range of cultural, social, health and wellbeing measures.
- Bail support programs that significantly reduce reoffending (by 33%), increase compliance with bail conditions (by 95%), improve a range of other social and health wellbeing measures relevant to the drivers of criminal justice system contact and achieve cost savings when compared to an absence of bail support.
- Post-release and diversionary community-led programs that have resulted in dramatic decreases in recidivism, including:
 - Intensive post-release support programs focusing on people experiencing problematic alcohol and other drug use and other complex needs (483 participants) have achieved reductions in custody days (by 65.8%), reductions in new custody episodes (by 62.6%) and reductions in proven offences (62.1%) measured two years post-referral.
 - A First Nations-led post-release service has achieved recidivism rates of 4.1% (compared to 57.3% for a comparable cohort).
 - A place-based, intensive support service for children at risk of criminal justice system involvement has dramatically increased the number of children engaging with education and/or employment (85%) and has led to significant reductions in crime (35%) in the surrounding community.

2. pp 5 - 7 https://assets.nationbuilder.com/justicereforminitiative/pages/335/attachments/original/1717567842/NSW_2023_BUDGET_SUBMISSION_TREASURER_57_.pdf?1717567842 viewed 17 July 2024.

- Best Practice in policing and alternative first-responder models that have reduced criminal justice system involvement and lessen the likelihood of arrest by 58%, halve the rate of crime and justice system involvement, significantly reduce levels of specific crime, improve health and wellbeing (especially for people with mental health conditions) and address the social drivers of incarceration while avoiding contact with police.
- Alternative and specialist court processes that reduce contact with the justice system including:
 - In-court diversionary programs reduce reoffending, increase health and wellbeing and address the drivers of incarceration.
 - Those who have their matter dealt with in a community and neighbourhood justice court have reoffending rates that are 25% lower than those whose matters are heard in mainstream courts.
 - Restorative justice processes significantly reduce the likelihood of reoffending, work to support people to connect with services and programs in the community (as well as provide support to victims of crime) and are extraordinarily cost-effective.
 - Drug courts reduce the likelihood of reoffending and improve access to alcohol and other drug treatment.
 - Mental health courts reduce reoffending and facilitate access to mental health treatment as well as improve other health and wellbeing measures.
 - First Nations courts reduce reoffending, empower First Nations communities, increase the likelihood of court attendance, and improve access to other supports and services.
- Alternative detention models that have extraordinarily low rates of recidivism including:
 - International therapeutic residential models for children (outside of detention centre settings) result in recidivism rates as low as 13.6%.
 - Rehabilitation and therapeutic incarceration models with a focus on alcohol and other drug treatment have recidivism rates as low as 2%.



Alister Ferguson - Executive Director & Founder, Maranguka,

Key Points

- What is happening in the criminal justice system for Aboriginal people is the result of the last 250 years.
- Maranguka means 'caring for others' in Ngemba language. It is guided by the Bourke Tribal Council in partnership with Just Re-invest NSW. We are now celebrating 10 years of its work.
- It was quite frustrating at the beginning of the journey but it took a comprehensive and innovative approach to strive for better outcomes for families, young people and children. We established a governance ecosystem in Bourke by bringing together all the decision makers (including Australian corporations). We established some principles for working together – it took 16 months to get the language right. At times it was like herding cats or mustering kangaroos!
- We undertook a rigorous process of mapping local and external supports in the community. We are also looking at investment mapping – to identify how much money is coming into the community. It is still a work in progress.
- The project was co-designed with shared decision making and cultural governance principles. From the outset better collaboration and coordination was a critical aim. The program is community lead, providing cradle to grave support. We know that punitive measures don't work. Young people are still coming back (from incarceration) to an environment that lacks support. Steps are being taken to implement more responsive, not reactive, approaches.
- There are three key working groups:
 - Children and parents
 - Men - Women recommended men be invited back to the discussion table.
 - Young people. We identified that the work had to look at families and work with them to bring about change. There were around 10 families in Bourke who presented with complex needs so we started working with them as families rather than working with family members as individuals. We have brought the number of people needing support right down through that changed approach.³
- At the core of the community's work is keeping the impacts of intergenerational trauma, dispossession and colonisation front and centre.⁴

3 Maranguka won a gold award in the community-led category of the 2023 Australian Crime and Violence Prevention Awards (ACVPAs) "Maranguka- ka...(not only) significantly reduced youth crime and the associated response costs but improved the outcomes for all participants. The increased education programs and school completion rates are outstanding" Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) Deputy Director Dr Rick Brown. Viewed 30 July 2024 <https://www.aic.gov.au/media-centre/news/maranguka-youth-support-model>

4 For more about Maranguka see their upcoming website at <https://maranguka.org.au/>.





Megan Boshell - Area Manager, Mission Australia

Key Points

- Western NSW has six of the regions that have the highest rate of domestic violence in the state.
- Safe Me is a targeted, 12 week early intervention program provided by Mission Australia for young males aged 13-18 who use violence in the household towards female partners or family members. Also, behaviour directed at female school staff or students.
- The driver for young people accessing the Safe Me program is domestic violence. The DV behaviours are gendered with young men aged 15, 16 and 17 practising DV. They have witnessed and are victims of DV themselves.
- If there were early intervention programs for young men at risk of committing DV, the statistics may be different. For example, young men may not change their behaviour after participating in short term programs such as the RAGE program. They need something more.
- ANROWS research and practice wisdom informed the development of Safe Me. Experienced practitioners built the program in partnership with a consultancy firm.
- The program applies a Risk Needs Responsivity framework to program delivery to ensure young people have the best opportunity to engage. The aim is to explicitly reduce the continuation and escalation of DV behaviours.
- The program comprises a number of sessions, with 1 hour sessions with workbooks. Topics include exploring values, removing barriers, protective factors and can be delivered in a range of settings but needs to be somewhere the young person feels safe and able to engage.
- Young people do not have to be involved in the justice system to be eligible to participate but need to want to engage and acknowledge concerns around behaviour. Being clients of Mission Australia provides a very sound foundation for ongoing casework support.
- Next steps include evaluating the program and securing more funding to roll it out more widely.

Questions and comments from the floor

According to UK research, every dollar spent on early intervention saves 10. Would this be something to put forward to the government?

Mindy Sotiri: Yes – the economic benefit seems to a good approach for the government and the public. JRI conducted market research, which showed that vast majority of people were not really concerned about the human rights issues. They were more concerned about the cost and believed that policing and prison reduced crime.

How do the young men get involved in Safe Me program?

Megan Boshell: Participants join via internal and external referrals. Participation is optional, and some young men show some reluctance about engaging but MA provides a non judgemental process and environment (so that they stay engaged).

How can Safe Me be introduced in rural and regional communities?

Megan Boshell: Very happy to discuss with anyone about setting up the program via partnership.

What advice do you have for advocating to the AG or the Justice Ministers?

Alister Ferguson: Money is not really the problem, it is the coordination, goodwill and contribution from the government, corporate and philanthropic supports that makes the difference. KPMG conducted an economic modelling which showed the program saved \$3.1M. That was the turning point to prove to the government that it can be done. Success requires the right mix of funding and community.





Discussion 1:

Keeping kids and communities safe and kids out of jail

From our discussions in Dubbo it is clear that communities and the services that work with them are working hard to support young people and keep their communities safe, that diversionary programs work, and that local services know what their communities need. In the current heated political climate politicians seem unable to answer fears and concerns coming from local communities with accurate information about what is happening on the ground to keep them safe, and commit to what we know works.

For First Nations communities the issue is even more dire - First Nations children aged 10 to 17 are about 24 times more likely to be in detention in Australia than other young people.⁵ There is no justice in our “justice” system for Aboriginal kids in NSW. The recent changes to bail laws were an example of a government pandering to community fears instead of building on the good work being done in and by communities. We urge the government to build on this work and get the settings right to keep kids out of jail and communities safe.

“ We know of one young Aboriginal boy who was remanded in custody for two years. When the case finally got to trial he was found not guilty – two years too late. And no compensation is available for the 2 years of his life taken from him by the “justice” system.

First Nations participant

5 Viewed 26 June 2024 at <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/youth-detention-rates-are-dropping-but-indigenous-children-remain-over-represented/8tpjjbrvo>

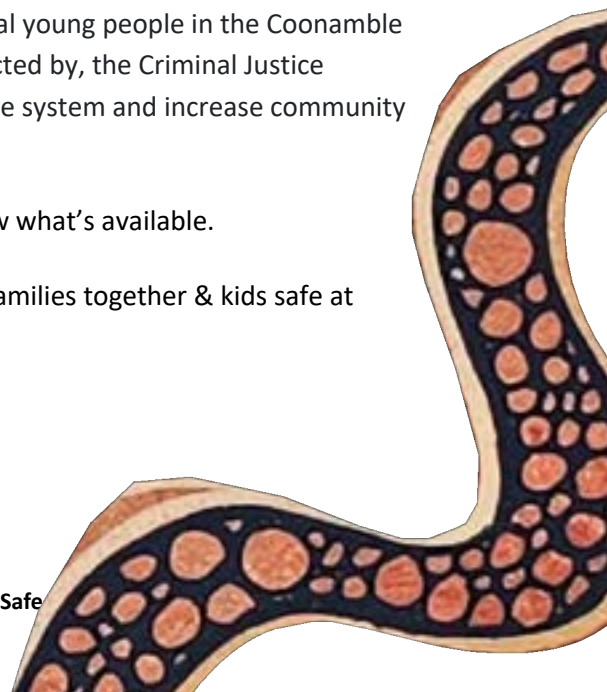
We asked

What services or programs are available in your area that are effective in keeping kids and communities safe and kids out of jail?

What people told us⁶

- **Aboriginal way brain injury identification** - [Synapse](#) is working with Aboriginal communities to develop culturally appropriate tools and supports for Aboriginal people suffering from brain injury.⁷
- Our **Accompanied Children's Support Service (Orana Support Services)** provides extra support for children and young people who are experiencing domestic and family violence and are experiencing or at risk of homelessness (Dubbo, Wellington, Narromine).
- Youth Justice's team in the **Bail and Accommodation Support Service (BASS)** provides an after-hours intake service for NSW Police. Young people can be connected with accommodation, transport, case support and other services to help them satisfy the conditions of a bail order. *But the BASS Centre in Dubbo is underutilised.*
- Dubbo College (public high school) provides opportunities for at risk young people through the [Clontarf Foundation Academy](#) for young Aboriginal men and the [NASCA](#) program. NASCA is Aboriginal Community Controlled and works with young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, actively engaging with their families and communities to ensure the work is community driven and sustainable.
- Mission Australia's **Community Support Program** works with young people who are at risk of entering custody.
- The **Homeless Youth Assistance Program (HYAP)** aims to reconnect children and young people with their families or wider support networks; or, where appropriate, help them to transition to more appropriate long-term supported accommodation. The target group are children and young people aged 12–15 years who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. The service operates in the Bourke, Brewarrina, Coonamble, Coonabarabran, Dubbo, Gilgandra, Walgett and Wellington areas through a number of service providers.
- REDI.E's **Indigenous Youth Support Program** works with Aboriginal young people in the Coonamble Shire who have had contact with, or whose lives have been impacted by, the Criminal Justice System. It aims to reduce the likelihood of further contact with the system and increase community safety.
- Interagency meetings are really important so that you get to know what's available.
- Mission Australia **Family Preservation Service** assists in keeping families together & kids safe at home, across the Western Region.

⁶ Many many programs were listed and discussed – we have pulled out a few to detail. Much of this detail has been sourced directly from program web pages.



- **New Street Services** (Health NSW) provide therapeutic services for children and young people aged 10 to 17 years who have engaged in harmful sexual behaviours towards others, and their families and caregivers. New Street Services work with the young person to assist them to understand, acknowledge, take responsibility for and cease the harmful sexual behaviour.
- **PCYC Programs** in Dubbo, Walgett and Bourke including **Project Walwaay** – this program provides opportunities for at-risk young people to succeed through diversionary programs, education and employment.

“ Assistant Commissioner Peter McKenna, from the New South Wales Police Force, said that Walwaay was given the blessing of the local Aboriginal Elders group, who also bestowed the name ‘Walwaay’, which is Wiradjuri for ‘young man’.

“ The AYT is the conduit between young people and other specialist agencies, coordinating fortnightly meetings with health, education, the Department of Communities and Justice and non-government organisations, sharing information about the youth and planning the actions required to assist them going forward.

“ This joined-up approach has resulted in a decrease in school suspensions, better access to essential health and dental services and importantly a 60 per cent reduction in Aboriginal Youth entering the criminal justice system, “said Mr McKenna.”

AIC Media 2021⁸

- **Reconnect Program** run by Mackillop for youth at risk of homelessness. Reconnect supports young people who are at risk of homelessness or who have been out of home for a short time. It aims to support families in the early stages of breakdown, encourage reconciliation where possible or rebuild a supportive relationship with their family. It is offered in Coonabarabran, Coonamble and Walgett.
- The **Stand As One Mentoring Program** (Shine for Kids) assigns a volunteer mentor to a young person at least 3 months before the young person’s release date. During this time the mentor and mentee meet regularly in an effort to develop a strong, trusting and stable relationship. The mentor then continues to support the young person in a range of areas as they attempt to reintegrate themselves back into school, vocational education, work and the community in a broader sense.
- **Temporary Accommodation** is needed for young people – there are 24 beds available for young people at **Orana Support Services** (Dubbo, Wellington, Narromine).
- **Youth Koori Court** works with young people with the guidance of elders and other respected people from Aboriginal communities. It looks at the issues that may be impacting on the young person’s involvement with the criminal justice system. An action and support plan is developed with the young person to help them to address these risk factors and improve connections with their culture and their community. It is a successful model operating for nearly a decade in Parramatta and Sydney.

7 Viewed 26 June 2024 <https://www.aic.gov.au/media-centre/news/project-walwaay-recognised-providing-opportunities-risk-young-people-dubbo>

- **Marathon Health Youth Outreach Project:** Young people in regional communities experience significantly higher rates of mental health concerns, and have limited access to readily available support. To create pathways to support for young people who don't have access to a headspace centre, Marathon are co- designing the Youth Outreach Project – a culturally safe outreach support service. The Youth Outreach Project will be available in Coonamble, Gulargambone, Warren, Collarenebri, Condobolin, Brewarrina, Bourke, Lightning Ridge, Walgett and Nyngan.
- **Winanggaay** Connecting culture and improving social and educational outcomes for suspended and at risk students in Kindergarten through to Year 6. Connecting Community Services (Dubbo Neighbourhood Centre) runs this program along with other successful programs such as the 'Night Patrol' bus providing safe transport of at risk young people on the street to their home or another safe place at night.

***WINS Community Centre** in Wellington is starting a new **night program** for young people a couple of nights a week. We are targeting kids that we know of that are involved in the justice system or at risk of getting involved. We are working with the police, schools, and the justice system as well as other community organisations. The aim of the program is to give the kids a safe space to hang out in – we'll run different activities based on the needs of the kids attending – might be music and art, culture, or home and life skills. There are already programs in town but they cost money, so we are providing a free space. It's tricky because Wellington is a small town, and we don't want to burn out our workers who might also work for other programs – so we are being careful about how we set it up.*

We are hoping that if we can show that it's successful we can get ongoing funding – funding at the moment is only for 12 months (funding is from NIAA). We are building relationships with the correctional centres (there are two in Wellington) – we have run successful programs with them in the past including working with people on parole – last group was 43 men 36 of whom were Aboriginal – two of these have got work, others are doing training to improve their chances of getting a job – we also now have a men's group that came out of this program.

We have also been running a program for primary school kids and we'll make sure we follow them into high school – It's been my observation that Year 8 is a tricky time for kids and its often when they get into trouble. We need to work with the schools to get them to understand that for some of these kids they may not have had any sleep the night before or anything to eat since they last saw them. Also for some kids the idea of jail becomes pretty normal – they have relatives that have been inside and tell them not to be scared of going to jail.

In conversation with Michael Peachey CEO, Wins Community Centre

More things that work

SKILLSET RECRUITMENT AND EMPLOYMENT PROVIDER *Boys to the Bush*
WELLWAYS SUICIDE PREVENTION PROGRAMS
Breakfast Club Flying Start transition to school program.
Shark Cage and Shark Cage junior
DISABILITY ADVOCACY NSW
MAC RIVER COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTRES
HOUSING PLUS *In school health services*
Aboriginal Legal Services outreach
FAMILY CAMPS DOORWAYS
Justice Advocacy BACK TRACK
FAMILY AND COMMUNITY CASE MANAGEMENT SUPPORT
Leader Life Programs WATTLE TREE HOUSE – SHS
Eloura HEADSPACE
FAMILY PRESERVATION
Love Bites PATHFINDERS FIT 4 LIFE
CAMHS *Family Support Services*
TENANCY SUPPORT SERVICES – MURRA MIA AND NEWTAAS RECONNECT
Season's for Growth, Season's for Healing
THE ORCHARD CORE AND CLUSTER DV ACCOMODATION
Koori Youth Courts TAFE Supports
HEADSPACE *Safer Communities Grants*
YOUTH ON TRACK YOUTH WORKERS
LOSS AND GRIEF SUPPORT SERVICES IN SCHOOLS
YOUTH FOCUS GROUPS
Wrap around support services. YOUTH HOLIDAY PROGRAMS

We asked

What support is needed from peak bodies and government agencies to build on the strengths of these programs and services? How important is collaboration? What else is needed?

What people told us

Networking, co-ordination, collaboration

- Social cohesion was lost over Covid – we need to rebuild that.
- Services need to be coordinated and integrated and have access to data. Need to be knitting social services and legal sectors together. Referral pathways need to be consistent and eligibility for programs clear.
- Money is wasted on the duplication of services and services fighting each other over clients – working together on things works for young people. Also, If the right staff aren't engaged the young people won't engage either.
- There needs to be better information flow – unless you are working directly with some of these services it is hard to know what is going on. Ongoing service mapping and a full-service directory is needed for networking and referrals. As well as better support for and co-ordination of interagency networks.
- We don't have access or control over our own (First Nations) data. This also affects trust as clients are very wary of offering up information to services. It's hard to work with people when they don't feel safe to communicate all their issues.
- More of an emphasis on a cradle to grave approach and an understanding and acknowledgement of the impacts of colonisation and dispossession – there is no level playing field here. We need to change the narrative to one of collaboration - across cultures, with families, and with communities...
- We need public education campaigns – the sector knows what works, the research is clear – we need to get the public onside. Continual push in the community for punitive approaches needs to be addressed strongly.
- We go to half a dozen interagencies as there is no one service that does everything that people need. We need to stay connected so our clients can.
- Government needs to commit to flipping the script and bring everyone together – police, corrections, community services, education sector, Aboriginal Community Controlled sector.
- Need a focus on community practice – lessons learned, sharing information and examples of best practice, investigating together what works and why, translating successful pilots into ongoing programs.

“ Need to get the language right – young people are not “customers” – need to keep the focus on young people as people! Participant

Strengthening the sector

- 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.
- Improved funding – more and more flexible funding to meet the challenges on the ground. Also need to reform outcomes measurement – is seriously off track – we need support and increased funding to build a real evidence base on our own terms.
- Western Division of DCJ has some skilled, knowledgeable and passionate CPO's but we need more.
- Need peak bodies to have a real presence in regional NSW. Two-way information exchange and support for growth and development including training and capability building are critical. Need to build capacity of interagencies and organisations – for example training in how to write parliamentary submissions.⁹
- Sector peaks and funding bodies need to acknowledge challenges on the ground, such as fatigue and burn-out - and collaborate with services on their terms - from the ground up.
- Maintaining advocacy for longer term contracts.
- Finding new ways to fund our work and allocate resources.
- Social services need to be recognised as essential services and workers supported to access training and education for free.

8 NCOSS in partnership with NSW Parliament offers a half day workshop in advocacy and submission writing. However currently this is only available in person, in Sydney CBD.



Consistent approach to funding across the regions

- Redirection of funding from punitive places to restorative places. Funding to facilitate specific programs like Safe me and flexibility in how funding is used in communities.
- Programs are offered very sporadically - geographically speaking. And time wise – no consistency in what is offered and where – roles change, successful programs end. This negatively impacts the ability of services to connect people in - often information isn't updated – also clients lose trust of programs – things are always changing and they don't know where to start or how to keep connected.
- Need to see successful programs replicated in all communities to build equity of access – not just in larger towns, for example: PCYCs in each community (see Project Waalway above), Clontarf & Girls Academy programs and other in-school programs. Wrap around support programs that work with families as well as the young people involved.
- Stop with the research, stop with the programs that don't work directly with young people - money going all over the shop to different places – (creates) extra back-end costs. Build on the success of programs that work – Koori Court, cultural programs etc.
- Need to address the limitations put on funded programs – proscribed age ranges not always appropriate, need to include family members or carers, ensure that programs are accessible for kids in OOHc, that they are not just 9 – 5, timelines too often too short eg 12 weeks.
- Need more money and incentives for people to work in the sector - to enable delivery of what works to keep communities safe.
- Need to address issues specific to regional and remote NSW:
 - Distance
 - Travel
 - Time
 - Different Safety issues
 - No public transport
 - Staffing
 - No phone service
 - Resources and funding stretched across huge areas.
- Competitive funding programs mean services are fighting over scraps instead of collaborating to keep kids and communities safe. Need an end to competition and short-term funding programs and grants.

“ *Need to end the focus on innovation and put the spotlight on what works!!*
Participant

“ *Bring the money over the mountain!*
Participant



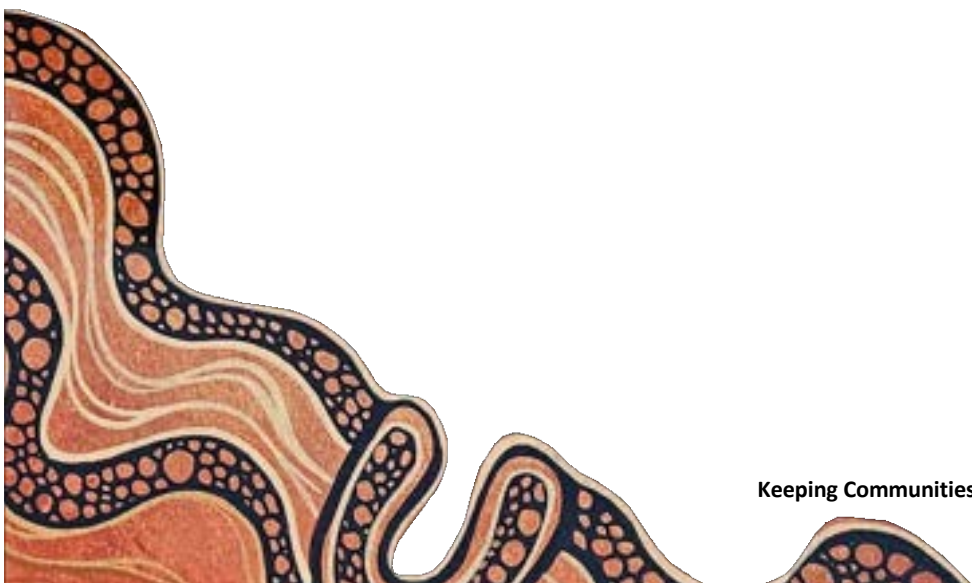
Early Intervention

- We need universal screening of all pre-school and school-aged children and to establish universal access to early intervention health services eg Paediatricians, OTs, Speech, Mental Health (including CAMH services) from an early age. 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. Need better options for face-to-face services.
- Improved access to psychiatry for children and young people.
- Improved IPTAAS funding – kms rating needs to change – is currently inadequate.
- We need urgent and radical reform to the child protection system to stop kids being taken from their families.

“ If kids that need support were successfully targeted at an early stage a lot of the busy work in the community sector would dry up.
Participant

Young people should have access to a purpose in life

- Education system is not appropriate for all children – especially those most vulnerable. Keeping kids in school until they are 17 when they don't want to be or can't be there is counterproductive – need new ways of thinking about this. Approved education, training or appropriate employment is not widely accessible for kids with complex needs, especially in regional NSW. Need alternative programs for kids who can't attend school.
- Young people are stigmatised in small communities and not given a chance in small towns after they've 'gotten into trouble'. Need to look at access to TAFE, work, traineeships and other alternative pathways to give young people a chance. Opportunities need to be developed through trauma informed practice.



Housing for Young People

- Young people need access to appropriate temporary accommodation¹⁰, transitional housing, affordable housing, and social housing across the region.
- Services including Orana are working towards establishing a Youth Foyer in Dubbo – an accommodation and support service for 16 to 24 year olds providing education, employment and wrap around support.

“ Young people in the region need access to stable and secure accommodation that is appropriate for them and their needs - in Dubbo and communities west of Dubbo out to Walgett, Lightning Ridge, Bourke, Brewarrina, Cobar, Wilcannia, Broken Hill & Dareton, the nearest Youth Refuge is in Orange (up to 800km away for some). This requires young people to travel off Country & out of Community (often over 10 hrs away) to access a Youth Refuge. Clients within this cohort have complex needs that often impede their ability to move into housing or maintain a tenancy – they need access to youth refuges that have appropriate supervision with a focus on living skills - to build their capacity to transition into more sustainable housing. It’s critical that we address this.

Regional Manager, Dubbo

Other things to consider

- Some things we could do with more of: mentoring for men, healthy relationships training for young people, engagement with sporting clubs, business sponsorship, flexible contracts, better zoning laws to enable youth housing, Youth Foyers, deckhand and sailing training, fostering programs for teenagers, rent to buy caravans!



⁹ Also known as crisis or emergency housing.



“ We need you to tell us how to do it better – and we need to listen.”

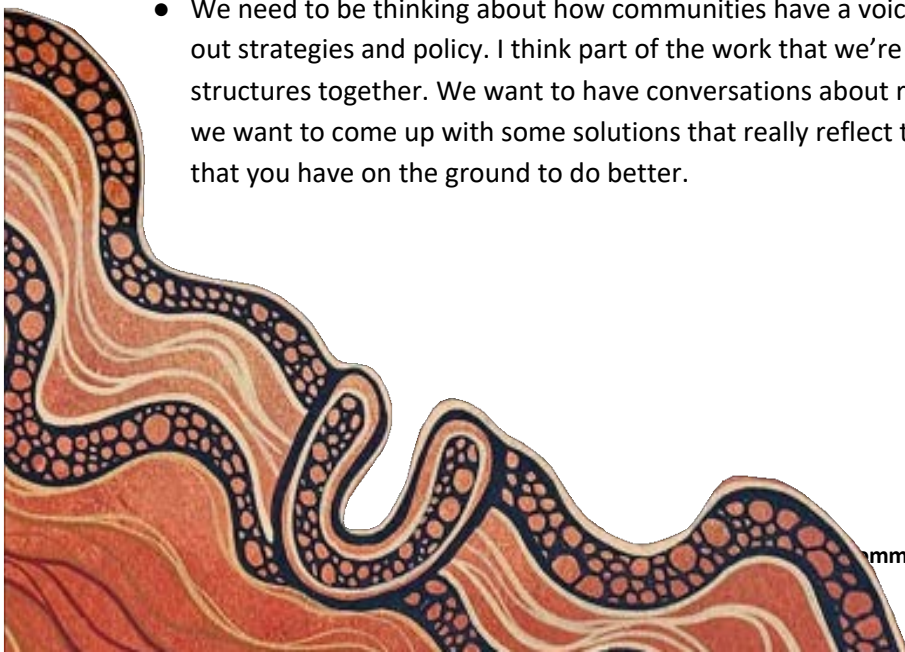
Housing and Homelessness

Rebecca Pinkstone – CEO HomesNSW

Key Points

- Homes NSW brings back housing, social housing, affordable housing and homeless into one division within DCJ.
- The aim is to put customers – public housing residents – right at the heart of service delivery.
- Homes NSW has a function to deliver great public housing, but is also responsible for system stewardship of the entire social housing system. To that end, it's bringing together policy for Aboriginal Community Housing throughout Aboriginal Housing Office, assets in the regions, service delivery, contract management with the community who has partners and with other agencies and homeless service providers all under one roof.
- The numbers of people that are applying for social housing in NSW are just ballooning. 58,000 people now on the register. And that's not even the amount of people that are eligible. At the same time the turn-away rates are at 40%. People are jumping through hoops to get housing.
- Staff on the frontline in housing and in homelessness services are really bearing the brunt of this crisis as well. We join these sectors because we want to make a difference. But it can be soul destroying when you are seeing those numbers and not being able to do anything.
- I want to acknowledge that we're never going to have enough money. But we want to ensure that our resources are used to the best effect.

- What do place based local responses really mean to people working locally? Because we can't all be at every meeting at every time. So, I want to really start having a conversation in local communities about how do we do that work better. How do we work collectively from a systems perspective to ensure that the resources are right? We are looking at pricing and contract management amongst other things. Are our contracts actually blocking local solutions?
- Another element is around our families and individuals and how they are falling through the gap. How do we come together locally to address their needs.
- Homes NSW Priorities:
 1. Customer Service – They're not clients, their customers, they're paying for a service, and we need to really provide good quality services to our residents. That's why we're bringing maintenance and the management of the maintenance and the management of those contracts back in house. We need to bring back tenants into the decision-making process.
 2. Look at how we're building up the system and the planning system. But to do that we need a real strategy about what we're going to do around social housing in NSW. What are our targets for housing? How do they fit across the state, in the city and also regionally? And how are we going to work with providers to get there?
- There have been great funding announcements from the Commonwealth. However, I am hearing regional and Aboriginal housing providers will miss out on funding because of the way it's structured to deliver. It's up to Homes NSW to ensure they are in the fold.
- NSW needs to build more homes and it's important for us to think about new ways to do that. We've established a task force around modern methods of construction. We're talking about local prefabs... I've heard the criticisms around modern methods of construction. We're talking about how we really energise that part of the industry to develop new methods of construction, to build more homes quickly. And we need this happening in regional and rural NSW more than anywhere, with the cost of construction, with the cost of materials and labour.
- Public housing has led innovation in construction internationally. We can do that again in terms of the way that social housing is delivered in NSW. We can be leading the market.
- It is not just the government building more homes. It's working with Community Housing providers, Aboriginal Community Housing providers and the industry to deliver more homes.
- We need to be thinking about how communities have a voice into the way that Homes NSW is working out strategies and policy. I think part of the work that we're doing is setting some new governance structures together. We want to have conversations about resource allocation locally with providers and we want to come up with some solutions that really reflect the funding available and the knowledge that you have on the ground to do better.





Michelle Craig, Manager Aboriginal Resource Unit, NSW Aboriginal Tenant Advice and Advocacy Services, Murra Mia Aboriginal Corporation

Key Points

- Murra Mia Dubbo has been operating in Dubbo for the last 10 months, and covers Orana, Far West and Central West regions. Aboriginal people make up 11.4% (35, 539) of the region's population of 312,290.
- Some key areas of its work include working on coalface issues such as homelessness experienced by Aboriginal people, supporting renters with advice and advocacy, tenant education and intervention. We reach out to the Aboriginal communities in the region to plan and deliver services.
- The new rent setting policies have affected Aboriginal communities.
- There is a high volume of matters around property care. Renters request assistance on repair and maintenance, rental arrears, rent setting policies and increases, property care, additional occupants and termination.
- Property occupancy – the concept and reality of additional occupants in a property for Aboriginal people are different to what mainstream services think. Aboriginal people face very limited housing options in WNSW often due to discrimination in the rental market. This can lead to overcrowding and risk of homelessness. An example of discrimination is being offered a rental property, which is then withdrawn when the real estate agency discovers the renter is Aboriginal. The same property may be relisted 2-3 weeks later.
- Aboriginal people are also discriminated against according to income and larger families, as well as by family and associations. Literacy issues also impact on the ability to obtain housing. Tenancy can fail if tenants have breached the tenancy agreement and have not received appropriate support in time. Relationships between tenants, landlords and tenancy managers can fail and puts tenancy at risk. Tenancy crisis can be an issue – **unfortunately Murra Mia can't support everyone who needs help.**
- There needs to be community education of tenants, so they are aware of their rights as set out in the tenancy agreements.
- Strengthening Aboriginal tenancies by providing practical supports for new tenants who need to manage their tenancy, and existing tenants who need support for ongoing risks/issues. **No one should be left out.**



Questions and comments from the floor

In response to Rebecca Pinkstone's presentation what would accountability of housing providers look like?

Rebecca: From 1 July 2024, Homes NSW maintenance call centre which will be smaller and locally based will log any maintenance work. The tenants will need to sign off on any jobs, and the maintenance call centre staff will be able to check the work quality. From October, tenants can use the Maintenance App to log work and check its progress.

Who are the providers of Aboriginal Housing accountable to?

Rebecca and Michelle: They are accountable to the AHO who have contractors for maintenance. All providers must meet the required standards. Aboriginal Community Housing providers have contracts with the government to manage stock, however, we acknowledge that tenants can struggle to know who is responsible for maintenance and ownership of the property. We need to build awareness

The government stated that it will build over 1 million homes – what is the status of releasing land to increase supply?

Rebecca: the government has committed \$70M to look at this issue. Homes NSW has a lot of land and properties that are not in good condition. There is no funding to address this shortage. There was record amount of building prior to the COVID pandemic, however that did not make a dent in the supply. There is no land issue, just issues with funding. An innovation would be for land councils/AHO and the government to jointly explore building for Aboriginal communities.



Discussion 2:

Housing and Homelessness

The message from services in Regional NSW is clear – more investments, at scale, are needed to provide well located, safe, secure, appropriate and healthy homes for people experiencing poverty and disadvantage. More needs to be done to make the housing system work *for* people. More needs to be done to eliminate perverse outcomes, unrealistic timeframes, and overly complex regulatory and funding requirements that get in the way of innovation, partnerships, and good work in the housing space.

The need for strong political leadership from all levels of government and considered evidence-based approaches to address our housing crisis is imperative. It has been clear for a long time that markets will never affordably house low-income households. It is the work and responsibility of governments in collaboration with the not-for-profit and Aboriginal Community Controlled sectors. We thank the NSW Government for their recent recognition of this in the 2024 - 2025 budget with the \$6.6 bn Building Homes for NSW package.

In regional NSW, a lack of quality housing for First Nations communities is a longstanding issue that we hope will be addressed through the recent budget measures and a re-invigorated approach to housing in HomesNSW. More is urgently required to address chronic undersupply, protect vulnerable communities from the ravages of climate change, and meet the Closing the Gap targets.

“ Current regional and remote Indigenous housing stock is unable to provide consistently healthy and comfortable indoor environments. There seems to be an unstated assumption that what is practically sustainable for governments and housing providers is the undersupply of substandard housing serviced by inconsistent repairs and maintenance.”

(Lea et al 2021 p 2)¹¹

10 Lea, T., Grealy, L., Moskos, M., Brambilla, A., King, S., Habibis, D., Benedict, R., Phibbs, P., Sun, C. and Torzillo, P. 2021 Sustainable Indigenous housing in regional and remote Australia, AHURI Final Report No. 368, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne viewed 1 June 2022 <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/sites/default/files/documents/2021-11/AHURI-Final-Report-368-Sustainable-Indigenous-housing- in-regional-and-remote-Australia.pdf>

We asked

Tell us your stories about housing and homelessness in your area – successes and challenges!

What people told us

Challenges

Pressures on rural communities

- Housing and rental reform is not keeping up with the situation on the ground – many of the families we work with are paying more than 50% of their income on rent.
- There are a lot of pressures on housing in rural communities when families move into or pass through an area – many reasons for this (including seasonal work, new infrastructure, online work, family obligations etc.)
- The number of AirB&B properties is an issue, it keeps properties off the long term rental market.
- Also pressures from large infrastructure projects such as energy or mining - implemented without thought to housing, accommodation, and other stressors to local communities. If the State planning authorities have approved it Council's wash their hands of it. If it's in Council's remit – such as mine expansions – they don't seek enough information such as workforce numbers to plan for it.
- We are seeing a lack of action from Local Government – they could be releasing surplus land but it's just not available or it's wrapped up in red tape. Building approvals are really slow and hampered by unrealistic DA requirements for example in regards to flood modelling – we are now having to do 200 year flood modelling.

“ We applied for a DA for social housing dwellings – the DA process went back and forth for 18 months – we were asked to do 100 year flood modelling, then they increased it to 200 year modelling. NSW Planning involvement slowed down the process.

Councils overall are becoming more and more risk averse – whereas previously DAs could be fast-tracked with pre-lodgement meetings the timeframe for getting DA approval, and then Construction Certificate approval is expanding, meaning the very tight timeframes in tender processes are difficult to meet. Many social housing tenders require you to complete projects within an 18 - 24 month timeframe – our experience shows it can take this long just to go through the DA process.

On the other hand, tender and grant notification delays can see land sold out from underneath a project – you've done your research, found land that suits the facility and is zoned correctly, you've got the vendors on board - then the grant approval timeframe is pushed out and the land is sold because the vendor is sick of waiting. This happened to us with a recent application – if we are successful we will have to find alternative land.

And it's getting more and more difficult to source land – it used to be that we could find surplus Crown Land and take a proposal to Council to get approved for release to a nominated party – now it has to go through a planning process and be rezoned, and then it has to go out to the community in a full Expression of Interest process – so you might not get the land after all.

Specialist Homelessness Service Provider Western NSW

Racism in the private rental sector

It can be hard for First Nations families to access the private rental market due to racism from landlords and real estate agents.

“ I went to a local real estate in person to enquire about a rental but was told there’s nothing available. When I applied online it was a different story and I was successful in obtaining a private rental property.

Aboriginal Worker, Dubbo¹²

Homelessness

- Link2Home has become unworkable and impacts on service delivery - for example 3 hour wait on phone calls – it’s not safe and it’s not productive. There’s no local knowledge so options offered are often unsuitable for example, homeless people in Mudgee being offered accommodation in Dubbo – an hour and a half away by car but a days travel by public transport.
- Homelessness impacts people from all backgrounds but there is also a problem with some rough sleepers behaving badly and impacting on local residents – its hard to get the wider community to care when they just see homeless people as a “problem”.
- The statistics don’t represent the reality on the ground – there is obviously a lot of under-reporting going on – for example there are more rough sleepers in Dubbo than the street counts would indicate.
- Temporary Accommodation is often not suitable for the families it is housing – for example large families in motels (sometimes for weeks and even months).
- 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.
- Prisoners on bail who are released on a Friday are released straight from Wellington Correctional Centre into community with no support including housing.
- There is a problem with the definition of homelessness – if you have a roof over your head, you are not considered to be homeless - for example, if someone is couch surfing.



¹² NCOSS hears similar stories from across regional NSW on a regular basis.



Access to Housing

“ Women in safe houses are taken off the priority list because they are considered “housed”!
Participant

- In Condobolin the safe houses are not safe – everybody knows where they are – need to keep women and kids in their own home as refugees won’t accept older boys and many can’t house more than 2 or 3 kids – so women should be able to stay in their home with security measures put in place.
- HomesNSW provides no face-to-face support or help with applications and forms. There’s also a high staff turnover so impossible to build collaborative relationships with them.
- There is also a problem with transparency and perceived fairness of allocations - what is the criteria, what local input into decision-making is there? What priority is given to young people? They really need to have their own wait list to ensure they are not overlooked.

Housing stock and maintenance

- We are experiencing a real lack of diversity in Western NSW in HomesNSW housing stock – it’s all 3 to 4 bedroom houses - no suitable housing for older single women, people with disability, and larger families including intergenerational families.
- As families change we need more flexibility in applying the rules – for example we have heard about people in a huge amount of distress from forced relocation when their family situation changes – eg losing custody of children, family members moving out or becoming deceased. On the other hand sometimes people from outlying area or remote communities have to move temporarily for health reasons, they get comfortable and want to stay...
- The mystery of ownership + responsibility can be impenetrable - tenants often do not know who owns the property or who manages it – they are often uncertain about who to call – sometimes changes to ownership are not disclosed to tenants properly.
- Poor maintenance is an ongoing problem across the board. Maintenance contracts aren’t necessarily given to local firms - for example, painters are coming from Sydney, so it’s much harder to hold them accountable. Much of the work done is “shonky”. Tenants living in properties with ongoing mould problems are told to “clean their house” or “paint over it”.
- The Womens’ Safe House in Lightning Ridge has had no hot water for 6 months.

Insufficient Change Management

- Positive policy changes might happen but it takes a long time to be implemented consistently on the ground – for example the rental diary policy for people in Temporary Accommodation changed nearly a year ago yet people in TA in Western NSW are still being asked to fulfill this obsolete requirement.

Successes

Place based/Community driven services

- Tenancy advice services like Murra Mia are vital – we have engaged them to resolve maintenance issues on the ground for vulnerable tenants.
- The Mobile Housing Outreach Team (set up in 2022) has been really successful in reaching out to rough sleepers and vulnerable families in our area – this really needs expansion across the regions.
- The sector is looking at different ways of working – the conversation is happening! For example there are some really good developments with Aboriginal Community Housing Providers – this sector should be supported more to grow.
- Where local allocation strategies are followed and the tenants are placed in a community that is right for them there is a much greater chance of stability and a sustainable tenancy for that tenant.
- Community engagement and community development approaches work to make sure we provide services that are steered in the right direction by community.

Partnerships

- Veritas House partnered with Bathurst RSL Club to provide Transitional Housing for vulnerable young people and families. The RSL owned the property and did renovations including reparative work to the foundations, fencing, painting, new carpet, heating, lighting and electrical upgrades, as well as new furnishings. Veritas House now offer the property to young people and families at risk of or experiencing homelessness, as they access other support services.¹³

“ Some Councils are very proactive and buying up vacant land for youth and DFV accommodation, and social and affordable housing. They are gifting the land or agreeing to a peppercorn lease pending the success of tenders. They may also provide the infrastructure to support the development.

Specialist Homelessness Service Provider, Western NSW

- Catholic Care has a model of converting old convents to housing for women and children leaving domestic violence. In Condobolin a new build will house 22 women and their children. The land was donated by the Catholic Diocese, and a local builder engaged to lead the capital works.¹⁴
- During Covid we managed to house everyone. This approach should be applied across the board – SHS could broker Temporary/Crisis Accommodation in areas where there are no Link2Home providers.

¹³ Details from <https://veritashouse.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Veritas-House-Annual-Report-2022-2023-WEB.pdf> viewed 26 June 2024

¹⁴ Noting that new funding for DV services was not made available for the site. See Catholic Care Media Release viewed 26 June 2024 <https://ccwf.org.au/publications/forbes-dv-service-to-miss-out-on-extra-domestic-violence-workers/>

Innovation and passionate staff

- Innovative housing programs with independent living, shared community spaces, shared maintenance and lawns – we can get economies of scale from these types of programs.
- In Condobolin there is community based tenancy support – it's an unfunded partnership with HomesNSW. It provided a safe space to collect keys, request maintenance etc.

“ Together Home (in Wagga) has been a real success – 50% of participants are women and kids escaping domestic violence. Within the 2 year timeframe 20% of participants are housed in the private rental market and employed... so in some cases 2 years of support is fine (although we recognise that people with more complex needs require ongoing support). But our program is tiny – only 8 people per year – and none of the other people on my table had heard of Together Home...”

Community Health Service Provider, Western and Southern NSW

- Providers in Dubbo have reduced stays in crisis accommodation by more than 2 weeks with positive outcomes through:
 - Acceptance re need to work with the families over a long timeframe to reach positive outcomes
 - Building relationships with local agents & housing providers
 - Warm referrals and advocacy
 - Inviting programs & services in to connect to clients
 - Educating clients on the available products and programs
 - Educating clients on importance of accessing services early before problems escalate
 - Improving post-tenancy support for tenants and tenants on the radar
 - Improved support and responsiveness to address child safety
 - Reducing pressures on families by providing long term accommodation and being able to address other issues.
- Workers that have skills, drive, shared values, transferable skills, life skills, and lived experience.



We asked

What support is needed to build on the strengths and address the challenges?

What people told us

Land, housing, infrastructure

- Need to stop the privatisation of housing and housing as an “asset” – it’s essential and should be available for everyone... instead rents are being driven up in regional NSW through sheer greed.
- Smaller regional towns need appropriate infrastructure for zoning and development (such as levy banks and storm water drains) – it can be difficult to attract funding for this.
- Appropriate Crown land (surplus to government needs) needs to be identified and released for social and affordable housing developments – need to put a priority on this.
- Place based approaches work best – improvements to encourage this way of working by housing providers in local communities and with local services. 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. *“Take the homes to the people!”*
- Need to look at better ways of creating opportunities for local government to partner with housing providers and services to provide social and affordable housing (see example under successes).
- Incentives for new styles of homes – diversity in housing supply eg smaller homes, pre fab homes, homes that can be connected for larger families.
- We need rent to buy schemes for social housing tenants – to provide more home ownership opportunities for disadvantaged people in regional NSW...¹⁶
- Unused, boarded up houses – need immediate repair or pulldown and rebuild. Also need incentives for community housing providers to get on to maintenance quickly.
- Need to consider the use of modular housing to speed up capacity for successful programs such as Together Home.

¹⁶ Tenants are currently able to apply to buy their homes, but HomesNSW does not currently run rent to buy or shared equity schemes.



Supported and Temporary Accommodation

- 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).
- Need suitable accommodation for men with children similar to women's refuges – our men's refuge takes adult males but not children – occasionally men have the care of their children – there is nowhere for them to go and usually they end up in a motel... or in a tent somewhere if they haven't accessed any services.
- Desperately need more Temporary Accommodation – not motels! And more refuges.
- There are no Safe Houses in our area – could social housing providers designate some properties for safe houses or provide more transitional and temporary housing?
- Aboriginal communities support homeless people – community is committed to not returning anyone to the street so overcrowding often results. This needs to be recognised and the impacts addressed. Need more support and options for communities to prevent this from happening.
- In smaller regional or remote towns potential providers for Links2Home tend to prioritise miners and tourists – need to provide incentives for them to become providers.

Access, communication and connections

- Need better networks and information on the ground so services and their clients can access the services and housing they need. Need an audit or service mapping to support this.
- Need to train workers in the sector better – better communication and customer service skills – timely, knowledgeable and supportive!
- More education and outreach about the waitlists for potential applicants – and about different housing products and who runs them. Need more education around maintaining tenancies.

- More transparency around maintenance, and accountability to tenants – need to grow awareness of the different roles of the property owner, managing CHP, how headleasing works, and the roles of AHO + DCJ, and LALCS...
- And more resources for Tenant Advice and Advocacy Services like Murra Mia. More resources and better integration across the board.
- Sector needs better understanding of the changes for housing owned by LALC's, what is happening with the AHO and the role of Aboriginal Community Housing providers (such as Birribee) and peaks (such as NSW LALC and ACHIA).

Transforming the system

- Aboriginal Housing Providers have a minefield of legislation that they are held accountable to – more so than most housing providers. Need to streamline accountabilities!¹⁷
- Policy flexibility for CHPS as well as DCJ. Contract flexibility! Line by line accountabilities stifle innovation and the ability to respond to changing community needs.
- We need more people on the ground and more funding! We also need to see HomesNSW following through on their promises.



¹⁷ In addition to regulations for all housing providers Aboriginal housing providers are also subject to the Corporations (Aboriginal And Torres Strait Islander) Act 2006 and, for many, the Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983 ACHIA NSW 2024



Workforce issues in the sector

Ben McAlpine - Director Policy and Advocacy NCOSS

Key points

- Overview:
 - the NSW social service sector employs 240,000 people
 - provides services to more than 1 million people each year
 - This was at August 2021 – since then, the number of people requiring services has grown.
 - Our sector is highly feminised. 3 in 4 workers are women.
 - 50% of our employees on casual or limited term contracts.
- Despite this significant contribution, the workforce is under immense pressure from three critical factors:
 - low pay and poor conditions
 - growing demand for services
 - Inadequate funding and investment.
- The impact of this is dramatic, including high vacancy rates, declining wellbeing and retention issues.
- Low pay and poor conditions:

“ ‘The value of the work continues to be a strong selling point, but people are **exhausted**, and other sectors offer more pay for less stress.’ CEO, Provider of multiple services, NSW (ACCS study)

“ ‘Higher levels of stress amongst essential face to face workers, higher levels of anxiety... We have had a **90% turnover** and have lost almost all corporate memory of how things were done prior to COVID.’ Staff Wellbeing Study participant

“ ‘I love the sector and have dedicated my career to it but it is **hard, unforgiving, low reward and very limited advancement...**’ Long Way to the Top survey participant

- It's clear to us that many people in the sector love what they do, and they want to continue to do it. But they feel undervalued. And this plays out in retention. From the ACOSS ACSS survey:
 - Majority said they have had increased difficulties keeping services properly staffed.
 - 70% said it has become more difficult to attract and retain staff since 2022.
- Growing demand for services:
 - Only 1 % of services can always meet demand.
 - 68% said that total demand had increased.
 - 63% said the complexity of need had increased.
- Inadequate funding and investment:
 - only 11% of services think their funding covers the full cost of service delivery.
 - Only 21% agreed that funding enabled them to attract and retain staff.
 - 82% said overheads were underfunded or not funded at all.
 - 87% said indexation was inadequate.
 - Only 40% thought funding was enough to meet regulatory obligations.

“ ‘Continual fighting for long term funding to continue the sound work we do is exhausting.’ Long Way to the Top survey participant

- Findings from *Taree Regional Forum (2023)* and *High Cost of Doing Business report (2022)*
 - Lack of flexibility in funding and guidelines doesn't reflect the reality of working in communities.
 - Short term funding impacts on staff development and retention, staff can't build skills or even stay in their own communities.
 - Aboriginal ways of doing things – sitting with people in their pain, listening, yarning and spending time with people is not acknowledged and funded.
- **NCOSS advocacy: Advocating for a sustainable sector that has the investment it needs to support the community**
 - Immediate increase of 20% to baseline funding.
 - Full funding of programs.
 - Evidence-based indexation.
 - Longer-term contracts.
 - Core funding for NCCs.
 - Population and needs-based funding model.
 - Embedded funding for innovation and emergency responses.
- We are also continuing our advocacy for:
 - core funding for neighbourhood centres and similar services.
 - increasing investment in the Targeted Early Intervention Program by 25%, prioritising Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.
- The NSW government has since committed to establishing a taskforce to look at contracting and funding agreements.





Alison Tye - Independent trainer, Jennifer Newman – CHIANSW, Janine Tulenew - Mission Australia, Kristy Bolch - Mission Australia

Key points

- Challenges being faced by organisations in the region:
 - Difficult to recruit because pool of recruits is quite small, the level of skill isn't always what we need.
 - Housing – we have workers but nowhere to put them.
 - Wage disparity - people don't stick around if they have really good skills, they need opportunities to grow. Between government and NGOs, and between NGOs.
 - Short term contracts impact not just staff and organisations – we are working with vulnerable people in the community - once a program goes we have to tell them to go somewhere else. There isn't always anywhere to go.
 - Flexible working conditions but not enough.
- Mission Australia was struggling to find staff with suitable qualifications so they turned recruitment on its head and took on new First Nations staff that had the right personal qualities and trained them up.
- The training program was funded by DCJ in partnership with Mission Australia and CHIA. It has been a real success for a number of factors:
 - Need to adapt the training to the local context and understand who you are working with.
 - Small things count - liking knowing to get the Apple Tea Cake from the bakery just out of town – it builds trust with participants if they can see you have local connections.
 - We learnt with **each other** by sitting down and having a yarn. Methods of training had to be adapted – we started the training on zoom and then moved to in person sessions. In person sessions fostered relationships and learning better.

“ ‘I’ve never spoken in public like this before – getting a job at Mission and going through the training has meant I am doing things I’ve never done before.’

Janine Tulenew – Mission Australia

“ ‘In a small town, you are not just the worker in the safe house. You are all the other things in the community. So it can be complicated... but I love working with my community’

Kristy Bolch – Mission Australia



Discussion 3:

Workforce Issues in the sector

Over the last two years NCOSS has generated a number of reports regarding workforce issues in the social services sector.¹⁸ Our members regularly report back to us the impact of workforce issues on their ability to keep the doors open. And at the Dubbo Forum the messaging is the same – services need to be valued for the work they do in collaboration with communities and supported to improve their workforce recruitment and retainment – to ensure that effective, ongoing, place-based programs and services can be supported and developed where they are needed – and in communities large and small.

It is time that governments commit to the real cost of doing business across the social service sector – especially in regional NSW where many service costs are higher due to distance, small and remote populations, and higher levels of need. It is unconscionable that in the 21st Century, in a sector that is mostly women, and that has a large proportion of First Nations organisations and workers, good pay and conditions are not adequately funded by government agencies.

Services are constantly having to choose between their staff and the communities they work with¹⁹. As a society we can do better than to exploit and undervalue the people that work to make the world a better place for us all. We hope that with the establishment of the Job Security and Funding Certainty Task Force the government will commit to increased investment in social services to address these pressing issues. It is long overdue.

¹⁸ [A Long Way to the Top](#) 2022 [The High Cost of Doing Business](#) 2022 [The NSW Social Sector: Capitalising on the Potential for Growth](#) 2021

¹⁹ Increasingly we are hearing from our members that sometime this choice is about whether to keep the doors open at all.

We asked

How are difficulties in recruiting/retaining appropriately skilled staff impacting your workplace? and community access to your services?

What people told us

Barriers to First Nations Employment

- Police checks are a real barrier to employment. With such high rates of incarceration in Aboriginal communities this really puts a barrier in the way of gaining employment for many people with suitable lived experience and other skills. Other barriers include:
 - Stress of walking in both worlds.
 - Community reputation.
 - Belonging to a particular family group.
 - Lack of supports to deal with drug and alcohol issues.
 - Lack of mental health supports.
 - Lack of appropriate housing.

Difficulties in Recruiting and Retaining Staff

- Applicants lack of skills/experience. Or knowledge about how to do a job application.
- Small population sizes and various issues that sit alongside this such as conflicts of interest. In smaller towns - whole families can work there. e.g. mother, sister, aunty. This not only impacts recruitment but also access for community needing to use a service.
- Regional and remote incentives (have to) come from core funding.
- 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. Skilled staff move on to where the grass is greener. Many workers love their work but just can't afford to stay.²⁰
- For smaller organisations inadequate funding is provided for staff training so its hard to take on untrained staff.
- Poaching of staff by other organisations.
- Community perception and client expectation (can lead to) staff shortages/high turnover.
- Young people leave regions for the Big Smoke.
- Small pool of skilled workers – move between providers.
- Advertising can be expensive.



²⁰ See NCOSS report from 2022 – [A Long Way to the Top](#) about conditions in the sector and impacts on women workers in the sector.

Valuing the role of social services

- In larger organisations (such as local councils) the corporate services arm (who are often the ones setting budgets) and executive teams do not necessarily understand or value the role of community services. They tend not to understand:
 - The complex nature of dealing with people in crisis situations (or ongoing complex needs).
 - The time required to work (effectively) with people with complex needs.
 - The need to ensure that job adverts are targeted, accessible and describe the position accurately.
 - That working in communities in a strengths based way is ongoing long term work that requires a collaborative approach.

Impacts on organisations and communities

- Strain for the existing team increases while they are trying to recruit. Staff are working outside of hours – fatigue and burn out lead to vicious cycle where the problem just gets worse and worse. This impacts workplace culture and overall morale.
- Loss of staff affects reputation and program delivery. Referring clients to other services can retraumatise them. We need to meet KPIs but we're dealing with human lives.
- Reliance on short term or casual staff leads to an inability to build relationships or trust with communities. Staff also don't feel connected to the services they are working for.
- Clients are triaged and experience delays in service intake or are turned away. Clients can get frustrated and at times become aggressive.

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

- High staff turnover means community members get affected by the lack of stability. We work with vulnerable people and they experience loss again and again.
- Geographical footprints (become) too large to cover – smaller communities tend to miss out.
- Good customer service and strengths based community development programs are not possible with short term staff or high turnover. Staff can lack basic knowledge about services and programs.
- Staff get promoted “just because they are there”.
- Lack of cultural awareness and local knowledge.
- Access to peripheral services: e.g. health, childcare, housing etc. is affected.
- New graduates enter the field, and it is difficult for them as they are idealistic but they get burnt out and leave.



We asked

How is your service addressing these challenges? What else is needed?

What people told us

Trusting and valuing ACCOs

- Employing local Aboriginal people to work with Aboriginal people, for Aboriginal people – without mainstream required qualifications. We share knowledge and build each other up.
- We need funding for:
 - Long term roles.
 - More investment into capital and assets.
 - Funding needs to be consistent (over time and location).²¹
- More community involvement is needed. Community need to be involved in decision making (including) who gets jobs, and (setting) payments for services.
- A challenge to the sector and funding bodies: PRACTICE WHAT YOU PREACH

Trusting and valuing the sector

- Social services sector should be seen as an essential service. It is as essential as ambulance, nursing, police, etc. Providers are employers and important to community wellbeing and economies. Appropriate funding is needed with the flexibility to adapt to changes of needs in community.
- Regional NGO workforce development planning needs to be a priority including:
 - Investing in education – TAFE/Uni need to be affordable and suitable
 - considerate of demographics and local context, expertise, culture and staffing.
- Being transparent with budgets/funding.
- DCJ must stop setting pay rates and qualification levels in contracts. Sometimes we are unable to recruit the staff we know will work best because they don't have the piece of paper required– there needs to be more trust in services and their knowledge, sound judgement, and experience.²²
- Longer term funding is critical for building up a skilled workforce. Women staff are passionate, have empathy, are carers. Women usually stay in the job, they provide good stability. BUT, contracts make it stop/start/stop.

21 NCOSS hosted a roundtable about Aboriginal Employment in the social services sector in partnership with Aboriginal Affairs NSW and CAPO NSW. The report *Non-Government Organisations Roundtable Report: Ngarala Duba (2022)* can be viewed [here](#).

22 NCOSS is also hearing from members that the roll out of the new DFV positions has been hampered by DCJ proscribing the level of pay for the positions – and at a rate that is too low to find adequately qualified staff working with highly traumatised people.

- Funding needs to be realistic and cover the real cost of service provision.²³ 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 – for example employee cars need to be equipped with bull bars, and there are higher costs for better mobile coverage.
- The sector also needs funding for the improved provision of:
 - Skills training and professional development Access to face to face training.
 - Childcare
 - Traineeships and mentoring programs. Including innovations such as the Mission Australia
 - Paid work experience.
 - Supported placements/pracs.
 - Supported education and training.
 - Different pay levels for regional areas.
 - Realistic staff ratios to ensure staff are not working for free.
 - Flexible working arrangements especially for parents, childcare, housing, retention bonus, better workplace conditions.
 - Wellbeing provisions for staff - not at the expense of admin costs (and other overheads). Including better leave.
 - Technology to support training and delivery.
 - Portable long service leave
 - Clinical/professionalsupervision (a critical component of high quality service provision for communities in need).
 - A range of diverse place based services - including smaller ones.
- There is an unnecessary waste of staff hours on reporting – DEX and other reporting systems should be more compatible, streamlined, and user friendly.²⁴

Culturally aware recruitment practices

- Recruitment processes need to be culturally sensitive and barriers such as licence requirements addressed.
- Make job application and recruiting processes simpler and supported to attract skilled staff who don't think they can apply.
- Support the applicant through the process and through onboarding.
- Provide pathways for people with lived experience to enter the sector. Requires wrap around support.
- Create different learning pathways – hands on – TAFE attendance, recognition of current competencies.

²³ Refer NCOSS report the [High Cost of Doing Business](#) 2022

²⁴ DEX regularly comes up in discussions with members as an unsuitable and time wasting component of reporting - causing a drain on staff resources; and not delivering any useful information for services.

Improved recruitment overall

- Be responsive and flexible to local needs in recruitment and employment. Develop frameworks to support service/role design.
- Develop quicker processes for recruitment.
- Strong organisation induction and mentoring.
- Provide culturally safe places for diverse staff.
- Create a focus on training up local people (create a keeper!)
- Develop traineeships for high school students to start an employment pathway , for example with a Cert III requirement (could be targeted to early school leavers or those not in schools).
- Create school leaver readiness programs – for example setting them up with TFN, bank account, and a medicare number.
- Build relationships with TAFE and other training institutions.

Marathon Health has developed a number of programs to improve recruitment:

- *Pathways for First Nations employment and opportunities. We embrace lived experience, cultural knowledge, skills and expertise and we work to ensure employment and upskilling opportunities for First Nations peoples is readily available.*
- *Core Connect program for psychology interns Including fortnightly workshops, peer-to-peer connections and social opportunities via our Community of Practice.*
- *Student placements and our New Graduate Program for speech, OT and social workers.*
- *We train staff on the job, offer courses and free training, and assist with assignments.*
- *We also pay wages for other providers to host students and trainees.*

Marathon Health, Community Health Service Provider, Western and Southern NSW

Other considerations

- Take 50% off HECs fees if work in a rural or remote community for 3-4 years for all essential services police fire, ambos, education and the sector.



Thank you!

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For more information

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