

HOMELESSNESS AND WOMEN EXITING PRISON

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INTRODUCTION

This paper will discuss the impetus of the joint project between three organisations to provide accommodation and support for women released from prison and experiencing homelessness in South Australia. The service description will be outlined and pathways for clients examined. The rationale for the separation of services will be discussed followed by the expected outcomes of the project for women and the organisations. Finally, the lessons learnt thus far will be described and provide recommendations for future projects.

BACKGROUND

The Women's Accommodation Support Service (WASS) is provided by Offenders Aid and Rehabilitation Services SA (OARS SA) and assists women released from prison who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. WASS works in partnership with the woman to access safe, secure and stable accommodation as the main aim. However, the use of a holistic approach to fulfilling this aim is vital. In order to maintain the accommodation that is accessed it is essential that other issues that may be causing distress or concern in the woman's life are also addressed. The types of issues that a woman may be struggling with include; social adjustment and acceptance, lack of support networks, financial difficulties, drug and/or alcohol use, domestic violence, being an adult survivor of child abuse, mental health, physical health and/or disability, sexuality, parenting and/or family reunification, legal (including family court) and unemployment. Some of these issues may be addressed within the case management role but others may need referral to appropriate services. Within OARS, services such as drug counselling, financial counselling, personal/family counselling and emergency assistance are offered to provide continuity of care within the one organisation.

The Women's Housing Association Inc (TWHA) is a not-for-profit community managed housing organisation that specialises in providing medium to long term, statewide, affordable housing primarily to women, and children, survivors of domestic violence. TWHA accesses properties through a government authority in order to provide accommodation. They have expertise in asset and property management, tenancy and rent management. TWHA has provided accommodation to women and children escaping domestic violence for 23 years. In recent times they have broadened their scope to provide accommodation for other disadvantaged women. TWHA provides a community friendly landlord role and has traditionally linked clients with support services.

The South Australian Housing Trust is the State Government public housing authority. The SAHT provides housing assistance and financial assistance to access accommodation in the private rental market to a diverse group of customers on low incomes and those with other special needs.

The seeds for this project were initially sown when Vicki Lachlan, the Executive Director of TWHA, and Cecile Dutreix, the Coordinator of WASS, met at a seminar and found they both held strong views on the importance of appropriate, affordable and safe housing for women, particularly women experiencing disadvantage. WASS had been providing case management and support to women released from prison who are homeless or at risk of homelessness to access accommodation in the first instance and to maintain that accommodation in the long term. However, the availability of appropriate accommodation was proving to be a formidable barrier at the first step of this intervention with women. TWHA had also noticed the increasing need for accommodation by women with other circumstances of disadvantage, including women caught in the criminal justice system.

The SAHT on the other hand has, due to a lack of resources and dwindling social housing stock, found itself in a position of tighter eligibility criteria which inevitably leads to the provision of welfare housing rather than social housing. Thus, SAHT now targets those most in need, experiencing critical levels of disadvantage and often with high and complex needs. This target group is likely to experience difficulty in maintaining their tenancy without some level of support and assistance. Thus the SAHT are keen to see supports accessed by tenants residing in their accommodation.

THE SERVICE

- Property management provided by The Women's Housing Association.
- OARS Women's Accommodation Support Service provide:
 - Flexible, wholistic and client-centred case management.
 - Support.
 - Groups and courses eg. Life skills, self-esteem, drugs and alcohol and relapse prevention, primary health etc. (to be provided by WASS in collaboration with government and non-government agencies).
 - Information and referral.
 - Outreach service.
 - A service to women not accommodated by the service but eligible for support and case management to access and maintain alternative accommodation.
 - A culturally appropriate service (will aim to employ some ATSI staff).
- Accommodation is to be transitional ie. Women will be accommodated until independent accommodation is accessed.
- The provision of long term accommodation and intensive case management and support to a very small percentage of women who require this level of assistance due to extremely high and complex needs and chronic level of institutionalisation.
- The Women's Accommodation Support Service has been providing a service to the Adelaide Women's Prison (AWP) for over 3 years. WASS staff visit the prison at least once per week to assess women the prison staff have identified as being homeless or at risk of homelessness on release. Good working relationships have been developed between AWP staff and WASS staff. This link is vital to effective referral and identification of clients eligible for this service.

THE PROPERTIES

- 6 properties, differing in size for single women or women with children eg. units, 2 b/r, 3 b/r, some with yards.
- Walking distance to public transport, chemist, shops, doctors and school.
- Project to be located in near city suburb for access to essential services.
- Not on main roads or in vulnerable locations (ie on corners of main roads or behind/beside public access walkways)
- Secure rear yards with the ability to put cars behind gates (therefore not visible from street)
- Easy access to amenities and shops
- At least 2 bedrooms per dwelling
- Security screen doors

PATHWAYS

As briefly referred to above WASS receive many of their referrals from the prison. Thus, the intervention starts whilst the woman is still incarcerated and offers an opportunity to both prepare for release and develop a trusting relationship. The relationship between client and support staff is vital to the success of the intervention. On release many women experience significant levels of anxiety and will rarely access staff or services with which they have no relationship or prior experience. Initiating the relationship on the woman's own terms in the prison environment will often enable a supportive relationship to develop that the woman is keen to continue on her release from prison. At the initial assessment the woman's options will be explored and may include; immediate placement into one of these properties, emergency or short-term accommodation whilst awaiting a vacancy, accessing other accommodation options or staying with friends or family. A likely path for a woman released from prison may be short-term accommodation, on to transitional accommodation through this project then into long-term, independent accommodation that may continue to be supported via outreach. Long-term accommodation may include SAHT, TWHA general program or private rental. TWHA particular interest in this project is to be able to offer several stages in

the housing continuum for women exiting prison, aiming to achieve long-term sustainable housing and reintegration into the community of their choice.

SEPARATION OF SERVICES

The model used for the project is that of separating support and accommodation. The hypothesis being that each agency is an expert in their field and that the bringing together of the three agencies would form a type of symbiotic relationship. Each agency providing a service that the other didn't have the means to and each benefiting from what the other agency could offer.

Early in this partnership, particularly between WASS and TWHA, it became evident that both agencies were philosophically aligned with regard to purpose, values and expertise with disadvantaged women. Mutual goals such as remaining client focussed, developing relationships with other relevant agencies and encouraging tenant/client participation are vital to a successful partnership that offers a high quality service to its clients. The alignment, philosophically and in its understanding of the client group and issues, of the agencies involved in providing support and accommodation have proven to be crucial to the successful implementation of such a project where accommodation and support are separated.

Each agency aimed to improve the quality of service aimed at assisting disadvantaged women released from prison and experiencing homelessness. The bringing together of three agencies, all experts in their field, allows each agency to concentrate on their role. The role of the SAHT is to provide affordable and appropriate properties that TWHA will manage. TWHA provides a community friendly landlord role and the WASS provides an appropriate and wholistic support service. A Memorandum of Understanding has been developed between WASS and TWHA to clearly outline the responsibilities of each party, and the Tenancy Agreement describes the tenant's obligations. Key to the success of the project is sustainable and successful tenancies for the women. Therefore all services work together whilst maintaining their own roles with the tenant. If and when a woman needs to move on the agencies and the woman work together to achieve this.

OUTCOMES

The anticipated outcome for the woman is that the project provides a stepping stone from prison or emergency/short term accommodation to transitional accommodation and finally into long term accommodation. The stability the transitional housing provides combined with the support of two agencies with joint philosophies will hopefully lead to further sustainable tenancies, increased social participation, increased health and wellbeing and reduced recidivism.

For the services – WASS is able to continue to offer ongoing support through the various tenures the women choose and can keep track of the women, rather than them becoming lost in an increasingly maze-like system; SAHT meets some of its community service obligations; and TWHA is further able to assist a very marginalised group of women with their housing opportunities. Each agency improves the quality of their service by providing a responsive and client focussed service that also contributes to the identification of how to achieve successful tenancies.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNT

- A great deal of time has been spent working on this project in the development stage, lobbying, meeting etc – with an expected outcome of merely 10 properties. And whilst this project targets a very disadvantaged group of women, TWHA 'normal' target group is also very disadvantaged and that involves nearly 300 properties. Economies of scale cannot be a measurement in terms of time and effort expended to establish this project.
- The source of the properties – through the Supported Tenancy Scheme of the SAHT – even at a reduced rate – has forced the project to charge a higher than usual rent.

- The administration and staffing costs, on top of the above rent, and staffing is higher for this project in that three monthly lease renewals are being undertaken rather than six monthly or longer.
- In order to cut the costs for the women in the houses a separate monthly lawn mowing round rather than the usual three weekly round has been organised – to cut their costs down a fraction considering their rent.
- Normally Holland blinds (for security reasons) would be automatically installed in TWHA properties as they are acquired, however, starting from scratch with a new program has meant that costs are in the red up front before any tenants entered the properties. The practice of installing blinds has been revised due to these costs as well as the fact that the properties are generally listed for possible redevelopment within the SAHT in the coming 4-6 years.
- TWHA don't usually allocate properties with the support service 'intervention' – that is usually TWHA prerogative. However in order for this project to succeed and the supports to be closely linked with the tenancy it is essential that WASS is involved at every level, and for every decision.
- Things as simple as light globes throughout are not installed when the property is obtained from the SAHT. This is another upfront expense for TWHA – we could expect the woman to install them, however, if she doesn't have much furniture or household goods it would be pretty bleak to put her in a house without light (she also wouldn't have a ladder to install them and being older dwellings the ceilings are generally higher than modern housing).
- Accessing furniture, particularly for women starting from scratch, is a time consuming but essential aspect of the case management process.
- TWHA waiting list for women escaping domestic violence is growing all the time, therefore whilst this project is closely linked to our longer term housing; all women are having to wait longer and longer – so the so-called transition period that women exiting prison will face within this housing project is going to blow-out further and further.
- With the SAHT continuing to reduce its stock there will be less housing for TWHA to access for this project (or indeed for other projects). In South Australia marginalised groups are going to find it harder and harder to access housing that is affordable and with landlords that are going to understand their particular needs.
- It is possible to separate support and accommodation and provide a service equal to, if not superior, to those in which support and accommodation are provided by one agency.
- Clients are well served by separate accommodation and support services. Support staff are able to work within a clearly defined role that focuses on the client and has the ability to provide a throughcare approach that supports the client from prison through the housing continuum to long term accommodation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion it is suggested that this project has been the result of an old cliché, "necessity is the mother of invention". The impetus for this project came about through the identification of a gap in accommodation for women exiting prison and homeless, one of the most disadvantaged and marginalised groups in our community. Despite such documents as the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948) and in particular The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), The right to adequate housing (Art. 11 (1) of the Covenant), of which Australia is a party there are many in our community without adequate housing. Commonwealth and State/Territory Governments need to address this basic human right as a matter of urgency. Projects such as this one will only go part way to addressing the needs of homeless women and will not continue to succeed unless the provision of bricks and mortar and support become a Government and community priority.