Federal Budget 2014 – what does it mean for homelessness and domestic/family violence?

We’ve had a look at the budget and summarised some of the key decisions that will impact on homelessness and domestic and family violence. Please note, this is not an exhaustive guide but we’ve tried to capture most of the major policy and program funding shifts.

Housing and homelessness

New Department of Social Services Grants and a new departmental structure.

New DSS grant arrangements bring together 18 programmes from 5 former departments into 7 streamlined programmes to align social policy functions.¹ DSS will have new 5-year grants beginning on July 1st 2014 to be offered to 250 services delivering Family and Relationship Services, Family Law Services and Communities for Children Facilitating Partner Services. These new arrangements prioritise streamlining of existing services, performance auditing and “a greater opportunity for innovation and collaboration in the delivery of services”. In addition to the 4 existing Ageing and Aged Care Programmes, 3 new categories have been created, Families and Communities Programme, Housing and Homelessness Programme and Disability, Mental Health and Carers Programme.

The Housing and Homelessness Programme will provide support for research, peak bodies, innovative projects, and emerging Government priorities. This programme includes the Housing and Homelessness Service Improvement and Sector Support Activity² which will build the evidence base for policy addressing homelessness and housing affordability over the long term; identify best practice models, enhance existing housing and homelessness policies and programmes; build the capacity of the community sector to improve linkages and networks and raise awareness of housing and homelessness issues at all levels of government and in community.

Homelessness Prevention will now sit under the Families and Communities Programme.

Discontinuation of the National Rental Affordability Scheme: The National Rental Affordability Scheme (NRAS) is a partnership between the federal government and the states and territories to invest in affordable rental housing which began in 2008. It seeks to address the shortage of affordable rental housing by offering financial incentives to persons or entities such as the business sector and community organisations to build and rent dwellings to low and moderate income households at a rate that is at least 20 per cent below the market

value rent. Discontinuation of NRAS is a very disappointing but not entirely surprising outcome. It’s particularly frustrating that a successful program that increased the availability of affordable rental housing has been targeted, while very expensive tax concessions like negative gearing and capital gains tax exemptions remain in place.

**National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH):** As announced earlier this year, the Government has extended the NPAH for another 12 months. While the extension of NPAH was welcomed, ongoing uncertainty about a commitment to this program over the longer term is a real concern for many organisations providing homelessness prevention programs. There are no forward estimates for the NPAH in the budget after 2015.

The Government’s Budget Fact Sheet on Housing has more detail on the new programmes and arrangements.3

**Women and Children**

**Office for Women:** There is a $1.6 million reduction in the programmatic budget for the women’s leadership and development strategy portfolio in Office for Women over four years.

There is an increase in the Office for Women's program budget for 2014-2015 of $840,000, this represents a 31% increase from 2013-2014.

**Funding for the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and Children.**

Larissa Waters, Greens MP announced on budget night that “funding for the National Plan to Prevent Domestic Violence is being cut by $7.4 million over forward estimates.”4 We believe she’s referring to detail in the DSS budget statement that refers to “National Initiatives” but as the National Plan sits in the Office for Women (which is now in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet) further details of this cut need to be confirmed.5 In the DSS budget, National Initiatives will see an immediate $2.6 million reduction in this 2014 budget year followed by a gradual rise in the forward estimates over the next 3 years.

There are a number of ongoing commitments relating to the National Plan made under the 2013 budget which it appears the government will honour. Budget announcements relating to the personal safety of women and children (National Plan) for 2013-14 included:

- $5.2 million over 5 years for the establishment and operation of the Foundation to Prevent Violence against Women and their Children.
- $7.6 million over 3 years to continue and extend DV-Alert training program.

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- $28.5 million to June 2017 to continue and expand 1800RESPECT, enabling an increase in the number of counsellors for the service, translation of online materials and online community for workers to access specialist professional support.
- $3 million over 3 years to dedicated research stream on perpetrator interventions through the National Centre of Excellence to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children.

Other previous funding announcements that relate or could potentially have an impact on preventing violence against women and their children included:

- $434.1 million over 4 years for the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. This includes $45 million to provide expert services to help support survivors
- $0.5 million between 2012-13 in grants for advocacy, research, training, and service provision for Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C)
- $10.3 million over 4 years, for Community Legal Centres and $42 million over 2 years for Legal Assistance Services
- $21.4 million, over 4 years to the Fair Work Commission to provide a legal remedy for victims of workplace bullying
- $4.6 million over four years to establish the Andrew Fisher Applied Policy Institute for Ageing
- Funding between 2012-2013 for sexual assault counselling in remote NT areas as part of the “mobile outreach services plus”
- Major internet service providers (ISPs) will be required to block child abuse websites on the INTERPOL ‘worst of’ child abuse list.

The explicit cuts that we can see relating to these previous commitments are the cuts to the Family Court and Circuit Court budget and a redirection of the funds for the Andrew Fisher Institute. We await confirmation of further detail on the funding of the National Plan.

New funding

**Funding for relationship counselling:** The $20 million Stronger Relationships trial which will be conducted during 2014–15 and will provide up to 100,000 couples with a $200 subsidy towards education or counselling to help strengthen their marriage or relationship. We believe that preventative investment in relationship counselling could be better targeted to men’s behaviour change, healthy relationship and primary prevention initiatives.

Quality control issues relating to the type of services offered under this initiative have not yet been detailed – there may be issues for people affected by DFV accessing relationship counselling for example.

**Online Safety for Children:** $10 million funding will be provided over four years for measures outlined in the policy to Enhance Online Safety for Children:
- 7.5 million to assist schools to access accredited online safety programmes
- 2.4 million to establish and operate the Office of the Children's e-Safety Commissioner (the Commissioner) to take a leadership role in online safety
- $0.1 million to support Australian-based research and information campaigns on online safety.

**Funding cuts**

Inevitably cuts to other areas will also have an impact on women and children affected by domestic and family violence.

**Older women:** There is a real concern that the discontinuation of the low income super supplement and the indexation of the aged pension to CPI will make housing unaffordable for many older women, particularly those renting or needing to enter the private rental market after leaving a violent relationship.

**Pressure on families:** There are a range of reforms to Family Tax Benefits A & B. Of particular concern is the freezing of Family Tax Benefits rates until 2016, which will put further pressure on the budgets of single parent families who are already under considerable stress in the face of rising costs. Housing costs are rising much faster than inflation. This benefit freeze represents a significant real cut to the support available to families already experiencing housing stress. Cuts to Newstart, Youth Allowance and University funding will impact on young people’s ability to live independently. National Council for Single Mothers media release calls it a “Brutal Budget”. [http://www.ncsmc.org.au/](http://www.ncsmc.org.au/)

**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services:** The National Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention Legal Services (FVPLS) program was advised of $3.6 million in cuts over the next three years late last year but it is likely that the streamlining approach under 2014 budget will further cut vital programs and services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. First reports are that Aboriginal Affairs has been cut by more than $500 million. A press conference was held in Canberra the morning after the budget with Kirstie Parker from the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, representatives from NACCHO, NATSILS and Antoinette Braybrook from the National Family Violence Prevention Legal Service. None of the agencies have released a written statement yet but the National Congress confirmed that it is likely to be posted on their website soon. [https://nationalcongress.com.au/](https://nationalcongress.com.au/)

**ACOSS** have made a brief statement following the budget and will be releasing further analysis next week. [http://acoss.org.au/media/release/budget_divides_the_nation_young_and_old_rich_and_poor_acoss](http://acoss.org.au/media/release/budget_divides_the_nation_young_and_old_rich_and_poor_acoss)

**Community Legal Centre funding** – Cuts to CLC funding of $19.6m over 4 years were announced in December last year. No media announcements about the cuts to CLCs have yet been made by the peaks or national community legal centre network since the budget announcement. For more detail [http://www.naclc.org.au/](http://www.naclc.org.au/)