

Kara House Submission to Royal Commission

Introduction

Kara House is part of the Victorian women's refuge service system and provides crisis accommodation and support to women and children escaping family violence, including those from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Kara House is a small service with one communal house providing accommodation for 5 women and up to 8 children.

Kara house was founded in 1978 and operates from a feminist perspective, recognising that family/domestic violence predominately affects women and children and is understood to occur because of the power imbalance between individuals, which is condoned and supported by dominant social attitudes and structures.

Kara House encourages and empowers women to take control of their lives and works towards eradicating all forms of abuse perpetrated against women and children.

Our Mission

*Kara House supports the right of women and children to live in safety and without fear -
using professional practice informed by Feminist, Human Rights and Social Justice
Principles*

Our Vision

*Kara House is committed to providing a physical and personal environment that optimises
the privacy, value and strength of the individual.*

Philosophy

All women and children should have the right to live free of domestic violence, harassment, discrimination and abuse.

Background

Kara House is funded under Homelessness to provide Crisis Accommodation. The original purpose of **women's refuges was to provide safe and secure** short term accommodation. In the past during the short 4-6 week stay in refuge and once past the initial crisis, women were primarily assisted to obtain income and alternative housing. Once relocated woman and children were linked to counsellors, education, childcare, immigration and language assistance etc.

Women and children now stay in refuge often for 12 weeks or longer and our support of clients in transitional housing can stretch 5 years or more.

Kara House does not apply many restrictions on the clients that stay with us. Women and women with children that stay at Kara house cover the spectrum of age from babies, to women 60+ and includes pregnant women. Kara House accepts older boys, up to 18 years, young women and families of up to 4 children. This is only limited by the size of our accommodation. We encourage women to continue working, enrol children in school and childcare and allow women to identify if our location is

safe for them. We support 2 clients with no permanent residency at any one time provided they are on an appropriate visa. Kara House endeavours to maintain a quick turnaround of refuge beds within one to two days, provided there are no maintenance issues.

What we do

As a state-wide women's refuge, Kara House provides:

- Safe and secure crisis accommodation
- Transitional housing support- sometimes for 5+ years
- Outreach Support- this is a growth area for our service and currently includes much needed support to women and women with children in motels while they await refuge beds. This is in partnership with Safe Steps Family Violence Resource Centre
- A Place to Call Home (APTCH)- funded program for families with intensive needs residing in DHHS owned transitional housing properties to facilitate the family forming linkages and the property transferring to become their permanent public housing.
- Risk assessment and safety planning with women and children- in refuge, THM and outreach and as a secondary consult with other services including Safe Steps.
- Case management, with crisis intervention and liaison with specialist services
- Holistic assessment, information, advocacy and active referral to other appropriate support services- including health professionals
- Cultural support through secondary consultation and co-case management with specialist services
- GLBTI support- historically we have provided support to Lesbian clients and most recently several transgender clients. We have also provided support to clients that identify as Bi sexual and transgender
- Partnerships with relevant stakeholders as part of an integrated response to domestic violence, including close working relationships with providers of other domestic violence services
- Secondary consultation and case management with mainstream services regarding the provision of appropriate and effective support to women and children
- Community education and training to other community services to improve community understanding about issues relating to family violence and to encourage changes in individual and community attitudes
- Advocacy at an individual, service system and broader structural level to challenge providers and government to adopt responses that are non-tolerant of violence and provide support to women and children
- Student placement- 2 or more students per year undergo placement within Kara House. We believe this is an important contribution to the quality training of future workers in the sector.
- Group work- In response to client need Kara House has developed an in house dv support group provided in house for women work program and plans in house counselling.
- Art Therapy- In response to client need Kara House has instigated an Art Therapy group provided in house for women and children

Issues

- **Housing-No exits out of refuge increasing pressure on system throughputs**
- **Children-No funding for refuge services to support children**
 - **Child Protection compelling women to enter refuge**
- **Crisis accommodation-Communal refuge/old buildings**
- **Clients- Increasing complexity of clients- Alcohol and Other Drugs/mental health**
- **Clients without PR- lack of options for women without PR**
- **Legal- lack of access to legal assistance**
- **Family violence in mainstream services**

Solutions

Housing

- **Provide funding for housing**

Housing is in short supply – clients are forced to stay in refuge longer and this sometimes lengthy stay impacts adversely on the women and children who stay with us and the system as a whole. On occasion a woman will return to her partner because “at least she has a house”. Single women are particularly disadvantaged.

- Women and children need access to safe affordable housing.
- Prioritise housing for single women
- Prioritise Office of Housing transfers for victims of family violence
- Expand A Place to Call Home Program (APTCH) as a priority for women and children victims of family violence
- Funding for family violence services to provide increased private rental brokerage/Housing Establishment Funds
- Funding for family violence services to provide increased access to Safe at Home for women who wish to return home.

Children

- **Provide funding for refuge services to support children**
- **Improve partnerships with Child Protection**

We are not funded to provide services for children. We **do** provide services for children, however, by virtue of our limited funding this does not cover the needs of the children we accommodate. Funding **refuge services would allow us to employ a qualified children’s worker, provide therapeutic groups for children and improve the parenting of mothers.**

Refuge services have frequent interaction with Child Protection. Often it is because a woman has been compelled to leave her home and enter refuge for the protection of the children. From time to time a women will enter refuge and Child protection will advise there is a court order stating she must reside in refuge, however there is no consultation with refuge regarding this. There is little understanding amongst Child Protection workers regarding the difficulty accessing housing and the issues for a service supporting a woman who does not want to be in refuge. Child Protection workers often do not share relevant information with refuge.

- Increase funding and access to counselling services for children.
- Increase eligibility for Special Childcare Benefit to enable vulnerable children to have ongoing social interaction.
- Refuge services are open to providing education and information regarding family violence to improve understanding of family violence for Child Protection workers.
- Child Protection to improve communication with refuge.

Crisis Accommodation

- **Redevelop refuge accommodation**

Some services, including Kara House, still operate from a communal model. This model suits some clients, however there are many who are deterred from entering refuge as they prefer privacy or fear exposing their children to clients with drug and alcohol or mental health issues.

- Accommodation needs to be redeveloped, not just refurbished. Redevelopment of sites would enable clients to be accommodated individually but still maintain the ability to connect with other women and children if desired.

Clients

- **Recognise the complexity of clients**

Women and children present with complex issues- these include drug and alcohol and mental health issues. Some of these issues mean that women are not suitable for communal living or that their issues prevent them from engaging with support. Access to mental health services is limited, complicated and often not available when required.

- Prioritise access to Mental Health and Drug and Alcohol services for victims of family violence

Clients without PR

- **Provide funding to refuge services to support clients without permanent Residency**

Women from cultural backgrounds quite often have no access to income or access to income may take several weeks. Refuge services provide food vouchers, transport and material aid in the interim. Certain clients have no access to Medicare or pharmaceutical benefits and the cost is borne by services. Women from New Zealand who are not entitled to any income, except for Family Tax Benefit, if they have children, present a particular problem as they are not entitled to public housing and, unless they work, have no ability to afford private rental.

- Provide funding to refuge services for the support of women and women with children who have no access to Centrelink benefits
- Prioritise access to Centrelink

Legal

- **Improve education about family violence to other services**
- **Provide access to Legal Aid**
- **Hold perpetrators accountable**

Refuge services are often required to advocate for clients as to their rights. This applies specifically to Office of Housing, real estate agents and police. Refuge and other family violence workers understand the complexity of relationships and the infinite manipulative and controlling tactics of perpetrators. Our experience indicates that police quite often take a simplistic view.

- **Education for other related services such as the Office of Housing as to a woman's rights under Family Violence legislation to remain in the home.**
- Greater education for magistrates, court staff and police
- Priority access to Legal Aid for victims of family violence
- Police to uphold Intervention orders and act on them

Specialisation

- **Maintain specialisation of workers in the family violence sector**

Kara House workers are all qualified with a minimum of a Diploma of Community Welfare or similar.

All new workers undertake the Common Risk Assessment training (CRAF) for specialist services and also the 4 day accredited Introduction to Family Violence training provided by DVRC (Domestic Violence resource Centre).

All workers undertake an extensive orientation which includes close supervision and mentoring by workers with significant experience in the domestic violence sector.

Workers in the sector are not highly paid; they do however have a passion for educating and assisting women and children and an empathy for the client experience.

Refuge provides a unique experience and opportunity to observe and work with women and children **at their most vulnerable and "real"**. We identify low self-esteem, mental health, drug and alcohol and parenting behaviours and make appropriate referrals. **The woman's stay in refuge is a rare** opportunity to engage and facilitate change. It is important to maintain this knowledge and understanding of the multiple unique experiences of women and children that can only be learnt by working closely with them and not have it diluted by reliance on mainstream services. This is not to say that there should not be a broad education program to enable other services to identify family violence, rather there should be utilisation and appreciation of the knowledge already within the family violence sector.

Appropriate Funding

- **Fund refuge services with other domestic violence services**

Kara House is funded under Homelessness. In terms of our Peak Bodies and networks this can sometimes place us with dedicated housing services and render much of our networking opportunities irrelevant.

From the perspective of a women and her children there is a belief that we have access to housing and an expectation that we will provide housing. This is often not possible.

We believe we should be funded under Domestic Violence to provide crisis accommodation and domestic violence support- our core business and why our workers entered the sector. Refuge services need recognition and funding for the numerous outreach clients they support, for working with children and women without permanent residency. If we are funded appropriately we can employ more staff, expand and undertake additional support. Kara House currently supports clients residing in motel while awaiting refuge beds, in partnership with Safe Steps Family Violence resource Centre in response to the needs of vulnerable clients- appropriate funding would allow us to expand this to provide additional dedicated support.

- Fund refuge services under family violence not homelessness