

# **Alice Springs Women's Shelter: a history and overview**

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## **ABOUT THIS OVERVIEW**

This history and overview has come from a national research project with three independent women's specialist services and the work they do with and for Aboriginal women experiencing domestic and family violence (DFV). A range of methods were employed in the project including literature reviews, surveys, interviews and focus groups. For more information about the project, please consult the final report – Putt, Holder & O'Leary (2016).

One of the partner services was the Alice Springs Women's Shelter. The purpose of this paper is to document the evolution of the service in more detail than was possible in the main research report. The overview and history of the service draws on published and unpublished material, as well as interviews conducted with staff and stakeholders for the project in 2015. In total, 24 one-on-one interviews were conducted with ASWS staff, former staff, and stakeholders. Where permission was granted, interviewees are named in this document. For current information and further background on ASWS please consult the website – [www.asws.org](http://www.asws.org).

## **Introduction**

The second biggest town in the Northern Territory and located in the centre of Australia, Alice Springs has never had a large population. Recent census data indicates it is no more than 25,000 people of whom one-fifth identify as being an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person. The town acts as a regional hub and service centre for the central cross-border region of Australia, which has an estimated population of around 7,000 primarily Indigenous people living in more than 26 communities (Putt, Sarre & Rowden, 2013).

Alice Springs has a history of, and reputation for, high rates of interpersonal violence, including domestic homicides (Bolger, 1991; Lloyd, 2014; Rothwell, 2011).<sup>1</sup> The extent and severity of

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<sup>1</sup> Alcohol abuse is widely recognised as a contributory factor to interpersonal violence and the extent and impacts of alcohol abuse amongst Aboriginal people has been the subject of major health focused research (for example, the longitudinal study in central Australia by Symons, Gray, Chikritzhs., Skov, Saggars, Boffa, & Low, 2012). Those interviewed about the early days of the ASWS comment about “the critical and overwhelming role” that alcohol played as a contributor to violence (email correspondence with Pam Ditton, 11 September 2016). Contemporary interviewees do not downplay alcohol as an element but noted a range of factors that impact Aboriginal women's experience of domestic and family violence. There is consensus, however, that reduction in the availability and supply of alcohol is beneficial to women's safety and wellbeing.

domestic and family violence (DFV) was evident in the data cited in an evaluation of the Alice Springs Integrated Response to Family and Domestic Violence project (see Putt, Holder & Shaw, 2016). According to police data, Aboriginal females are far more likely to be the victim of an assault, particularly those related to domestic violence, than non-Indigenous females; and are more likely to be the victim of an assault related to domestic violence than other kinds of assault. The high rates of victimization recorded for Aboriginal women are indicated by:

- The rate at which Aboriginal females are recorded by police as victims of domestic violence-related assaults in Alice Springs is much greater than the rest of the NT (3.6 times greater based on the average monthly rate for 2013).
- Indigenous females in the Alice Springs Hospital (ASH) made up 66 per cent of all Indigenous women hospitalised for assault related injuries in the NT public hospitals, and that Indigenous women are nearly twice as likely as Indigenous men to be in the ASH for such injuries. (Hospitalisation separation data for assault related injuries, 2013-14).
- Ninety-five per cent of the 447 women and 356 children accommodated by the ASWS in 2009-10 were Indigenous. (Putt, Holder & Shaw, 2016)

Since its establishment in 1975, the Alice Springs Women's Shelter (ASWS) has provided a vital refuge for women – mostly Aboriginal women - experiencing domestic and family violence. It has always been a relatively small independent, non-government service run by women for women. As Table 1 shows, the first decade after its establishment was a period of considerable turmoil related to both the management and funding of the service. The following two decades were a time of consolidation and in the past decade, there has been an expansion of the service from crisis accommodation to include outreach and court support services.

Over the past forty years, the majority of staff at ASWS have been non-Aboriginal women, but Aboriginal women – as clients, staff, and Board members - have had a significant influence on how the service has operated. A core aspect to the service has been efforts to engage with a diverse range of Aboriginal women so that the service is accessible and meets their needs. The following overview traces the evolution of the ASWS from its early years. It illustrates how the service has developed in response to demands from governments and the local community, and been influenced by broader socio-political trends in service provision with and for Aboriginal

people. Throughout its history, the ASWS has been at the frontline of helping women and their families who have been affected by DFV.

**Table 1: Brief timeline of ASWS – a history of engagement**

<b>FIRST DECADE (1975-1985)</b>  BATTLES	<b>SECOND AND THIRD DECADES (1985-2005)</b>  CONSOLIDATION	<b>FOURTH DECADE (2005-present)</b>  EXPANSION FROM CRISIS TO OUTREACH
<p>1975 Established by Women’s Electoral Lobby</p> <p>1977 New collective – service run and for all women – ‘black and white’</p> <p>Aboriginal Women’s Council established by Aboriginal women</p> <p>Inadequate premises under pressure with more and more Aboriginal from town camps and communities accessing the premises</p> <p>Anti-Aboriginal locals who highlighted over-crowding sided with one faction of the mainly non-Aboriginal management collective</p> <p>1980 lost funding from NT government. Seen as only catering for Aboriginal women</p> <p>Premises bulldozed</p> <p>1981 funding commenced, new premises – The Women’s Community House</p> <p>Aboriginal Women’s committee effectively ceased functioning</p> <p>1984 Clients locked out the management committee</p>	<p>1990 purpose-built shelter</p> <p>Additions made in following years</p> <p>Services offered included a bus to transport people to services around town and appointments, also helped with trying to find accommodation after the Shelter</p> <p>1991 renamed the Alice Springs Women’s Shelter</p> <p>1980s women’s centres started in the communities, which made a huge difference ‘able to try and sort things out there’ (shelter worker)</p> <p>NT government critical of the number of Aboriginal women who kept returning to the Shelter</p> <p>Late 1990s funding for one outreach worker</p>	<p>2007/08 report – 30 bed accommodation service, 94% of clients were Indigenous</p> <p>Provided education and support groups for women and children in town camps and wider community</p> <p>2008 first increase in funding in 10 years</p> <p>2007-09 – women’s social activities at healing centres in town camps</p> <p>2010 funding for outreach program, estimated 16% clients non-Aboriginal women</p> <p>2012 start of the Alice Springs Integrated Response to DFV project. ASWS core agency</p> <p>Funding for new court advocacy and support position</p> <p>Funding to provide partner/ex-partner support as part of new Men’s Behaviour Change Program (run by Tangentyere Council)</p> <p>2013/14 launch of diversity policy</p> <p>2015 funding to extend outreach program to four remote communities</p> <p>2016 project to better engage young women</p>

## Establishment and early years

The Alice Springs Women's Shelter was established in 1975 by the local Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL). It was located in an old Housing Commission House in Bath Street, in the centre of town, and was referred to as a Women's Centre. Initially WEL members ran the centre on a voluntary basis, but eventually funding was secured through the NT Department of Health. It did not initially act as a refuge but provided services including emergency help for "personal and family crisis including domestic arguments." (Tuzewski, 1998)

Late in 1977, at the Annual General Meeting, a group of women took over the committee. Pam Ditton, a member of the new committee, explains that it had a vision that "it was a service run by women for all women – black and white. These were the terms used in the 1970s. We had a collective management constitution" (Ditton, interview, 2016).

The new collective set about providing women with respite from domestic violence. Urban Aboriginal women and non-Aboriginal women accessed the service during 1978. The collective sought to encourage Aboriginal women to join the collective but it wasn't particularly successful. Ditton explains,

We found they weren't comfortable with the style of the times, with collectives....During 1978 a parallel Aboriginal women's group was established comprised of many of the key Aboriginal women activists in town who had important traditional roles and were respected by Aboriginal women and men as women lawmakers. They would establish the norms of conduct, who had rights to come in so that white women weren't laying down the conduct rules.... That worked extremely successfully through to 1979.... There were very good relationships between the two groups Ditton, interview AS24, 2016." Ditton, interview, 2016

Lesley Sammon, the Coordinator of the Centre during the period explains that the Aboriginal women's council was an idea suggested by Aboriginal women. They provided advice about how

to manage situations. For example, there was a young woman staying at the shelter and the council suggested that her mother come and stay as well. “Then, if the man came to the shelter, the mother could go out and confront him. This was a right relationship way of doing things.” (Sammon, interview, 2016).

One of the members of the Aboriginal women’s council recalls, “Yes. I used to tell them. Tell them about who’s who and who might come in as a gammon as a friend. Some family might come in like that you know?” (Aboriginal women’s council member, interview, 2016)

Sammon further explains that there was extensive collaboration with Aboriginal organisations like the Aboriginal Legal Service and Tangentyere, particularly for sharing transport and for referrals.

At the time those organisations were just starting up and there was a real sense of possibility and excitement that they could make things better. They were very small organisations then. (Sammon, interview, 2016).

The building housing the service at the time was a run-down cottage with old plumbing and one bathroom. It was completely inadequate for the demands placed upon it, particularly as the number of clients greatly increased as women from remote communities began to utilize the service. “During 1979 more and more bush Aboriginal women and women from the town camps started to come until they were overwhelmingly the users.” (Ditton, interview, 2016).

It was clear that the infrastructure and resources of the Centre were inadequate for the demands placed upon it, and there was public scrutiny of the hygiene and management of the centre. At the same time, there were tensions developing within the collective and between the collective and other women’s groups. It should be noted that the refuge was operating within a context in which there was strong tension within Alice Springs in relation to construction of housing for Aboriginal people within the town. In 1979, the NT Housing Commission announced a program whereby twenty 'special' Housing Commission houses were to be built for Aboriginal tenants throughout the town. This was strongly opposed by a group named “Citizens for Civilised Living,” which campaigned to stop the construction of housing for Aboriginal people next door to or opposite privately owned homes. The campaign was successful with only ten of the houses

being completed. (Coughlan, 1991, p. 90) Within this context, providing a refuge for Aboriginal women within the centre of town was highly controversial.<sup>2</sup>

Sammon explains,

There was chronic homelessness in Alice Springs at the time. The town camps were just camps.... Usually Aboriginal people were on the outskirts.... We used to do a lot of advocacy.... There was an organisation called "Citizens for Civilised Living. They were basically trying to stop black people being rehoused into the suburbs, being rehoused amongst the whites.... We were involved in opposing this kind of stuff. (Sammon, interview AS15, 2016).

Sammon goes further to describe the centre as an 'activist hub.' "We were anti-nuclear, involved in women's advocacy, anti-racism." Ditton explains that the centre was not only a refuge, but also a political centre for activities, and reflects that this may have been an error and that the political activities should have been held elsewhere. (Ditton, interview, 2016).

In 1980 the Shelter lost its funding. The loss of funding was in part related to governance issues, there being some conflict between groups of women as to how the Centre should operate. Newspaper reports from the period point to issues relating to whether the service should promote religious values relating to the role of family. "Several women said they were Christians and were worried that the centre failed to promote the family; it did not want to keep families together." ("Sack collective" vote. Women Centre money stopped, 1980)

In a letter to the editor reflecting on this period, one of the collective's members, Pamela Ditton argues,

.....church and state combined in the early 70's to attack the work of women setting up the first women's shelters in London, Sydney and eventually Alice Springs... It was the norm for these pioneers to be vilified, accused of being anti-men and breaking up families. Police forces were still almost exclusively male. Domestic violence was certainly not on the mainstream agenda. (Ditton, *Alice Springs News*, 1998).

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<sup>2</sup> The history of the controversy is described in a three part newspaper series. Ellis, E., 'Alice Springs Women's Centre – past, present and future.' *Alice Springs Star*, 3 part series, May 1980.



However, the main issue appears to have been in relation to how the service positioned itself in relation to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women, there being a perception by some that it was catering for Aboriginal women to the detriment of non-Aboriginal women. “..Very few white women were calling at the centre these days. Not many are using the place.” (“Sack collective” vote. Women Centre money stopped, 1980).

Pamela Ditton wrote,

Over half the women beating a path to the refuge were Aboriginal and, horror of horrors, some were traditional women who arrived with dogs as well as children. I believe the unspoken assumption of the funding bodies was that the refuge would be used by white women, largely as a staging post on the way back down South. Collective workers were determined not to discriminate, and if that meant that some non-Aboriginal women refused to share the crowded premises with Aboriginal women, then, at least until larger premises were found, not much could be done. (Ditton, *Alice Springs News*, 1998)

A group of women approached the NT Government with the view that “the town may have a need for a separate centre for Aboriginal women.” The then Health Minister responded by saying that “he recognized that there were ‘separate needs,’ and that funding ‘for both sections of the community should be administered by one woman’s organisation comprising of both cultures.’” (Start New centre: Tuxworth, 1980)

The Women’s Centre building was eventually bulldozed. One of the then members of the Aboriginal Women’s Council, reflecting on the demolition of the centre recalls,

Oh they just break it down. Everyone was so upset.... They had the big bulldozers in ... and the whole building got destroyed...I think some of the non-Aboriginal people wasn’t very happy and there’s more Aboriginal people going in.... a lot of non-Aboriginal people didn’t like it (Aboriginal women’s council member<sup>3</sup>, interview, 2016).

For the next fourteen months, Alice Springs was unable to provide specific, safe accommodation for women experiencing domestic and family violence. Women and their children sought

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accommodation at the Salvation Army who were briefly funded to provide the service, the YWCA and in people's private homes and backyards. Finally, 1981 saw the Shelter refunded, re-established in Telegraph Terrace and re-named. It was called The Women's Community House and it was located at its present site in an old set of demountables. The Aboriginal women's committee did not continue in the same organized way. "There were always some Aboriginal workers and close informal links with key Aboriginal women in the community. The refuge related to all the community organisations." (Ditton, interview, 2016).

The demountables were meant to be a temporary measure, but they were to be the home of the service for the next nine years. It seems that the controversy around the management of the centre was not immediately resolved at the new site. In 1984, the clients locked out the management committee. The worker who became the coordinator of the service at that time in 1984 explains,

I was in Alice Springs probably about two or three weeks and my friend ... came around to visit one night and said, "You need to come with me. You need to come to this meeting at the women's refuge. There's been a big blow up and we need some new blood." So I was intrigued and I went along .... to this meeting and what had happened was the clients in the house at the time were very unhappy with the management situation and they locked the management committee out of the refuge and we were trying to negotiate back in there and they wanted a new committee formed. And so because I was a new face in town.... I was voted in as the Coordinator for the refuge. (Former shelter coordinator, interview, 2015)

A woman who was a shelter worker in the 80s recalls that the centre had six bedrooms which sometimes housed fourteen women and their children. She describes the centre as

a broken down set of demountables. They had been there for years so we spent years lobbying for a decent place for women to go and finally got one about 1990. We finally got a purpose built one – where it is now. (Shelter worker in the 1980s, interview, 2016).

The present building was purpose built in 1990 with additions being added over the following years. In 1991 the service was re-named as the Alice Springs Women's Shelter (ASWS). In

2008, a Northern Territory Emergency Response report described ASWS as a thirty-bed accommodation service for women and children escaping Family and Domestic violence which provided accommodation for 380 women and 320 children in 2007/8, 94% of whom were Indigenous. It also mentioned ASWS's provision of education and support groups for women and children on town camps and the wider Alice Springs community. (Australian Government, 2008).

## Service development

### **Crisis accommodation**

From 1978, the focus of the Shelter was the provision of crisis accommodation. Sammon explains that in those initial years the aim was provide somewhere safe to be, to receive medical help and sometimes a Domestic Violence Order (DVO). DVOs had recently been introduced (Sammon, interview, 2016). Recalling those early years of operation, a local Aboriginal woman who worked in a homemaker service at the time explains,

We used to go to visit these ladies because we had a car of our own we could go and see them. But we had to go see them without him knowing that we are going. Some of these men were very very violent... We used to go and get them...and put them under our washing...But we got her and took her to the women's centre. She was in that basket with clothes in... Yeah terrified that lady used to be. (Aboriginal women's council member, interview, 2016)

Of her time as Coordinator in 1984-5 at the site of the new demountables, a former worker recalls,

....a lot of Aboriginal women used the refuge and it became known as a safe place for women to go to. So they would come and spend a night to two nights there. They would bring children sometimes. Then they might just leave. The services we offered – we had a bus and we would transport people to services around town; health centres, post office, bank. Try and encourage enrolment of kids in schools. .... take the women to the various appointments and places they needed to go, so there was a bit of structure around that. There was some work around trying to rehouse and find accommodation for people

which was always a challenge, so we had a couple of hostels available then, and one of those was Toddy's cabins that had some availability, and Stuart Lodge was a place where women could have accommodation, but it was also short term. (Former shelter coordinator, interview, 2015).

A worker from the 1980s and 1990s describes looking after women's varied needs. She explains,

It wasn't a matter of women leaving their partners. They just wanted the violence to stop... There was lots of alcohol abuse. Out in on bush on the communities it was better. There were women's centres that started in the communities from the 1980s on. These made a huge difference. They were able to try and sort things out there. Some were able to get their communities declared dry. It started to settle things down. (Shelter worker in the 1980s, interview, 2016).

An issue that emerged for the Shelter during the 1990s was the Northern Territory government's attitude to Aboriginal women predominately using the service, and Aboriginal women's return rate to the shelter. While for non-Aboriginal women, coming to the shelter was part of their strategy of leaving their partner and leaving town, for Aboriginal women, this was not the case.

The government thought that they came, you fix the problem, they go out and you never see them again... there wasn't much we could do –get women not to return to their partners? It wasn't going to happen... In the end it was a decision about coming down on the side of the women. You would work the data to get them (the government) off your back... (Shelter worker in the 1980s, interview, 2016)

The worker perceived that this government attitude was related to the history of the shelter, and the conflict that had arisen between groups relating to how the service positioned itself in relation to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal clients.

We walked a fine line. We were aiming to deliver a service and to ensure that whichever woman walked in she got a good service.... There was a lot of pressure to reduce the number of Aboriginal women. (We) had to think and decide that the needs of the women were the needs of the shelter. (Shelter worker in the 1980s, interview, 2016)

While this same pressure to reduce the number of Aboriginal clients is not an issue for the crisis accommodation service today, there are still some parallels in relation to how “success” is measured. The crisis accommodation is currently funded as a homelessness service. However, the shelter has no sustainable housing outcomes, women are encouraged to return to the Shelter if they are at risk, and women often exit the service to homelessness. While it can be argued that women returning to the service when at risk of domestic violence is a measure of success in that it shows a level of confidence in the service, it is not a good outcome in relation to homelessness outcomes. It is for this reason that the service made the decision to focus on developing tools for measuring success in its crisis accommodation service as a part of this research project.

Bolger (1991) provides information on the number of women accommodated at the Women’s Community House in the late 1980s, which at the time had a capacity of 23 women and children. For the 1987-88 financial year, the total number of women accommodated was 477, of which 420 (or 88%) were Aboriginal. 61% were aged between 21 and 35 years of age. The number of children accommodated averaged one per woman. On average 12 women had to be turned away each month. (Bolger, 1991, p. 21) The table below compares crisis accommodation data from this period with information available from ASWS’s 2014-15 annual report. (Alice Springs Women's Shelter, 2015, p. 12)

The total number of women and children accommodated between the two periods was similar. The proportion of Aboriginal women accommodated increased over the period. Although it is not possible to compare the numbers turned away as women only were reported in the 1987-88 period, whereas only women and children combined were reported for the 2014-15 period. However, assuming that the proportion of children turned away is similar to the proportion of children accommodated, then it would be estimated that more than double the number of women and children were turned away in the 2014-15 period.

**Table 2: ASWS crisis accommodation clients, numbers accepted and turned away, 1987-88 and 2014-15.**

Year	Aboriginal women	Non-Aboriginal women	No. Children	TOTAL women accommodated	TOTAL women and children accommodated	No. women turned away	No. Women and children turned away
1987-88	420 (88%)	57 (12%)	477 (approx.)	477	954	144 (approx.)	Data not available
2014-15	522 (97%)	16 (3%)	411	538	949	Data not available	627

Sources: Bolger (1991), ASWS (2015)

## Outreach

Alice Springs Women’s Shelter has delivered outreach services for many years, albeit in an unfunded and ad hoc manner at times. A worker from the 1980s and 1990s explained that the Shelter received funding for one outreach worker late in the 1990s but there needed to be more outreach workers to offer an effective service. (Shelter worker in the 1980s, interview, 2016). A former coordinator at ASWS explains that the shelter used to get money as part of the crisis accommodation to do some outreach but at the time she came to work at the centre in 2008, there had been no increase in funding in ten years so the funding had been “swallowed” (Former shelter coordinator, interview, 2016).

A current outreach worker explained that around 2007-9, prior to outreach becoming a formal program, the counsellor thought it would be great to have a women’s group, not primarily for education although information was provided when required, but to provide pampering activities<sup>4</sup> to build trust and relationships. It was initiated on town camps that had learning centres. Some of those women had also been clients of the service at various times. The longer that work went on, women would tell the worker on the day that they needed to go to the shelter.

<sup>4</sup> Pampering activities are offered to Aboriginal women in community settings and include nail painting, and hair colouring and braiding.

The worker explained that one of the consequences of this outreach work was that women began to self – refer to the Shelter (Outreach worker, interview, 2015)

A former coordinator explains that early in her tenure it became clear that women were leaving the Shelter, sometimes in the middle of the night, and there was no follow up with the woman once she left. In addition, she explains that the service was seeing large numbers for women from a small cohort,

traditional Aboriginal from remote communities, from town camps. Where were all the other women? ...I was lucky in that we had a board that was prepared to invest so we did hire a single worker for a period of time to do some work to see what might work, so then by the time the transformation fund money was there, we could say “we’ve been doing this. It needs investment.” And then it’s really gone on to a life of its own. (Former coordinator, interview, 2015)

The Alice Springs Transformation Plan (ASTP), announced in May 2009, was a joint initiative of the Australian and Northern Territory Governments which aimed to make fundamental and lasting improvement to the lives and opportunities of the residents of the Alice Springs town camps. The ASTP funded an Outreach Program for the service from 2010-2013. Funding has been renewed since that time. The Outreach Program was provided to support women and children in Alice Springs experiencing domestic and family violence who were not accommodated at the Shelter but who required assistance to maximize their safety. The longer – term goal was to provide an early intervention model that would reduce demand on the Shelter’s emergency accommodation.

Funding for the outreach service for the 2011/12 year was \$348,500. It employed a Team Leader, Aboriginal Mentor support worker, three outreach workers and a counsellor (Gander, 2013). Outreach services include flexible case management support focused on women’s and children’s individual circumstances, and focusses on developing practical safety plans with clients, supporting women to identify their own risks as well as immediate and long-term solutions to maximise the safety of themselves and their children.

ASWS works with women at extreme ongoing risk in the community which is significantly different to many other outreach models which are often focused at the recovery end of the service system...Due to the unique context of Central Australia and the number of women with multiple vulnerabilities the model of outreach is assertive with workers proactively following up by attending town camps, contacting family for information and at times attending households where the perpetrator of violence may be in attendance. The model responds to the severity of the violence experienced by women in Central Australia but also other barriers to service such as lack of access to phones. (Alice Springs Women's Shelter, 2015)

A member of the ASWS Board explains “Outreach has opened it (the service) up to a whole range of other groups... so women who wouldn’t traditionally stay at the Shelter are now provided with a service, and it’s things like doing the community development and the project work etc. It makes the women’s shelter a whole women’s service rather than just a crisis service.” (Board member, interview, 2015) Whereas earlier it was observed that most of the clients of the crisis accommodation were from Town Camps or remote communities, in the nine month period to March 31, 2015, these clients represented only 40 percent of the outreach client group. Sixteen percent of outreach clients over the period were non-Indigenous (Alice Springs Women's Shelter, 2015). This is in contrast with the crisis accommodation service where the proportion of non- Indigenous clients is typically one to three percent.

In discussing the approach to outreach work with one of the workers, the ways she worked with Aboriginal women were explored, and she was asked how this might be different than her approach with non-Aboriginal women. The worker provided an example of the practical help she had provided in her work with an Aboriginal woman, such as assistance with food, clothing and transport.

It’s building that relationship. It takes a while for an Indigenous woman to trust or just be ready to actually tell the story and sometimes it becomes a bit like a timeline of telling stories and all these little things that we do are actually part of the support because when we are giving her a lift to .. let’s say we’re giving her a Vinnie’s card....Two weeks ago a woman who had disclosed 33 years of DV in the shelter but ... that was the first



presentation. We'd never seen her before. So I worked with her, this was in Outreach, and when I went to her she was only talking to me about "there's so many people in my house. I have no money for food. I need money for food." So I just said I might drop some stuff for you next day and how about we meet you know Friday or something. So I drop some stuff for her and she just felt like they care about me and my family. So then the next week I try to find her again and she was in the same situation and then I had a bit more of a conversation "What's going on? When do you get paid?" So had a bit more of a conversation around that and said to her. "Look this is the support we offer and we want to talk about this stuff but I know that this stuff kind of takes up everything because it's really important because you need to eat." And she's like "yeah" so we kind of talk and amongst all this chat she said to me "But this is it. This is domestic violence. Like when there's no food, we have no money, my partner stresses, he gets angry, he gets depressed, he starts drinking and then the violence is here." That's what she said to me and it is part of violence and this woman explained it really well. She was kind of saying you need to help me with these because that's how I'm going to stop it, which we still help with all these things. And she may not be able to tell us right now 33 years of violence and what that means but she's able to just like, "I want it to stop and this is how it might stop so can you help me?" (Outreach worker, interview, 2015)

Another initiative of the ASTP was the Alice Springs Integrated Response to Family and Domestic Violence project<sup>5</sup> that aimed to increase the safety of women and children, and improve accountability of men who use family and domestic Violence and support them to change their behavior. The integrated response project commenced in 2012-13 and is described as,

one in which agencies make a commitment to work collaboratively to improve the safety of women and children and to support people who use violence to take responsibility for their behavior and to change that behavior (Northern Territory Government, 2015)

The Alice Springs Integrated Response to Family and Domestic Violence project continues to the present day with funding from the Northern Territory Government. ASWS is a core agency

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<sup>5</sup> For more detailed information on the Alice Springs Integrated Response to Family and Domestic Violence project see the evaluation report (Putt, Holder & Shaw, 2016).

of the project and participates in the project Reference Group meetings and regular Family Safety Meetings as part of the Family Safety Framework. A worker from the outreach team is assigned to the project. In addition, funding from the integrated project also enabled ASWS to set up a court support service for victims of DFV and to help partners/ex-partners of men who participated in the newly established Men's Behaviour Change Program.

Established in 2012-13, the Victim Advocacy and Support Service (VSAS) position provides support to women who attend court for a domestic violence matter, such as Domestic Violence Order (DVO) applications and as witnesses in criminal matters. The court position has become an integral part of the ASWS outreach service, with a former coordinator explaining that in the first half of 2015, the court based position "cold called" twenty five women whose partners had pleaded guilty to a domestic violence charge and who were not currently a client of the service. Every one of those women accepted support from the service (Former coordinator, interview, 2015).

In July 2015, ASWS was funded to extend its outreach program to remote Aboriginal communities including the Aboriginal communities of Ntaria, Papunya, Yuendumu and Ti Tree, all of which are relatively large communities within the region and are located within a 300km radius of Alice Springs.

Outreach activities also include special projects to engage women within the service. The *100 Voices Project*, undertaken from 2010 over a two-year period, worked from the basis that women were more likely to seek help from family and friends first rather than from police or support services, and sought to share stories of how women can help women in unhealthy relationships to "stay strong." The project engaged with nearly 100 women who shared their stories over the period, and ten quilts were created, drawing together participants' thoughts and ideas. Since the project's completion, the work has continued through engaging women in arts, crafts and music (see [www.asws.org.au](http://www.asws.org.au), accessed March 2016).

More recently, ASWS has worked in partnership with the recently established Tangentyere Women's Committee Family Safety Group to hold a workshop about domestic violence within the Central Australian context with a range of organisations and stakeholders. Another recent initiative was an arrangement with a local supermarket for ASWS to be donated food which was

then taken to Town Camps as a way of engaging with people. ASWS also facilitated a “pop up shop” in the Alice Springs mall, where women could participate in craft activities, as a way of engaging women with the organisation. A former coordinator explains,

Workers find it hard. But I do think you just need to try things. That pop up shop. There was some resistance, but it was fantastic because we got something like three hundred people through that shop. Most of them had had nothing to do with the shelter. A lot of people who then disclose their own experience. We got beautiful social media, we got beautiful news media on it. There’s nothing bad about that. Do we do it again? I put it in a presentation that they should, but you’ve just got to try it. It could have been a complete disaster if no one came in. Well you know, you don’t do it again. As long as it’s not damaging. Reputations are incredibly important in this field in a small town. (Former coordinator, interview, 2015)

ASWS is currently exploring ways to better engage with young women aged 14-17 years who are experiencing intimate partner domestic violence. The project seeks to clarify duty of care obligations and legal implications related to working with younger women, and develop appropriate policies and procedures to better equip the organisation to work with this group so that it is better placed to actively engage young women in the service. The service hopes to be in a position to employ specialist case workers to work with young women in both the crisis accommodation and outreach areas.

### **Relationship with police**

The importance of a good working relationship with police for women’s specialist DFV services was highlighted by ASWS staff and other interviewees in the research project. Like other services, ASWS has had an often tense or distant relationship with police. In the previous five years, several key initiatives have increased the formal and more structured contact between ASWS and police. The first of these was Supportlink, which is contracted by NT Police to enable frontline police to make referrals to other services for people (notably victims) during the course of their duties. As a result, a considerable number of women who had no previous contact with ASWS have been referred to ASWS by police.

A second and critical initiative is the Alice Springs Integrated Response to Family and Domestic Violence project, of which both the police and ASWS are foundational and essential participants. The police chair and ASWS attend the fortnightly Family Safety Meetings and are the main agencies that share information and take action, and intervene with high-risk victims and offenders. Joint training on the leaders of ASWS and the police deliver training jointly on the Family Safety Framework for other services' staff. A further component of the project – the VSAS – which is run by ASWS also means that police prosecutions have greater contact with the person responsible for this service and with the ASWS outreach workers. Importantly, as the evaluation found, the project has resulted in greater prominence and recognition of ASWS and its expertise in Alice Springs and more widely (Putt et al., 2016).

Several NT Police interviewees commented on improvements in the relationship between ASWS and police. According to one there were tensions between workers in the ASWS crisis accommodation service where there was an “interesting bunch with belief systems about the police...” but the relationship between the two services was described as better than 12 months previously (Police officer, interview, 2016). Several officers referred to the high-turnover in staff in both services and their different priorities as underlying the difficulties, and one argued for more systemic processes rather than relying on how well key leaders communicate, as this makes the relationship very personality dependent and variable over time (Police officer, interview PO6, 2016). A senior police representative stressed the need to work together effectively and acknowledged the importance of the women's specialist services to the police because of their knowledge of, and contact with, Aboriginal women victims:

I think it probably goes both ways, and I think the only answer to that is getting together and working together, the difficulty being with ASWS and probably us as well is the high turnover of staff. People come with preconceived ideas of what a woman's shelter worker is like and what a copper is like. They might be true but that's what we've got to try and work on....We're all working for the safety of the victim, and in terms of ASWS, particularly where we have people from different cultural backgrounds, they often feel safer talking through an intermediary which may be the ASWS and so they tell them

things that they might not tell the police, and similarly with CAWLS<sup>6</sup>, trying to put in place some Family law or DV orders so we work with them to give as much information to get a successful outcome from what they're working on in the court. And NPYWC<sup>7</sup>[Domestic and Family Violence Service] – liaison with them is critical. They have relationships with key people in communities. Some aren't policed 24/7 so their input is invaluable to find out who to talk to in the community and some of the relationships will be that we shouldn't be talking to others about so all that cultural stuff that's quite difficult to navigate sometimes. (Police officer, interview, 2016)

## Current situation

With the recent expansion in services, ASWS now includes 24/7 shelter access, the crisis shelter (of 30 beds), the outreach service in Alice Springs and to four remote communities, the court support service, counselling and partner contact for the Men's Behaviour Change Program.

It also saw a move to new premises to house the outreach, community development, counselling, court support, Men's Behaviour Change Program safety service and administration functions, demonstrating that the organisation is much broader than an accommodation service. The move to new premises "...signals ASWS moving beyond purely homicide prevention into a proactive, broad ranging advocacy organisation." (ASWS 2013/14 AR). The same year (2013/14) saw the launch of ASWS's diversity policy acknowledging the broader context of gendered violence and the lack of service responses to gay, lesbian, intersex and transgendered people.

Table 2 showed the number of women and children accommodated in a year in the Shelter. Although the number of women in 2014-15 has not increased much from 1987-88, the proportion of Aboriginal women has increased and the number of children has declined. In 2014-15 a total of 948 women and children were accommodated at the Shelter, of whom 97 percent were Aboriginal and 34 percent aged under nine years. A total of 627 women and children were recorded as being turned away in the same period. In the same year, it was estimated that the

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<sup>6</sup> Central Australian Women's Legal Service

<sup>7</sup> Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council

services of ASWS had assisted more than 1,500 women and children from 85 different communities across four states, of which approximately 80 percent were Indigenous persons.

In 2015 there were approximately 40 staff employed by ASWS, mostly non-Aboriginal women. In recent years there have been some changes to worker orientation and support processes, professional development and training at ASWS. These changes were in part prompted by high turnover in staff, with the 2011/12 annual report referring to an 80 percent turnover of staff in the first six months of the reporting period. Exit interviews identified homicides and critical incidents as factors. A focus on occupational health and safety resulted in the development of a vicarious trauma policy, training in relation to prevention of trauma, the development of self-care plans with workers, and increased internal supervision. Since the implementation of a 24-hour service, there had been a lone worker rostered on at the Shelter at night. This practice was discontinued in May 2012 for health and safety reasons, from which time the Shelter was staffed by a minimum of two workers at all times. The service went into deficit to fund this in the 2011/12 financial year, but secured funding for the practice to continue from 2012/13.

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