

# Preventing homelessness for women and children affected by family and domestic violence: An evaluation of the Safe as Houses Program

## Background

Whilst the causes of homelessness are complex and multi-factorial, family and domestic violence is a key precipitator of homelessness for women and children, who experience unique vulnerabilities once homeless. The complexity of issues facing women who have experienced family and domestic violence and who are at risk of homelessness transcends legal, housing, health and social sectors and requires a collaborative response.

The Safe as Houses (SASH) program is an innovative collaboration between three community legal services, Tenancy WA, The Women's Legal Service of WA and Street Law WA, which provides wrap-around legal, financial and social services to women at risk of homelessness through family and domestic violence.

The Home2Health Team within the School of population and Global health, UWA was commissioned to perform an evaluation of first 23 months of operation of the organisation SASH (Mar 2017-Feb 2019).

## Evaluation Aims and Methods

The evaluation aims were to;

1. Describe the demographic profile, legal needs and housing issues of individuals who receive support from SASH,
2. Examine the services, support and assistance provided to clients,
3. Examine how clients perceive SASH and their perspectives on the successes, barriers and potential for future service delivery to be strengthened.

The evaluation entailed in-depth qualitative interviews with clients, focus groups and staff from the three legal services involved and collation of quantitative data on legal and other issues addressed. The data sources included a legal health check, client and staff surveys and extracts from the organisation data bases. Case studies were used to triangulate quantitative and qualitative data from both client and staff perspectives.

## Results

### In the first 23 months of the program

The three main types of support provided by SASH are - legal support, non-legal support and referral of clients to other community support agencies.

**133 women were assisted.**

**201 instances of legal advice were provided.**

**89% were referred to one or more other service e.g. accommodation, counselling, mental health support, emergency relief.**

## Key Aims of SASH

**Health and Wellbeing**

Safe & secure housing can lead to improved health, employment & education outcomes

**Preventing and Ending Homelessness**

Providing assistance with legal social & other issues

**Keeping women and children safe**

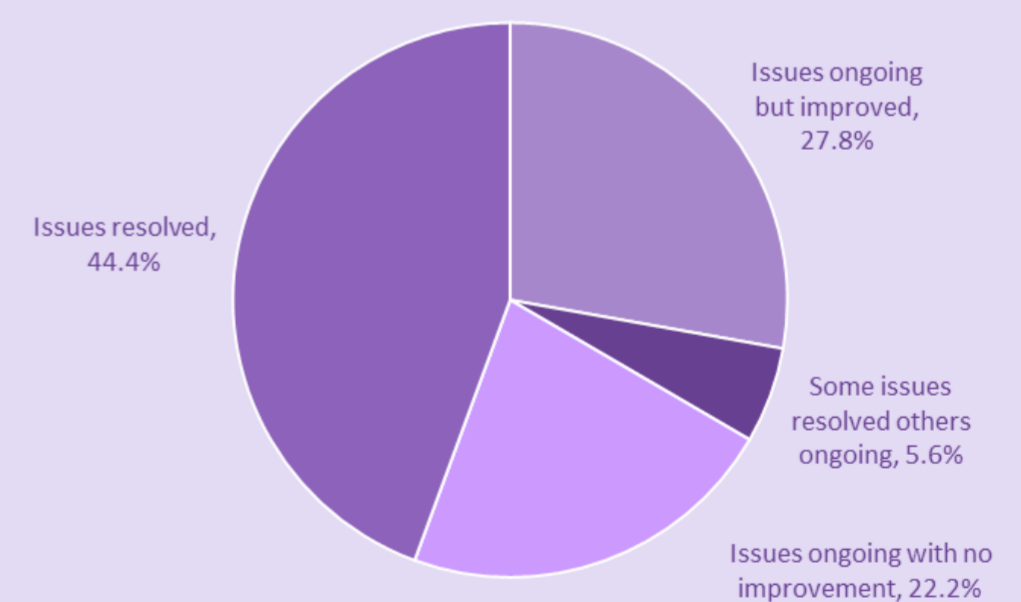
Providing assistance with obtaining stable, secure housing & legal protection



"They covered every base with me, every single base was covered, right down to my wellbeing, down to legal aspects, down to me being safe, clothes and fed. All of that stuff was available, you can't really ask for much when you've been put in that decision." - SASH Client

"...[The perpetrator's lawyers] were taking advantage of the fact that I didn't have any legal representation...it was a huge relief to get [SASH lawyer] on board." - SASH Client

## Client perspectives on issue resolution



## Conclusions

The Safe as Houses model provides a unique service that addresses the complexity of clients' circumstances, enables clients to obtain or maintain secure accommodation and reduces their risk of entering homelessness.

In terms of *The National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2020*, The Safe as Houses Program has focused on: **Outcome 4 - That services meet the needs of women and children experiencing violence** and **Outcome 5 - That justice responses are effective.**

**83%** reported financial issues and **57%** had bad debts

**32%** had family violence restraining orders (FVRO) against the perpetrator

**19.5%** identified as requiring a FVRO and not yet having one in place

19% of clients were living in a potentially dangerous situation in their own homes, at risk of physical, emotional and financial abuse as well as mortgage default and other property issues.

"...on top of rent and everything like that, I was only able to pay off the interest...I was paying as much as I could off it, and I was kind of vulnerable because of that because I wasn't getting enough food and different things like that." -SASH Client

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