

Outsourcing Community Service Delivery

Organisation: Mountains Community Resource Network

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Position: Manager

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4th May 2012

Dear Committee Members,

Submission to the NSW Legislative Assembly Enquiry – the Devolution and Outsourcing of Housing Services from Government to Non-Government Sector

I write to formally make representation to the Committee on behalf of the Mountains Community Resource Network (MCRN). MCRN is the peak umbrella body representing the community sector in the Blue Mountains region.

The Blue Mountains community sector targets the most vulnerable - socially and financially disadvantaged - members within our community. Increasingly our member organisations are being called upon to support and advocate for individuals and families experiencing severe financial and housing stress at risk of homelessness, and people who are currently experiencing homelessness.

Unfortunately, there is little or no accurate data about the size or scope of the homelessness problem in our region. Anecdotal evidence in the past 12 months or so has identified a range of emerging issues; as well as increasing pressure on local community services to deal with ever-larger numbers of those who are homeless or at significant risk of homelessness. The attached submission includes the results of an informal data collection exercise recently undertaken by a number of community agencies/services involved in the Blue Mountains Homelessness Action Group over a short period (13-30th April 2012). The results of this 'Snapshot' have prompted calls in the sector for a more extensive and inclusive body of research - to identify the current issues, and to identify and quantify trends.

A summary of the issues identified can be found in the attached submission.

Yours faithfully,

Kris Newton
Manager
MCRN

SUBMISSION TO LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY INQUIRY INTO OUTSOURCING COMMUNITY SERVICE DELIVERY

Increasingly Blue Mountains community services and agencies are being called upon to support, and advocate for, individuals and families experiencing severe financial and housing stress at risk of homelessness, and people currently experiencing homelessness.

Unfortunately, there is little or no accurate data about the size or scope of the homelessness problem in our region. Anecdotal evidence in the past 12 months or so has identified a range of emerging issues; as well as increasing pressure on local community services to deal with ever-larger numbers of those who are homeless or at significant risk of homelessness. The attached annexures summarise the results of an informal data collection exercise recently undertaken by a number of community agencies/services involved in the Blue Mountains Homelessness Action Group over a short period (13-30th April 2012). The results of this 'Snapshot' have prompted calls in the sector for a more extensive and inclusive body of research - to identify the current issues, and to identify and quantify trends.

The increase in this client group requesting assistance has resulted in community sector services and agencies working with the local non-government social housing provider - Wentworth Community Housing. These operational realities at times impact negatively on the outcomes for individuals and families experiencing housing stress who require housing assistance.

It is this contact with the social housing provider which has enabled the identification of a number of issues centring around two core areas:

- Infrastructure, staffing, and staff capacity;
- Efficiency.

Core areas of tension and frustration impacting on those experiencing housing crisis and the generalist service providers assisting them, whilst not all linked to the general issues identified above, also require attention within the system and specifically relate to:

- Temporary Emergency Accommodation – issues around allocation, inconsistencies with information and application of the parameters for access, and lengths of stay;
- Priority Housing – identification of where individuals are on the priority housing list, management of stock to ensure allocation of all available stock in the most timely manner;
- Lack of nexus to, and integration with, other social housing providers for identified at-need/at-risk clients locally;

- Agencies and government departments exiting people **into** homelessness - against policy directives; eg
 - public hospitals discharging patients to no address;
 - mental health clients not being admitted as in-patients on the basis of long-term homelessness;
 - people exiting live-in rehabilitation to no known address, with no ability to enter the private rental market.

These issues have been consistently raised with Wentworth Community Housing, in a spirit of collaboration, via a range of ongoing interagency-type sector meetings and fora – they are aware of the issues, and acknowledge that they need to be addressed.

Whilst the issues highlighted relate to our experience of Wentworth Community Housing and the broader service system, we believe that the issues, causative factors and solutions are potentially transferable to other areas.

Issues identified in working with the Greater Western Sydney social housing provider:

1. Infrastructure

Housing NSW transferred significant numbers of housing stock to Wentworth Community Housing in 2010, increasing the housing stock to approximately 419. Prior to this time, Wentworth Community Housing was a small- to medium-sized non-government organisation with limited numbers of housing stock across the Penrith/Blue Mountains LGAs. The transfer of NSW Housing stock exponentially increased the size and complexity of this organisation, without the necessary commensurate infrastructure being bedded to support such rapid growth. This reality has significant impacts on the quality and consistency of service available across their service system.

Common areas that require improved infrastructure and resources include:

- Staff numbers and supervision
 - For example, there appears to be no full-time manager/senior on site at the Katoomba office, and staff numbers seem unable to handle the volume and complexity of clients adequately. As a consequence of lower than average house and rental costs, the Katoomba area has the highest per capita incidence of those facing homelessness. Lack of local governance results in wide variance in performance of staff dealing with vulnerable community members, with poor response from Wentworth staff to phone and email enquiries. It has also appeared to result in inadequate face-to-face interactions – particularly in

relation to the quality of the information provided to clients. This leaves vulnerable clients at risk. They are often unsure of critical information: such as the progress of their case; the options they have to secure housing; or access to housing products such as Rent Start lodgements. Failure to provide adequate infrastructure impacts on other local services - requiring assistance, updates and information to continue to support individuals/families appropriately.

➤ Staff capacity and organisation

- No doubt due to the rapid growth of the social housing provider, staff at Wentworth Community Housing often lack the necessary training and experience to deal with the (apparently escalating) issue of homelessness in the Blue Mountains. The previous depth of experience and understanding of the broader issues which previously resided in NSW Housing was not necessarily transferred along with the housing stock. This lack of capacity is also compounded by the 'silos' of the organisation's structure (see 'Efficiency' below).
- Anecdotally, it appears that Wentworth Housing stock in the upper Blue Mountains can be left vacant beyond the accepted benchmark between tenants, waiting minimal maintenance and repair, or reallocation. Delays in allocation, turnover and maintenance are unacceptable, and may be linked to the lack of infrastructure, staffing and governance of allocations. It is possible that these apparent delays are simply the result of lack of transparency and information-dissemination to the connected community sector – if so, this needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.
- The Katoomba office of Wentworth Community Housing (dealing with some of the most vulnerable and at-risk clients in or region) is closed on a Wednesday – this is unacceptable given the import of housing to the safety and well-being of individuals and families. The Blue Mountains Family Support Service is also not open on a Wednesday or a Friday, so families and individuals in housing and financial stress are unable to access the most appropriate services to assist them (eg EAPA vouchers, food support etc.) for significant periods during the normal working week. This places additional stress on the other community services/agencies in the area – which is not part of their formal remit; and which they are not funded, or staffed, to handle.

2. Efficiency

Efficiencies can, and must, be improved within the outsourced social housing provider - most specifically, those related to feedback to referring agencies; and (more importantly) follow-up for clients waiting housing products and in crisis.

Timeframes and benchmarks need to be developed and implemented to ensure standard practice and timely decision making, and appropriate intervention, occurs. Improved infrastructure and increased staff numbers locally would improve efficiencies and increase the likelihood that Wentworth Community Housing can better engage and network with locally services/agencies.

The structure of Wentworth Community Housing currently consists of three arms: one dealing with the housing stock, one with client allocation and tenancies, the other with the social support of complex clients.

This unfortunately creates a natural disconnect when attempting to work with very complex cases. This means that “right hands and left hands” often appear not to be aware of what each ‘silo’ is doing. As a consequence, any mechanisms for disseminating information across the group, and within each area, are currently inadequate, and this is a constant source of frustration to the broader community sector.

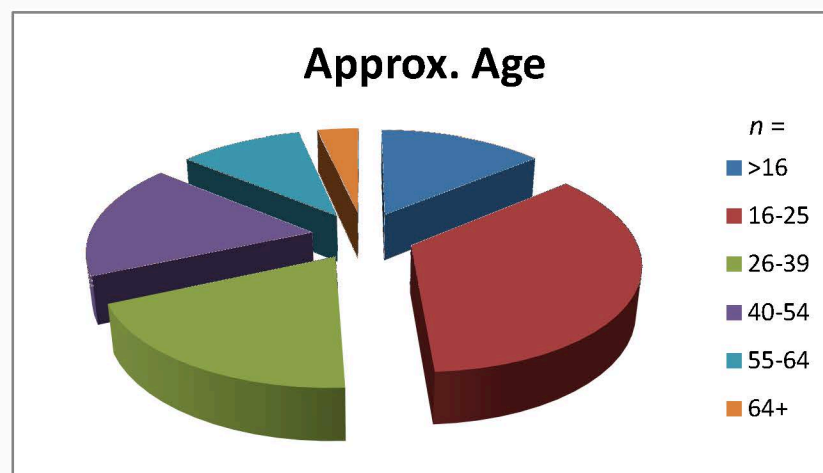
In addition, specialist social support programs/workers are largely based in the Penrith LGA, with their positions time-limited around non-recurrent specific funding. This results in sustainability issues, and creates and maintains the expertise in dealing with very complex clients in a small team – that is, it is not mainstreamed across and within the service.

As part of an ongoing data collection project on homelessness issues - conducted by the Blue Mountains Homelessness Action Group in the month April-May 2012 - member services/agencies collected data on client presentations. The data from five of these services/agencies over the period 13th-30th April - consisting of 50 presenting individuals/couples - has been collated. Despite the restricted sample size in this 'snapshot', significant trends are already emerging:

BM Homelessness 'Snapshot' Data 13-30 April

Gender	Male	Female					TOTAL (n=50)
	27	23					

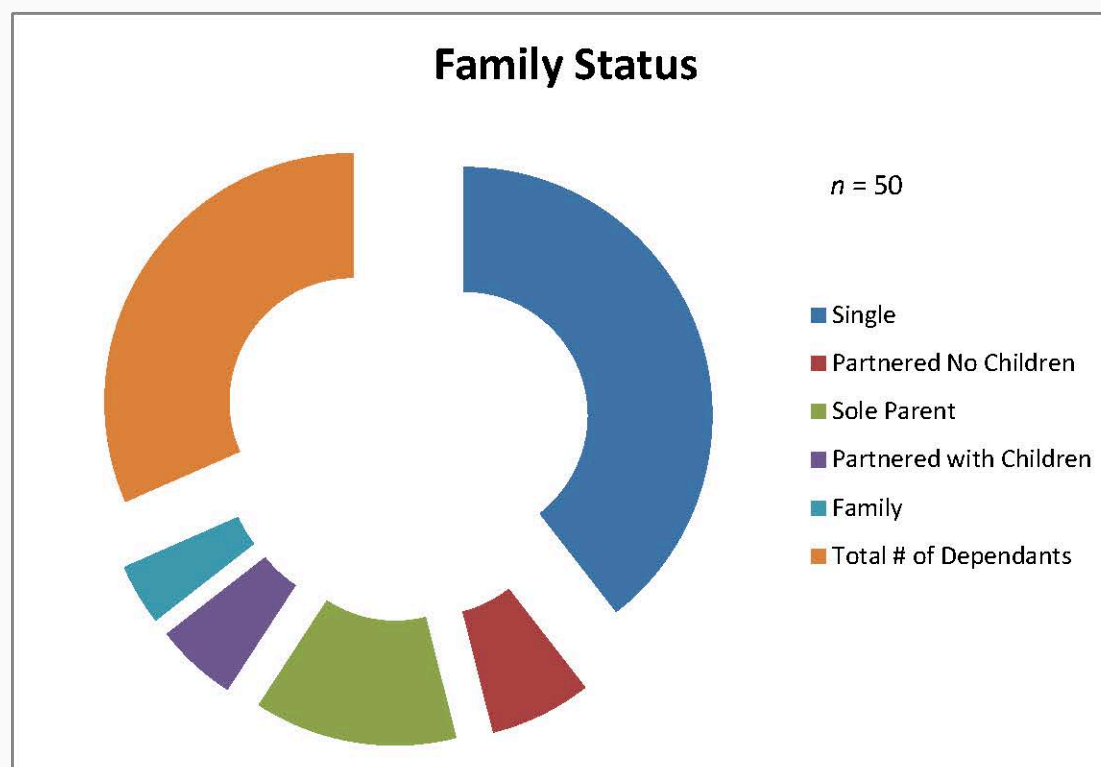
Age	>16	16-25	26-39	40-54	55-64	64+	TOTAL (n=50)
	8	20	11	10	6	2	



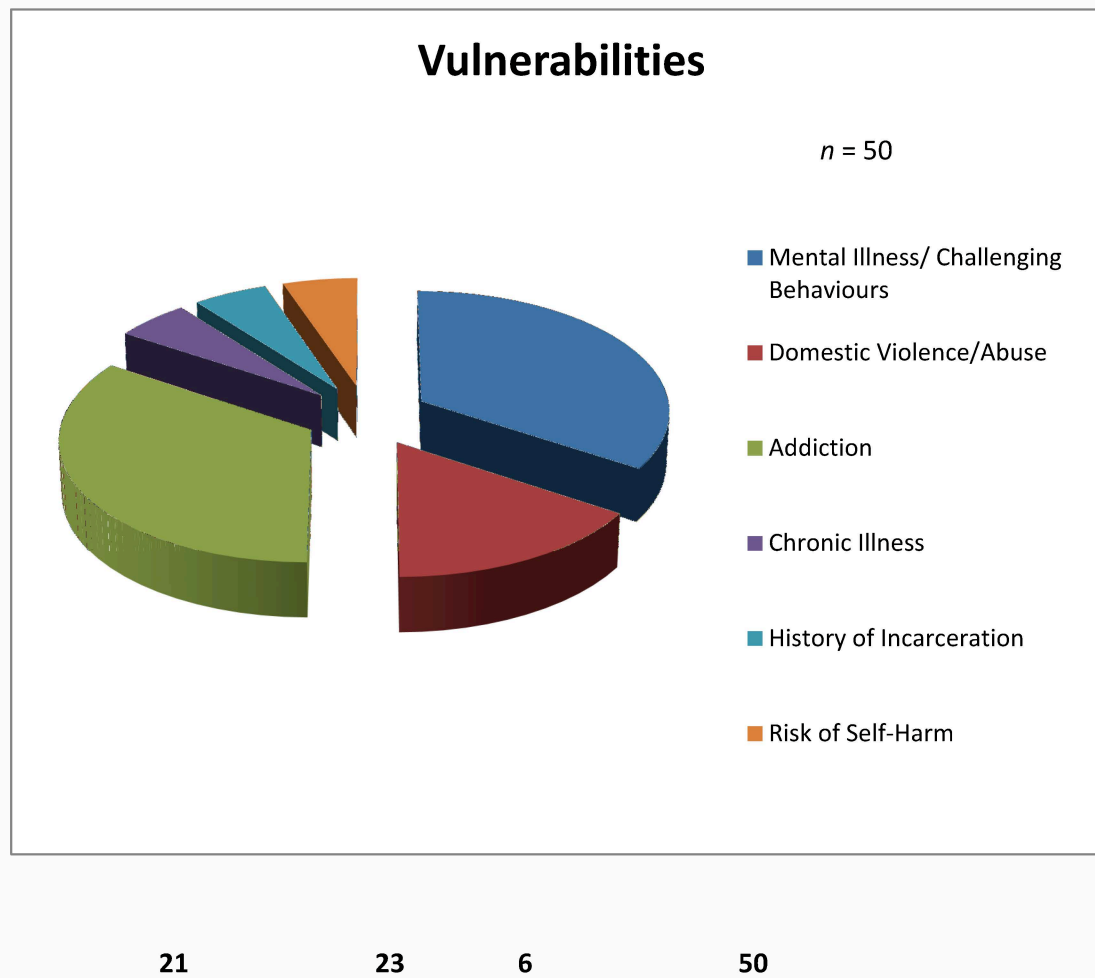
Identify as: Aboriginal CALD
 6 3

Circumstances:

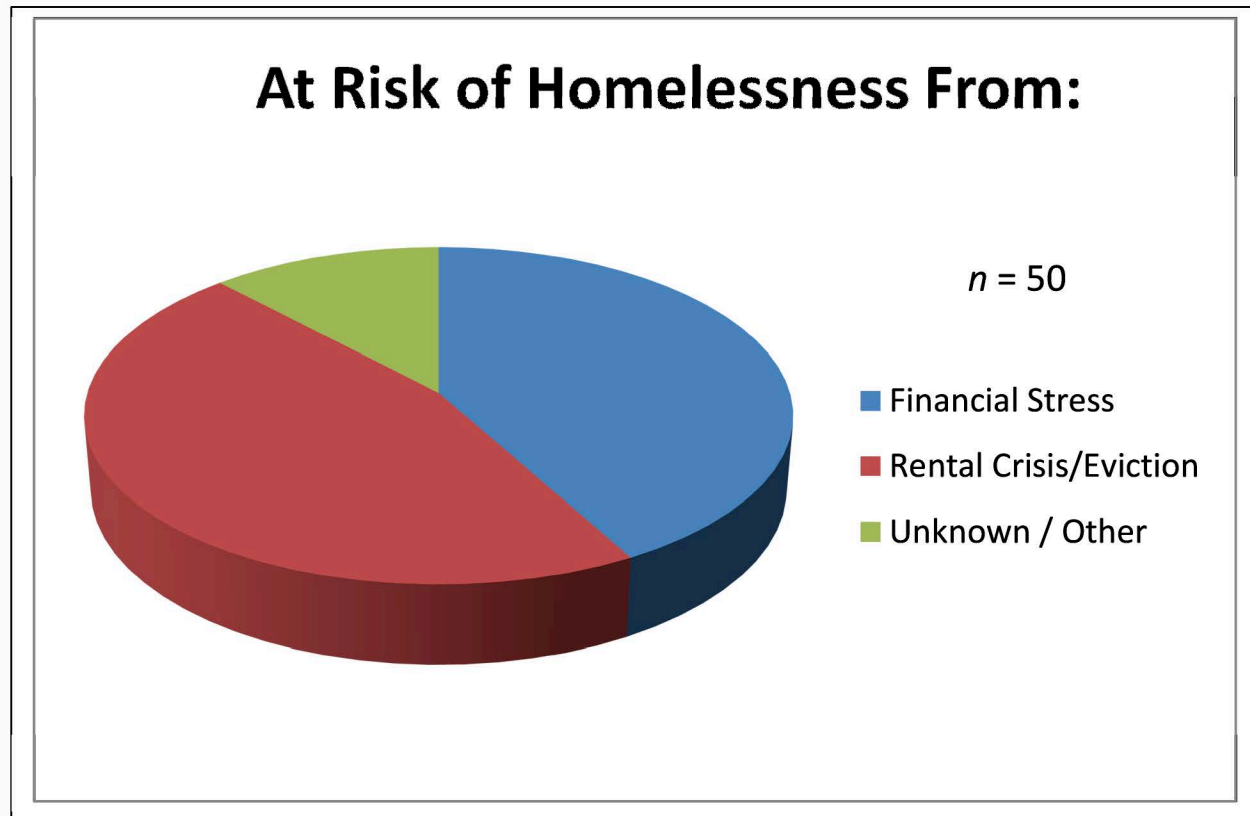
Family Status



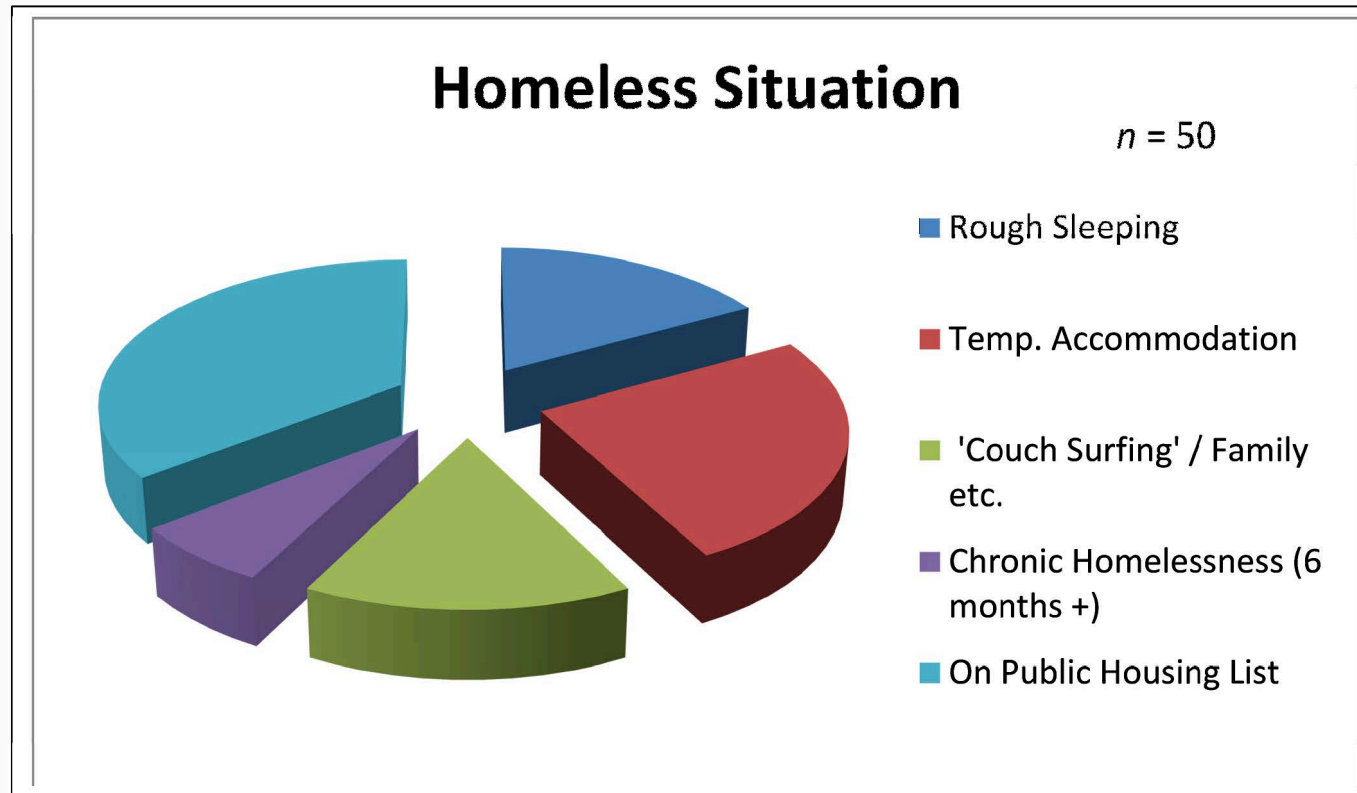
Vulnerabilities:



*At Risk of
Homelessness
From:*



Homeless -
Situation:?



**Referral
Pathways:**

*Referred to this
Service?*

Yes
24

No
22

TOTAL
(n=50)

By:

Word of
Mouth
10

Temp. Accom.
Provider
2

Office of
Fair
Trading
1

TAFE
1

Juvenile Justice
1

Welfare
Agency
5

Clinic/GP
2

WCH
1

Centrelink
8

CTTT
3

Lands
Council
1

*Referred on
to:?*

Housing
Provider
23

Domestic
Violence
Support
4

Mental
Health
Service
5

Welfare
Agency
10

Specialist
Housing Provider
3

GP
7

Counselling
4

Food Support
5

Community /
Neighbourhood
Centre
0

Drug & Alcohol
Service
2

Family
Support
3

Indigenous
Program
3

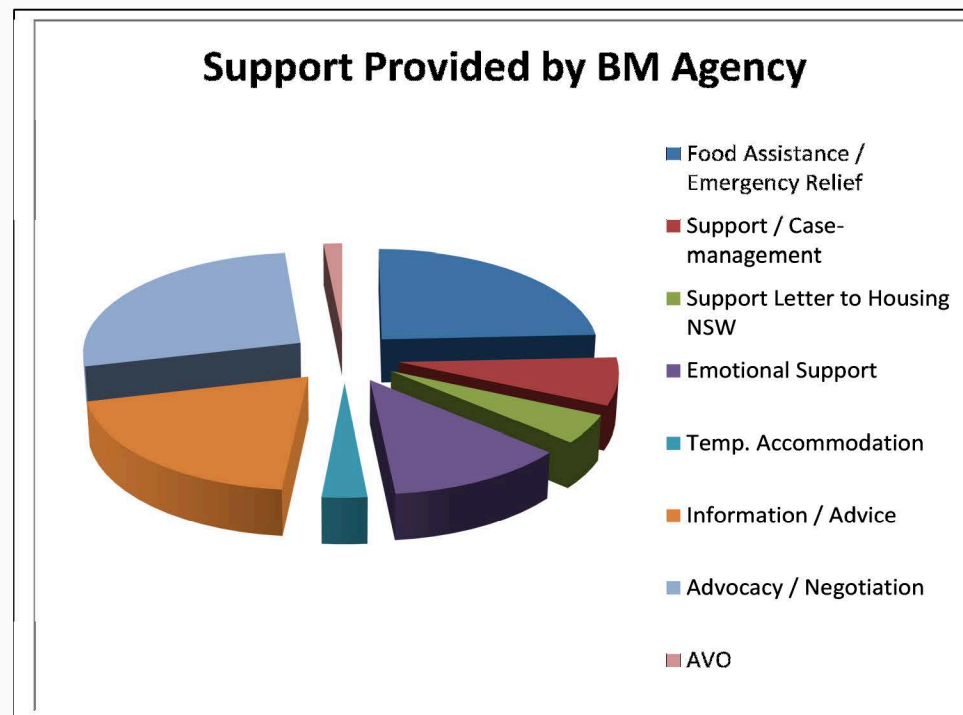
Legal
Centre/Legal Aid
1

Real Estate
4

Financial
Counselling
/ Support
4

Specialist Youth
Services
1

<i>Assistance Provided by this Service:</i>	Food Assistance / Emergency Relief	Support / Case- management	Support Letter to Housing NSW	Emotional Support	Temp. Accommodation	Information / Advice	Advocacy / Negotiation	AVO
	16	5	3	8	2	13	18	1



<i>Client(s) Feedback re: Value of Referrals?</i>	Yes	No	Total
	22	20	(n=50)
<i>Positive?</i>	Yes	No	
	22	0	