



Betty's Place Women's Refuge Albury NSW

Redevelopment Brief
March 2021

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Background

Yes Unlimited has been providing services in the Albury area since its inception in 1983 and is the lead agent for Specialist Homelessness Services in Southern Murrumbidgee. We provide a range of services including a Centralised Intake system for homelessness, a Community of Schools and Services model: The Albury Project, Broughton House Youth Refuge, Staying Home Leaving Violence and Betty's Place Women's Refuge. Yes Unlimited has a particular bent for driving systems change and in mid 2020 Yes Unlimited commissioned a piece of local research exploring the current model of crisis accommodation provided by Betty's Place to provide a set of recommendations for its future re-development. While the report will not be finalised until July 2021, early indications are that the move towards a 'core and cluster' type model would be a major step forward in how we provide crisis accommodation to local women and their children.

Domestic and Family Violence in Albury

Domestic and family violence (DFV) continues to be a pressing issue for communities across Australia and the regional twin city of Albury-Wodonga is no exception. In the last 6 months there has been over 1040 police referrals for DFV incidents to the Albury regions Women Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service. Of these, there were 145 specific requests, for accommodation and housing related support. In the last 12 months Yes Unlimited has provided more than 290 periods of support to women and their children who have experienced DFV through Betty's Place Women's Refuge and our Staying Home Leaving Violence program. Considering only 40% of women in NSW actually report DFV (The Social Sector NSW, 2021) and that these are only the NSW statistics in a cross-border context, these figures paint a concerning picture. A recent report from the Family Violence: Cross Border Issues and Solutions Forum facilitated by Latrobe University highlighted that Albury-Wodonga experiences significant disadvantage and that rates of DFV in both cities exceeds state averages (Crime Statistics Agency, 2018; Albury City, 2016).

Betty's Place Women's Refuge

Betty's Place Women's Refuge has been an important part of the Albury service landscape since the early 1970's when local residents Bob and Betty Maclean began accommodating women in their own home. Betty's Place currently provides accommodation to up to five women and their children alongside onsite case management, and a range of other supports to assist women in achieving their goals. The site is centrally located, and operates within a 'communal' living

environment, accommodating up to two families in the main house and one family in a semi self-contained unit in the backyard. There are two single rooms also located in the main house. Residents currently share bathrooms, kitchen, lounge rooms and laundry facilities.

Owned by the Lands and Housing Corporation, the building was constructed in the 1930's and as a result has extremely high maintenance and utilities costs. Anticipated costs for Yes Unlimited for utilities alone, mainly due to heating and cooling, is anticipated to be \$18k this financial year. Our partners Homes Out West Community Housing, who manage the building and maintenance, carry the ongoing costs (approximately 19k per annum) of the failing electrical systems and plumbing that are to be expected with any ageing house. A room at the front of the house is used as a staff office, which we are beginning to outgrow as our DFV services continue to expand.

The Case for Change

While the model in its existing form has served an important purpose for many years, the stories from women who use the service and an emerging evidence base around communal refuges, all indicate it is time for a significant change. Notably a key recommendation from the Victorian Royal Commission into Domestic and Family Violence was to begin a staged transition of all communal models to what is known as a 'core and cluster' model. An insight gained during the COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted this, with the increase in Job Seeker payments seeing women choose to self-fund accommodation in hotels/caravan parks rather than utilise a communal refuge. There are a number of

problems with the communal refuge model that both reduce the outcomes for women accessing them and make them difficult to manage as a service provider, including:

- **Re-traumatisation:** A communal living environment following an exposure to trauma can be a confronting and difficult experience for women and their children. Having to live alongside other residents with varying needs and their own experiences of trauma can exacerbate the damage that has already occurred and extend the healing process.
- **Privacy:** Many women report the discomfort associated with the inevitable loss of privacy that comes from living in shared environment as a reason for either not accessing refuge accommodation or ending their stay early. This is particularly pertinent given the deeply personal experience of DFV and the vulnerability that is present at the point of needing crisis accommodation.
- **House dynamics:** Shared living is difficult at the best of times and tensions and conflict between residents are commonplace. Alongside the impacts this has on a resident's experience, significant amounts of staff time and organisational resourcing are spent managing these dynamics, which detracts from the work of moving towards longer term, sustainable outcomes for clients.

- **Safety and risk management:** Managing risk in a communal refuge is inherently more difficult, having to consider how the multiple risks factors associated with an individual client may interact with each other. On a practical level this often means that full accommodation capacity is reduced (e.g. one or two rooms not used) in order to mitigate presenting risks.
- **COVID-19:** A more recent challenge was the management of social distancing and isolation during COVID-19 pandemic which led to a reduction in accommodation capacity in order to ensure this was able to happen.

“You need your own space to grieve privately and not be locked in a room and you could interact when you wanted to. Sharing with other people is hard.”

Jane, DFV Survivor

“Having your own space is an important aspect of self-esteem and self-respect – having something that is mine. When you are feeling anxious or insecure, you don't want to make small talk. It's important to have your own kitchen and bathroom”

Leah, DFV Survivor

Core and Cluster Models

Core and cluster refuges are a more modern and flexible approach to crisis accommodation for women and their children. They consist of a number of independent units, the 'cluster', located on the same block as a multipurpose space, the 'core' including staff offices, meetings rooms and communal facilities. They are usually centrally located, with high quality security and offer a range of services onsite.

This set up provides women with their own space, mitigating most of the problems associated with communal refuges, while maintaining the important components of safety, and onsite service provision.

A flagship example of this in NSW is *The Orchard* located in Orange which officially opened in 2020. Yes Unlimited has a solid trauma-informed service model and this would be a key consideration in the design of new crisis accommodation, ensuring the physical space itself conveys a sense of safety, stability and predictability.

“A core and cluster model would be ideal so you can remove yourself if necessary - you could engage and disengage. You wouldn't have to manage the difficulties that arise when people do things differently from you, you wouldn't have to be uncomfortable”

Erin, DFV Survivor

“The environment is important - you need something luscious - like a reward after all you have been through. It should be colourful, full of plants and books, a place where you feel safe immediately.”

Leah, DFV Survivor

Potential Ways Forward

At this point in time Yes Unlimited is considering two potential options in transitioning from the current model to a core and cluster.

Option 1 | Re-develop the existing site

Option 1 would pursue a demolition of most or all of the existing building and designing a core and cluster refuge that is suited to the block of land.

With this option we could potentially explore a phased build process where units were constructed on the back of the property before the main house was re-developed, allowing for a continuity of service provision during the build. Other considerations would include:

- The overall costs of demolition and re-build weighed up against building on a new site.
- The block's suitability for re-development e.g. permit requirements, easements.
- Ensuring crisis accommodation options are available during the development.
- The approval and active support from the Lands and Housing Corporation (LAHC).

Option 2 | A purpose-built facility on a new site

Option 2 would involve working with the Department of Communities and Justice and LAHC to either sell or re-purpose the existing site and purchase a block of land suited to a core and cluster model.

Considerations for this option would include:

- Ensuring crisis accommodation options are available during the cross-over period between the new and existing site i.e. would existing site need to be sold prior to development.
- Availability of undeveloped land in a central area.
- Availability of existing suitable LAHC property that could be redeveloped.
- Capacity to use the capital from the sale of the existing site to purchase a new site.
- Potential to re-purpose an existing property e.g. an old hotel.

In conclusion

There has been a growing community awareness of the damage caused by DFV in recent years, and with this, an emergent push to modernise our service responses. We believe this is an exciting opportunity to create the kind of place where women and their children can genuinely heal and move forward with dignity from an experience of violence. Either option would be a significant investment, requiring community consultation, architectural design, detailed project planning and input from multiple stakeholders. At this point we are looking to rally the right collaborators to help us in progressing these early conversations towards a tangible plan.

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