



Acute women's refuge shortage exposed

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Increasing numbers of women who escape from domestic violence with their children are being placed in caravan parks and cheap motels and hotels due to a critical shortage of vacancies in women's refuges, a report has found.

The report, commissioned by the Federal Government but not released for 15 months, has called this practice "unsafe", and a major factor in women returning to dangerous situations.

The co-author of the report, Julie Oberin, said the practice provided women with little or no support or healing from damage inflicted by domestic violence.

"For women in total emotional crisis, and for distraught children without their toys, pets or belongings, it's too hard in a motel room, so they go home," she said.

Women's refuges turn away one in two women escaping domestic violence every day, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare reported in September. In NSW the 55 women's refuges are under severe pressure as women stay longer due to the increased complexity of their problems, the lack of public housing, and the high cost of private rental accommodation, ser-

vice providers said.

Catherine Gander, executive officer of NSW Women's Refuge Resource Centre, said most refuges had money to put women up for short periods in hotels or caravans. As well, the Domestic Violence Help Line, funded by the Department of Community Services, referred women to hotels and motels if there were no vacancies in refuges.

"No one says it's good practice but the alternative is to send them home," she said.

A spokeswoman for the Minister for Community Services, Reba Meagher, said no figures were kept on these referrals.

The *Herald* has learnt that a young mother, escaping domestic violence with a three-month-old baby and a two-year-old, was recently placed in a small motel room with limited follow-up. The baby was later badly scalded and admitted to hospital, and both children were taken from the mother and put into care.

Trish O'Donohue, manager of a St Vincent de Paul refuge service, said the incident would not have happened if the woman had been in the refuge, or if the service was funded to provide more outreach services to women.

"Most of the women find it very difficult confined in a room

with a couple of kids, no kitchen or laundry, and unable to leave," she said. "They don't feel safe if they believe the perpetrator is looking for them." In contrast, refuges had strict security systems, other residents, and staff to provide support.

Women's and other crisis refuges are funded jointly by federal and state governments. A new five-year agreement was signed in September which provided no growth funding from the Federal Government, despite a recommendation by an independent evaluation last year that a 15 per cent real increase was needed to maintain services.

The Opposition spokeswoman for women, Tanya Plibersek, said the Government had "put its logo" on a television advertising campaign about domestic violence. "But when it comes to committing real money to provide accommodation and emergency services, they will not do it."

The report, *Women's Refuges, Shelters, Outreach and Support Services in Australia*, said the extent of unmet demand for services and the shortage of crisis accommodation needed to be recognised "as a serious issue warranting expansion of funds".