

SAFE AS HOUSES

EVALUATION REPORT SNAPSHOT JUNE 2019



SAFE as HOUSES
Preventing Homelessness for Women & Children

Preventing homelessness for women and children affected by family and domestic violence.



39.8%

of all homelessness in WA is due to family and domestic violence



50%

of women experiencing family and domestic violence have children in their care



62%

of those seeking homelessness services in WA are women

KEY AIMS OF SASH

PREVENTING & ENDING HOMELESSNESS

ASSISTANCE WITH LEGAL SOCIAL & OTHER ISSUES

KEEPING WOMEN AND CHILDREN SAFE

ASSISTANCE WITH OBTAINING STABLE, SECURE HOUSING & LEGAL PROTECTION

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

SAFE AND SECURE HOUSING CAN LEAD TO IMPROVED HEALTH, EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION OUTCOMES

WHAT IS SASH?

Safe as Houses (SASH) commenced as a pilot program in early 2017 to provide integrated and holistic legal and support services to women who are experiencing legal issues due to Family and Domestic Violence (FDV) and are either experiencing or are at risk of homelessness.

FDV is the leading cause of insecure housing and homelessness. Whilst the imperative to keep women and children safe from FDV is of highest priority, even when women have left violent relationships, they can be left with many other stresses and challenges, often relating to financial insecurity, legal issues and risk of homelessness.

Conventional legal and homelessness services are often only able to address part of the intertwined issues encountered, and having to retell one's story, or seek help from multiple agencies can be confusing and overwhelming. SASH was established to provide legal assistance coupled with wraparound case management to assist clients with their often complex legal, financial and social issues.

WHO IS INVOLVED IN SASH?

SASH is a partnership of three established community legal centres, Tenancy WA, Women's Legal Service WA and Street Law Centre WA who collectively identified the need for integrated legal and non-legal support for women who face the challenges of homelessness and FDV.

Tenancy WA acts as the lead agency responsible for administration and case management of SASH clients, and assists clients with tenancy disputes.

Women's Legal Service WA specialises in assisting clients with family law settlements and agreements regarding children, child protection and violence restraining orders.

Street Law Centre WA assists clients with legal issues including debts, fines and infringements, minor crime, criminal injuries compensation, family violence restraining orders and ID documents.

SASH collaborates with a wide variety of stakeholders that can refer clients to SASH or can provide other support to clients for non-legal issues (eg: financial counselling and health issues).



**THE UNIVERSITY OF
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This snapshot presents key findings from the independent evaluation of SASH undertaken by researchers from the School of Population and Global Health, UWA. Authors: Lisa Wood, Angela Gazey, Elise Irwin & Karen Martin

For further information about data and other findings, please see the full report.



WHO HAS BEEN SUPPORTED?

133

Women have been supported in the first 23 months of operation.

40

(range 15-87)

Mean Age of Clients (range)

31

(23.3%)

Recently Evicted from a Tenancy

81

(60.9%)

Have children under 18

29

(21.8%)

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD)

33

(24.8%)

Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander

HOW DO CLIENTS ACCESS SASH?

Client eligibility for SASH

Eligible clients are either homeless or at risk of homelessness, are experiencing or have experienced FDV and have legal needs that span two or more partner agencies' areas of expertise.

How clients access SASH

Clients can be referred to SASH by any of the three partner agencies' or by external organisations, or clients may self-refer by phone or email to the program coordinator.

Other organisations that have referred clients to SASH include FDV services and/or refuges, health services (such as Women's Health and Family Services and King Edward Memorial Hospital (KEMH) and not for profit community services such as Unitingcare West). Other less frequent referrals have come from WA Police (WAPOL) and of note and proactively, Westpac bank where there was a mortgage default situation associated with FDV.

What type of support is provided?

The support provided by SASH has two main components – legal and non-legal. The three partner agencies work with clients to resolve the legal issues that fall within the scope of their expertise, whilst the SASH program coordinator provides clients with case management to address their non-legal issues. Sometimes there are issues that can have both a legal and non-legal components, hence the merits of having a case manager embedded within the SASH program.

SUPPORT SASH OFFERS

Legal Support

- Obtaining/objecting to FVROs
- Family Court matters eg custody/children's issues, property settlement
- Minor criminal matters
- Criminal Injuries Compensation Claims
- Tenancy issues, eviction proceedings, rent arrears
- Assistance with debts, unpaid fines, infringements
- Court representation
- Accessing pro-bono legal services
- Child protection matters

Non-Legal Support

- Case management and coordination
- Coordinating support for clients from other organisations
- Assisting clients to maintain current tenancies (eg repairs and advocacy)
- Assistance to address non-legal needs (eg immediate material needs, food relief).

Referral of SASH Clients to Other Community Support Agencies

- Of the 133 clients supported by SASH, 119 had received one or more referrals to external organisations. Most commonly for: Accommodation, counselling (including mental health support), emergency relief and whitegoods, personal items and household furniture.
- Other referrals have included NDIS, financial counselling, Department of Communities, Allied Health and Homeless Healthcare.
- If the client requires specialist legal services that are outside of the remit of SASH, they are referred to specialist community legal centres or specialist pro-bono legal support.

LEGAL ISSUES

In the first 23 months of the SASH program

MARCH 2017 TO FEBRUARY 2019

The mechanism for providing legal assistance to clients can vary, depending on the clients' individual circumstances and requirements. Some SASH clients received discrete advice for individual legal issues they were experiencing, however due to the complex nature of the legal, financial and social issues experienced by clients the majority received ongoing support from the SASH program coordinator and partner agencies.



Instances of legal advice were provided to clients



Legal tasks completed for clients across the three partner agencies

"...(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

Legal Assistance Provided by the SASH program



"Because honestly, I would not have known what to do with my legal side of things. Really, I would not have known, I probably would have been like a newborn baby I'd say... I was amazed to find out that they handle the whole - and that took a weight off my shoulder, it really did. It took a load off my shoulders."

- SASH Client

SASH clients typically present with multiple legal issues, that require involvement of more than one of the partner agencies. Clients are referred to the relevant CLC (e.g. if it is family law matter, the client will be assisted by WLSWA, if a client is experiencing legal issues related to their tenancy they will be supported by Tenancy WA and if the matter is related to fines and infringement, the client would be assisted by Street Law) as required and in accordance with SASH internal requirements.

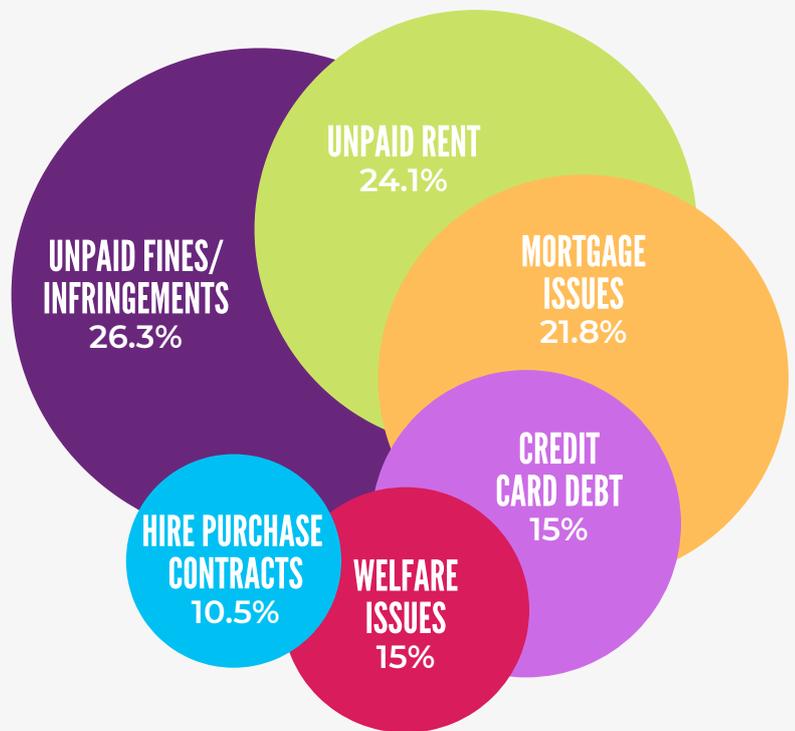
FINANCIAL ISSUES

There is a range of financial issues experienced by SASH clients.

83% of SASH clients reported that they were experiencing financial issues when they were first supported by SASH

57% of SASH clients had problems with debts

- Unpaid fines and infringements were the most common financial issues affecting SASH clients
- Unpaid rent has substantial implications for maintaining housing security and was a major issue for over a quarter of SASH clients
- Mortgage issues and credit card debt were also common challenges facing SASH clients



"...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

PREVENTING/ ASSISTING WITH HOMELESSNESS

Risk of Homelessness

A core aim of the SASH program is to prevent homelessness amongst women and children who have experienced FDV.

83% of SASH clients were assessed as being at risk of homelessness at the time of first contact with the program

11% of SASH clients were experiencing primary homelessness (e.g. rough sleeping) when first supported by SASH

19% of SASH 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, settlement and other property related debt issues

For SASH clients in rental situations, FDV had often meant that they were left with no, or significantly reduced, income whilst at the same time, forced to take responsibility for the tenancy.

In working towards connecting clients with stable and secure accommodation, SASH aims to empower clients to move forward, and take greater control of the next steps in their lives. Evidence of this was seen across many client case studies and reflected in some of the client interview comments. Being able to manage finances, sustain their tenancy or think about returning to work are all positive markers of this.

"So now I'm in the position where I'm in private rental, I'm managing financially. I've always been really good at budgeting, which a lot of people don't expect if you've been on the verge of homelessness...I'm working...so it's contract to contract and you kind of - but it's beautiful work and it's really - I feel socially valuable."

- SASH Client

IMPACT OF SUPPORT ON CLIENTS' ISSUES

Among clients who responded to a survey, the majority indicated that the issues for which they initially sought assistance from SASH had either been resolved (44%) or were ongoing but improved and with plans in place to address (28%).

Although some clients reported that their issues were ongoing or had not yet improved, this may reflect complex legal, housing and financial issues that generally will take considerable time to resolve. Property issues, criminal compensation claims as well as securing accommodation which can take months due to lack of housing options currently available are all examples of this complexity. Some clients do not have the capacity to deal with all their complex issues initially due to their FDV experiences. The staffing and budget constraints on the SASH program and the number of clients needing intensive case management support may also mean that not all of client expectations are able to be met.

Case Study | Ashley

Background

Ashley, a single mother in her mid-thirties, was experiencing multiple legal and financial issues when she sought help from SASH. She had been subject to financial abuse and had accumulated large debts. Her living situation was unstable as she was residing at a property without a formal tenancy agreement and the house was in poor repair. Ashley also had a child in the care of the Department of Communities and was experiencing mental health issues that resulted in a hospital admission. The FDV Ashley had experienced over an extended period of time had left her with limited support networks. With limited income and outstanding fines and infringements Ashley was unable to afford a private rental. When she first presented to SASH she was exhausted, anxious and concerned for herself and her child's future and safety.

What was SASH able to do to resolve the issues?

SASH provided legal advice and assisted with collating her debt history, and support for Ashley to apply for the fines to be converted to community work. She was referred for financial counselling, and SASH assisted her to find more appropriate rental accommodation and to claim rent assistance. SASH also provided assistance with Ashley's application for public housing and priority housing waitlists, and negotiated a rental agreement at a reduced affordable rate. SASH has provided support for Ashley to seek appropriate counselling, support to understand legal terminology and advice to assist in the complexity of her circumstances with all parties. In relation to her DOC matter SASH liaised with the FinWA (Family Inclusion Network of Western Australia Inc.) advocacy worker and Legal Aid WA lawyer on Ashley's behalf. SASH also provided assistance with emergency relief, a SmartRider to enable attendance at DOC meetings and support letters to various agencies. DOC are now considering reunification of Ashley with her child.

Case Study | Ines

SASH Client with Complex Legal Issues

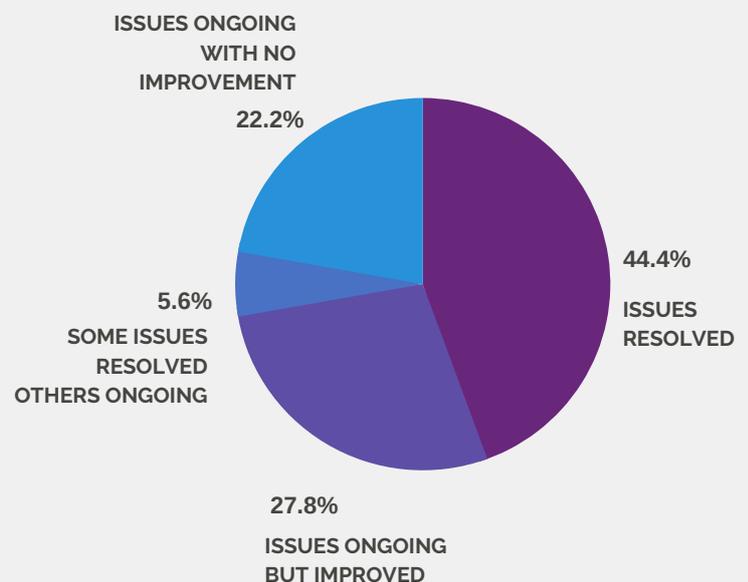
Background

Ines is a lady in her late thirties who experienced FDV over an extended period and has three children in the care of Department of Communities (DOC). At the time of first contact with SASH Ines was living in public housing and was pregnant with her fourth child. The perpetrator of the FDV was imprisoned for offences against Ines. Ines began engaging with the DOC with the view to keep the baby in her care once born. Ines engaged with DOC and worked hard to provide a safe and secure home for the baby when he arrived, although there was significant damage to the public housing property as a result of the violent behaviour of the perpetrator.

What was SASH able to do to resolve the issues?

SASH supported Ines through her legal issues by assisting her to apply for and be granted a priority transfer to safe housing based on the safety risk and vulnerability of herself and her new baby. Ines was also assisted to apply for an FVRO against the perpetrator of the FDV. Through SASH, Ines was provided advice and support on the DOC process, family court applications, family court orders, and FOI applications for a criminal injuries compensation application due to FDV. Ines has been offered support to appeal an outgoing property condition report based on the condition of her house as the damage was a direct result of FDV. She was provided referrals to the Sexual Assault Resource Centre and was supported with emergency relief. SASH continues to support Ines when requested with a view to resolving her legal issues at a pace set by Ines. Due to the complexity of her needs, Ines still has unresolved issues after almost 12 months of SASH support. This is the norm for most SASH clients who require a service that can provide extensive long term support at a pace they can cope with and at their direction.

CLIENT PERSPECTIVE ON ISSUE RESOLUTION



KEEPING WOMEN AND CHILDREN SAFE

Experience of Family and Domestic Violence among SASH Clients

All SASH clients experienced various forms of FDV either previously and/or at the time they sought support. This included physical, emotional and financial abuse, often multiple types of abuse combined, and/or a long history of recurrent exposure to violent abuse. It is important to note that although all SASH clients have experienced FDV, not all incidents have resulted in a criminal compensation claim, and not all incidents have resulted in perpetrators being convicted, therefore not all clients are on the victim of crime notification register.

The catastrophic effects of physical, emotional and economic abuse in its many and varied forms are sometimes played down by women. Leaving a partner, family home, neighborhood and pets, and moving into a situation of fear and uncertainty may be too unpleasant to contemplate. This makes the need for holistic and expert support all the more crucial.

One of the critical considerations for SASH and its partner agencies is the fact that many women leaving or exiting from a FDV situation can remain at risk, it is vital that any efforts to support clients and their children does not place them at further risk. As part of the client intake process, SASH assesses if it is safe to make phone contact and completes a safety plan with clients where necessary.



OF SASH CLIENTS IDENTIFIED AS VICTIMS OF CRIME AND HAVE BEEN PLACED ON THE VICTIM OF CRIME NOTIFICATION REGISTER.



OF SASH CLIENTS HAD FAMILY VIOLENCE RESTRAINING ORDERS (FVRO) AGAINST THE PERPETRATOR OF THE FDV.



OF SASH CLIENTS IDENTIFIED AS REQUIRING AN FVRO AND NOT YET HAVING ONE IN PLACE.

"...the avenues they give you, I just wouldn't have been aware, it would have taken me a lot longer and I would have probably been a lot more stressed, just to have the resources and information accessible and just the quick response, even if there's no result, they still will let you know, this is what we've got to do, we've got to look into it further, bear with us, we'll get back to you..."

- SASH Client

Through the evaluation, the value of the SASH program in addressing a key gap in services available to women who have experienced FDV was recognised across client, partner agency and stakeholder domains. The majority of clients indicated that:

Their experiences with SASH had been positive and that they had received greater advocacy and more in-depth support than with other services they had received.

The wraparound, holistic approach to the multiplicity of issues faced by many clients was perceived to be both unique to SASH and critical to its success.

Past difficulties in having to access multiple services to meet their needs was common, and each time having to share their story from the beginning was distressing.

They were often surprised to find a service that could address the multiple issues and offer ongoing support to meet their needs. This had resulted in significant positive changes. One client described the load that had been taken off her shoulders as a result of support provided by SASH.