

Getting services to survivors: a progress report from Lae

by Stephen Howes

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I was fortunate to be able to spend a week earlier this month in Lae with our **Case Management Centre** team. The Centre opened in July, and is now staffed by a team of eleven. Run by the PNG NGO, Femili PNG, which I have the honour of chairing, the Centre aims to help survivors of family and sexual violence get the services they need.

The Centre works directly with survivors, both women and children. Clients are referred to us by other service providers, such as health clinics, the police or the courts. One of our four case workers meets the clients, and talks with them to work out what they want and what can feasibly be done. Cases vary tremendously, but often women need secure shelter. They may require police intervention, and ultimately legal action. In some cases, they may require relocation out of Lae to a more secure environment. Our target for referrals in the first year is about 25 a month, and we have already achieved that. The number of cases is a sad reflection on the level of family and sexual violence, but also a vindication of the need for client referral and follow-up. Most of the cases we see are very complex, requiring multiple consultations. It can take months to close a case, or years if legal action is involved.

The Centre also works closely with other service providers. Lae is fortunate to have a number of organisations working with survivors. There is a dedicated Family Support Centre at the Angau Hospital, and the Family and Sexual Violence Support Unit at the police station. The provincial government and the courts also have personnel working with women and children at risk. There are two safe houses for women and an orphanage for children. Yet often the efforts of service providers are undermined by a lack of resources. Lack of safe house capacity is a particular constraint. The voluntary organisations that run safe houses may not have the resources to provide their clients with food. We can help there. We are also funding one of the safe houses to build a more secure fence, and to expand capacity. By working with stakeholders and filling gaps rather than duplicating services, we can help improve the effectiveness of the sector as a whole.

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Working with other stakeholders is not just a matter of providing resources. It's also about information sharing and resourcing. We have introduced monthly stakeholder meetings, where we jointly discuss emerging issues and long-standing problems. And we host smaller case meetings, where we work out how, by working together, we can solve individual cases.

During my time in Lae, I heard some horrifying stories, but also accounts where, through the work of the Centre and other service providers, women and children had been brought to safety, and permanent solutions had been found to situations of repeated violence. I also learnt of cases where there had not been a satisfactory resolution, for example, where a woman's petition for divorce on the grounds of violence had been rejected.

I came away very impressed by the dedication and competence of our staff, and encouraged by what has been achieved in a very short time. It's only a start, but I'm proud that we are making a difference to individual lives and, in so doing, sending out a message loud and clear that family and sexual violence is completely unacceptable, and that we must do all we can to help those who are the receiving end of the scourge of domestic violence.

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Stephen Howes is Director of the Development Policy Centre, ANU. He supports the Case Management Centre in a pro-bono capacity and is also Chair of the Management Committee of Femili PNG.

Author/s:

Stephen Howes

Stephen Howes is Director of the Development Policy Centre and Professor of Economics at the Crawford School of Public Policy at The Australian National University.

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