

CPAG Presentation 23 May 2018

Kia ora koutou, as Peter has said, my name is Katie O'Donnell and I am the manager of Nga Wahine Tamariki Punanga o Whakatu Nelson Women's and Children's Refuge Service. I feel very privileged to have been invited to speak to you today. CPAG provide an analysis of the state of our children's wellbeing and of government budgets that would be difficult for a lot of us to understand otherwise.

Most people here would have a good understanding of Women's Refuge and what we do. We have been a core service in the Nelson Tasman region for 42 years, providing a confidential place of refuge and a 24 x7 0800 crisisline for women and children experiencing domestic violence. We also support women and children in their own homes, provide a specific advocacy service and programme for tamariki and rangatahi, women's educational programmes and in a recent contract with MSD, emergency accommodation for families who are homeless. We have 2 outreach advocates: one in Golden Bay and one in Murchison. And of course we have our amazing volunteers who work from governance, to admin to crisisline and gardening. Without them we would have great difficulty in operating.

I have been in my role since October 2014 and I must say the biggest challenge is finding adequate funding to keep the service running. We are well supported by our community however, and my thanks go to all of those organisations and individuals that support the Refuge financially, and in kind....you help to keep our doors open and our women and children fed and clothed!

Like others in the social services sector, we received no increase to our baseline funding over the last 10 years. We have been offered new contracts by government which, while good strategies, are still poorly resourced and actually increase the demand on our capability and capacity, so have not relieved the financial pressure. I take my hat off to all of the organisations here who have survived. Of course some services didn't survive.

But, we are relieved that in the budget the Government has provided for the family violence sector with \$76 million over 3 years with a 30% increase in funding likely in the year to come. I know I am speaking mostly to the converted when I say that it will go some way to redressing the previous 10 years deficit in funding. The government has said that they want to acknowledge the social sector that consistently overdelivers on the smell of an oily rag (my words not theirs). As the cost of running our organisations increased exponentially, this amounted to a reduction in funding.....and mirrored the rising needs of the women and children we work with. There has been a feeling that we will carry on regardless, an expectation that we will do more with less.....and we did.

In the 2016-17 year we worked with 1431 women and children in this region. That's contracts that were opened and closed. It does not count all of the walk-ins, telephone calls, food parcel collections etc. The vast majority of these women were on a benefit, many were also in low-paying jobs. I have to mention here that there is some mythology that poverty is a cause of domestic violence. It isn't....but it can be an aggravating factor. And it can keep women in an abusvie relationship because of their lack of choices and resources.

What do we see withour clients? We see the effects of intergenerational abuse and poverty. We see mums who have never been parented well themselves making their children oreos and milk for breakfast. We see women who can't transport their children because they can't afford to run a car,

or the car needs a warrant or registration, or repairs...that they cannot afford, and getting into difficulty because they use them anyway, and so a cycle begins. Also, they become more isolated in two ways...by the violence and by poverty. And of course we see the families who can't afford enough food for the week, having to make decisions between paying the bills and buying the groceries. Women and children living in poverty have less access to the resources they need to get out and away from violence to safety. Living with violence means living with uncertainty and insecurity, and chaos. It is much more difficult to plan ahead when you are struggling just to get through the day.

So, while I'm feeling positive at the injection of funding for our sector, I'm very disappointed that some opportunities to relieve poverty have not been taken up. I want to particularly mention the sanctions on women on benefits who do not name the father of their child or children. Section 70A means that those applying for a sole parent benefit must name the other parent of their child when applying, or lose \$22 per child immediately which then increases to \$28 (for the first child only) if they still will not reveal who the parent is after 13 weeks. Around 300 men are effected by Section 70A around the country, but the majority (some thousands) are women.

They have to prove that they do not know who the father is or that they have a compelling reason to not disclose such as sexual or family violence. It is not a simple process and they must swear that what they are saying is the truth. These are our most vulnerable families. It does nothing to encourage any responsibility from parents to support their children and it literally takes food out of their mouths. Despite the high cost of groceries, we know that \$22 or \$28 would make a huge difference in someone's weekly budget. And it applies for each child, so for some families this could amount to over \$100 they are missing out on per week. It punishes women and they and their children suffer. One of the effects of sanctions like this, of living in poverty for women who have been subjected to violence and abuse, is that returning to the abuser starts to become an option....after all the relationship isn't generally bad ALL the time, and perhaps they provide some care for the children, or they have the car, or two incomes (even low ones) are better than one. Families actually need more money in order to provide for their children and no amount of budgeting will change this if there is not actually enough money coming in. Imposing sanctions pushes more children further into poverty and removes hope for any improvement in their lives.

I would like to see the government remove these sanctions immediately. If they put tamariki at the centre of what they do, then it is a no-brainer.

One of the services that lost funding recently was Supergrans and I would love to see their reinstatement. I know the Soroptimists are working on that too. Supergrans are able to provide a service in the home that helps families with the basics of cooking a meal and looking after children and a home. Many of the families we work with have not had the opportunity to learn the skills that Supergrans can teach, as well as providing a listening ear, advice and companionship. Poverty is depressing! It is almost impossible to have a positive outlook for the future for yourself or your children when the day-to-day anxiety of putting food on the table and paying the bills consumes all of your energy. Groups like supergrans can alleviate some of this.

Lastly, I wanted to talk about food. We have a pantry and freezer full of food donated by our community. Like everyone else, every year we have noticed higher need for food and other goods.

Every year Women's Refuge create around 80 Christmas hampers for the families we identify as having least resources and that we have worked with over the previous 6 months. Everything in the hamper is donated by this community, with one generous donor in particular, from hams, chickens, and Christmas puddings to gifts for children and mums.

It is the best feeling in the world to be able to give to these families. It is an enormous privilege and a humbling one, to be in the position of being able to help make this happen for families living in such dire poverty that they have not been able to buy special treats or presents for Christmas and every year the need is greater. The women are so grateful and many of them cry. Many say that without our hamper, there would not be Christmas in their home.

It upsets me that in our land of plenty this state of affairs continues and worsens and because this has become a norm for us and that we provide more and more hampers each year.

Every child in Aotearoa has the right to security food shelter education and health care. And Christmas.

This government has pledged to end child poverty and it is up to us to hold them to that!

Thanks you.