Submission to Australian Productivity Commission Research Study into the Contributions of Australia's Not For Profit Sector

The Wollongong West Street Centre (WSC) is a government funded community based (or non-government) organisation for women and children who have experienced sexual assault in childhood as well as their families and carers. We provide free counselling, group work, community education and training as well as community development projects and other related activities. The West Street Centre community is committed to providing a socially just, ethically based, best practice service for women and children who have experienced the violent crime of childhood sexual assault.

Our service was established over 20 years ago under the NSW Child Protection Council's four year programme in 1986. Since 1986 the service has undergone a number of transformations – new funding guidelines, new names and new premises – however our core work has always focussed on childhood sexual assault and it effects both on the individual and the community.

This submission to your study is written from our experience as small non government organisation (NGO). We also draw upon our recent involvement in a yet to be published research project "Valuing Local NGO Knowledge in Planning Community Services" in which WSC was one of the five research sites. The research was funded by an ARC grant and jointly sponsored by the University of Sydney, University of Western Sydney and the Illawarra Forum (regional peak organisation for local community organisations). The research will form the basis of a PhD as well as a series of other articles, seminar or workshop presentations.

Below are the important points we would like to raise in relation to your study:

1. **Assess measures of the contribution of the not for profit sector and how these can be used to improve government policy and programs and optimise the sector's contribution**

Not everything can be measured

One of the unique features of small community based or non-government organisations (NGO) is that they can provide an opportunity to *practice social justice and social inclusion* – they 'do not merely provide a service that is "access to justice"; rather, they practice social justice themselves.' (Quote from unpublished paper Knowing in Practice, Illawarra Forum, 2009). Social inclusion is much more than just a "job and a bed" it involves full participation in community life, for example, having a voice in the public sphere, being part of building social networks and community.

In small NGOs practicing social justice occurs by providing an environment where participation is valued, respectful practices are commonplace, social networks and community are created, community members (including those who are often disenfranchised)

have a place to belong. These values and practices cannot be replicated in large bureaucracies. Research clearly shows that experiences of participation, belonging, recognition, respect can have a positive impact on physical and mental health on the individual, result in social cohesion and community building. The <u>Knowing in Practice</u> (unpublished paper, Illawarra Forum, 2009) concludes 'social policy that focuses on the value of community networks, groups and organisations is urgently needed'.

Experiences of recognition, respect and belonging are vitally important, and yet how can be measured? One of the conclusions of the "Valuing Local NGO Knowledge in Planning Community Services" research project is that "not everything can be measured" that, meaningful measures are not always possible or desirable. We are missing much of significance when facts and figures are privileged over stories of people's lives and their efforts to tackle social problems.

<u>What measures shall we use?</u>

Therefore we believe that it is best to adopt (or maintain) a simple 'bums on seats' type of measures along with 'case studies' or narratives to illustrate outcomes. Reporting should be minimal to ensure that organisations are not over burdened by data collection that will take them away keeping its doors open and staff available to do the work of the organisation.

2. Identify unnecessary impediments to the efficient and effective operation of not for profit organisations and measures to improve their contribution

- Our involvement in research project has reemphasised that there are limits to type of data that can be collected without detracting from service delivery. It is imperative that governments reduce unnecessary or burdensome accountability mechanisms, imposed funding agreements that detract from service delivery to collect, input and analyse data about participants. Therefore, as highlighted above, we believe that it is best to adopt (or maintain) a simple 'bums on seats' type of measures along with 'case studies' or narratives to illustrate outcome.

- There is an increased emphasis placed on the use of evidence based practice. However there is a limit to the types of data available. If there is going to be a continued emphasis on evidence based practice this needs go hand in hand with funding that will ensure that the efforts and outcomes small and local NGOs adequately represented in research.

<u>Competition or collaboration?</u>

- Competitive tendering has undermined the cohesion of the sector. A decade or so of competitive tendering has fostered a climate of competition, where each organisation works for themselves, rather than collaboration and support for community initiatives and activities.

- Another problem with competitive tendering is that small organisations cannot compete with larger bureaucratic charities or private organisations. This is problematic because, as outlined above, we believe that small and local NGOs offer unique benefits around social cohesion, community building and the practices of social justice and social inclusion.

3. Consider ways in which the delivery and outcomes of government funded services by not for profit organisations could be improved

The staff of any government funded service are their most important asset. The work of most services has become more and more complex over the years and this has contributed to increased workplace stress and, anecdotally, worker's compensation claims. Wages in the sector can be completely inadequate and not on par with remuneration for work in government organisations. We believe that both of these factors can contribute to difficulties in attracting staff and the loss of experienced staff members.

Ensuring the sector has sufficient funding is essential. Adequate funding can translate into adequate staffing and acceptable workloads. Best practice models of staff support and professional development are now essential for all community services – this takes time and resources.

For example, the model used by our service is summarised below in a section taken from our last Annual Report:

> *Monthly clinical consultations are undertaken by all counsellors reflecting the West Street Centre's commitment to providing a quality service for clients. Clinical consultations are provided by Johnella Bird, who is a Narrative Therapist specialising in working with people who have experienced abuse. We thank Johnella for her skilful and accomplished support done over the telephone from Auckland New Zealand.*
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> *As a part of the internal clinical support systems, the team engage in the following:*
> *Weekly team meetings – As well as the general administration of the service these meetings also include allocation of clients and discussion about or review of the waiting list. These discussions are informed by broader guiding principles of access and equity.*
> *Case Management – each counsellor works with the Coordinator, as needed, to monitor their caseload.*
> *Staff Development – another element of our weekly team meetings can be discussion of training needs or other staff development issues. Workers are also encouraged to summarise or give feedback about any training they have undertaken.*
> *Peer clinical support – informal peer clinical support forms part of the day to day running of our service. Each counsellor is encouraged to debrief after each session as well as discuss any clinical issues or dilemmas that have arisen in their work. This informal context, together with the more formal means, such as team meetings and monthly clinical supervision, create regular opportunities for counsellors to review their work and discover new ways of working via the support and input from their colleagues.*
> *Counselling Reviews – occur on a six monthly basis. After negotiation with the client, another counsellor will come to a session and explore what has happened in counselling over the past six months, how useful it has been and what further work is needed in order for counselling to be completed. A more comprehensive review also occurs at the end of counselling and then again one year after leaving the service.*

In addition to these measures each staff member has their own annual training budget they are encouraged to undertake two training workshops or conferences per year.

4. **Examine recent changes in the relationships between government, business and community organisations and whether there is scope to enhance these relationships so as to improve outcomes delivered by the sector**

The importance of the role of advocacy by NGOs cannot be overemphasised – both advocacy for an individual as well as systemic advocacy which works toward broader social change. WSC has a long history of advocacy around childhood sexual assault (CSA). It is imperative we are able to promote change in government policy and the justice system in relation to child protection and the treatment of adult survivors of CSA without concern for the future of our funding or our PBI status and DGR endorsement.

5. **Examine the impact of the taxation system on the ability of not for profit organisations to raise funds and the extent to which the tax treatment of the sector affects competitive neutrality**

No comments in relation to this objective.