

Womens Liberation Halfway House Collective



PO box 70
elsternwick
3185

Ms. Lena Gustin,
102 South Terrace Rd.,
BANKSTOWN, 2200.

12th October '79

Pie
16-10-79

Dear *Lena*,

I am writing to you to explain the position of the Women's Liberation Halfway House Collective on an area of conflict between Victorian Refuges and both the Australian Department of Health and the Victorian Department of Community Welfare Services. Both Departments have argued that Refuges should provide these Departments with their residential addresses. Mr. Jona, the Minister of Community Welfare Services has suggested that Refuges which refuse to give their addresses will have to operate independently of the Refuge Programme (i.e., without funding). The WLHWH Collective has decided against giving its address and is concerned that its position, be explained.

As you are probably aware Women's Refuges have existed in Victoria for four years. Women's Liberation Halfway House was the first Refuge to be established and as such was the major force behind the struggle to achieve Government funding. The role of the Refuges in providing support situations is now widely recognised. State and Federal Governments have acknowledged by the funding of Refuges, that the Refuges provide services outside the scope of Government administered welfare services.

HOW REFUGES OPERATE.

Refuges provide women and children fleeing domestic violence and crisis situations with temporary accommodation and access to wider support systems. Refuges operate on a self-help principle. This is essential to Refuges' Structure, as it is dictated by their aim of fostering self-reliance among women. This is in response to a situation where women's lack of proper social and legal status has led to them and their children being placed at risk physically and mentally. Thus a refuge provides its residents with a home. It is not an institution. The refuge aims to provide a supportive and above all safe and secure environment, where a woman can live without fear of harrassment by a violent husband or de facto.

THE ISSUE.

The Australian Department of Health has argued that Women's Refuges should be accountable to their funding bodies and that such accountability should include the provision of addresses and the willingness

to receive visitors from Government Departments. The WLHWH Collective considers that it is already accountable to its funding bodies: financially through the annual audit of expenditure and the provision of receipts for all capital items, and administratively through its participation in regular meetings between the Department of Community Welfare Services and the Victorian Women's Refuge Group. In addition there are regular meetings between the Refuge Group and this department to co-ordinate monitoring and data collection by the refuges. The Department of Community Welfare Services has argued that addresses are required for visits from them regarding fire and health safety. Victorian Refuges have already expressed their willingness to be examined by local health and fire authorities. Visits from the Department are therefore unnecessary. The WLHWH Collective considers that the security of the HWH is of utmost importance for the peace of mind and physical well being of the residents. Many residents of refuges have been subjected to violent physical abuse by their spouses or boyfriends. On several occasions and sometimes as a direct result of information gleaned from supposedly discreet Government Departments, hostile males have located women at refuges and unpleasant situations have occurred. For this reason the WLHWH Collective considers that the secrecy of its address is vital. Providing addresses to Government Departments would only increase the threat to the physical security of the residents of the Refuges. We feel that no bureaucracy can guarantee to safeguard this sort of information. Refuges in other States, where addresses are known suffer constant harassment because of this. These refuges are therefore unable to provide a secure, home-like environment. The continuous threat of intrusion under which they operate requires them to be staffed 24 hours a day by paid workers. We see no reason why Victorian refuges should be 'brought into line' with an undesirable situation for the sake of uniformity.

VISITS

Both Federal and State Governments have indicated that they want the addresses so that departmental officers can visit refuges. Visits by departmental officers are directly contrary to the principles by which a refuge operates. They would be an intrusion into what is the resident's home and have the long-term effect of giving greater bureaucratic control over the day-to-day running of the Refuge, thereby undermining the environment the refuge strives to create and the values it represents.

At a recent meeting on the 25th September 1979 between the Minister for Community Welfare Services, Mr. Jona and the Victorian Women's Refuge Group, Mr. Jona made it clear that Refuges which refuse to give addresses will have their funding cut. He has however provided no reasonable justification for this stand.

The WLHWH Collective together with other Victorian Refuges will continue to resist Government demands which it considers will undermine the operation of the Refuge. We will struggle to maintain our position even in the face of threats to cut our funding.

You will no doubt appreciate that this is a matter of grave concern to all Victorian women and their children. We therefore ask you to write to the Federal Minister for Health, Mr. Hunt and the Victorian

Minister for Community Welfare Services, Mr. Jona expressing your support for Victorian Refuges and the position taken by WLHWH.

The situation is urgent.

Yours faithfully,

Virginia Geddes

On Behalf of Women's Liberation
Halfway House Collective.

Ms. Lena Austin,
162 South Terrace Rd.,
Melbourne, 2200.

PO box 70
Melbourne
3185

12th October '79

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