



## **MEDIA RELEASE**

**Thursday, 15 October 2009**

### **More care to protect women in mental health units**

Community Visitors Annual Report tabled in Parliament today calls on the State Government to speed plans in mental health units for areas specifically for women, and to provide more affordable housing options for people with a mental illness.

The report by the Community Visitors Mental Health Board based on 1315 visits to 118 mental health facilities across the state said that issues reported in the past relating to the safety of women in mental health units and supported accommodation continued.

Board chair, Public Advocate Colleen Pearce, said that some providers allowed a situation to occur where there was only one female in a mental health unit with a number of males.

“Such a situation occurred at a secure, extended-care unit in Ballarat where a female was sharing with 11 males over several months resulting in an alleged sexual assault against the female consumer,” the report said.

Ms Pearce said while such allegations were difficult to uphold, it was not the first time an allegation of this type had been made and raises the spectre of the risks of sexual assault in mental health settings where people are vulnerable, sight lines can be poor and bedroom doors are not lockable.

The report went on to say: “Gender imbalance has been a long-term issue that needs to be addressed.

“Female consumers often report feeling unsafe because they are unable to prevent intrusions into their rooms by other consumers. Locking doors to prevent access by other consumers can reduce anxiety and give a sense of security. Installing locks can be a way forward.”

The report said issues can become compounded in a unit of men and women when a patient may suffer from reduced inhibitions.

“The female only unit at Maroondah hospital has been reported to Community Visitors as a success, with positive feedback from both consumers and staff.”

On the issue of accommodation, the report said that discharging patients was “often difficult and can be delayed as a result of the lack of affordable and appropriate accommodation.”

“Women were particularly vulnerable when placed in Supported Residential Services (SRSs) without appropriate support,” Ms Pearce said.

The report highlights that in the Hume Region, there is an increase in people who use mental health services becoming homeless due to the lack of appropriate supported accommodation.

Community Visitors welcomed a range of Government initiatives towards addressing ‘gender-sensitive’ issues such as guidelines to help staff better manage women’s needs in mental health facilities but called for them to be implemented urgently. The guideline from the Chief Psychiatrist will guide all staff working in acute mental health units for promoting sexual safety. The guideline was developed with stakeholders including the Office of the Public Advocate.

Community Visitors are volunteers supported by the Office of the Public Advocate. They are empowered by law to visit shared supported accommodation for people with intellectual and/or physical disabilities, Supported Residential Services (SRSs) and mental health facilities with 24-hour nursing care to ensure their rights are being met.

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