

EDITORIAL

I spent a couple of days last week in Canberra, first as part of our efforts to build collaboration across the entire COSS network, and then as a part of an all-COSS delegation in a series of meetings with Ministers, Shadow Ministers, the Greens, and senior ministerial staffers. Our visit was well worthwhile and it's genuinely impressive to see our network working as one. I was reminded, though, of how distant Canberra and Parliament House can be, and how important it is to consistently raise in this context, in a myriad ways, our concerns for people suffering disadvantage.

Hot on the heels of ACOSS' 2011 Australian Community Sector Survey (see overleaf), we brought to Canberra three key messages: the community sector is working harder than ever; the demand for support is exceeding any capacity; and sector organisations are still being asked to deliver vital government services with funding that doesn't go close to meeting the full costs of actually providing those services.

Of course, if supplementary funding follows, the pay equity case will hopefully go some way towards improving base wages—an issue critical to attracting and retaining high quality staff into the future. But for all its importance this is still only one step. Funding processes right across government must acknowledge and incorporate all the costs really involved in delivering the services our sector provide so well.

But is the community sector ready and prepared to actually make this kind of demand on government, with determination and with one voice? In my last editorial I wrote of state government spending cuts to programs generally regarded as intervening early—that prevent problems from growing and ultimately requiring more costly interventions. These cuts, from Treasurer Foley's last Budget, are only now really starting to take effect.

Sadly, despite our best endeavours, we have made little progress on our campaign to get a better deal for people who might be facing financial hardship. What is interesting though is that the sector has developed its voice and determination. While SACOSS is leading much of the public action and commentary, we know that the whole sector is right behind us—from our largest charities through to some of our smallest services. We know that there is widespread alarm and concern that the government is still failing to hear what the sector is saying.

Since I last wrote for SACOSS News, the Association of Major Charitable Organisations and the SA Financial Counsellors' Association met directly with Minister Rankine, to present to her that offering the general public of South Australia just 3.5

financial counselling roles in place of the 44 FTE positions previously available through Families SA is a very bad deal—especially at the very time cost of living pressures are mounting at an enormous rate. The Minister was not prepared to budge, although did say she would review the decision over the coming 12 months subject to demand on the sector. We subsequently asked that the Premier urgently intervene and have just recently been informed that he has asked Minister Rankine to initiate further dialogue.

In the meantime three major agencies—Anglicare, UnitingCare Wesley Adelaide and the Salvation Army—all publicly released demand data showing that there has been a marked increase in demand for financial assistance and counselling services. This is not, of course, news to us. The ACOSS community sector survey pointed to the very same issue—demand had escalated in line with cost of living and the residual impact of the global financial crisis, while the number of people being turned away without financial counselling assistance has increased.

In the next week or so we will again be writing to all our State MPs updating them on the very poor progress of this issue, and renewing our request that they use all their powers to redress the situation. We also know there are yet more cuts to come, not the least being the impending 23% cut to the Family & Community Development Fund.

We also know that after months of speculation we are now en route to the installation of a new Premier in Jay Weatherill. While he sits in waiting we remain hopeful that, in assuming this office, Minister Weatherill quickly moves to change not just the *appearance* of engagement from his government, but more importantly the actions that build on consulting and working with our sector.

Maybe the new Premier could take a leaf from the Western Australian government's playbook: in the last budget it vastly increased funding for the community sector, and built on the relationship, through *The Partnership Forum*, bringing together leaders of WA's government agencies with key leaders from the community sector.

Our sector has an incredibly vast body of understanding and knowledge about how our community operates, and of its vulnerabilities. We can be good partners, and have shown a significant level of dedication in pursuit of strengthening community capacity. We expect to be treated with respect and would welcome an opportunity to re-engage with government in a spirit of genuine partnership.

