Entry type: Organisation
Entry ID: AWE0018

Elsie Women’s Refuge

(1974 -)

Born	19740101, Glebe, Sydney New South Wales Australia
Occupation	Women's refuge

Summary

Elsie Women’s Refuge was the first refuge set up in Australia for women and children escaping a violent home who had nowhere to sleep. The refuge offered advice and assistance in relation to the legal, welfare and health systems.

Details

When a group of Sydney feminists met to celebrate International Women’s Day at the Teacher’s Federation auditorium in Sussex St Sydney on 10 March 1974, the speakers at its forum ‘Women in a Violent Society’ addressed a crime then not recognised in law and generally ignored by police – domestic violence. Three Women’s Liberation members, Anne Summers, Jennifer Dakers and Bessie Guthrie responded immediately. On 16 March, armed only with broom handles and shovels, they broke into two adjoining terrace houses in Glebe, ‘Elsie’ and ‘Minnie’ (73 and 73 Westmoreland St), left vacant due to the NSW Builders Labourers ‘green ban’ on the then Askin Government’s redevelopment of a number of Sydney’s architectural and historic sites. There they established the first domestic violence refuge in the world.

Elsie’s founders conducted extensive media interviews to raise public awareness of this service, and raised money in whatever way they could. Donations of food, white goods and playground equipment quickly followed. The visit of Bill Hayden, Minister for Social Security in the Whitlam government, resulted in the refuge receiving a one-off Commonwealth government grant of $24,250, enabling its move to more spacious premises in Derwent St, Glebe. By mid-1975, eleven women’s refugees had been established by volunteers nationwide, initially without government funding. The thousands of women and children seeking protection in these refuges convinced the Whitlam Government to respond to this previously unacknowledged social need by funding them from 1975.

In 1981, under Premier Neville Wran, the NSW Government became the first Australian government to conduct an inquiry into domestic violence. While this led to significant policy changes, funding remained uncertain and inadequate until 1985, when refuges were granted secure funding through the Commonwealth-State Supported Accommodation Assistance Program. By 1999, 25 years after the opening of Elsie, there were over 300 refuges Australia-wide. On 29 August 2014, the management of Elsie Women’s Refuge and 44 other shelters in New South Wales, was outsourced to the St Vincent de Paul Society under the NSW Government’s Going Home Saying Home policy.

Published resources

Article
Australian Women's Refuge Funding - a New South Wales Case Study: 1970 to 1990s, Melville, Roselyn, 1998c

Book
Getting Equal: the History of Australian Feminism, Lake, Marilyn, 1999

Ducks on the Pond: An Autobiography 1945-1976, Summers, Anne, 1999

Resource Section
Memorable Summers, Summers, Anne, 1999

Forty years of the Elsie Refuge for Women and Children, Gilchrist, Cathie, 2015, http://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/forty_years_of_the_elsie_refuge_for_women_and_children

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Archival resources

State Library of New South Wales
Elsie Women's Refuge records, ca. 1974-2014

Mitchell and Dixson Libraries Manuscripts Collection
First Ten Years of Sydney Women's Liberation Collection, ca. 1969-ca. 1980

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