

## **Submission of Family Planning NSW**

### **Inquiry into the current and future provision of health services in the South-West Sydney Growth Region**

May 2020

Family Planning NSW welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Parliament of New South Wales regarding the 'Inquiry into the current and future provision of health services in the South-West Sydney Growth Region'. We commend the Committee members for their attention to the health and wellbeing of those living in South-West Sydney.

This submission focuses on the importance of ensuring the availability and accessibility of essential reproductive and sexual health services, information and comprehensive sexuality education in South-West Sydney, particularly as the region experiences a period of high growth.

### **About us**

Family Planning NSW is the leading provider of reproductive and sexual health services in NSW and Australia. Our mission is to enhance the reproductive and sexual health and rights of our communities by supporting all people to have control over and decide freely on all matters related to their reproductive and sexual health. We have been operating for over 90 years, working with communities across NSW, including in South-West Sydney, with a fixed clinic located in Fairfield and outreach clinics in Blacktown, Campbelltown, Miller and Tahmoor.

Family Planning NSW has significant experience in the provision of reproductive and sexual health information and services. We provide clinical services to more than 30,000 clients annually, information and health promotion activities to communities, and best practice education and training in reproductive and sexual health for doctors, nurses, teachers, disability support workers and other health, education and welfare professionals.

Our services are targeted to marginalised and disadvantaged members of the community, including people from culturally and linguistically diverse and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, refugees, people with disability, young people, and people from rural and remote communities.

### **Recommendations**

Family Planning NSW recommends:

1. prioritising the improvement of reproductive and sexual health outcomes for people living in South-West Sydney
2. planning for the future provision of health services to include the reproductive and sexual health care needs of South-West Sydney residents through representative community consultation
3. increasing access to reproductive and sexual health services in South-West Sydney through the provision of additional physical services and expansion of telehealth
4. expanding telehealth services to meet the unmet need for reproductive and sexual health care in the region
5. increasing the availability of trained nurses providing contraceptive services, including insertion of long-acting reversible contraceptives
6. increasing access to community-based comprehensive sexuality education for all people in SWSLHD, including those with specific needs, particularly people with disability, young people, people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, newly arrived and refugees and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Our key points, in relation to the inquiry *Terms of Reference* (item d), are outlined below.

## Key points

### (d) An investigation into the availability and shortfall of mental, community and allied health services in the South-West Sydney Growth Region

Reproductive and sexual health is at the forefront of ensuring not only a person's physical health but also their mental wellbeing and ability to function at an optimal level within society. This is especially the case for women and girls in the achievement of their rights to equality in academic and employment pursuits and in making an equal contribution to the community.

Family Planning NSW provides essential reproductive and sexual health services to the South-West Sydney community, including clinical services, health information, professional education and support, and comprehensive sexuality education to people of all ages. There were 4,239 visits to Family Planning NSW clinics in South Western Sydney in 2018-19. The unmet need for reproductive and sexual health services far exceeds the current levels of funded service provision.

We strongly affirm the need to place essential reproductive and sexual health services at the forefront of planning for the future provision of health services in the South-West Sydney growth region to ensure that the current and future reproductive and sexual health needs of the community are met. In delivering services, there is a requirement for increased numbers of staff trained in the delivery of reproductive and sexual health services, including GPs, Nurses, Psychologists, Social Workers, Health Promotion Officers and Educators and affiliated support staff.

#### 1. Reproductive and sexual health in South-West Sydney

On average, individuals living in South-West Sydney experience poorer reproductive and sexual health outcomes than people living elsewhere in NSW. Almost all Local Government Areas within South-West Sydney have significantly higher teenage fertility rates than wider NSW, with the rate in the Campbelltown Local Government Area being two times higher when compared to wider NSW.(1) The region also experiences lower rates of cervical cancer screening across all Local Government Areas.(2) The lack of access to and/or compliance with testing for sexually transmissible infections (STIs) is demonstrated in the lower notification rates for chlamydia and gonorrhoea in comparison to the average rates in NSW.(3) This, of course, leads to lower rates of treatment and higher levels of underlying morbidity. Poorer reproductive and sexual health outcomes often result from limited access to reproductive and sexual health information and care including in relation to contraception, abortion services and comprehensive sexuality education. In 2019, there were 4,391 incidents of domestic violence-related assault recorded by NSW Police in South Western Sydney Local Government Areas, making up 14% of the 31,187 incidents recorded in NSW.(4)

To improve health outcomes, there is a need to increase the availability of accessible and affordable reproductive and sexual health services. Evidence shows that investing in reproductive and sexual health is cost-effective at a systematic and individual level.(5-7) Good reproductive and sexual health has the potential to minimise costs to the health system and has significant benefits at personal, family and societal levels.(5-7)

Family Planning NSW's *South-West Sydney needs assessment* undertaken in 2016 investigated the reproductive and sexual health needs and barriers faced by culturally and linguistically diverse populations living in South-West Sydney.(8) Findings from the needs assessment showed that both community members and service providers had limited knowledge of available reproductive and sexual health services in the region.

**Recommendation one:** Prioritising the improvement of reproductive and sexual health outcomes for people living in South-West Sydney.

#### 2. Planning for reproductive and sexual health service expansion

South West Sydney Local Health District is one of the largest Local Health Districts in NSW in terms of population and has the marked challenge of being highly culturally and socio-demographically diverse. Over

90,000 residents in the South-West Sydney region speak a language other than English at home, over 20,000 residents identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and the youth population is high with 35% of residents aged 24 or under.(9) Limited access to reproductive and sexual health services further exacerbate the disparity that exists for disadvantaged populations. Future planning of health services needs to include extensive community consultation so that the reproductive and sexual health needs of the wider South-West Sydney population, including the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, young people and people with disability are met.

During the growth period in the region, the demand for health services and infrastructure will increase and additional and/or expanded services will be required to meet demand. Funding of additional reproductive and sexual health services through fixed clinics, outreach models and telehealth and the expansion of existing services would ensure greater access to these essential services. Community and professional education in reproductive and sexual health would also be beneficial. With these services in place, there would be much greater traction in lifting people and communities out of poverty and optimising individuals' health and achievement of their capabilities.

**Recommendation two:** Planning for the future provision of health services to include the reproductive and sexual health care needs of South-West Sydney residents through representative community consultation.

### **3. Increasing the availability of reproductive and sexual health services**

If most women can access essential reproductive and sexual health services during their lifetime, this enables them to meet their holistic reproductive and sexual health needs, including cervical cancer screening and sexual and gender-based violence screening and support.(10) Reproductive and sexual health services can facilitate access to other community-based social services, including housing and legal support or police services.(10) It is essential that there are enough accessible reproductive and sexual health services available to meet the needs of the growing South-West Sydney region.

**Recommendation three:** Increasing access to reproductive and sexual health services in South-West Sydney through the provision of additional physical services and expansion of telehealth.

### **4. The expansion of telehealth**

With implementation of the Australian Government's response to the COVID-19, GPs, Family Planning NSW and some allied health professionals have been able to offer access to clinical services via telephone/ video-conference. In addition, the Australian Government and the NSW Ministry of Health have recognised access to pregnancy options services as essential services. This has dramatically increased access to reproductive and sexual health services in an area of Sydney where access/service uptake has been poor, with attendant individual and societal consequences.

As a specific example, with the implementation of funded telehealth services, eligible women in NSW, including South-West Sydney, are now able to access tele-abortion services. This has been a 'game-changer' for South-West Sydney as access to low- or no-cost abortions in this community has been extremely poor up until the present. However, the continuation of tele-abortion is subject to telehealth continuance following COVID-19.

It is essential, that in continuing to work towards optimising the reproductive and sexual health of the increasing population in South-West Sydney that access to funded telehealth services continues. This will involve advocacy at both state and federal levels.

Separate to clinical services via telehealth, Family Planning NSW's Talkline provides free and confidential information, advice and referral services across a wide range of essential reproductive and sexual health issues, including contraception, pregnancy options including abortion services, STIs and healthy relationships. Talkline operates across multiple channels including via telephone, online live chat and email and receives numerous inquiries relating to access to reproductive and sexual health services and related concerns. In 2019, Talkline received 9,686 inquiries with 785 of those inquiries from people living in the

South-West Sydney region.(11) Though most inquiries are from members of the community, an important cohort of inquiries come from clinical professionals seeking additional clinical health management advice for their complex patients. Through Talkline, these professionals have access to Registered Nurses and medical experts in reproductive and sexual health.

Talkline has become an integral part of how Family Planning NSW provides state-wide services and advice, particularly in targeting regions with a large geographic footprint and limited reproductive and sexual health service access. Access to reproductive and sexual health care and affordability of care decreases the further someone resides from a metropolitan hub.

Telehealth services and the Reproductive and Sexual Health Talkline are therefore essential to bridge the gap. They will have more impact if they continue to be funded and their funding is increased with the capacity to reach areas of need in South-West Sydney.

**Recommendation four:** Expanding telehealth services to meet the unmet need for reproductive and sexual health care in the region.

### **5. Nurse-led insertions of long-acting reversible contraceptives**

Long-acting reversible contraceptives (LARCs) are highly effective in preventing pregnancy and are more effective than other contraceptive options. Access to affordable and effective contraception reduces unintended pregnancy and is critical to ensure that women have access to their preferred method of contraception.(12) It is also essential in ensuring women reach their full potential as individuals and in the community.

Nurse-led insertions of LARCs would increase affordability and access to contraception for Australian women.(12) Future planning of health services should consider the addition of funded and trained registered nurses to complement access to these services through GPs. Funded and trained nurse-led LARC insertion could be accessed in primary health in general practice, multi-disciplinary clinics and Aboriginal Medical Services.(12) This would offer increased access to LARCs and assist in addressing the contraceptive needs of growing populations where access to GPs is highly limited.

**Recommendation five:** Increasing the availability of trained nurses providing contraceptive services, including insertion of long-acting reversible contraceptives.

### **6. Comprehensive sexuality education**

It is crucial that all people receive high-quality and evidence-based comprehensive sexuality education. In Australia, comprehensive sexuality education is not provided consistently across the country. A global review conducted by the United Nations, Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) found comprehensive sexuality education has a positive impact on safer sexual behaviour, delays sexual debut, and can reduce unintended pregnancy and STIs.(13,14)

In 2018-19, Family Planning NSW provided comprehensive sexuality education to 3,239 community members and formally trained 422 professionals in the delivery of such education in South-West Sydney.(11) We are concerned that if consideration is not given to the future delivery of comprehensive sexuality education, many individuals will miss out and rates of unplanned pregnancy, STIs, cancers of the reproductive tract, and reproductive and sexual ill-health will increase. Consequences of this are well documented and include increasing levels of poverty, higher rates of physical and mental ill-health, poorer levels of education and higher rates of domestic and family violence.

As the population in South-West Sydney increases, it is imperative that comprehensive sexuality education is delivered across the region through both formal school-based education, formal professional based-education, parent education and at community levels to ensure systematic and individual health benefits, including reduced future costs on the health system.(5,6) Ensuring the availability of culturally appropriate comprehensive sexuality education is available to all people, including people with disability, young people

both in and out of school, newly-arrived migrants and refugees, people from culturally diverse communities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is a key driver for effective community development and reducing poverty.

**Recommendation six:** Increasing access to community-based comprehensive sexuality education for all people in SWSLHD, including those with specific needs, particularly people with disability, young people, people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, newly arrived and refugees and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

## Conclusion

We strongly urge the NSW Government to prioritise essential reproductive and sexual health services in planning for the provision of health services in the South-West Sydney Growth Region. Without these services, many people will experience poor reproductive and sexual health, and increase the financial burden on the health system. Where face-to-face reproductive and sexual health services cannot be provided, access to funded telehealth is critical. In addition, specially trained registered nurses should be funded to provide contraceptive services. Finally, the provision of comprehensive sexuality education at school, community and professional levels will ensure that communities in South-West Sydney have access to essential reproductive and sexual health information and care. Without these fundamental underpinnings, then other areas of critical development priorities in health status and community development in the broadest will be severely impeded.

## References

1. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Births, Australia (Cat.no. 3301.0) 2018.
2. Cancer Institute NSW. Cancer control in New South Wales: Statewide Report, 2017. Sydney: Cancer Institute NSW, 2018.
3. NSW Health. NSW Sexually Transmissible Infections Strategy 2016-2020: Jan to June 2019 Data Report. Sydney: NSW Health, 2019.
4. NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (Dec 2019) NSW Recorded Crime Statistics 2015 to 2019: Incidents of domestic violence related assault as recorded by NSW Police for each NSW Local Government Area.
5. Singh, S, Darroch, K, Ashford, L, Vlassof, M. Adding it up: The costs and benefits of investing in family planning and maternal newborn health. New York: Guttmacher Institute and United Nations Population Fund, 2009.
6. Vlassoff, M, Singh, S, Darroch, J, Carbone, E, Bernstein, S. Assessing costs and benefits of sexual and reproductive health interventions. Occasional Report No. 11. New York: Guttmacher Institute, 2004.
7. Jacobsen, V, Mays, N, Crawford, R, Annesley, B, Christoffel, P, Johnston, G, Durbin, S. Investing in well-being: an analytical framework. *New Zealand Treasury Working Paper 02/23*. Wellington: New Zealand Treasury, 2002.
8. Family Planning NSW. An investigation into the reproductive and sexual health concerns and barriers faced by culturally and linguistically diverse populations living in South Western Sydney. Sydney: Family Planning NSW; 2016, unpublished report.
9. South Western Sydney Public Health Network. South West Sydney: Our Health. An in-depth study of the health of the population now and into the future. South Western Sydney PHN, 2019.
10. Garcia-Moreno C, Amin A. The sustainable development goals, violence and women's and children's health. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*. 2016;94:396-7.
11. Family Planning NSW. Annual report 2018-2019. Sydney: Family Planning NSW, 2019.
12. Botfield, J, Lacey, S, Fleming, K, McGeechan, K, Bateson, D. Increasing the accessibility of long-acting reversible contraceptive through nurse-led insertions: A cost benefit analysis. *Collegian*. 2020;27:109-114.
13. United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization. Emerging evidence, lessons and practice in comprehensive sexuality education: A global review. France: UNESCO, 2015.
14. United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization. UNESCO strategy on education for health and well-being: Contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals. France: UNESCO, 2016.