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ACROSS THE NATION

Find out what is making headlines across Australia.

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AT THE LIBRARY

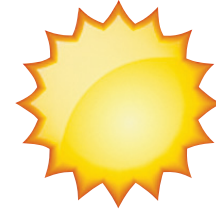
Find out what is happening at the Dubbo library.

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LETTERS TO SANTA

Letters to Santa from local students.

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Sunny

Advocacy group raises concerns

A WOMEN'S advocacy group has raised concerns about the safety of Orana women seeking shelter from domestic violence under the NSW government restructured social support system.

SOS Women's Support Services launched a campaign this week to highlight areas within NSW facing a high need for women's refuges and where current services were falling short or needed certainty.

SOS spokeswoman Roxanne McMurray said Dubbo had been named a place of concern.

"The new (Dubbo) service is allowing homeless women suffering mental illness or experiencing drug and alcohol dependency to share the refuge with women and young children escaping violence," she said.

"We were recently contacted about a woman escaping domestic violence locking herself and her three-year-old daughter in their room because of the behaviour of a

drug addicted resident.

"That's an unacceptable situation for women and children to be placed in when they need safety."

But Orana Support Service Inc CEO Peter Gallagher said the claims were not reported to staff.

"The service has a risk assessment process in place and does not tolerate behaviour in any of its services that places staff or clients at risk," he said.

"Both Sturt House and the Dubbo Women's Refuge have security in place and trained staff to manage behavioural issues with clients."

Mr Gallagher said sometimes women with children and women with mental health issues or drug and alcohol addictions live together. He said at times the two groups interlocked.

"Generally the Women's Refuge prioritises families escaping domestic violence," he said.

"Often these families that have been traumatised have mental

health and drug and alcohol issues due to the environment they are fleeing.

"As long as their behaviour is acceptable they are welcome in the refuge."

Ms McMurray said the faults were not of the services, but urged the government to review the process.

"We're asking the government to make the groups separate," she said.

"To have women addicted to drugs and alcohol and who are acting erratically living with women traumatised by violence is unacceptable.

"The rules have been disrupted, it's the way the tender has been constructed.

"So organisations are doing the best they can in very trying circumstances."

The Dubbo incident was a specific example, which had raised concern with members of community, according to Ms McMurray.

"People from the Dubbo community had real concerns for the current arrangements of general homeless women with drug and alcohol addiction and mental illness living with those fleeing from domestic violence," she said.

Orana Support Service Inc also manages Sturt House and the tenancy support service, which is based at the Dubbo Neighbourhood Centre.

Ms McMurray said SOS Women's Services are also concerned women in the Dubbo Women's Refuge are not subject to women's only environments.

"It is very important that women who are fleeing from domestic violence are in women's only environments at a time of crisis," she said.

"They need to feel completely safe, both physically and emotionally."

Mr Gallagher said the service criteria was under constant review and changes would be made if needed.

He insisted management change through the government's Going Home Staying Home package was positive for Dubbo services.

"We've not only increased the number of women and children in accommodation, but also started to get some good outcomes for our clients," Mr Gallagher said.

"People who come looking for crisis accommodation can now come to a central point where we can access all of our options.

"It's much more person centred."

The issue of cuts to women's services was debated in Parliament last week after SOS presented a petition with 15,000 signatures from across NSW to Parliament in September.

Shadow Minister for Family and Community Services Linda Burney in Parliament said the government's "brutal slash-and-burn tender process" had destroyed the NSW network of women's shelters.