



# ILLAWARRA WOMEN'S HEALTH CENTRE

Strategic Plan 2017-22

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Health, respect and equality for women and girls



# FOREWORD

For over 30 years, the Illawarra Women's Health Centre has supported girls and women in the Illawarra understand and address their health needs. Our Centre provides this critical service in a professional, caring and empowering way. We assist all women who walk through our door, regardless of age, ethnicity, sexuality or disability. Our Centre is a safe place. We put words into action in a way that demonstrates to women how they should be treated in all aspects of their life: with respect, dignity and kindness.

Our approach to health is underpinned by a social determinants of health framework. This, combined with ongoing research and a capacity to deeply understand our client's experiences, means we can respond to and integrate our community's changing health needs into our services and programs.

We are a mature organisation with a long-standing reputation for excellence that places us in a strong position to be a leader in our field of work and expertise. We provide accessible and cost effective support to women who may be vulnerable and marginalised - women who are not able to access relevant and reliable mainstream services in a timely manner. With over 3,000 women a year attending the Centre we are a vital and dynamic component of the primary health care system in the Illawarra.

This strategy sets an ambitious agenda to increase our support for individual women and our impact on the systemic issues that continue to marginalise and negatively impact on women's health. In developing the strategy, the Council of Women drew on the experience and perspectives of our staff, volunteers, and community partners, current health trends impacting our community, and research indicating the trajectory of such trends.

A proudly nimble and creative organisation, the strategy will guide the direction of our programs and inform the way we build capacity and sustainability of our organisation. It retains what has been distinctive and effective about our approach, and builds on our learnings and experience. It also provides a clear strategic framework for assessing our progress and impact.

In particular, we intend to grow our services for young women who are experiencing increasing rates of mental health issues, older women who are the fastest growing demographic experiencing homelessness, and women with disabilities, 90% of whom experience sexual assault and domestic violence. We will continue to provide comprehensive sexual and reproductive health support to all girls and women.

We will continue to raise our voice, to advocate for social and cultural change that places women in our society where they are respected, equal and healthy.

Chairwoman  
Judy Daunt

General Manager  
Sally Stevenson AM



# WHO WE ARE

## OUR VISION

Women and girls are respected, safe and healthy and experience full participation and equality in their lives.

## OUR PURPOSE

To improve the physical, mental and social health and wellbeing of women and girls, and build engagement and activism by women for change in communities and the health system.

## WHAT WE DO

We are a community based women's health centre, run by women for women and girls.

Our core business is:

- Free or low cost individual and group health care services :
  - Medical, mental health and complementary therapy services
  - Counselling and wellness workshops and programs
- A safe and woman-centred space for social support, community activities and groups
- Primary prevention and early intervention outreach programs and health education
- Community development, activism and advocacy to address the underlying causes of poor health for women and girls and improve policy and services.



## OUR VALUES

Illawarra Women's Health Centre is guided by values grounded in feminist philosophy and the proud legacy of women's health centres. Our values are lived out in the way we understand women's experience and health needs, in our practice and action and in the way the centre is managed and governed.

- Respect – women involved with our centre are treated with respect and dignity. We provide a safe, friendly space that offers a genuine welcome to all women and ensures their privacy and confidentiality.
- Equity – we target women and girls who are at high risk or have special needs, and we stand with women in their struggle for justice, safety and equality.
- Compassion – we provide a caring, non-judgemental and person-centred approach to service delivery that responds to each woman's individual circumstances.
- Integrity – honesty, transparency and trustworthiness are foundational to the professionalism of our board, staff and volunteers and our relationships with clients, other services and donors.
- Diversity – we value and respect women's racial, cultural and sexual diversity and strive for excellence in being a culturally competent and inclusive service provider.
- Recognition and reconciliation - We value and recognise the heritage and history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and are committed to advancing healing, reconciliation and justice for Indigenous Australians.

## OUR APPROACH TO WOMEN'S HEALTH

We operate from a feminist perspective. This means we understand and value women's life experiences and recognise the continued discrimination and structural inequality they face in their communities and Australian society. It also means we see an ongoing need for a gendered analysis and approach to health, empowerment of women and girls and strong advocacy for gender equity and women's rights.

We embrace a social view of health, as framed by the World Health Organisation, and reflected in Australian federal and state health policies. This view recognises health status is shaped by the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age. Factors such as financial security, affordable housing, education, employment, disability, racism, locational disadvantage, gender inequality and discrimination based on sexual identity and preferences impact individual health outcomes and cause health inequalities.

Our feminist beliefs and this social view of health shape our approach to women's health and they underscore why our focus on marginalised and disadvantaged women and girls is so important. Illawarra Women's Health Centre is a nationally accredited community health service. We are committed to excellence in service delivery and continuous quality improvement and learning, guided by national standards and research relevant to our field.

# STRATEGIC DIRECTION AND PRIORITIES

## THE OUTCOMES WE WORK FOR

1. Women of all ages coming to the centre:
  - have choice and control in how their health needs are met at different life stages
  - can access timely, woman-centred clinical, allied and complementary health services in a safe community setting
  - feel connected, validated and strong through participation in learning, social support and wellbeing programs
  - get timely information, advice and support - directly and through referral to other service – on issues related to housing, legal advice, financial management and access to community services.
2. Women experiencing domestic violence and sexual assault, get the information, guided referral and advocacy needed to ensure their safety and a specialised, holistic response to their needs.
3. Girls can access appropriate information that empowers them to make healthy life choices and helps them access safe and personal support when they need it.
4. The health and community service system in the Illawarra is more accessible, cohesive and effective for women and girls who are vulnerable and at risk of poor physical and mental health.

## PRIORITY FOCUS AREAS

The centre will give priority to the following population groups that evidence shows have high needs and inadequate service system responses in the Illawarra.

- Women with mental health concerns
- Women with disabilities
- Young women and girls (10-25 years)
- Older women facing financial hardship and isolation

Building on the centre's current strengths, and to address significant gaps in the service system, we will have a primary focus in three health domains:

- Sexual and reproductive health
- Mental and emotional health and wellbeing
- Domestic violence and sexual assault.

## OUR GOALS AND BROAD STRATEGY

### **GOAL ONE:** Strengthening the centre's current offering

Maintain and improve the current range of health care and wellness services and activities and grow our capacity to assist more women.

Strategies:

- Build capacity to offer the centre's suite of health care services and group activities for more hours and after hours.
- Offer services off site and in partnership with other service providers to achieve wider geographic reach.
- Develop new services and programs that are flexible and responsive to the needs of our priority populations.
- Develop an evidence base that demonstrates the effectiveness of our services and programs and supports learning and continuous improvement.

### **GOAL TWO:** Community engagement and outreach programs

Develop community networks and activities with a prevention, early intervention and health education focus targeting high risk populations of women and girls.

Strategies:

- Expand community outreach and support for women with disabilities at risk of domestic violence and sexual assault.
- Expand our young women and girls program focused on empowerment, resilience and self-protection (targets young women experiencing family violence, mental health and sexual and reproductive health issues).
- Raise awareness among young women and girls of the risks and high rates of mental illness and suicide and how to address barriers, get support and maintain good mental health.
- Develop outreach and support programs for older women who are socially isolated and financially disadvantaged.



### **GOAL THREE:** Research, advocacy and activism

Strengthen the centre's positioning as a respected expert in women's health matters and expand our efforts in advocacy and community activism to improve women's access to health and justice.

#### Strategies

- Partner with the University of Wollongong and other research institutions to conduct and access research on community needs, service gaps and design and evaluation of services and programs.
- Advocate for accessible and affordable termination services in the Illawarra, as part of a more comprehensive response to women's sexual and reproductive health needs.
- Foster networks and partnerships to raise awareness and advocate the need for a more integrated, safe and timely service response to women experiencing domestic violence and sexual assault.
- Participate in awareness raising and activism that challenges the increased objectification and sexualisation of women and girls.
- Advocate for improved access to health and community services across the Illawarra, including the need for better public and community transport.

### **GOAL FOUR:** Organisational development

Develop the organisational capacities critical to our success – governance, visibility, a professional and committed staff team and a predictable funding base.

#### Strategies

- Strengthen centre governance by building board stability and investing in board development.
- Put in place a strategy to achieve stability of funding and growth in untied funding.
- Ensure the centre's management, structure and staff competencies are in line with our goals and priorities, including:
  - increased capacity in fundraising, public relations, advocacy and community mobilisation and outreach
  - a workable balance of full time and part time staff, and continued investment in staff learning and development.
- Maintain strategic relationships with Women's Health NSW, the Illawarra and Shoalhaven Local Health District, other women's health centres and key stakeholders in our priority focus areas.