

A WSWs investigation into the social crisis in Australia's Mount Druitt

Funding cuts push community organisations to the brink of closure

Our correspondents
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As part of its investigation into the deepening social crisis in Mount Druitt, a working-class suburb in Sydney's outer west, the WSWs spoke to representatives of long-standing community organisations facing the prospect of closure as a result of state and federal funding cuts.

Under conditions of myriad social problems caused by decades of job cuts, and the running-down of government health, education and housing programs, various local organisations have sought to provide essential services for residents in the area.

Numbers of organisations have been forced to shut their doors over the past few years, as a result of funding reductions, while others must rely on private funding, or year-by-year tenders and one-off grants from state and federal government bodies.

As part of its 2014 austerity budget, Prime Minister Tony Abbott's federal government abolished significant areas of funding to the community and social service sector, to the tune of \$240 million over four years. Last December, "Youth Connections," which provided federal funding for organisations working with disadvantaged young people, was ended.

The WSWs spoke to Sally and Marten Wynd of "Eagles RAPS," a small centre in Doonside, near Mount Druitt, that provides educational programs and recreational facilities for young people. They were funded under the "Youth Connections" program and faced closure when it was abolished. Since "Eagles RAPS" opened in 1997, some 2,000 young people have attained high school qualifications with its assistance, while many more have used its recreational facilities.

The Wynds had witnessed a marked decrease in apprenticeships and other work training opportunities for

young people, along with a growth of social problems.

Sally Wynd said: "There's a lot more drug-affected mental illness out there. They're into the drugs earlier—so by the time they're 15 and we're getting them, they already have a lot of problems ... In the community there has been a growth in the use of ice [a crystal form of methamphetamine]. Just because of the nature of the drug, those kids aren't going to be in school or studying. The world's moving too fast for kids—they need to be stimulated all the time, and ice is just a progression of that."

Marten Wynd added: "The drugs were there when we started, but you could count the kids who used drugs on two hands. Now you'd be struggling to find the kids who aren't."

Asked about the impact of the funding cuts, the couple said they began "winding down" the organisation at the beginning of this year, and were only able to remain open as a result of support from the community and philanthropic donations.

Marten said they were forced to turn back enrolments. "We had to say to kids, 'sorry we can't do it.' They had nowhere to go, just back on the streets wandering around. At the time, there were so many people in the same boat that lost the funding, and were in the process of closing their doors. We had to tell the department of education to stop referring kids to us, because we couldn't offer what they needed."

Marten explained the funding cuts had "huge ramifications," not only for the youth denied services, but for the jobs of welfare workers. "We were lucky, because we're a very small family-based organisation, so we support each other. However, there are people out there providing services similar to us that had to put people off.

So there were welfare workers who were suddenly facing a very bleak future with no ongoing work.

“It was quite a rude awakening to the industry. For the young people, it was a shrug of the shoulders, and ‘we’ve been let down by welfare again.’ These kids are working hard to support themselves and to make a slightly brighter future for themselves and their community, which is all you can ask for from a young person.”

Sally commented: “We’re running on about 2/3rds of what we had under the funding. At this point it’s probably only guaranteed to the end of this year. A lot of our work is taken up with fundraising.”

The WSWS also interviewed Margaret Bell, the founder of the Mount Druitt Learning Ground centre, and its only paid staff member, Debbie Higginson-Bradley. The centre provides leadership and mentoring programs for children, young people, adults and families.

Bell, well-known for her work, spoke out against the funding cuts to the community sector on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “Q&A” program on May 11.

Bell told the WSWS the social crisis has “escalated.” She commented: “There are a lot of social issues. When we started working here, we were dealing with young people, Year 8 to 10s. Year by year, I see the schools are asking us to take the year younger, so that indicates how early kids are having social issues—bullying, arguments at home, problems with social media and drugs.”

Higginson-Bradley added: “And younger kids are having to fend for themselves—‘latchkey kids’ of Year 7 and 8 are now 7, 8 and 9 year-olds—because mum and dad are working and they are fending for themselves. These kids have adult responsibilities but are still treated like a child. That sort of behaviour comes out in an aggressive way.”

Learning Ground received an interim federal government grant that expires in June. Bell said: “I am forced to spend around 20 hours per week in submission writing and generally trying to raise money—time that could be well spent in program development.”

Bell pointed out that Higginson-Bradley, Learning Ground’s project manager, is paid only a part-time salary, and works an additional two days as a volunteer. “We urgently need to convert this arrangement to a full time appointment.”

Bell explained: “Since January we have had funding rejections from federal and state governments, and 11 foundations and trusts. St George Bank Foundation has made a small grant available.”

Without success, Bell made “constant contact” with one

of New South Wales state Premier Mike Baird’s senior advisors in an attempt to meet with Baird, who is also the state minister for western Sydney, as was his predecessor, Barry O’Farrell.

“Funding has been sought through the last five premiers, and in particular those who are named as ministers for western Sydney. Appeals to government result in sending us on a wild goose chase from department to department.”

Explaining Learning Ground’s work, Bell said: “This whole program is about behavioural change management and it makes me so angry that governments don’t take notice of it. They talk all the time about people getting education and getting jobs and closing the gap, and so on. And they are the three things that we do here. We don’t go out finding a job in the local mechanics store, but we equip the person to do that.

“Behavioural change that is achieved at Learning Ground is a pathway to mainstream living, to returning to school, going on to higher education, or achieving job satisfaction either in paid work or as a volunteer.”

Bell said many young people who came to Learning Ground “have been beaten around the head, both literally or emotionally. They haven’t been able to get jobs; they have been rejected for work; they have difficulties at home.”

Schools refer pupils with behavioural and social problems to Learning Ground for assistance. Bell said the organisation assisted young people and others facing “problems, including those considering suicide or substance abuse as a way to relieve the pain of living.”



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