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**Submission to Inquiry: More Effective Social Services**

Tena koutou katoa

Thank you for the opportunity of submitting to this inquiry. My submission is based on over 30 years experience in social work practice and education, which has included working in Government statutory agencies, a District Health Board, and a non-government organisation, in both Auckland and Christchurch. I am currently working as a lecturer in the Department of Social Practice at Unitec Institute of technology. My role includes coordinating fieldwork practicum experiences for students, which requires substantial ongoing relationships with a vast range of social work and community development organisations, in the statutory, health and non-government sectors, and businesses providing health and social services. The views expressed in this submission are my own and do not necessarily represent the views of Unitec.

To commence, I refer to several of the statements from Chapter 1 of the Issues Paper about the expectations of New Zealanders, people who use social services, service providers, and the Government. In particular the Paper asserts that:

- People who use social services “want the services they require to be effective in dealing with their specific circumstances, and to assist them towards a healthy, safe, self-sufficient and fulfilling life . . . they want those services to be available in the place they live. They want clear information about the services available to them, and ideally a choice between providers of those services. They want a stable relationship with their provider.”
- Providers of social services “want to get on with the job of helping their clients . . . they want sufficient funding, and for it to be stable and predictable. They often see contestable funding as creating financial risk for their organisation and the risk of service disruption for their clients . . . Many social service providers feel

that they are closer to their clients and the communities in which they operate, and that they have a better understanding of their clients' needs than their funders. They want the flexibility to adapt their services to the specific needs of their clients and to better reflect the overall mission of their organisation."

My submission is that the model of commissioning, contracting and purchasing services from non-government and community providers utterly fails to meet, indeed actively undermines these valid and legitimate expectations of service providers and the people who use their services. My submissions are particularly exemplified by the Ministry of Health's abrupt decision in March 2014 to terminate the Problem Gambling Foundation's (PGF) contract as the lead agency for gambling addiction services, replacing them with another provider, which is currently the subject of a Judicial Review in the High Court. The Ministry's decision reflects a callous disregard for the fact that the PGF is the largest provider of problem gambling services in the Southern Hemisphere, having served over 25,000 clients over the past 20 years. PGF is actively participating in research with the University of Auckland, has hosted several successful international conferences and its expertise is regularly sought for international consulting. A particular feature of PGF's services is its much needed specialist Asian and Pasifika services. As well as being the "ambulance at the bottom of the cliff, PGF has actively engaged with local communities in preventive initiatives, including negotiating "sinking lid" policies on gambling outlets with local authorities. If implemented this decision would mean the closure of most of PGF's services throughout the country, with most of its staff being made redundant. The replacement provider is a well respected social service organisation, but does not have the same specialist expertise as PGF.

The current regime of Government commissioning and contracting with the non government sector is actually an illusion that totally violates the essential identity and social function of civil society. The Issues Paper identifies that many non-government and community organisations feel that they are closer to their clients and the communities in which they operate, and that they have a better understanding of their clients' needs than their funders, especially central Government. As a result of this a vital role for non-government and community organisations, indeed often intrinsic to their identity, is to be the voice of civil society in a democracy, in sociologist C Wright Mills's words to connect "personal troubles to public issues". This may mean critiquing the impact of Government policies and actions on people who use their services collectively, and advocating for policy change. However under the current regime non-government organisations are effectively muzzled in this role. Research by Dr Sandra Grey and Dr Charles Sedgwick of Victoria University in 2013 found that of 153 NZ community and voluntary sector groups, 23 had contracts with Government agencies which explicitly stated that they must not make public comment on Government policies and actions, and overall 79 (51.6%) stated a perception that organisations risked funding by dissenting with Government (Grey & Sedgwick, 2013). These findings have been replicated in research by my colleagues Sue Elliott and David Haigh at Unitec. This seems to have been a factor in the Problem Gambling Foundation situation, as not only

has PGF engaged in advocacy against the Government's Sky City Convention Centre deal, it has actively engaged with local communities and councils to restrict gambling outlets, angering the gambling industry. Tau Henare's infamous tweet is revealing: "Why should Govt pay a group to be critical of it? Pay them to help but don't pay them to bag the hand that feeds them."

A further implication of this contestable contract funding regime is the removal of choice of providers from the users of social services. The Issues Paper assumes that service users want a choice between providers of those services, and a stable relationship with their provider. Indeed the individual personal choice of consumers is highly valued under the neoliberal ideology that recent Governments have espoused. However under the current regime, exemplified by the PGF decision, this personal choice is abrogated by Government funding decisions. The actual consumer of the services has no more choice than if services were simply provided by central Government agencies.

Providers' need for sufficient, stable and predictable funding is also impacted by changes in the practices of Government agencies regarding providing services for their clients themselves, or referring these clients to community agencies. Many community non-government organisations serve a combination of clients referred by Government agencies, such as Child, Youth and Family or the Courts, and "self-referral" clients who seek help voluntarily. These agencies often depend on a stable base of statutory agency funded referrals to provide the organisational security and stability needed to be able to continue to provide services to voluntary clients at minimal cost. A particular case is men's Stopping Violence Programme providers, which generally do not attract the same public appeal or business support as Women's Refuges, and are therefore more dependent on Government funding. These agencies serve a mixture of clients referred under Court orders by the Department of Corrections or the Family Court, and men who seek assistance voluntarily. Indeed in view of the current concern about family violence and the Government's stated priority of addressing the needs of vulnerable children, it is essential that such services are readily available for men (and others) who realise they have a problem with abusive behaviour and reach out for help to change this. Organisations must have a stable funding base to be in a position to provide this. However this sector has experienced frequent changes in Department of Corrections policies and practices, alternating between referring their clients to non-government services and providing their own programmes within the Department. This undermines the ability of organisations to provide services for those in need.

In summary I make the following recommendations for policy change:

1. That all Government contracts with the non-government sector respect the right of non-government organisations to advocate for change on behalf of the people and communities they service, including challenging Government policies as they see fit.

2. That Government agencies be required to enter into stable, ongoing, high trust contracts with non-government organisations.
3. That Government commissioning and purchasing strategies recognise the right of people who use social services to have a choice of provider.

## References

Grey S. & Sedgwick C. (2013) *Fears, constraints and contracts. The democratic reality for New Zealand's community and voluntary sector*. A report presented at the Community and Voluntary Sector Research Forum, Victoria University of Wellington, 26 March 2013.

Mills, C. W. (1959) *The Sociological Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.