

# The Sydney Morning Herald

Exclusive National NSW Women's health

## Mariam's centre supports 500 women a year. There's barely enough money for four full-time staff



Kate Aubusson

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### KEY POINTS

- Women's health centre operators say many will be forced to close within the next two years without a funding boost.
- Closures could leave 50,000 women without physical and mental health services.
- A business case report was presented to NSW Treasury with recommendations from the health ministry this week.

Multiple women's health centres are on the verge of collapse amid chronic underfunding by the NSW government, leading to growing wait lists of vulnerable patients.

Operators of the state's 20 Women's Health Centres say many will be forced to close within the next two years without a major boost in government investment, leaving 50,000 women without physical and mental health services, including cancer and sexual health screening and trauma counselling.



Mariam Mourad, Bankstown Women's Health Centre manager, says the centre cannot meet demand. LOUISE KENNERLEY

Denele Crozier, the chief executive of Women's Health NSW, which runs the centres, said the centres had reached a crisis point after no real funding increase for 36 years. State government funding for the 20 centres for this financial year is \$12.96 million.

"The need for our services far outstrips the funding received from NSW Health," Crozier said.

"For staff who are in their roles in the community sector to make a difference, nothing is more difficult than turning away a woman in crisis."

Crozier said services were forced to make clinical and mental health staff redundant or cut services.

The Campsie centre had to turn away 258 women last financial year because the waiting list exceeded three months. At the Liverpool centre, administrators had to ask other services, including NSW Health itself, to stop referring clients for counselling because they couldn't cope with demand.

Women's Health NSW submitted a business case report for the centres to NSW Health outlining three funding scenarios to keep the services afloat. The report was presented to NSW Treasury with recommendations from the ministry this week.

Mariam Mourad, manager of the Bankstown Women's Health Centre in south-west Sydney, said the centre could no longer meet demand.

The centre supports 500 women per year yet barely receives enough money to employ the equivalent of four full-time staff, she said.

“The funding we get is just not nearly enough,” Mourad said. “We rely on people working unpaid hours, on volunteers. It’s just not sustainable.”

The centre uses non-government funding from charities and businesses to run some services, including a domestic violence support worker and a food bank, while the local council assists with rent.

At the Central West Women’s Health Centre in Bathurst, the team is effectively homeless, unable to pay market price for rental properties, and cannot retain staff due to funding uncertainty. The centre’s manager Karen Boyde said they had to close their counselling wait lists, a serious blow to women in the area who have no access to alternative services.

“It’s nigh impossible to keep our services running,” said Boyde, who lost three employees in the past year. “I am constantly applying for grants, cap in hand, for small amounts of money, none of which helps to keep the lights on or pay running costs.”

The business case report commissioned by Women’s Health NSW estimates that every \$1 spent on the centres saves the government \$1.71 in acute public health costs through early treatment and prevention.

The most modest funding scenario outlined proposes a funding increase to \$19 million, which the report said would save \$32.6 million in costs for the acute public health system.

The most desirable scenario for the centres would be funding of \$30 million per year, which would allow the services to address the unmet needs of the women on their wait lists, population growth and emerging local health issues. It would save public health services an estimated \$56.4 million, the report said.

“Our report is clear: Women’s Health Centres are an essential part of the NSW primary integrated health care system,” Crozier said.

“After 36 years without a structural funding adjustment, Women’s Health Centres are chronically underfunded and require a boost in base funding to \$30 million per year.”

A spokesman for the Minister for Women, Regional Health and Mental Health, Bronnie Taylor, said the NSW government acknowledged the important role of the centres.

“We thank Women’s Health NSW for their ongoing advocacy and will continue to work closely with them to address the issues raised,” the spokesperson said.

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**Kate Aubusson** is Health Editor of The Sydney Morning Herald. Connect via [Twitter](#) or [email](#).

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