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Matilda Women's Refuge

A public meeting was held in August 1975 to start the process of setting up a women's refuge in the north-west region of Melbourne. An interim committee was formed to write a constitution and at the next public meeting on 24 September 1975 this was ratified and 12 women volunteered to become members of the North West Region Women's Refuge Committee.

The Committee met regularly to write submissions for funding and to work out what else needed to be done to set up a women's refuge in the area. It took awhile but after a national women's refuge program was set up in the 1977 budget, government money finally did come through at the beginning of 1978. The Committee initially hired two part-time workers, rented a house in Brunswick and Matilda Women's Refuge, as the refuge came to be called, opened in March 1978 to provide accommodation for women and children fleeing domestic violence and to provide support and information as well as advocacy and a radical political approach to dealing with domestic violence and related issues.

The day to day running of the house was mainly the responsibility of the residents with back-up support from the paid workers who also offered support for women when they were applying for pensions and housing commission flats as well as an outreach service when the residents left the refuge to make a life for themselves. The paid refuge workers also attended meetings with government departments, wrote the annual submissions for funding, lobbied politicians, were responsible for the finances, were advocates around the issues relating to domestic violence, helped organise conferences, ran workshops and generally promoted the rights of women and children to enjoy a safe and financially secure life for themselves.

The first issue of Seasponge Monthly, Matilda's monthly newsletter, came out at the end of May 1978. It included minutes of meetings, articles, poems, information about a range of events and matters of interest and provided an invaluable link between paid and unpaid workers, residents and ex-residents to keep everyone informed about decisions being made and up-to-date with whatever else was going on both politically and at the house.

Matilda was only one of several refuges in Victoria. By the end of 1979 there were 16 refuges altogether, which met on a monthly basis at the Victorian Women's Refuge Group

(VWRG) meetings to sort out issues of mutual importance and benefit, including the annual financial submissions and to work out strategies for the on-going negotiations with the Department of Community and Welfare Services (DCWS) about levels of funding. During those first two years Matilda was one of the women's refuges involved in the campaign to withhold the residential addresses of all the refuges in Victoria from the government in order to maintain security and to ensure the privacy of the residents. Instead, Matilda supported the setting up of the Women's Liberation Switchboard / Women's Refuge Referral Service (WLS /WRRS) in 1979, a phone information, support and referral service as a central contact point to refer women and children to refuges.

Matilda, as a fully government funded women's refuge under the Supportive Assistance Accommodation Program (SAAP), continued to provide a radical, innovative and feminist support service for women and children for another ten plus years until it closed down towards the end of the 1980s.