

A photograph of a cluttered outdoor area, possibly a backyard or a storage area, showing a wooden doghouse, a pink toy, and various debris scattered around. The scene is somewhat messy and disorganized.

A Foot in the Door

The Management of Compulsive Hoarding & Severe Domestic Squalor in South Australia

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Government
of South Australia

SA Health

Overview

- > Severe domestic squalor and compulsive hoarding are serious issues for a number of state and local government and non-government agencies
- > Media attention, locally conducted research (Julia Merkel) and enhanced collaborative problem solving between agencies has increased awareness (and expectations) regarding this issue
- > Positive, sustainable outcomes require increased interagency collaboration and coordination aimed at identifying and addressing the root cause of the issue

Cases in South Australia

THE AUSTRALIAN

March 19, 2009 01:23am AEDT

Sick boy died in Adelaide house of squalor

Pia Akerman | March 19, 2009

Article from: [The Australian](#)

A BOY who died of a common ear infection lived in a house where the stench of faeces and rotting food was overpowering, and layers of garbage on the floor were so thick police could not walk through some rooms.

An inquest into the death of Jarrad Roberts, 10, in October 2006, was yesterday shown shocking video footage of the Adelaide home where he lived with his mother and older sister.

Senior Constable Darren Mead told South Australian Coroner Mark Johns he had found "bags upon bags" of garbage on entering the house, only three hours after Jarrad died in hospital.

"It just smelt of rotten food, of sweat, urine, faeces," he said. "It just was a very overwhelming smell when we walked in."

Jarrad's death came hours after he was taken to a local health clinic by his family. He arrived in a wheelchair and seemed to be drowsy, complaining of pain in his neck, fever and bleeding from his right ear.

He had had the ear infection for five days, and it was recommended he go to hospital for treatment. Instead, his mother Michelle took him home and gave him a dose of antibiotics.

He collapsed 20 minutes later.

The inquest is hearing evidence about Jarrad's medical treatment, as well as testimony from departmental officials on why he was living in such squalor at the house in Prospect, in Adelaide's inner north.

When police visited the house, they found bird faeces from a pet pigeon covering the furniture, a fridge full of mouldy food, and the bulbs missing from most of the ceiling lights.

"There was no toilet paper in the house at the time," Senior Constable Mead said. He had found a T-shirt on the bathroom floor by the toilet, smeared with faeces.

One room was impossible to get into because there was so much junk piled up against the door.

Ms Roberts was due to testify earlier this week, but has been allowed time to seek legal advice before she gives evidence.

The Coroner has heard life in the house "fell apart" after Ms Roberts's boyfriend moved out.

The video footage showed some care had originally been taken in decorating the house, but the rooms had subsequently become overrun with rubbish.

In Jarrad's sister's room, pink Barbie curtains hung over the windows, but the layers of debris gave police the impression no one could have slept there "for weeks to months".

Jarrad had slept on a mattress on the lounge room floor that was littered with ashtrays and rubbish. Senior Constable Mead said the room's only lighting was the television.

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Cases in South Australia



SA Health

Why is the Department of Health involved?

- > The Department of Health is the corporate policy wing of SA Health and works closely with local government environmental health officers (EHOs)
- > State and local government EHOs are authorised under the *Public and Environmental Health Act 1987* (the centrepiece of public health legislation in SA)
- > Section 12 of Act imposes a statutory obligation on the Minister for Health and each local council to promote proper standards of public and environmental health within the state and each jurisdiction respectively

Local Government Interventions using the *Public and Environmental Health Act 1987*

- > Local councils are called to intervene in situations of severe domestic squalor primarily as a result of complaints to local councils about the condition of a property
- > Cases of severe domestic squalor (and some cases of compulsive hoarding) may be deemed to constitute an *insanitary condition*
- > An insanitary condition is defined as a premises which:
 - > gives rise to a risk to health
 - > is so filthy or neglected that there is a risk of infestation by rodents or other pests
 - > causes justified offence to the owner of any land in the vicinity
 - > emits offensive materials or odours
 - > for some other justified reason
- > A premises can be deemed unfit for human habitation by reason of an insanitary condition

Cases in South Australia



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Local Government Interventions using the *Public and Environmental Health Act 1987*

- > If an insanitary condition exists, local council can issue a Notice which orders the owner or person responsible for the insanitary condition to take necessary action to improve the condition of the premises
- > Notices are appellable to the District Court or the Public and Environmental Health Council
- > Feedback indicates that interventions under the Act are often resource intensive and frequently produce sub-optimal outcomes or unsustainable improvements in living conditions

Public and Environmental Health Council

- > The Act establishes the Public and Environmental Health Council (the Council)
- > Appeals to the Council result in a full review of the case (not bound by the normal rules of evidence and procedures can be adopted as seen fit by the Council)
- > The Council can:
 - Dismiss the appeal
 - Revoke the Notice
 - Alter the Notice
- > The Council's decision can be appealed to the District Court

Public and Environmental Health Council

- > In addition to serving as an appellate body, the Council has mandated responsibilities including;
 - Overseeing the administration of the Act
 - Reporting to the Minister on matters relating to public and environmental health
 - Initiating, carrying out or overseeing programmes and activities designed to improve or promote public and environmental health

Public and Environmental Health Council

- > Under the auspices of the Council and consistent with its mandated functions, a locally based guidance document is being developed aimed at;
 - promoting appropriate administration of the Act at the local government level as it relates to severe domestic squalor and compulsive hoarding
 - achieving better outcomes for people living in severe domestic squalor and with compulsive hoarding where there is a tangible public health dimension

Investigations Informing the South Australian Guidance Document

- > Research methodologies informing the guidance document were based on;
 - focus group interviews and discussion sessions (qualitative)
 - survey of local councils and key stakeholder groups

- > Investigations did not constitute a full study and results are indicative only

Key Stakeholders & Focus Group Members

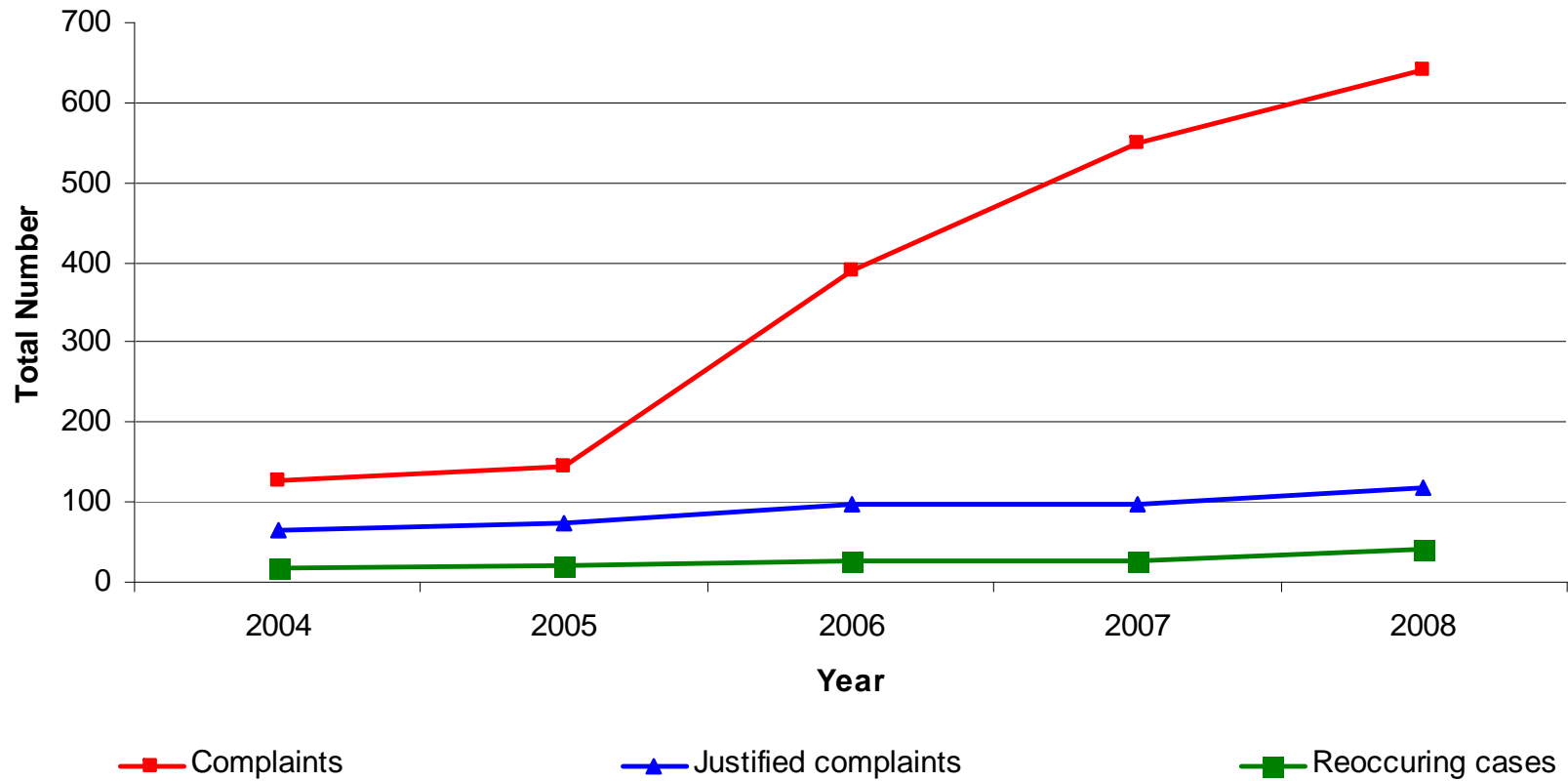
> Participating government and non-government agencies include:

- United Care Wesley - Port Adelaide
- Disability Advocacy Service
- Obsessive Compulsive Support Services
- Western Linkages
- RSPCA
- Environmental Health Australia (SA Branch)
- Aging and Community Services SA & NT
- Meals on Wheels
- City of Onkaparinga
- City of Mitcham
- City of Playford
- DFC – Housing SA
- DFC – Domiciliary Care SA
- DFC – Child Protection
- SA Metropolitan Fire Service
- SA Guardianship Board
- SA Office of the Public Advocate
- SA Mental Health

South Australian Statistics

Total number of compulsive hoarding and domestic squalor complaints according to South Australian Local Government 2004-2008

SA Health 2009 *Unpublished*



South Australian Statistics

South Australian Local Government Survey

2004 - 2008

SA Health 2009 *Unpublished*

- > On average, approximately 4-7 home visits and 16-25 hours of staff time are required in order to reach an end point (usually a clean up)

- > Approximately 52.6% of cases are resolved without the need for legal action, that is, they are solved via negotiation and mediation
 - Where legal action is used, approximately 55% of cases do not comply

- > Clients are aged between 61-80 years in approximately 47% of cases

Qualitative Feedback

South Australian Local Government Survey

2004 - 2008

SA Health 2009 *Unpublished*

- > “Council will take the proactive approach in negotiating action before using legislative mechanisms”
- > “We resolve complaints without other agencies. We do not address the mental health problems, but do take them into account”
- > “In the absence of support and assistance by any other agencies, a Guardianship application was made in relation to the ongoing case that has been dealt with since 2006. Many of the above agencies have never been approached because we didn't know of them and have not been informed of them in our recent extensive dealings with a range of community service agencies”

Qualitative Feedback

South Australian Local Government Survey

2004 - 2008

SA Health 2009 *Unpublished*

“I will never forget that clean up day. I had mental health nurses present (after much pleading) because you can't deny the client from being present and the emotion was overwhelming. She was climbing into the skip bin and removing matter that would appear to be rubbish to most but not her. I did not involve the police because I understand what police presence has on many mentally ill people who are not a danger. This can have a devastating effect on the client. They are not criminals.”

“At the end of the day why is local government dealing with mental health problems?? We are not professionally qualified to deal with such matters.”

An Environmental Health Officer in Local Government

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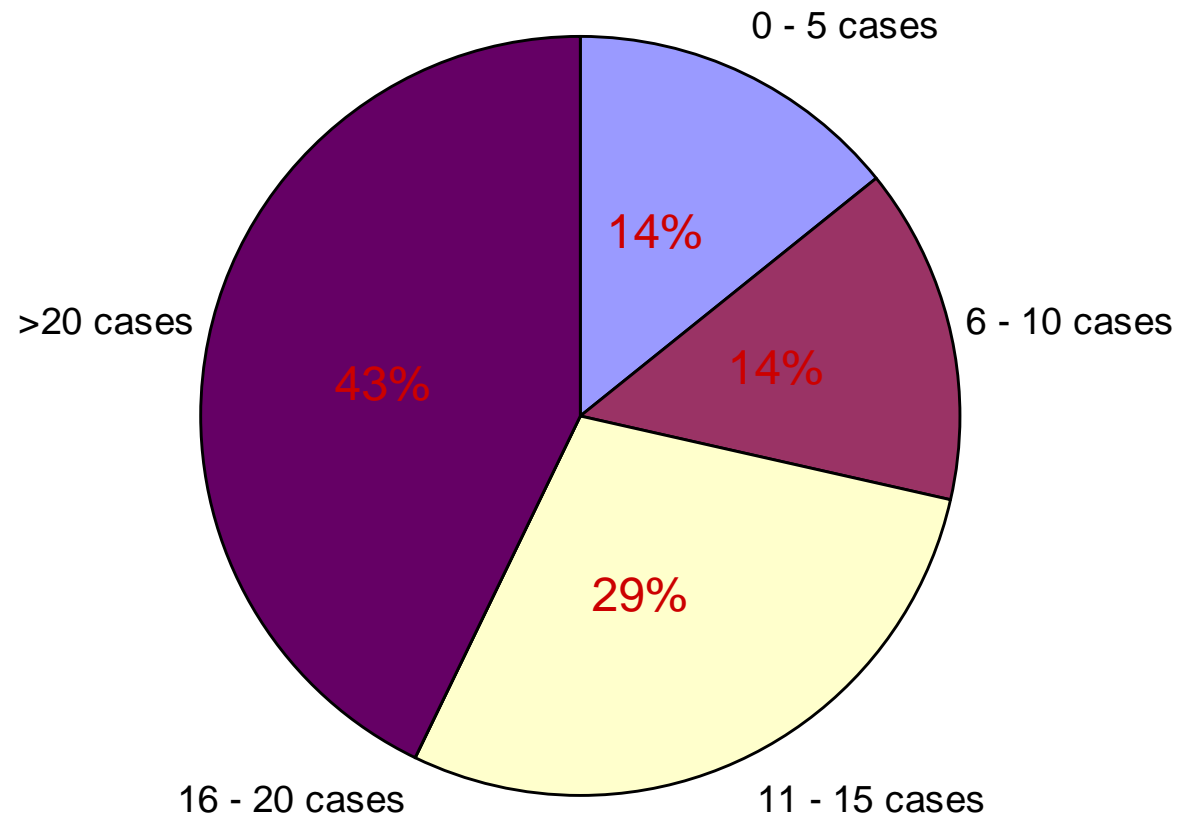


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South Australian Statistics

The average number of hoarding cases encountered each year by stakeholders in South Australia

SA Health 2009 *Unpublished*



Qualitative Feedback

South Australian Stakeholder Survey

SA Health 2009 *Unpublished*

- > “OH&S is a major concern for us when entering properties”
- > “Encourage multi-organisation response”
- > “Hard to find other organisations”

Qualitative Feedback

South Australian Stakeholder Survey

SA Health 2009 *Unpublished*

“...In the end though putting this down to obsessive compulsive disorders and mental illness is a little naive and simplistic. There seems to be an ongoing trend that if a person has a mental health issue, departments and organisations are washing their hands of situations purely on that basis. People with Mental illness CAN function and interact with other people WITHOUT a trained mental health person holding their hand at all times.

There is also the issue of accountability and responsibility, slobbs can be slobbs without having a compulsion or mental health related reason. Mental Health and Mental Illness are conditions not excuses for failing to conform with societal norms.

Also, if the person has breached council laws etc then it's a legal issue regardless of intent or mental wellness. All the health field can do is as you suggested present to a GP for assessment and diagnosis and referral on to specialists for further treatment and care.

But really if the council reckon that counselling and therapy is going solve their squalor problems then they're going to be sadly mistaken...”

South Australian GP

South Australia's Approach

A Foot in the Door

*The Management of Compulsive
Hoarding & Severe Domestic Squalor in
South Australia*

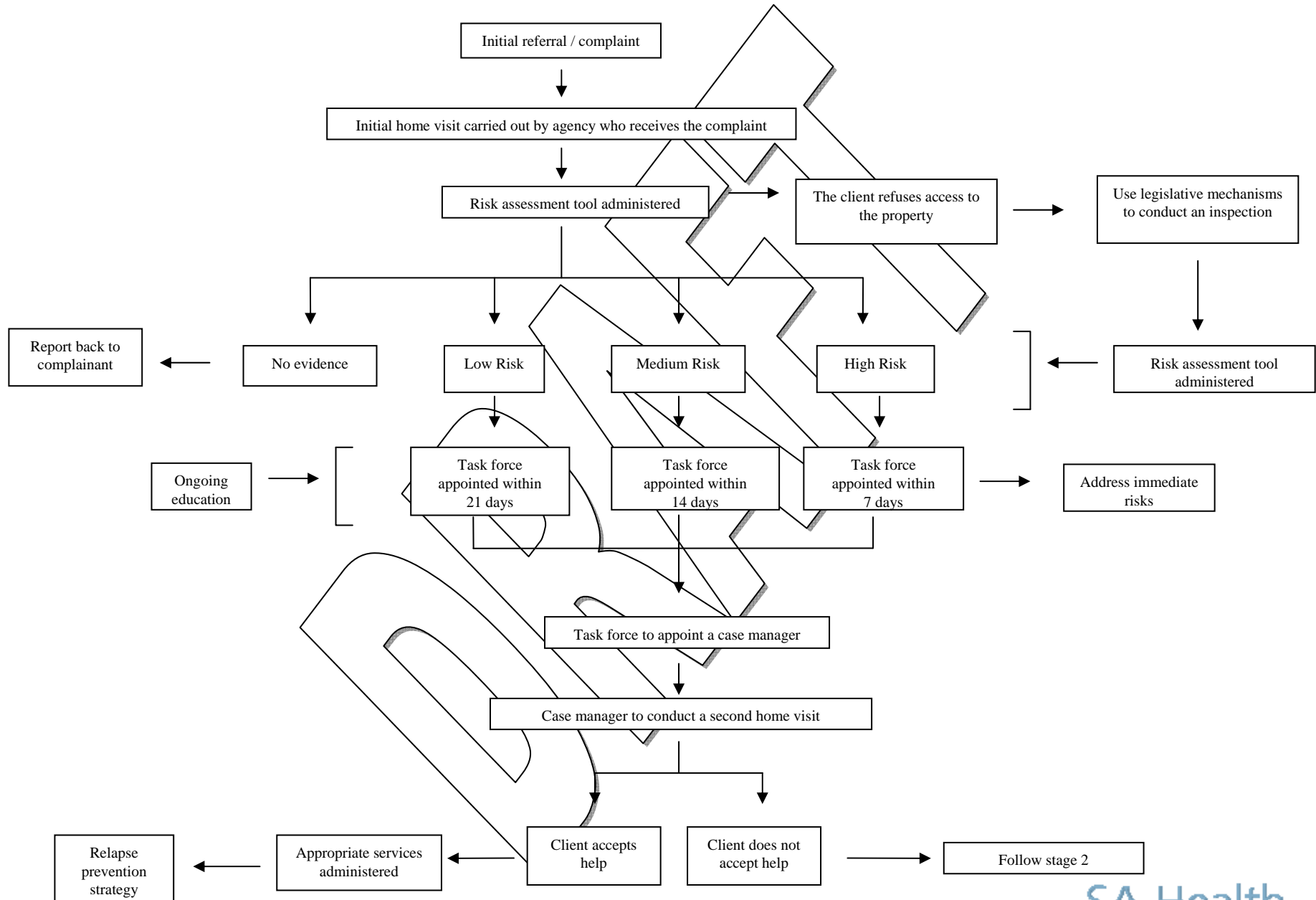
A Foot in the Door

Risk assessment tool

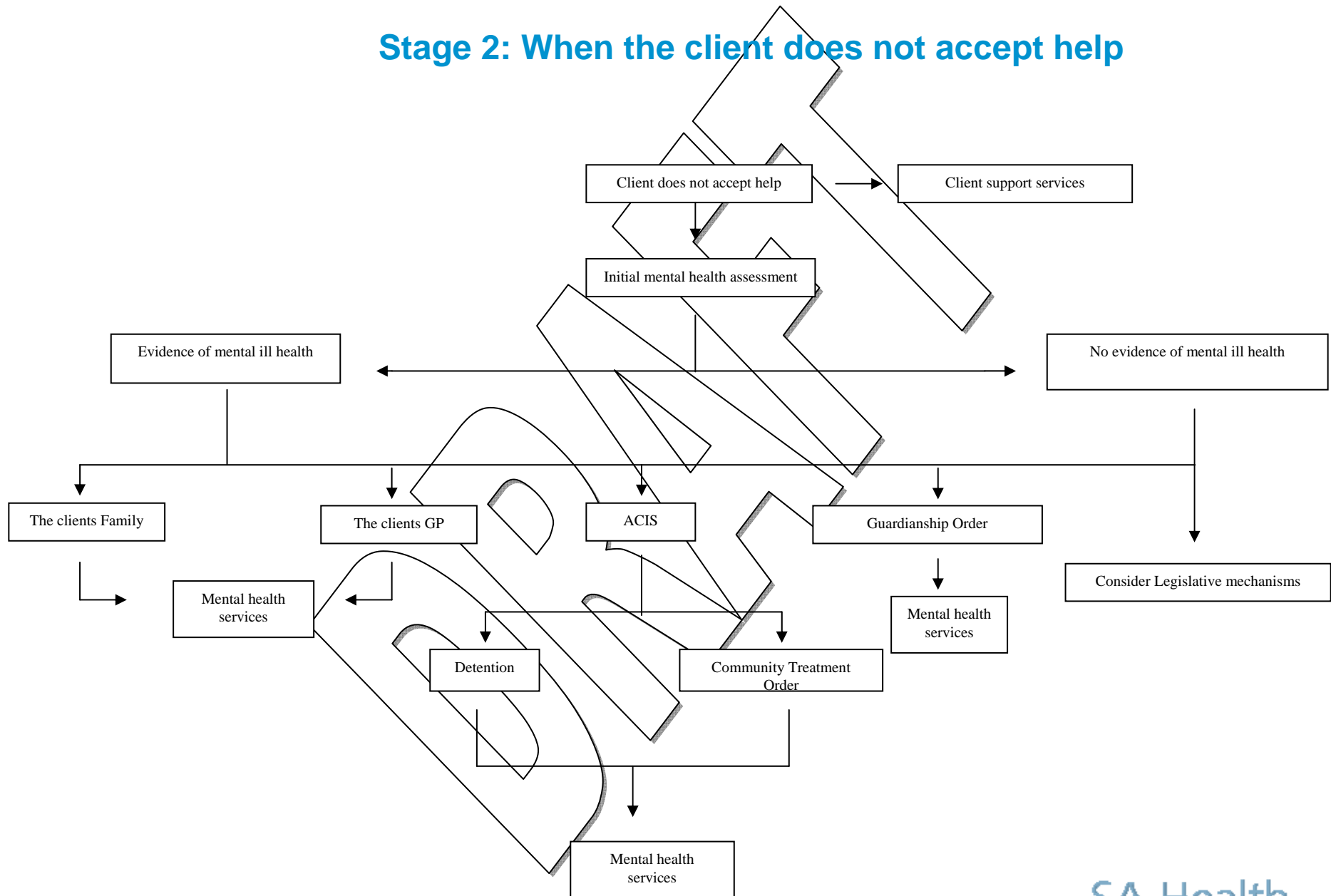
- > Based on the Environmental Cleanliness and Clutter Scale by Graeme Halliday & John Snowdon

- > Divided into 4 sections
 1. Is there evidence of compulsive hoarding / domestic squalor?
 2. Does the condition of the dwelling impact on the health of those who live inside?
 3. Does the condition of the dwelling impact on the public's health?
 4. Other issues for consideration

Stage 1: Investigation process and formation of the task force



Stage 2: When the client does not accept help



Future Directions

- > New legislation
 - South Australian Public Health Bill 2009
 - South Australian Mental Health Act 2009

- > Complete the guidance document

- > Circulate a draft for agency consultation

While a formal hoarding 'task force' would be great, an agreed interagency approach can achieve the same results without the need for significant resources

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