

Media Release

Specialist women's safety services call for urgent action – thousands of women and children experiencing violence may not receive support when pandemic funding ends

Embargoed 6:00am Wednesday, 7 April 2021

Ahead of a meeting of Federal, State and Territory Women's Safety Ministers today, New South Wales and Queensland specialist safety services have written to the Federal Government calling for decisive action to repeat the \$150 million injection of additional funds distributed to the states and territories in response to increased rates of family and domestic violence during the pandemic.

Demand on services has not decreased notwithstanding the reduction in coronavirus cases or lockdowns, and without continued funding, specialist women's safety services and women's refuges will be forced to reduce staffing levels and support.

In NSW, frontline domestic, family and sexual violence services recorded the worst year on record for violence against women, children, and demand hasn't gone down since.

The Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Services alone provided an additional 73,863 occasions of service to women experiencing domestic and family violence in NSW last year. This is a huge increase of 35% in just one year.

In Queensland, Ending Violence Against Women Queensland (EVAWQ) President Emma Iwinska said *"all service sectors across Queensland are inundated with women seeking support and are struggling to keep up with demand even with the COVID funding. If COVID funding is removed, we will see more women and children unable to access the help they need. Perpetration of violence is not decreasing, so it is imperative that funding for the specialist services that support women is not decreased either. We call on the Federal Government to extend and increase funding commitments to all women's specialist services on an ongoing basis."*

EVAWQ is a network bringing together domestic violence, sexual assault, women's refuge and women's health services across Queensland.

"Some services have seen women's requests for help in relation to men's perpetration of violence double or triple in the first few months of this 2021. The impacts of COVID and the escalation of men's violence is still ongoing and services need continuing funding to address this," said Emma Iwinska, *"Alongside funding much needed service responses, it is imperative that all levels of Government invest in long-term primary prevention of violence initiatives to drive the structural and societal change needed to stop men perpetrating violence in the first place."*

The report from the Federal Inquiry into Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence, with bipartisan support, recommends the continuation of the additional funding throughout the pandemic (Recommendation 13). Whilst welcoming the announcement of a summit into family, domestic and sexual violence, and the focus on the development of the Second National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Their Children, adult and child victims of violence need help now – and federal, state and territory governments have the opportunity to make a decision today to ensure that Australia does not go backwards in our response efforts.

The organisations who have co-signed the letters attached call on the federal, state and territory ministers gathered today to take immediate action by committing to a repeat of the \$150 million in additional funding to specialist women's safety services to ensure more women and their children do not miss out on the support they need to escape violence and live safely.

Quotes:

Queensland

"In addition to our concerns already raised in the attached letter, we note that it is too early to determine the impact on women and children who are experiencing DFV of the JobKeeper payments ending on 28 March 2021. What we do know is that women are significantly represented in lower paid and vulnerable employment, and who may therefore be seriously impacted by this payment ceasing. Additionally, if their partners or ex-partners no longer have a steady source of income, women may be facing additional financial abuse and coercion, or intimidation and threats relating to allowing partners to remain the relationship or return to the family home because they cannot afford to pay rent or other financial obligations. None of which reduces their risk of experiencing DFV or supports them into living safe unburdened lives." Rosie O'Malley, Convenor QDVSN

"All service sectors across Queensland have been inundated, with women seeking support and are struggling to keep up with demand even with COVID funding. If COVID funding is removed, we will see more women and children unable to access the help they need. Perpetration of violence is not decreasing, so it is imperative that funding for the specialist services that support women is not decreased either. We call on the Federal Government to extend and increase funding commitments to all women's specialist services on an ongoing basis."

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New South Wales

"Investment is needed now. We don't have time to waste or wait. This remains a national emergency. Solutions have been provided for years. They are simply not committed to or invested in."

Less talk, more action please." Delia Donovan, CEO Domestic Violence NSW

"Violence against women is at crisis point in this country. We need a more ambitious National Plan to address this epidemic, but we can't wait until 2022 to act. Hundreds of thousands of women and children need help now. We cannot turn our backs on them when they need us most. We need a commitment today. Words and promises won't help women and children who need to escape right now and over the next 12 months." Hayley Foster, CEO Women's Safety NSW

Western Australia

“The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified pre-existing issues for specialist family, domestic and sexual violence services working with victim-survivors. It has created a marked increase in demand for services and growing complexity of what client’s need. Additional funding provided to these services to assist with the response was welcomed by the sector in 2020. This was a start, but more funding is urgently needed to account for the pandemic’s ongoing effects on the levels of family, domestic and sexual violence across the community. Now is the time for an urgent consideration of the current funding model as it is hindering the efforts of family, domestic and sexual violence services to support victim-survivors to regain safety and hold perpetrators to account,” said the spokesperson for the Centre for Women’s Safety and Wellbeing, Dr Alison Evans.

“We must ensure that all elements of the family, domestic and sexual violence system are funded adequately and sustainably. Right now, the funding deficits are preventing the sector from meeting the needs of women and children. This includes a lack of accessible, culturally safe and appropriate services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children experiencing family and sexual violence, who must be engaged in the discussion on how best to work through this crisis.”

National

“It should be unthinkable that we ask specialist women’s safety services across the country to cut back on their ability to support women and children fleeing men’s violence when we know that the need has never been higher. Billions of dollars in pandemic support was given to corporations who reported huge profits. Surely the safety of women and children should not be allowed to be reduced, at a fraction of that cost.” Brad Chilcott, Executive Director, White Ribbon Australia

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