

DVNSW members' experiences of the Escaping Violence Payment Program

May 2022



D O M E S T I C
V I O L E N C E
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Acknowledgement

This report was written on the stolen and unceded lands of the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation. We pay respects to the Gadigal Elders past, present and emerging.

Domestic Violence NSW would like to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the breadth and depth of Australia. We recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have lived and cared for Country for over 65,000 years and continue to do so, honouring ancestors and knowledge holders within community, and observing ancient cultural practices.

We would like to recognise the impacts of colonisation and the ongoing systemic racism and oppression that is still present within institutions and the broader community.

We acknowledge the strength and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and hold their stories with great care.

We concede that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are at the highest risk of sexual, family and domestic violence compared with other women in Australia. We acknowledge that domestic and family violence are not part of Aboriginal culture.

Domestic Violence NSW work to position ourselves as allies, to walk alongside, to listen, to give our voice and strength, to respect, to never forget and to learn from past mistakes.



About Domestic Violence NSW

Domestic Violence NSW (DVNSW) is the **peak body for specialist domestic and family violence (DFV) services in NSW**. We have over 125 member organisations across NSW. We work to improve policy, legislative and program responses to domestic and family violence and to eliminate DFV through advocacy, partnerships and promoting good practice.

DVNSW members represent the diversity of specialist services working in NSW to support women, families and communities impacted by domestic and family violence. They are non-government-funded organisations. Our member organisations include crisis and refuge services, transitional accommodation and community housing providers, family support services, Aboriginal controlled organisations and specialist CALD organisations, specialist homelessness service providers, men's behaviour change programs and networks, community organisations working with high-risk communities, specialist women's legal support services, women and children's support services, and Safe at Home programs.

We would like to thank the DVNSW members who gave their time in raising issues relevant to this report and participated in our survey.

Executive Summary

The Escaping Violence Payment (EVP) Program was welcomed by the sector upon its announcement in August 2021, as lack of access to funds is a key barrier that prevents victim-survivors from accessing safety and/or forces their return to unsafe situations. Timely access to these funds has the potential to prevent homelessness, reduce disability and injury and support families with vulnerable children. However, since the initial rollout of the pilot commenced in September 2021, there have been serious and ongoing concerns about the implementation of the program and the impact on victim-survivors trying to access the payment.

Domestic Violence NSW (DVNSW) has continued to raise concerns with the hon. Minister Ruston, the Department of Social Services (DSS), Uniting Care, and Wesley Mission, who are contracted to administer the EVP Program. Ongoing advocacy since October 2021 has included several meetings with these stakeholders and regular escalations of issues as raised by our members, however underlying systemic issues within the EVP Program remain. DVNSW has provided recommendations to Uniting Care and Wesley Mission regarding potential improvements, most of which have not been taken onboard.

As part of our continued advocacy, DVNSW surveyed member services with results confirming previous anecdotal evidence received by members; revealing systemic issues within the EVP administration which may put victim-survivors at risk, including:

- Lack of trust in the administration of the EVP, deterring services from referring clients to the program.
- Dangerously long wait times and delays (up to 12 weeks), when timely support is vital.
- No access to the cash component at all (only vouchers), which severely limits options and freedom to women escaping violence.
- Substantial difficulty accessing the goods and services component of the package, with no clear guidelines of what may be eligible for reimbursement.
- Poor communication from EVP workers who lack DFV specialist knowledge, leaving women uncertain of their choices.
- Charging of an unanticipated 'administration fee' of \$1000.

“At the moment, I am not pursuing EVP with clients as it is too difficult and burdens the DFV service with paperwork that goes nowhere. There is no clear way to access the service and the rules change consistently.” (DVNSW member)

This report details our members' experiences of the EVP Program including findings, case studies and comments.

DVNSW is in full support of the pilot continuing. Based on the findings, we make nine recommendations to improve the EVP administration including:

1. Ensure future contracts are delivered by specialist DFV service providers.
2. Offer dignity of choice to victim-survivors by repackaging the payment as \$5000 in cash.
3. Decrease delays in payments and increase efficiency by introducing a seven-day payment processing agreement.
4. Reduce re-traumatisation of victim-survivors by improving EVP workers' responses; provide specialist DFV training to EVP caseworkers.
5. Extend the 12-week case management timeframe to twelve months.
6. Provide regular information sessions by the EVP with specialist DFV services, so that information can be shared and issues can be raised and addressed.
7. Make EVP summary data publicly available on a quarterly basis to ensure transparency.
8. Release data on the number of applicants who have been charged an administration fee and ensure they are paid the full amount, retrospectively.
9. Expand eligibility to include victim-survivors of family violence.

DVNSW calls on the Federal Government to immediately take action to improve the administration of the EVP program and ensure help is available to those who need it when fleeing violence.

Background

Uniting Care were contracted by the Department of Social Services (DSS) to administer the EVP program across Australia, commencing in September 2021. Wesley Mission was sub-contracted to facilitate the program in NSW and the ACT. To support the implementation, DVNSW hosted an information session with Wesley Mission for our members regarding the rollout of the EVP program in September 2021.

EVP Program Concerns

The information session followed by the initial implementation of the EVP program prompted widespread concern from the sector, with concerns the initial implementation had serious, negative consequences for victim-survivors applying to access the EVP. Sector concerns included inappropriate eligibility requirements, confusing and inappropriate payment structure, significant processing delays, and the burden of excessive paperwork on an already under-resourced domestic and family (DFV) sector.

EVP Program Advocacy

In November 2021 DVNSW supported the sector's advocacy by facilitating the writing of an open letter from the sector to the Hon. Minister Ruston, Minister for Women's Safety (Cth) and Minister for Families and Social Services (Cth), and the Hon. Minister Payne, Minister for Women (Cth). The letter had over 135 signatories and called for urgent changes to the implementation and eligibility criteria of the EVP Program and resulted in a meeting with the Hon. Senator Ruston on 11th November 2022.

During this meeting, the sector's concerns were heard by the Minister, certain points were clarified, and the Minister expressed her dedication to improving access to finances for people escaping domestic and family violence. However, in the time since, DVNSW continued to receive numerous and ongoing feedback from the sector including:

- long wait times and delays (up to 12 weeks),
- lack of communication from EVP workers,
- no access to a cash payment (vouchers only),
- difficulty having items/services approved for brokerage,
- insistence on use of preferred suppliers for goods, and
- payments being capped at \$4000, due to an administration fee.

DVNSW shared this feedback from the sector directly with DSS and Minister Ruston's office via email and again wrote to Senator Ruston in February 2022 highlighting these issues. Ruston's office assured DVNSW that the charging of an administration fee should not happen and would not continue to happen. Minister Ruston also emphasised the importance of victim-survivors having access to cash, rather than vouchers.

Uniting Care

We met with Uniting Care on 8th December 2021 to openly discuss concerns from the sector and provide member feedback. At Uniting's request, we shared a series of deidentified emails containing feedback from members, with the same provided to DSS. We met with Uniting Care again on 25th February 2022, due to continued feedback from members of ongoing concerns of the same nature. During this meeting Uniting Care committed to:

- Ensure \$1500 cash payment would be available for victim-survivors via pre-paid card or bank transfer.
- EVP workers would ensure available balance on vouchers before sending to clients (as a number of services reported victim-survivors received vouchers with no or very low balance).
- Explore more affordable deals for available goods through their networks if the required volume exists.
- Consider sharing data on improved wait times, number of applications received, and number of payments made, including cash/vouchers and goods and services.

Administration Fee

DVNSW received ten allegations from members regarding an administration fee of \$1000 being charged to victim-survivors in 2021. Evidence was sent to DSS in December 2021. DSS confirmed that all administration costs for the EVP Program were covered by DSS and that Uniting Care and Wesley Mission should not be charging victim-survivors an administration fee. However, DVNSW continued to receive reports from members that this was still occurring in early 2022.

This information was escalated to Uniting on initial allegation and again in January 2022 with evidence. Uniting is yet to formally respond to the allegations.

Solutions

DVNSW has made some suggestions to Uniting to improve the EVP program during face-to-face meetings on 8th December 2021 and 25th February 2022 and via email communication. Suggestions include:

- An agreed payment processing time of 7 days (similar to Victims Services immediate needs support packages). This would provide clients and workers with some assurance and assist clients in their planning to safely escape the violence, as the payment intends to do.
- Appoint an escalation point in the team at Wesley Mission/Uniting across all states and territories, so that domestic and family violence workers have a process to follow when they are experiencing issues with a payment.
- Wesley and Uniting Care to hold regular information sessions for DFV services, so that Uniting can offer the correct information regarding payments and so that workers

have the opportunity to give feedback with Uniting/Wesley to better understand the issues at hand and make improvements.

- Release summary data on the EVP program including existing backlog, number of applications received, and payments made (with breakdown of cash/vouchers and goods and services).

Response

Uniting Care have not agreed to a payment processing time, information sessions for members, or to release program data, however they have taken onboard DVNSW feedback regarding the importance of an escalation point. Currently, matters are escalated through DVNSW, as there is no escalation point available directly at Uniting/Wesley. DVNSW then escalates individual matters to Wesley Mission for support. We have heard from members that often cases are resolved after we have escalated them, however members report that without escalating to DVNSW, outcomes for clients are very poor, with issues ongoing including:

- continued delays,
- confusion regarding access to cash/vouchers,
- difficulty obtaining approval for brokerage for goods and services,
- poor, delayed or no communication,
- misinformation from EVP workers, and
- lack of DFV awareness and trauma-informed responses from EVP workers.

Systemic Concerns

While the sector appreciate Uniting Care and Wesley Mission have been responding to matters on a case-by-case basis as escalations are received, the underlying systemic issues within the EVP Program administration continue to remain, despite continued feedback and advocacy with Uniting Care, DSS, and Minister Ruston.

To support our advocacy, we asked members to complete a short survey of their experiences with EVP. The aim of this survey is to provide data on the ongoing concerns about the EVP Program administration and propose recommendations to improve the EVP. These recommendations include improving accessibility and offering dignity of choice to victim-survivors, decreasing delays in payments, reducing re-traumatisation of victim-survivors by improving EVP workers' responses, and reducing the burden of paperwork on DFV services.

Survey Methodology

DVNSW provided an online survey to its members from 29th March to 8th April 2022 around their experiences with the EVP (see appendix one). The survey contained nine questions and was designed to collect data regarding issues that had previously been reported to DVNSW by members. The aim of the survey was to determine how widespread these issues were and if there had been any improvement since our advocacy. For example, the question regarding the administration fee specifically refers to a fee charged in 2022. This was so only new fees were captured to ensure face validity.

The survey was distributed to members via email and received seventy-nine responses. This is a relatively high response rate for a DVNSW survey, particularly during a time when members have reported they are incredibly busy with issues such as natural disasters, responding to the pandemic, and being understaffed and underfunded.

We note a potential limitation in the research is that workers who have already ceased applying for the EVP for clients, as per question five of the survey, may not have completed the survey, feeling they were unable to provide contemporary examples. As such, we anticipate this figure is higher than captured. Data analysis was performed primarily through univariate analysis.

Summary of findings

Results of the survey confirmed previous anecdotal evidence received from members, revealing systemic issues within the EVP Program administration. These issues are putting victim-survivors at risk due to significant delays in processing payments, substantial difficulty accessing the goods and services component of the package, and poor communication from EVP workers who lack DFV specialist knowledge.

Findings include:

1. 89% of specialist DFV services said they had experienced issues with the EVP process.
2. 72% of specialist DFV services said EVP issues had deterred them from recommending clients apply for the payment.
3. Only 15% of specialist DFV services said victim-survivors had received the full \$5000 (including cash/vouchers/good and services).
4. Only 33% of specialist DFV services said victim-survivors had been offered cash rather than vouchers.
5. 15% of specialist DFV services said victim-survivors had been charged an administration fee in 2022.
6. Other EVP issues reported include:
 - 77% of specialist DFV services reported communication issues with the EVP team.
 - 66% of specialist DFV services reported experiencing repeat requests for information/evidence.
 - 58% of specialist DFV services reported experiencing delays receiving cash payments.
 - 58% of specialist DFV services reported experiencing approval issues for payment of goods and services.
 - 51% of specialist DFV services reported accessibility issues for victim-survivors.
 - 48% of specialist DFV services reported victim-survivors experienced delays receiving vouchers.

Recommendations

- 1. Ensure future contracts are provided to specialist DFV service providers, administered on a state-by-state basis.**

The current administration of the Escaping Violence Payment (EVP) Program by non-specialist providers is putting victim-survivors at risk due to significant delays in processing payments, difficulty accessing the goods and services component of the package, and poor communication from EVP workers who lack DFV specialist knowledge.

In NSW, the Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Services (WDVCASs) are often the first point of contact for women experiencing domestic and family violence and are the only state-wide domestic and family violence specialist service. These services are best placed to assess the needs of women and would save women the trauma of having to retell their story. In many cases the front-line services are already doing the bulk of the administration for the EVP team, as evidenced in the survey.

- 2. Re-package EVP as a \$5000 cash payment by removing the requirement of brokerage for goods and services.**

\$5000 in cash payments for victim-survivors provides dignity of choice and would also mean less administration for EVP caseworkers and DFV services. Cash is a better option for people who are escaping violence as it provides them with agency, which they may have been deprived of during an abusive relationship. Victim-survivors are best placed to determine what they need and how the money is best spent, rather than a non-specialist third party making these judgements for them.

The full \$5000 payment should be available to all applicants who are eligible for EVP, with cash being the preferred method of payment. Only 15% of survey respondents said their clients had received the full \$5000 (including cash/vouchers/good and services) and only 33% said their clients had been offered cash rather than vouchers. Vouchers are not valid for on-line use, thus limiting victim-survivor's choice.

In lieu of full payments being made available in cash, the process for applying for brokerage for goods and services should be simplified and streamlined to ensure:

- A) EVP workers communicate directly with victim-survivors rather than DFV services in approval of brokerage. This would speed up the process and reduce the burden of administrative paperwork on DFV services.** 58% of survey respondents reported experiencing approval issues for payment of goods and services.

B) Reduce the evidence requirement for invoices for goods and services and allow quotes. Many retail stores do not provide invoices, thus restricting victim-survivors' choice. As identified in the comments in Question 4 and in Case study 2, services have reported difficulty in having items approved for brokerage, particularly at more affordable stores including Kmart, Big W, and Fantastic Furniture that are often preferred by victim-survivors, as these stores do not provide invoices.

3. Commit to a 7-day EVP processing time from the date the application is received for funds to reach victim-survivor's accounts.

Committing to a 7-day timeframe for payment would assist victim-survivors in planning a safe exit from the relationship. Without a known timeframe for payment, victim-survivors may be placed in danger if they are relying on these funds to escape the violence.

4. Provide specialist DFV training to EVP caseworkers and ensure they are working within a trauma-informed framework that recognises the specific needs of victim-survivors from a diverse range of backgrounds and offers flexible service responses.

There are significant communication issues with the current EVP caseworkers, showing a lack of understanding of trauma-informed principles, creating a negative experience for victim-survivors who are trying to access the Program. 77% of survey respondents reported communication issues with the EVP team and 66% reported experiencing repeat requests for information/evidence.

The [DVNSW Good Practice Guidelines](#) are a good example of an evidence based framework that EVP case workers should adhere to.

5. Extend the 12-week case management timeframe to twelve months.

This would demonstrate a better understanding of the complexities and intersecting dynamics of domestic and family violence, including mental health or post-traumatic stress. An extended timeframe would allow victim-survivors who have experienced crisis and trauma and may have other complex issues more time to make use of the funds appropriately.

6. The EVP should provide regular information sessions with specialist services so that services can provide updates on any issues. We believe this will increase trust with the sector in the EVP Program and increase referrals.

Trust in the administration of the EVP is very low, with 72% of survey respondents reporting that issues experienced have deterred them from referring clients to the Program. Providing specialist services with a platform for raising concerns, where feedback is considered to inform improvements to the EVP will, over time, increase trust in the Program that will increase referrals.

7. Make EVP data publicly available on a quarterly basis, including:

- **Number of payments made**
- **Number of applications received**
- **Total amount received per applicant (including breakdown of cash, vouchers, goods and services)**
- **Time taken from application received to payment made**
- **Number of referrals made to other services**

Sharing public data will provide transparency to the sector and will increase trust in the EVP. If data cannot be made public, then it should be shared with Peak bodies in order to make comparisons between anecdotal feedback received from the sector and actual payments. This data would also be useful in examining trends in the demand for support which could support future initiatives.

8. Release data on the number of applicants who have been charged an administration fee and ensure they are paid the full amount, retrospectively.

15% of survey respondents reported their clients were charged an administration fee in 2022. This may not represent the true extent of the issue, as some providers may not have been made aware of this, with comments indicating that EVP workers were not transparent about charging an administration fee. To help regain credibility, the EVP should release this data or at the very least, make sure all eligible victim-survivors receive the full amount.

9. Expand eligibility to include victim-survivors of family violence.

While the program is designed to support victim-survivors to leave violent relationships and this tends to apply to intimate partner relationships, victim-survivors experiencing family violence would still benefit from the financial support.

Survey findings in detail

Question 1: What kind of service do you work for?

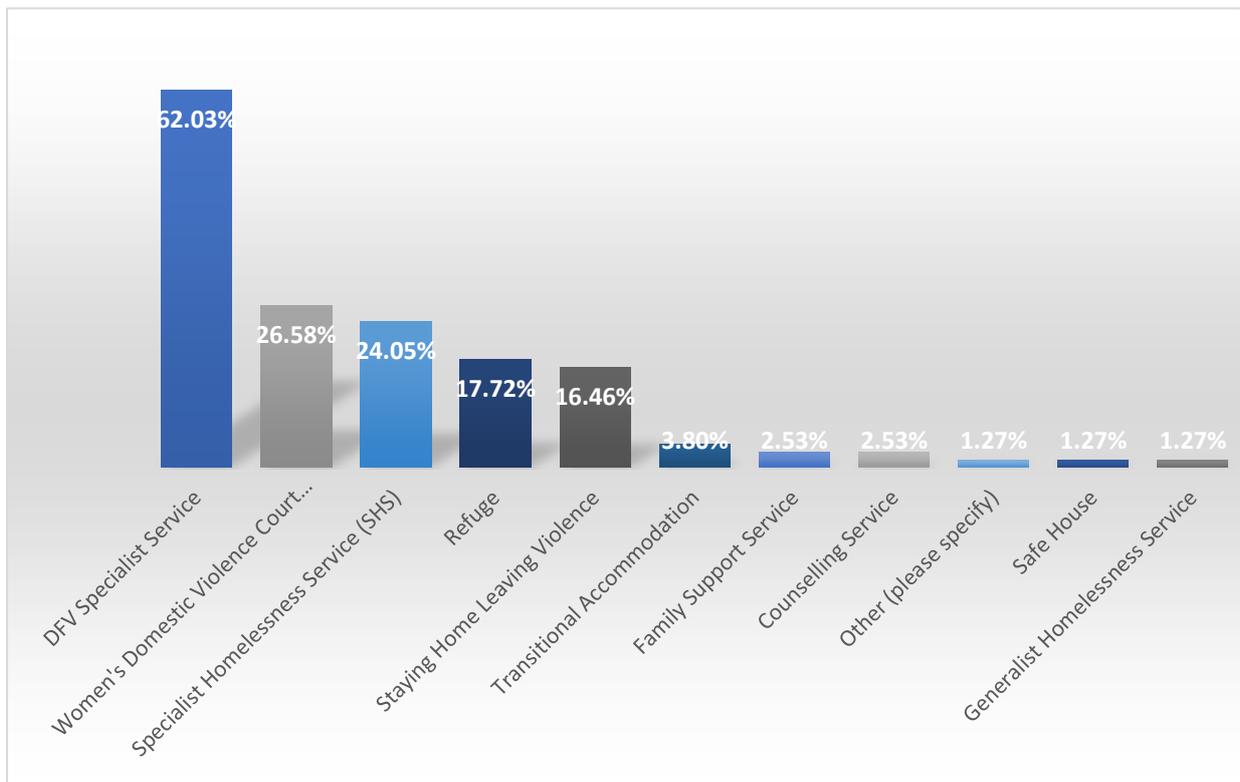


Figure 1, Services worked for

The majority of members who responded to the survey were domestic violence specialist services, including DFV Specialist Service (various), Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Services (WDVCASs), Staying Home Leaving Violence services, refuge services, and specialist counselling services. Non-specialist DFV services were also surveyed, which include specialist homelessness services, transitional accommodation, family support services, generalist homelessness services, and a safe house.

Question 3: Have you experienced any issues with the EVP process?

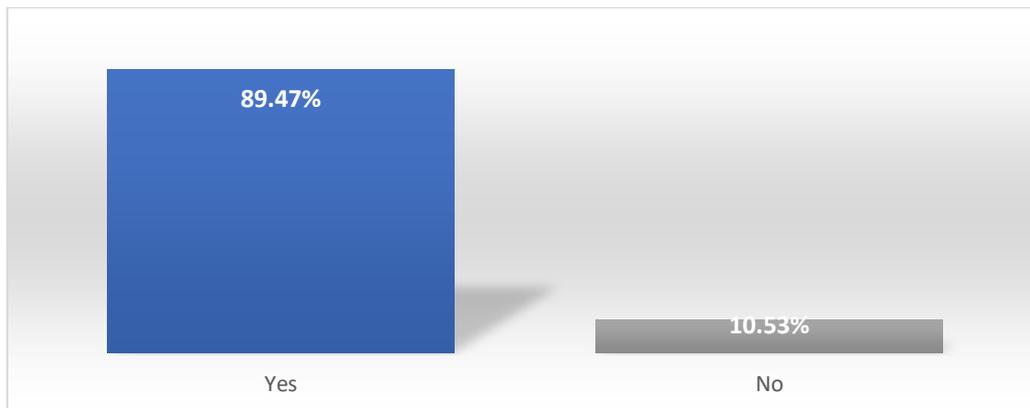


Figure 2, EVP issues

Over 89% of respondents said they have experienced issues with the EVP process. Details of these issues are explored in question four.

Question 4: What issues with EVP have you experienced?

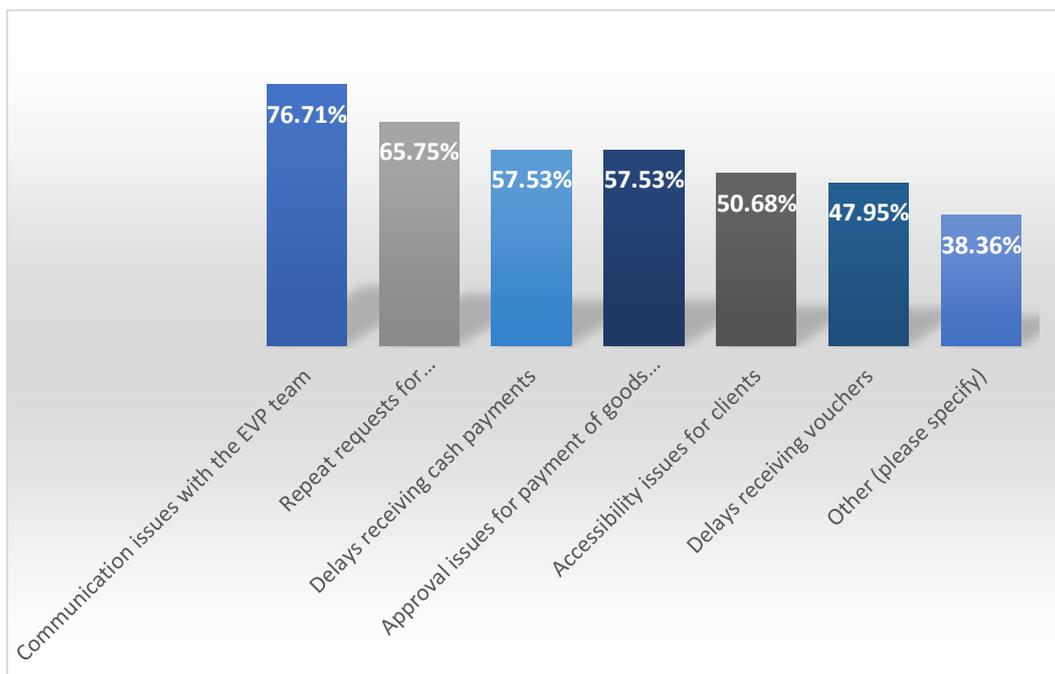


Figure 3, Type of issues experienced

The survey collected data on a range of issues that had previously been identified by members. These issues were further detailed in the free-text boxes both in this question and in question 9.

Comments from survey respondents regarding systemic issues:

“Nothing done until it is escalated. Denial of inadequate service provision at the Wesley end.”

“Is another judgement-based system that makes them [victim-survivors] feel unworthy.”

“This payment is designed for escaping domestic violence, I don't think the way it has been set up will help any women from actually leaving the violence.”

Comments from survey respondents on the issue of approval for goods and services:

“The invoices clients need to get have to have specific details e.g., it has to say the word 'invoice' on the document. However, a lot of stores, e.g., Fantastic Furniture can't produce a document that says 'invoice', instead it says 'sales order' which contains the same information, but EVP won't accept it. Fantastic Furniture is the best option for clients in our area as it is cheap and has a wide variety of options for furniture.”

“Issues finding stores which provide specific types of invoices that EVP will accept.”

“There are delays getting invoices, furniture orders and reimbursements processed.”

Comments from survey respondents on the issue of repeat requests for information:

“Wesley Mission requested evidence that I sent multiple times and was continued to be asked for the same evidence to be sent. Since sending a month ago I have not heard back to see if it has been approved. She [the victim-survivor] needed support with moving and has since moved without help of this payment as we were unable to rely on it.”

“Evidence required needs to be clearer to stop the additional requests for more information, which takes more time for payment to be approved.”

Comments from survey respondents on the issue of delays in processing:

“Still waiting for a response almost 4 weeks and 3 emails later.”

“Extremely long wait times, no communication/difficult to communicate with, and applications are difficult to complete if the client is attempting to do this themselves.”

Comments from survey respondents on communication issues:

“EVP staff not contacting clients directly but expecting the referrer to be the intermediary (this is time consuming and confusing for the client).”

“Worker advised she could only communicate with me and not client.”

“Attempted to ask questions and no reply.”

Question 5: Have issues deterred you from recommending clients apply for payment?

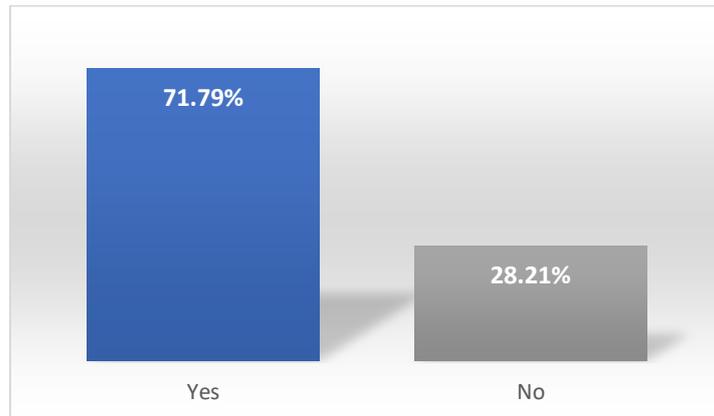


Figure 4, Issues deterring from recommending clients apply for EVP

Almost 72% of survey respondents said that issues experienced with the EVP have deterred them from recommending clients apply.

Comments from survey respondents who said their issues experienced with the EVP have deterred them from recommending clients apply:

“It (EVP) has been an absolute nightmare. It is at the point where our teams do not even want to try.”

“At the moment, I am not pursuing EVP with clients as it is too difficult and burdens the DFV service with paperwork that goes nowhere. There is no clear way to access the service and the rules change consistently.”

“Our client did NOT wish to proceed because it [EVP] felt like they were forever chasing information. I have not offered this support to any other clients.”

“Process to obtain this service for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) women is unsustainable, ridiculous and deters anyone to seek this service. Waiting list to obtain the service is very long.”

Question 6: In 2022 have any of your client's been charged an 'administration fee'?

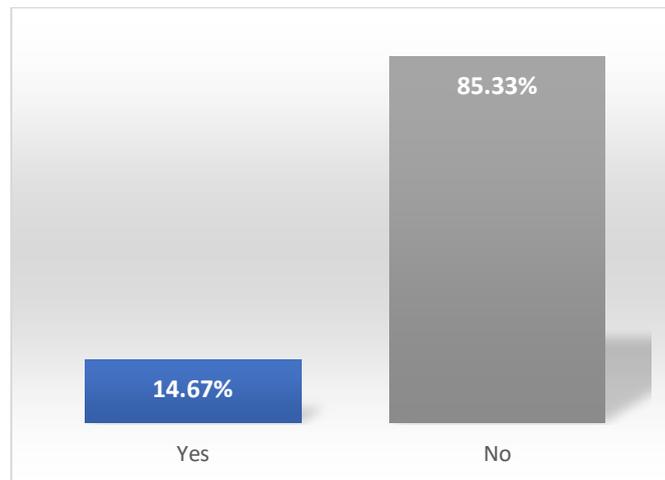


Figure 5, Clients charged an administration fee

Almost 15% of survey respondents said victim-survivors had been charged an administration fee this year.

Comments from survey respondents on the charging of an administration fee:

“I am very worried that they are not transparent around the admin fee – they stated they do not charge it, but staff on the phone line said that it is standard to take 1K (\$1000) from the client.”

“In regard to an administration fee, I was told that clients would be charged this which is why they wouldn't be getting the full \$5000, but EVP wouldn't tell me how much the fee was.”

“My client was offered vouchers and approved for additional support which totalled around \$4000. I had huge issues with the remaining amount and was told there was a service fee.”

“Part of the payment was kept as admin fee, client received \$3500.”

Question 7: Have any of your client's received the full \$5000 (including cash/vouchers and good and services)?

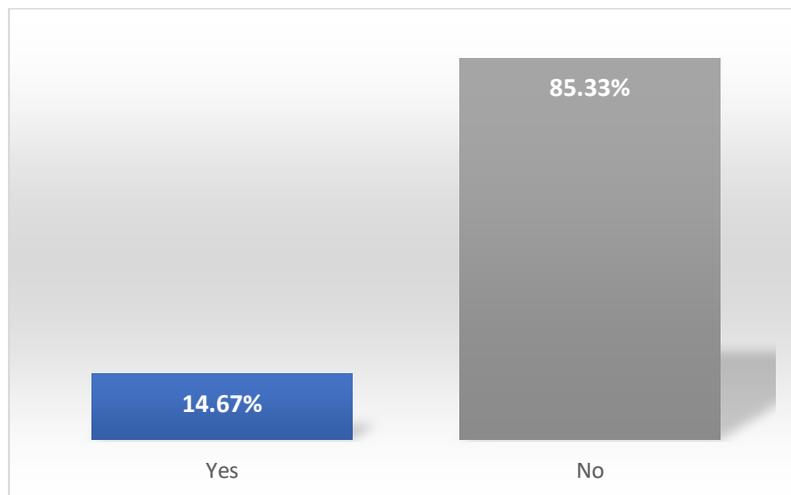


Figure 6, Clients who have received the full \$5000

Less than 15% of survey respondents said victim-survivors had received the full \$5000 payment.

Comments from survey respondents regarding how much was received in cash/vouchers and good and services:

"I have only been able to get \$1,500 in EFT payments for my clients. However, I have received no reply as to how to get the remaining \$3,500 of the EVP."

"Client received \$500 payment but would like further support, has received email informing that additional information is required, client gave up as they ask for too much information, which she had already given them."

"So far, all that has been received by my clients has been \$500 in Big W voucher (which seemed unrelated to the assistance requested) and \$1000 cash transfer."

"Client only received voucher for \$500 - nothing else was given to client."

Question 8: Have any of your client's been offered cash rather than vouchers?

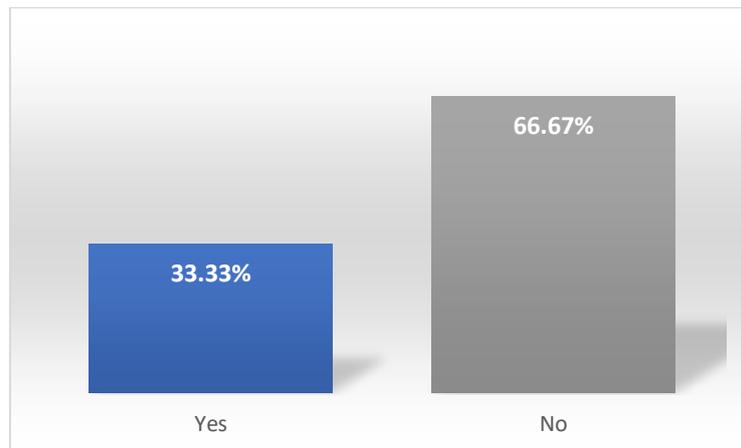


Figure 7, Clients who have been offered cash rather than vouchers

Only 33% of survey respondents said their clients had been offered cash, rather than vouchers.

Comments from survey respondents on whether they were offered cash or vouchers:

“The biggest issue presently is about choice. Clients don't get to choose how they get vouchers. They get a limited number of options. A Kmart voucher is useless - can't be used online. Clients have the right of choice. Given them an EFTPOS card or a Visa debit card. Stop telling them how they can spend money that they are entitled to. It is NOT Wesley's money and being taken from some other budget - this is supposed to be an opportunity to help, support and empower. It's not.”

“The issuing of vouchers instead of cash is demoralising and paternalistic. It suggests that these women do not understand their own needs or can't be trusted with 'cash'.”

“My client was never offered cash payment.”

“Vouchers were already used when clients received them.”

The latter issue was reported by three members who highlighted the detrimental impact that this had on clients, having trolleys full of much needed items, only to be rejected and humiliated at the checkout. Particularly for those who have been subjected to financial abuse, this is a completely unacceptable continuation of that abuse, this time by an organisation tasked to help them.

Question 9: Are there any other issues or concerns regarding EVP you would like to raise?

Sixty-four respondents provided free text answers raising several concerns with the EVP including victim-survivor dignity and re-traumatisation, transparency issues, burden of work on DFV specialist services, extensive delays in processing and payments, and poor communication from EVP workers.

Victim-survivor dignity and re-traumatisation:

"It does more harm than good! It is in no way trauma informed and robs women of their dignity. Appalling rollout!"

"It is very humiliating for clients not being able to redeem their vouchers at the checkout due to the used vouchers being sent to multiple clients."

"Poor communication and lengthy delays as well as contradictory information and advice has contributed to client distress."

"Lack of communication from EVP caseworkers, extremely slow process, re-traumatising for clients."

"Their initial forms were horrendous and triggering. One question asked if the client believed he was going to kill her."

"Takes too long to process applications. The program is incredibly slow and clunky; this has meant client's escaping violence have not been able to access funds or furniture in a timely manner. This has led to traumatising of clients, and I have had to constantly apologise for the program delays."

Transparency issues:

"They wouldn't tell me how much the clients had left to spend which made it difficult for clients to know their budget when getting invoices for items they needed."

"Client was not approved for payment as by the time they got her application, it was past the timeframe, and she was denied payment due to this."

Burden of work on DFV specialist services:

"Existing services e.g., DVF, Refuge etc are doing the bulk of the work with referring requirements, quotes, producing evidence etc."

“EVP workers have advised they will not contact clients, which means communication is going through an extra party (the referrer), slowing down the process.”

“EVP staff not contacting clients directly but expecting the referrer to be the intermediary (this is time consuming and confusing for the client).”

This is contradictory to the advice provided by Uniting on 8th December 2021. We were assured this myth would be cleared up through organisational communication.

“(The EVP team) requests for me to confirm client eligibility after I have sent a support letter with the application letter. Surely with all that information plus access to my email and phone they could ask further questions if they need to clarify whether the client is eligible for the funding. They appear to be passing on the eligibility responsibility to us rather than checking it themselves.”

Poor communication from EVP team:

“EVP Caseworkers are abrupt and rude at times.”

“I applied twice and both times I was unsuccessful in even getting a response. A huge waste of time.”

“Slow response time, support letter was sent over 2 weeks ago, I did not receive any confirmation that the email was received and neither worker nor client have heard anything yet.”

“Lack of communication to advise of allocation delays. Failure to handover client's application progress to next EVP caseworker if original EVP caseworker resigns.”

Issues regarding allocation of a caseworker:

“There have been long delays waiting for a caseworker to be allocated after being approved (one client has been waiting 3 months). “

Delay in receiving payments:

“Accessing the payment took around 3 months for a client I helped support. Ongoing communication issues. The outcome ended up being the client was offered \$1000 cash payment and \$500 grocery voucher.”

“Client was approved for \$1500 payment, bank details etc were sent back the same day, 2.5 weeks later, she still hasn't received her payment.”

“Took 2 weeks for client to receive \$500 payment via bank transfer.”

Concern regarding 12-week eligibility after leaving relationship:

“Concern around the 12-week eligibility of leaving DFV relationship (not long enough for clients to seek support - should be offered up to 2 + years after leaving the relationship).”

“Client applied in November and was responded to end of Feb requesting evidence of the DV to be within 12 weeks from the date in Feb. She applied in November when she just left so there was no way the dates would fall within the 12 weeks required.”

“All of this (applying for EVP) must be done within the first 3 months that we are working with the client to be eligible. Often there are other issues that we must deal with first, particularly safety and emotional concerns which can take three months to do in this climate, [where] lack of housing support and covid [take priority]. By then we could have missed the 3-month time frame for this funding.”

Concerns regarding the application process:

“The applications need to be more flexible/generic as not all workers completing these are case managers, and therefore do not have things such as a support plan or financial risk assessment.”

Case studies

The following longer form case studies were provided by survey respondents in the comments section.

Case study 1:

I only work with clients for 3 months. Sometimes I must close with a client who is still waiting for some things through EVP. I've asked EVP to follow up directly with the client as I've closed supports. EVP kept emailing me pushing me to be the go between for them, they really didn't want to talk with the client directly, they asked me if the client had another caseworker who could support them with EVP so they wouldn't have to deal with the client directly.

I've submitted requests for reimbursement to EVP for a client and the team leader approved it, but the client never got the money. When I followed up with EVP about this, they said the client's 12 weeks with them was up (even though the reimbursement was submitted and approved within the 12 weeks). I had to advocate for the client to get the reimbursement, which they eventually got.

I'm a high crisis DV caseworker trying to help clients and their children with safety concerns. Our service gets clients who are at very high risk, we work with them for approx. 3 months to get them safe and then refer them to a step-down service so we can take on the next high-risk client. I'm having to extend my support periods with clients because of the time it takes to get things through EVP, which means I'm unable to take on another high-risk client/family because I'm busy dealing with EVP administration processes unnecessarily.

It's so much quicker for our service to pay for client's items upfront so the client has what they need straight away as EVP takes too long to process and pay for items. Our service then claims reimbursement back from EVP. But this is not a sustainable solution as our service is not funded to do this, we don't have the money to do this for all our client's (we only do it for extremely urgent situations e.g., security upgrades for immediate safety or a fridge if the family doesn't have one due to DV). Again, this is also very time consuming for our staff and takes our time away from other high-risk situations/clients.

EVP need a faster way to make payments. The process of having clients get invoices that match EVP's specific criteria is not working. One client told me that the process was so stressful for her, and it made her situation much more difficult (she was escaping DV from her very dangerous, violent partner who was in a bikie gang and she has 2 young children). The client was terrified to go to the shops in case she ran into the perpetrator or his associates, so just going and getting the invoices was traumatic, let alone the long and convoluted process of getting the 'right' invoice with the 'right' details on it.

EVP is meant to help women and makes it easier to escape DV, not make it harder and more stressful. Colleagues tell me they aren't referring clients to EVP because the process is so difficult, confusing and time consuming.

Case study 2:

EVP don't give out consistent information to referrers or they might give information to some referrers but not to others. EVP never told me that they have accounts set up with certain stores (e.g., Amart Furniture and JB HiFi), I only found this out when I spoke to another worker who had referred someone to EVP. This would have been good information to have much earlier as it means clients don't have to get an invoice if they choose items from these stores.

I've had clients say that trying to get an invoice that EVP will accept is very difficult and we end up going back and forth with EVP for weeks sending through multiple invoices before EVP will accept it. One client ended up getting about 4-5 invoices for a lounge from different stores because each time we submitted an invoice, EVP rejected it.

We tried Fantastic Furniture but the document said 'sales order', not 'invoice', then the invoice was addressed to the client and EVP need it addressed to Wesley Mission, then we tried Amart Furniture but the item client chose wasn't in stock at the local store (even though it was being delivered anyway), then the item she chose was a 'custom order' and EVP won't approve custom orders from Amart (which they didn't tell us before the client chose the item).

Often by the time the client was able to get an invoice that is acceptable for EVP, the item is no longer available, or the price has gone up and it's no longer within the client's budget.

EVP don't have a phone number to call to get information quickly, they only use email, or they call me from private numbers so communication is difficult. They make it my responsibility to pass on information to the client or get information they need from the client. I don't have time to go back and forth constantly between the client and EVP, it would be much easier if they just communicated with clients themselves.

Case study 3:

The communication from the case management team is very inconsistent, seeking invoices then requiring further justification for items seeking to be purchased.

For example, the client had to justify why she needed to buy her child a new school uniform after fleeing. The information from the referring agency already outlined the victim had fled to a safe place and the referral form outlined what was required.

There were three weeks of correspondence from the EVP team and the referring agency due to Lowes not being able to provide an invoice. The victim-survivor did seek to be provided cash/voucher to purchase, but EVP declined, and stated payment would be reimbursed.

Appendix One- Survey

1. What type of service are you from? *(Drop down menu available)*
2. Have you helped a client to apply for EVP? *(yes/no)*
3. Have you experienced any issues in this process? *(yes/no)*
4. What issues have you experienced?
Tick all the apply:
 - Communication issues with the EVP team
 - Delays receiving cash payments
 - Delays receiving vouchers
 - Delays on payment for goods and services
 - Approval issues for payment of goods and services
 - Repeat requests for information/evidence
 - Accessibility issues for clients
 - Other- please add (free text box)
5. Have issues deterred you from recommending clients apply for payment? *(yes/no)*
6. In 2022 have any of your client's been charged an 'administration fee'? *(yes/no)*
7. Have any of your client's received the full \$5000 (including cash/vouchers/good and services)? *(yes/no)*
8. Have any of your client's been offered cash rather than vouchers? *(yes/no)*
9. Are there any other issues or concerns regarding EVP you would like to raise? *(Free text box)*