

# Domestic Violence NSW Regional Forum

March 2022

Co-hosted by NSW Country Women's Association



DOMESTIC  
VIOLENCE  
NSW

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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 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.

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## Summary

The Regional Forum was co-hosted by the NSW Country Women's Association and well attended by members and guests with 65 attendees. Celebrating 100 years this year, the Country Women's Association prioritise addressing domestic and family violence (DFV) in regional, remote, and rural communities and want to provide a voice for people. Domestic Violence NSW (DVNSW) is the peak body for domestic and family violence services in NSW, representing over 125 specialist organisations.

It was harrowing to hear from members about the major housing crisis NSW is facing, which has been exacerbated over the past two years by the COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters. Regional, rural and remote services spoke about a range of additional challenges they face related to servicing large geographical areas, access to adequate IT support, adequate policing and justice responses, cost of living, work-life balance for staff living in small communities and workforce shortages as they struggle to provide competitive wages and attractive career pathways.

DVNSW continues to advocate to ensure regional, rural, and remote services are adequately resourced to help women, children and LGBTIQ+ people fleeing violence. DVNSW advocates for:

- Long-term housing solutions that are fit for purpose, safe and affordable with specific regional, rural, and remote allocation;
- Adequately funded regional and remote services, noting additional costs in relation to servicing large geographical areas, recruiting and training staff;
- Investment in a workforce strategy to recruit, train and employ more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander focused workers, particularly in regional, rural and remote areas and establishment of a support network for identified workers;
- Specific initiatives in the workforce strategy to incentivise working in regional and rural areas and ensure that training and career pathways into the DFV sector are available, with subsidised travel to professional development; and
- Creation of a Victim Survivors Advisory body for the NSW Government that includes members from rural and regional areas.

# 1. Housing crisis

The housing crisis in NSW regional communities is at a crisis point. Members reported social housing waitlists are now similar to those of the city. Due to COVID and the migration of people from cities to regional areas, there is a catastrophic lack of affordable accommodation. Members expressed frustration with the current housing situation right across the state, with holiday homes lying dormant or used for Airbnb, with landlords opting to rent to affluent holiday goers rather than families in need and rental prices steadily increasing.

Members spoke of women and children being stuck in refuges with no exit pathways to stable accommodation, leaving many women having to choose between returning to a perpetrator or becoming homeless. Regional communities are in urgent need of housing solutions and safe at home programs to support women to stay safely in their home. Housing solutions need to be long-term, fit for purpose, safe and affordable with specific regional, rural, and remote allocation. If housing developments had stronger affordable housing targets, this would take some of the burden off the private rental market and social housing.

Services in flood affected areas shared that their communities were in housing crisis before the floods and are now feeling desperate and hopeless. Providers fear increases in DFV following the disaster and that victim-survivors will be less able to leave unsafe relationships due to the complete lack of housing across the whole community.

More remote communities like Murrumbidgee are at crisis point with a complete lack of any housing, let alone affordable housing, no access to temporary accommodation within 200km, and lack of transport options to get to those towns that offer it. In Tamworth social housing is boarded up and the women's refuge has been at capacity since mid-2021. The Central Coast community services are well resourced, but there is no housing. Young people, women, and children experiencing DFV are homeless and living on the street putting women at risk of losing their children.

## **Recommendations:**

- 1.1 Build 5,000 new social housing dwellings every year for the next 10 years.
- 1.2 Ensure appropriate housing for women and children who have experienced violence and specific housing for marginalised communities, including Aboriginal, young people, people with disabilities, large families, and single women.
- 1.3 Housing solutions must be long-term, fit for purpose, safe and affordable with specific regional, rural, and remote allocation.
- 1.4 Invest \$500,000 in a maintenance fund to repair existing housing stock.
- 1.5 Increase funding to specialist homelessness services by a minimum of 20% or \$156 million over 3 years.
- 1.6 Commit to affordable housing targets of 20% for private developments.

## 2. Funding and resourcing

Members talked about funding and resourcing being a huge issue for regional domestic and family violence services, mainly due to funding dependence on election cycles. Funding needs to be available for the term of the contracts to allow services to spend the money over the entire funding period, not 12 months. This would allow for workforce development and job security for employees. Funding allocation needs to take into account higher costs in regional/rural/remote areas associated with recruitment, servicing large geographical regions and the need to travel to major cities for professional development.

Recruitment is another roadblock services are facing - there are no houses for people relocating to many regional areas and there is a skill shortage in the sector. Services are experiencing a diminishing ability to maintain staffing levels due to vicarious trauma, especially during the floods and pandemic. Staffing vacancies increase workloads of other staff increasing the risk of burnout.

Demand for domestic and family violence services often outweighs the capacity of services. Women experiencing abuse are just trying to survive and stay alive whilst they are on a waiting list for support. Alternatively, staff and services are reluctant to turn clients away and end up exceeding their allocated caseloads and hours of work. One member spoke about the lack of resources at the local hospital to support sexual assault victims, with no forensic space available and a hospital that does not support terminations. Services in rural areas have to be a one stop shop, as they are often the only service provider in the area and with limited funding, they cannot ethically turn people away. This impacts workers as they feel that positive outcomes are not being achieved for clients due to all the barriers.

### **Recommendations:**

- 2.1 Increase baseline funding for specialist DFV services by at least 50% to ensure a sustainable, well-resourced sector that can provide quality support for victim/survivors experiencing gendered violence.
- 2.2 Ensure regional, rural and remote specialist DFV services are adequately funded, noting additional costs in relation to servicing large geographical areas, recruiting and training staff.
- 2.3 Fund the development of a NSW Primary Prevention Strategy which aligns with the two National Prevention strategies developed by Our Watch; Change the Story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia and Changing the Picture: A national resource to support the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their children.
- 2.4 Fund the coordination and implementation of the primary prevention initiatives in the above plan.

### 3. Aboriginal communities

The remote Aboriginal community of Wilcannia faces similar challenges to those above plus additional layers of discrimination and disadvantage. The remote geography means long wait times for police response and lack of housing and support. Police are often at full capacity, relying on the Royal Flying Doctors Service when there is an incident. There is no affordable housing in the area and no planning for long-term housing. Securing long-term housing means leaving community and family supports, which is not an option for most people. When working with clients to seek employment, people are having to choose between employment or housing, as being employed means being taken off the housing list.

There are issues with telecommunications and blackouts due to storms with community members forced to walk out of town for mobile coverage during a DFV incident. There are lengthy court delays, with ADVOs taking three months to go before a magistrate. Accessing Centrelink support requires two plus hour phone calls. Food is extremely expensive and access to fresh fruit and vegetables is scarce.

#### **Recommendations:**

- 3.1 Increase the number of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations operating specialist domestic and family violence services.
- 3.2 Develop and implement a workforce strategy to recruit, train and employ more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander focused workers, particularly in regional, rural and remote areas, across DFV services and establish a support network for identified workers.
- 3.3 Implement mandatory cultural safety training for specialist DFV workers across NSW.
- 3.4 Support the development of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-led strategy to prevent gendered violence in NSW.
- 3.5 Increase recurrent funding for existing Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisations (ACCOs) by a minimum of \$10 million over 3 years and increase the number of ACCOs to meet the demand through a minimum investment of \$82 million.

## 4. Workforce support and capacity building

A New England member service shared their insights in relation to the high crisis work environment but minimal human connection, due to geographical distance between staff as they cover a large area and support a growing number of clients. Over the past 12 months BOCSAR reported a 1 % increase in DFV offences reported to police, however on the ground they have experienced a 5% increase in referrals overall and a 55% increase in female referrals to Safety Action Meeting (women assessed as high risk).

The struggle with recruitment for regional DFV services is substantial, taking up to nine months to fill a position due to lack of availability of skilled DFV workers. Low wages that can't compete with other sectors, increasing cost of living, petrol prices, rent, and a lack of work/life balance, present significant hurdles in recruiting and retaining a well-resourced and sustainable workforce. The requirement for travel to attend industry specific training, held in metro areas, means services must prioritise either supporting women and children or skilling up staff. COVID has increased stress and burnout with work and personal life meshed while working from home which has contributed to high staff turnover.

### **Recommendations:**

- 4.1 Fund the development of a ten-year workforce strategy for the specialist domestic and family violence sector and men's behavioural change sector in NSW, that includes increased baseline remuneration comparative to other industries with similar qualifications.
- 4.2 Support and skill development for up to 80 new graduates to enter the specialist DFV workforce, gain employment and develop skills to work in a specialist field.
- 4.3 Include specific initiatives in the workforce strategy to incentivise working in regional and rural areas.
- 4.4 Ensure that training and career pathways into the DFV sector are available in regional and rural areas and subsidise the cost of travel to professional development.
- 4.5 Deliver training for current specialist DFV and male family violence intervention sector services in trauma and gendered violence-informed practice, cultural safety and awareness, risk and compliance, violence prevention, health and wellbeing, in particular, countering the impact of vicarious trauma.

## 5. Lived expertise

A lived expertise advocate shared her experience of DFV and living in a rural town trying to support her husband who had mental health issues. Beyond the issues of lack of housing and transport in rural NSW, access to guns is another element of concern. Confidentiality is an issue when you live in a rural area, limiting help-seeking. Even after a serious incident where her husband threatened to kill her and held a knife to her throat, she didn't feel safe to share this with anyone. In a situation like this, a well-resourced DFV service is essential and can be life changing.

Member services asked how can we build women with lived expertise into roles where they can support and utilise their knowledge? Women with lived experience can provide valuable input to inform policy and government.

### **Recommendations:**

- 5.1 Create an engagement model to include victim-survivors in the strategic development, design, implementation, and evaluation of initiatives to respond to and prevent sexual, domestic and family violence in a safe and meaningful manner.
- 5.2 Fund a Survivor Media Advocacy peak or representative industry body.
- 5.3 Create a Victim Survivors Advisory body for the NSW Government in NSW that includes members from rural/regional areas.
- 5.4 Include pathways for victim survivors to join the DFV workforce in the DFV 10 year workforce development strategy.

## Thank you

We would like to thank all our guest speakers and attendees for sharing their knowledge, expertise, and passion, including Penny Dordoy from Housing Plus, the Hon. Natalie Ward, Minister for Women's Safety and the Prevention of Domestic and Sexual Violence, Tracy Lumb from Shoalhaven Women's Health Centre, Mary Ronayne from Domestic Violence Service Management, Danica Leys from the NSW Country Women's Association, Jane Matts, lived expertise survivor advocate, and Cassandra Cutmore from WDVCS New England.

DVNSW will continue to collectively raise our voices and those of our members, including those with lived expertise, to advocate for social and affordable housing and funding for frontline specialist services. DVNSW will continue to advocate to ensure all services, in particular regional and rural services are adequately equipped to help women, children and LGBTIQ+ people fleeing violence, and ensure their voices are heard by those who can make a difference.