

Domestic Violence NSW Regional Forum

July 2023

Co-hosted with NSW Country Women's
Association



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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 acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the first sovereign nations across the breadth and depth of Australia. We recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have lived and cared for Country for over 60,000 years and continue to do so, honouring ancestors and knowledge holders within community, and observing ancient cultural practices.

We acknowledge the damaging silence 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 and assert that the responsibilities of Aboriginal families and kinship systems do not align nor are reflected in current government policies. Domestic Violence NSW work to position ourselves as allies and give voice and strength to the unique position that Aboriginal and Torres Strait people hold in their own family systems and communities.



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 150 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 migrant and refugee 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

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics Personal Safety Survey, 21% of women living outside of capital cities experience violence from an intimate partner, compared to 15% living in capital cities. Women in rural, regional and disaster affected areas are geographically isolated and often unable to locate suitable resources.

Domestic Violence NSW (DVNSW) has co-hosted three regional forums with the NSW Country Women's Association (CWA) since 2020. Year on year our work to reflect the needs of regional and rural NSW work becomes even more critical, and we continue to hear of the concerns in the regions, from our members and sector stakeholders.

The aim of this year's report will be to ensure previous outstanding regional forum recommendations made to NSW Government are captured, highlighted and brought together alongside the recommendations and report from the 2023 forum.

DVNSW co-hosted the first regional forum with CWA in 2020, to create awareness around the range of systemic issues and service gaps in supporting victim-survivors and responding to perpetrators of DFV in rural, regional and outer metropolitan NSW, which has become an annual event. The 2020 forum highlighted the challenges of geographical access to domestic and family violence (DFV) services, lack of funding for primary prevention programs, insufficient or inconsistent police responses to DFV and the shortfall of crisis accommodation and long-term affordable housing.

The second Regional Forum held in 2022 highlighted additional barriers to reporting and escaping DFV for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victim-survivors due to fear of police and systemic racism within the justice and child protection systems, alongside the risk of losing community and family supports if they are required to travel long distances to access specialised services. Other issues identified were focused on the importance of incorporating lived experience into disaster management planning, and that long wait-times in regional, remote and rural areas leave women and children in refuges with no safe and long-term exit pathways to stable accommodation. The 2022 forum noted that short term funding contracts, recruitment barriers, along with limited housing options, limits the attraction and retention of qualified staff in the regions. DVNSW, therefore, welcomed the NSW Government's commitment to a 10-year workforce development plan in response to our advocacy. Further, DVNSW also welcomed the NSW Labor election commitment to move social services contracts to five years. Other issues raised in the 2022 forum included the need for improved and accessible policing and justice responses, improved access to information technology and genuine recognition of the impact of the cost-of-living crisis in regional and rural areas.

Moving to this year's forum, DVNSW members and service providers agreed that a cohesive and collaborative Government approach is vital to disaster and recovery management, particularly in the context of DFV.

The 2023 forum focussed on the prevalence of DFV following disaster and the impact of gender inequality on disaster and recovery management in the regions. Members and service

providers agreed that a cohesive and collaborative Government approach is vital to disaster and recovery management, particularly in the context of DFV.

DVNSW note that members and regional community stakeholders continue to raise the same concerns and issues each year. While some regional forum recommendations have been actioned, many are yet to be adopted and implemented by the NSW Government. DVNSW urgently calls on key policy and decision makers to implement the below recommendations.

Outstanding key recommendations from previous forums

Recommendations
1.1 Increase baseline funding for specialist DFV services in regional, rural and remote areas by at least 50% to ensure a sustainable, well-resourced and non-competitive sector that can provide quality support for victim/survivors experiencing gendered violence. 1.2 Allocate sufficient funding for the implementation of the primary prevention initiatives in the NSW Primary Prevention Strategy, currently in development. 1.3 Allocate sufficient funding for the implementation of the primary prevention initiatives in the NSW Primary Prevention Strategy, currently in development. 1.4 Support the development of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-led prevention strategy for gendered violence in NSW. 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. 1.7 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. 1.8 Implement mandatory cultural safety training for specialist DFV workers across NSW. 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. 1.9 Ensure that NSW Government disaster management planning includes domestic and family violence responses, ensuring that evacuation procedures are safe for victim survivors. 1.10 Ensure specialised DFV services have adequate funding to maintain services and support during disaster management and recovery.

Insights from the 2023 Regional Forum

Gender inequality and disaster

It has long been identified that gender inequality during disaster and disaster recovery contributes to higher rates and escalation of DFV and needs to be a consideration in disaster management and planning. In the 2023 forum, Gender and Disaster Australia provided a comprehensive and insightful report on the impact of gender inequality on DFV victim survivors. Gender and Disaster Australia explained that **rigid gender stereotypes of masculinity impact how men behave during and post disaster, which in turn increases DFV**. For example, it is typically more socially acceptable for men to be aggressive following a traumatic experience than to be depressed or anxious. In addition, men may experience stigma which increases reluctance to access services and are more likely to manage mental health with drugs and alcohol, further increasing risk of DFV.

In 2020, the NSW Women's Alliance¹ provided a submission to the NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry, which pointed to the way in which "heroism" contributes to DFV. Men can often take on a "hero" role during a disaster, controlling and making all decisions, particularly in relation to staying to defend property or leaving for safety. Women are often tasked with caring for children and forced to choose between staying in a potentially unsafe situation or leaving their partner behind without having equitable input into decision making.

Gender and Disaster Australia undertook research in 2011, *The Way He Tells It: Relationships After Black Saturday*, which found that **violence against women and children during and after disaster is condoned or minimised** with victim-survivors at risk of being labelled as unsupportive or ungrateful for the saviour efforts of the men. Victim survivors were ignored or devalued when reporting domestic violence. Women retracted their statements for fear of community retribution or police encouraged women to delay their statements. Victim survivors were expected to forgive and excuse violence because of the 'heroic efforts' of the men.

Gender and Disaster Australia found that responses to reports of DFV in the context of disaster were inadequate and harmful. Referrals to services were inappropriate as the intake process was lacking or ill informed. These issues were also acknowledged by Women Up North, a specialist housing service for women, children and young people experiencing domestic and family violence in the Northern Rivers that was impacted by significant flooding in 2022. Women Up North highlighted the difficulties of running a multidisciplinary service that delivers transitional housing, outreach, early intervention and drop in, during flood disaster. They noted that service infrastructure is compromised and takes a long time to rebuild while the need for DFV services remains critical and ongoing. Women Up North suggested that it is vital to **prioritise planning in relation to housing for geographic areas that are at high risk of disasters such as flood and bushfire**. Collaborative and strategic forward

¹ The [NSW Women's Alliance](#) is a coalition of peak organisations and state-wide specialist service providers with expertise in preventing and responding to sexual, domestic and family violence.

planning are essential to ensure safe and appropriate recovery plans can be executed during disaster. Evacuation areas and makeshift crisis dwellings must be genuinely safe with accommodation allocated specifically for DFV victim survivors to prevent perpetrators from being placed in the same temporary housing.

Gender and Disaster Australia suggest that an increased understanding of the relationship between gender and disaster will improve the health and wellbeing of disaster impacted communities. National and International research and experience has informed the development of [Gender and Emergency Management \(GEM\) Guidelines and a Gender and Emergency Management Action Checklist](#) which support Governments, services and communities to plan for and respond to disasters and the risk of DFV.

The 2023 Regional Forum, therefore, provides several recommendations, outlined below, which aim to mitigate and respond to DFV in disaster planning, response and recovery, which should be considered alongside the DVNSW submission to the NSW Independent Flood Inquiry and submission to the Inquiry into the response to major flooding across NSW in 2022.²

Recommendations
2.1 Ensure ongoing funding to deliver nation-wide, state specific, training for anyone who is affected by disaster, particularly first responders.
2.2 Increase welfare sector workforce capacity to prevent the gendered impact of disaster.
2.3 Allocate ongoing funding to continue to build on existing research on DFV in regional areas, whilst also commissioning new research to ensure data and practice responses are timely, accurate and have a gendered lens.
2.4 Increase evidence-based men's support and behaviour change programs in regional areas to ensure accessibility.
2.5 That the NSW Government work with Gender and Disaster Australia to incorporate the <i>National Gender and Emergency Management Guidelines</i> into NSW disaster planning.

Funding and resourcing

The 2023 Regional forum also highlighted insufficient funding and resourcing as a significant concern for regional domestic and family violence services. Short-term funding contracts place victim survivors at risk if services are discontinued and fail to provide security for staff which impacts recruitment and retention of quality workers. Additional costs associated with delivering services in regional and rural areas, including costs associated with travel, professional development, outreach and recruitment, must be considered in funding models. DVNSW welcomed the NSW Government election commitment to 5-year contracts for social

² Available on request.

services, in response to our advocacy, and are calling for this to be implemented as soon as possible.

Recommendations
3.1 Implement 5-year contracts for all DFV and specialist homelessness services immediately.
3.2 Increase funding for the specialist DFV sector in NSW by a minimum of \$145 million annually, thus ensuring quality, holistic and long-term support to victim survivors, vulnerable children and their families.

Integrated approaches to support families, children and young people

The Association of Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA) expressed concern that support for children is not being integrated with the service delivery for adult victim survivors. Domestic and family violence service responses need to ensure children are supported as independent victim survivors, with access to specialist services with suitably qualified and experienced children's workers.

Recommendations
4.1 Invest new funding of \$10 million annually to establish Specialist Workers for Children and Young People in every frontline domestic and family violence service in NSW.

Housing

Domestic and family violence (DFV) is the leading cause of homelessness for women in Australia.³ A lack of stable, affordable, and safe short, medium and long-term housing has been a prevalent issue across all DVNSW regional forums from 2020 to the present. Members continue to report that women and children remain in refuges for months with no exit pathways to stable accommodation, leaving many women having to choose between returning to a perpetrator or becoming homeless. In Australia 7,690 women a year are returning to perpetrators due to having nowhere affordable to live.⁴ Members reported many victim survivors have no option but to live in their car and remain mobile to mitigate the risk of being located by their perpetrator. However, this is not a safe option and makes it more difficult to remain engaged with essential services and police.

The lack of appropriate, long term and affordable housing in NSW regional communities continues to remain at a crisis point, as social housing is limited and safe dwellings for victim survivors are scarce. Due to the housing shortage in NSW, temporary accommodation in disaster affected regional areas that is usually allocated for victim survivors escaping DFV, is

³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2020). [Specialist homelessness services annual report, December 2020](#).

⁴ Equity Economics (2021). [Nowhere to go: The benefits of providing long-term social housing to women that have experienced domestic and family violence, July 2021](#)

being used by disaster management personnel and specialist staff, limiting accessibility for victim survivors. DVNSW welcomed the NSW Government's announcement of an increase in temporary accommodation from two to seven days following advocacy from DVNSW and other peak agencies. However, a further increase to 28 days is required to meet the needs of DFV victim survivors in regional and rural areas, along with an increase in the number of temporary accommodation providers and audit against quality standards, to maintain accessibility.

A case study from Wilcannia was shared which demonstrated that this region, like many rural and remote areas, continues to experience limited affordable housing and a lack of planning for long-term housing. DFV workers report that their inability to support victim-survivors into stable, safe, long-term housing is the most frustrating and disheartening part of their work. DFV victim survivors are often required to leave the area to secure housing which also means leaving community and family supports. For some victim survivors, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their children, moving away from their support system is not a viable option, forcing them to remain with or return to the perpetrator.

Recommendations
5.1 Deliver a social housing target of 10% of occupied residential dwellings in NSW by 2050 to provide much needed relief to the current housing crisis and provide safe and affordable housing for women and children who have experienced DFV. DVNSW suggests allocation of 20% for victim-survivors of DFV, recognising that DFV has greater impacts on marginalised communities. 5.2 The NSW Government match the Commonwealth Government's contribution of \$610 million for social housing and ensure specific allocation for women and children experiencing DFV. Pending the passing legislation of the Housing Australia Future Fund (HAFF), ensure 20% allocation of properties for women and children experiencing DFV. 5.3 Ensure safe and affordable transitional housing for women and children exiting crisis refuges by assessing current availability across the state and fund additional capacity particularly in regions where new core and cluster refuges will be built. 5.4 Introduce streamlined development approvals for Community Housing Providers to fast-track affordable housing projects and reduce planning and delivery costs. 5.5 Increase the accessibility of private rentals by increasing Commonwealth rent assistance by a minimum of 50%, double the Job Seeker payment and remove 'no grounds' evictions. 5.6 Increase the amount of Temporary Accommodation (TA) from seven to 28 days, ensuring that there are a minimum number of dwellings for DFV victim survivors.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities face additional cultural ramifications for reporting DFV, finding that their parenting capabilities are judged negatively by their

community, with an increased risk of children being removed from parental care in the event of a DFV report. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victim survivors who disclose DFV risk being excluded from their community for making reports against men. General visibility of the challenges in remote areas remain problematic – challenges go unnoticed as the focus remains on Metropolitan regions, plus the complexities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues remain misunderstood. This in turn can lead to policies that are not fit for purpose for the community, and a lack of necessary services, including men’s behaviour change programs. Dust storms in remote communities creates loss of services, particularly phone carrier access and information technology, which contributes to risk or victim survivors of domestic violence.

To service the need in rural and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, specialist DFV services travel significant distances to provide outreach which puts undue pressure on finite resources. Other essential services such as healthcare are also limited, preventing DFV victim survivors from accessing ongoing holistic care, which means that signs of domestic and family violence are not always identified and actioned as readily.

Recommendations
6.1 Invest in culturally safe crisis accommodation and accessible housing for First Nations women and their children, including any children under 18.
6.2 Invest in culturally safe, primary prevention and respectful relationships initiatives beginning from early childhood.

Summary of 2023 recommendations

Recommendations
2.1 Ensure ongoing funding to deliver nation-wide, state specific, training for anyone who is affected by disaster, particularly first responders. 2.2 Increase welfare sector workforce capacity to prevent the gendered impact of disaster 2.3 Allocate ongoing funding to continue to build on existing research on DFV in regional areas, whilst also commissioning new research to ensure data and practice responses are timely, accurate and have a gendered lens. 2.4 Increase evidence-based men's support and behaviour change programs in regional areas to ensure accessibility. 2.5 That the NSW Government work with Gender and Disaster Australia to incorporate the <i>National Gender and Emergency Management Guidelines</i> into NSW disaster planning. 3.1 Implement 5-year contracts for all DFV and specialist homelessness services immediately. 3.2 Increase funding for the specialist DFV sector in NSW by a minimum of \$145 million annually, thus ensuring quality, holistic and long-term support to victim survivors, vulnerable children and their families. 4.1 Invest new funding of \$10 million annually to establish Specialist Workers for Children and Young People in every frontline domestic and family violence service in NSW. 5.1 Deliver a social housing target of 10% of occupied residential dwellings in NSW by 2050 to provide much needed relief to the current housing crisis and provide safe and affordable housing for women and children who have experienced DFV. DVNSW suggests allocation of 20% for victim-survivors of DFV, recognising that DFV has greater impacts on marginalised communities. 5.2 The NSW Government match the Commonwealth Government's contribution of \$610 million for social housing and ensure specific allocation for women and children experiencing DFV. Pending the passing legislation of the Housing Australia Future Fund (HAFF), ensure 20% allocation of properties for women and children experiencing DFV. 5.3 Ensure safe and affordable transitional housing for women and children exiting crisis refuges by assessing current availability across the state and fund additional capacity particularly in regions where new core and cluster refuges will be built. 5.4 Introduce streamlined development approvals for Community Housing Providers to fast-track affordable housing projects and reduce planning and delivery costs. 5.5 Increase the accessibility of private rentals by increasing Commonwealth rent assistance by a minimum of 50%, double the Job Seeker payment and remove 'no grounds' evictions.

- 5.6 Increase the amount of Temporary Accommodation (TA) from seven to 28 days, ensuring that there are a minimum number of dwellings for DFV victim survivors.
- 6.1 Invest in culturally safe crisis accommodation and accessible housing for First Nations women and their children, including any children under 18.
- 6.2 Invest in culturally safe, primary prevention and respectful relationships initiatives beginning from early childhood.

Thank you

We would like to thank all our guest speakers and attendees for sharing their knowledge, expertise, and passion, including Steve O'Malley and Lorian Bethune from Gender and Disaster Association the Hon. Jodie Harrison, Minister for Women, Minister for Seniors and the Minister for Prevention of Domestic and Sexual Violence, Jillian Knight-Smith from Women Up North, Mary Ronayne from Domestic Violence Service Management, Carolyn Thompson and Marie Kissouri from Association of Children's Welfare Agencies and Danica Leys from the NSW Country Women's Association.

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, 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.