

## **Emergency briefing: Supporting women, children, young and LGBTIQ people experiencing sexual, domestic and family violence during the COVID-19 crisis**

### **Recommendations**

1. Enable sexual, domestic and family violence services to adapt service models and continue service delivery.
2. Adopt a whole of government response to supporting people experiencing sexual, domestic and family violence.
3. Support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, immigrant, refugee, culturally and linguistically diverse women, children and young people, people with disability and LGBTIQ people at higher risk of SDFV.

### **Background**

During the COVID-19 crisis, women, children, young and LGBTIQ people are at risk of increased and more severe sexual, domestic and family violence (SDFV) due to further isolation from work, schools, friends and family and other support networks. People may face greater barriers to leaving a violent partner due to a loss of income, fears around the risk of contracting or spreading the virus from accessing services and increased difficulties in making an exit plan and getting the support they, their children and their animals need. People who are in isolation with a violent partner or family member are also much less likely to be able to safely access telephone and online support due to the perpetrator's monitoring and surveillance.

Aboriginal women, immigrant, refugee and culturally and linguistically diverse women, women with disability, children, young and LGBTIQ people are at even higher risk of experiencing SDFV. This is due to the reduced levels of community outreach and education and changes in service delivery as well as the lack of culturally appropriate, in-language and accessible information and advice.

Perpetrators are using the risk of contracting the virus as a tool of power and control, such as by making threats to force a person out of the home and to put them or others at risk of the virus. Where a perpetrator uses financial abuse, this is likely to exacerbate during this time with additional financial pressures resulting from job losses, insecure work, and increased opportunity for their monitoring and control. A perpetrator's alcohol and drug misuse is likely to increase during this period of isolation and this too can contribute to their escalation of SDFV.

### **Sexual, domestic and family violence services**

SDFV services provide safety planning, support, outreach, case management, crisis and transitional accommodation, counselling, court assistance, legal assistance and representation and referrals. SDFV services include: Specialist Homelessness Services, Staying Home Leaving Violence providers, Women's Domestic Violence and Court Advocacy Services, Women's Legal Service NSW, Wirringa Baiya Aboriginal Women's Legal Centre, Women's Health Centres, NSW Rape Crisis Centre and Men's Behaviour Change programs.

## Recommendations

### 1. Enable sexual, domestic and family violence services to adapt service models and continue service delivery.

**1A. Alternative accommodation:** Provide services with safe, self-contained accommodation for clients with higher risk of severe health issues and clients with COVID-19, as well as brokerage and additional temporary accommodation.

**1B. Additional staffing:** Provide additional financial support to services for trauma-informed surge staffing to respond to increased client demand and staff shortages.

**1C. Access to food and essential items:** Ensure that services can access food and essential items for clients and their service e.g. hand sanitiser, toilet paper, tissues, sanitary pads, milk powder for babies, nappies, cleaning equipment and products.

**1D. Guidance on preventing and responding to COVID-19 risk:** Provide guidance for services on how to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in their services and appropriately support any person with symptoms of the virus and their dependents, including new referrals and intakes.

**1E. Technology-enabled client support:** Equip services with technology such as laptops and video and tele-conferencing software that is safe, encrypted and confidential. Ensure DFV services can access safe phones and advice on how to use secure technology to support clients through WESNET's Safe Connections and Safety Net Australia services.

**1F. Additional funding for SDFV services:** Additional funding for SDFV services across NSW to respond to the expected increase in SDFV during and post COVID-19 crisis.

**1G. Fund case management:** Fund SDFV services to provide case management to people experiencing violence to navigate multiple systems and access the range of supports they, their children and their animals need.

**1H. Support frontline workers:** Support SDFV workers to mitigate and manage vicarious trauma, including by funding additional clinical supervision and counselling.

**1I. Access to sexual and reproductive health care:** Ensure that women can continue to access sexual and reproductive health care as an essential service. This is particularly important for women who are experiencing reproductive coercion. Women who are pregnant and women with children can also be at higher risk of SDFV.

## **2. Adopt a whole of government response to supporting people experiencing sexual, domestic and family violence.**

**2A. Support schools to keep children and young people safe:** Support schools to identify children and young people at risk of SDFV and provide them with information about where and how they can get help at any time. If schools are to be closed, make a plan for a NSW government response to support children and young people at risk of SDFV. Provide alternative childcare arrangements for people experiencing DFV who need to work.

**2B. Respond to child protection concerns:** Make provisions for Police, the Joint Child Protection Response Program and Child Protection to continue to safely respond to child protection reports and prepare for the expected increase in frequency and severity of SDFV.

**2C. Encourage people to access SDFV services:** Invest in a state-wide public health information campaign using television, social media and community engagement to communicate to the public that SDFV services are available and how to safely access them.

**2D. Guidance for workplaces:** Provide guidance and resources to workplaces on how to ask workers if they are safe at home, particularly if people are asked to work from home, and how to respond in a trauma-informed way and provide referrals to SDFV services.

**2E. Resource NSW Police:** Resource NSW Police to ensure senior police officers with DFV expertise are in place to oversee domestic violence related charges and extended provisional AVOs, that police have sufficient capacity to return children and young people who are subject to shared care arrangements to a safe parent or caregiver where this presents as an issue, and that high risk offender teams can maintain their effective monitoring of high risk perpetrators during the COVID-19 crisis.

**2F. Ensure provisional Apprehended Violence Orders (AVOs) are appropriate and well-tailored:** Ensure that provisional AVOs orders are appropriate and well-tailored to the individual needs of each person, that children and young people are included as protected persons on AVOs where appropriate, and that consideration is given to the appropriateness of exclusion orders being granted in cases where women, children and young people are able to be supported to remain safely in their own home if the perpetrator is excluded.

**2G. Increase resources for safe at home measures:** Fund DFV services to support victims to remain safe in their homes through security upgrades, financial and rental assistance, liaison with police and ongoing support and case management. Ensure these services and supports are available in every metropolitan, regional, rural and remote location.

**2H. Change tenancy laws to support the safety of women, children and young people:** Women, children and young people experiencing violence and abuse in their home should not have to flee into homelessness to be safe. Where a victim of DFV is listed as an occupant rather than a tenant on the lease, provision should be made under pt 4 of the *Residential Tenancies Act 2010* (NSW) for them to be recognised as a tenant after the exclusion of the perpetrator under the domestic violence provisions under that same pt.

**2I. Support people who are renting:** Ensure that no one is evicted during the COVID-19 crisis, except where a person is excluded and removed from a home due to their use of violence.<sup>1</sup> Support people who experience difficulty in meeting financial and employment obligations under Rent Choice Youth and Start Safely initiatives and do not penalise them.

**2J. Extend temporary accommodation (TA) with no caps:** People experiencing SDFV throughout the COVID-19 crisis should be provided with TA for at least 14 days and this should not count towards the maximum support period. Perpetrators should also be provided with housing, preferably with support of a Men's Behaviour Change Program provider, to minimise risk and ensure the safety of victims.

**3. Support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, immigrant, refugee, culturally and linguistically diverse women, children and young people, people with disability and LGBTIQ people at higher risk of SDFV.**

**3A. Fund urgent legal support for issues arising from SDFV:** Fund community legal centres including specialist women's legal services (Women's Legal Service NSW and Wirringa Baiya Aboriginal Women's Legal Centre) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled legal services to provide urgent legal advice and advocacy support to parents where their children are at immediate risk, for example children who are isolated with a violent parent, and for other issues arising from SDFV.

**3B. Provide in-language information:** Provide timely, updated and accurate in-language information to immigrant, refugee and culturally and linguistically diverse communities about the virus and access to SDFV services.

**3C. Support people on temporary visas:** Ensure that people on temporary visas and people seeking asylum who are experiencing DFV can access emergency relief, healthcare, income, accommodation, legal advice and case management support.

**3D. Support LGBTIQ people:** Fund existing specialist LGBTIQ services (ACON, the Gender Centre and Twenty10) to provide case management, brokerage, outreach, support and referrals to LGBTIQ+ communities, including LGBTIQ children and young people, who are at risk of SDFV and impacted by higher rates of homelessness, isolation from supportive community environments, pre-existing mental health issues and who may be impacted by COVID-19 as a result of higher rates of immunodeficiency viruses.

**3E. Support people with disability:** Provide additional funding for SDFV and disability services to provide outreach, advocacy and case management support for people with disability at risk of, or experiencing, SDFV in safe and accessible ways. Ensure that there is continuity of support for people with disability, including through NDIS providers.

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<sup>1</sup> See 'Protect our communities: No evictions in a health crisis' campaign: <https://www.tenants.org.au/tu/news/protect-our-communities-no-evictions-during-health-crisis>

**3F. Immediate injection of resources for SDFV services in regional areas:** Provide an immediate injection of resources for SDFV services in areas that are still recovering from the impacts of the bushfires to support their staff to assist people experiencing SDFV.

**3G. Ensure the early release of prisoners:** Ensure the early release of prisoners including: those at high risk of harm from COVID-19 such as people with pre-existing health conditions and older people; children and young people; people who are pregnant; mothers with children; people on remand for non-violent offences. Prisoners should be screened for COVID-19 before being released into communities and be advised of test results in a timely manner. People in prison and those being released should be provided adequate healthcare and information about COVID-19 in plain English, easy English and other languages. People exiting prison must have access to safe housing, which can include temporary accommodation in hotels as well as access to other supports to assist in the transition from prison into the community. Ensure reporting requirements for those on community supervision are consistent with social distancing requirements, including consideration of reporting to a Community Corrections Officer with the assistance of technology.

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## **NSW WOMEN'S ALLIANCE**

### **NSW Women's Alliance**

- ACON
- Domestic Violence NSW
- Immigrant Women's Speakout Association NSW
- Multicultural Disability Advocacy Association NSW
- Muslim Women Australia
- No To Violence
- NSW Council of Social Service
- People with Disability Australia
- Rape and Domestic Violence Services Australia
- Wirringa Baiya Aboriginal Women's Legal Centre
- Women's Health NSW
- Women's Legal Service NSW
- Women's Safety NSW
- Youth Action

### **Contact person**

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