

Pre Budget Submission 23-24 National Women's Safety Alliance

Introduction

National Women's Safety Alliance (NWSA) welcomes the opportunity to provide guidance to the Australian Government on the forthcoming Australian Budget 2023-2024.

As one of the six National Women's Alliances, the NWSA brings together 305 individual and organisational members, including those who provide front-line services, research and legal expertise, as well as survivors of domestic, family, and sexual violence. In this capacity we have worked with the Government to provide advice on a range of policy measures that directly affect women living with violence and the staff who work tirelessly to provide advice and support to them.

Along with a suite of legislative reforms, the October 2022-2023 Budget represented a turning point of investment and worthwhile ambition on the part of the Australian Government to make a difference for Australian women. We welcomed the suite of measures to deliver additional front-line workers to our exhausted sector and the foreshadowed reforms to introduce paid domestic and family violence leave and funding to progress the recommendations of the Australian Human Rights Commission's *Respect@Work* report. We also noted the additional investment of \$104 million to support the work of Our Watch in addressing primary prevention. As a pillar of the *National Plan to Eliminate Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032*, the Budget's emphasis on primary prevention is a welcome addition.

The 22-23 Budget met election promises and coincided with the release of the *National Plan*. The 2023-2024 Budget presents a unique opportunity to build on the current Budget to embed long-lasting structural reform against the pillars of early intervention, response, and recovery and healing.

NWSA (the Alliance) members continue to raise serious concerns about growing waiting lists, a disconnect between Commonwealth priorities, on-the-ground allocation of funding through States and Territories, and the confronting reality of

a burnt-out workforce responding to increasingly complex cases, while balancing a shortage of safe exit points.

The forthcoming 2023-2024 Budget is an opportunity for the government to make the *one generation* as stated in the *National Safety Plan*, a reality.

The NWSA recommends the Australian Government build on the existing pillars through the following strategies.

1. Resource the sector with a view to viability, through the national partnership agreement with States and Territories; including
 - a. Frontline services Domestic & Family Violence (DFV)
 - b. Sexual Violence (SV)
 - c. Women's legal services
 - d. and refuges.
2. Invest in a trained, sustainable and accessible workforce integrated with other health or social support services.
3. Establish a centralised data source showing the extent and complexity of violence and service delivery outcomes.
4. Ensure relevant stakeholders and providers can access current (de-identified and low-cost or free) comprehensive data to inform policy planning and delivery of services in real-time.
5. Continue to fund and deliver national campaigns aimed at raising awareness, creating understanding, and changing behaviour towards preventing violence against women and children.

How we developed this Budget submission

In developing this advice on the 2023-2024 Budget, the Alliance consulted with our membership base and expert working groups.

A survey conducted with our members this year (January 2023) received a 46.5% engagement with over 250 clicks. Alliance members want a revised plan as to how

frontline services are funded. Members are concerned about workforce burnout and cited concerns about the rise in sexual violence complaints coming into their individual services.

We have incorporated case studies and front-line anecdotes into this submission which align with the remaining three pillars of the *National Plan*. These case studies and anecdotes highlight the urgent need for:

- increased resourcing
- better coordination between the Commonwealth and States and Territories
- improved data capturing and sharing (including access)
- investment in the growth and professionalisation of the workforce.

Early intervention pillar

Early intervention presents an opportunity for survivors of violence and front-line services to provide advice and support before the point of crisis. It is a life-saving

level of intervention that ensures assessment and coordination of need before the survivor needs to manage the escalating violence, their own trauma, while also making life-changing decisions.

The national conversation on the dynamics of domestic and family violence has gradually improved, due to the consistent advocacy of the women's sector and Government-led national campaigns.

Our concern is that the increased awareness and current campaigning is not matched with the level of front-line investment that will be needed to respond to the already growing demand.

YWCA Canberra provides an early intervention service for women experiencing domestic or family violence. The service works in concert with frontline crisis respondents including the police to accept referrals before reaching the point of crisis. The service has recorded a significant increase of incoming referrals over the year, and a 360% increase in demand for housing support following violence. The DV Support Service has continually operated at or above capacity since commencing in 2020. On average the service is receives 18 new referrals each month and have recently had to advise referral points of limited capacity. Despite this, referrals continue to be received. There has also been a continuous increase in self-referrals from women who otherwise may have otherwise ended up in crisis.

Without subsequent investment in services and ancillary support, we are creating a false level of security among women who approach women's services at the early stages of intervention. Feedback from Alliance members indicates that non-crisis level intervention services are already at breaking point and are now unable to meet new client demand. This is reflected in the increased number of answered contacts for the 1800 RESPECT advice and referral line.¹

Response pillar

The *National Plan* prioritises access to safe, affordable, and long-term housing solutions is fundamental to providing an adequate response to escaping domestic and family violence and recovery. This is a welcome acknowledgement. As reported by Homelessness Australia, only three per cent of women leaving violence get the long-term housing they need, a number which has been steadily going backwards.²

The 2022 *Nowhere to Go* report painted a bleak picture of housing outcomes for survivors and the scale of the policy challenge ahead. *Nowhere to Go* estimated that around 9,000 women who escape violence find themselves homeless, and nearly 8,000 of them return to a violent home as they are unable to find an alternative housing solution. The perversity of this choice; between violence and homelessness amplifies the urgency of an adequate housing response to achieve the ambition of the National Plan.

We acknowledge the scope of the Housing Australia Future Fund and its target to build 30,000 new social and affordable dwellings in the first five years of operation. We also note that the expected returns from the Fund will eventually be utilised to deliver 4,000 social housing properties to support survivors of violence. Given the findings of the *Nowhere to Go* report, this target will fall well below what the annual need to ensure women and children escaping violence have a safe exit. As discussed above, forthcoming national awareness raising

¹ 1800RESPECT contacts [Family, domestic and sexual violence data in Australia , 1800RESPECT contacts - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare \(aihw.gov.au\)](#)

² In 2019-20, 39,408 people fleeing family violence came to homelessness services in need of long-term housing and 3.1 per cent were housed. In 2020-21 demand had increased to 39,680 with only 2.9 per cent housed.

campaigns and a strong investment in primary prevention will see this shortfall increase as the demand for services grows.

The National Plan also acknowledges the need to strengthen the capacity of the workforce as well as ancillary services to meet the objectives of the response pillar.

While the Alliance acknowledges the 2022-2023 Budget invested in the frontline workforce to lift capacity by 500 workers over four years, without further investment in growing the workforce, and building specialist expertise to respond to an increasing complexity of need, it will not be sufficient to offset the turnover in the sector and combat workforce burn-out.

The 2022 ACROSS survey of the community sector found fatigue among Australia's domestic and family violence workforce was significant.³ As cost-of-living pressures continue to be felt across the community, we expect not only an increase the complexity of client need, but new demand for our services and increased burn-out across the workforce.

The Alliance also remains committed to seeing comprehensive, shared, and integrated data collection that illustrates the journey of a service user, the complexity of need and the pressure on response systems. As it currently stands, unless a victim of domestic, family, or sexual violence is presenting with the additional burden of housing crisis there is no central collection point tracking their service history. This means that for a woman

The discrepancy between Commonwealth funding priorities and how funds are distributed on the ground by state and territory governments has been discussed and remains a concern. Women's Legal Services Australia have detailed how funding allocated in the 2021-2022 Budget toward specialist Women's Legal Services, which provide wrap-around and integrated support to women experiencing violence, was redirected at the local level towards mainstream community law providers who do not bring a comparable level of holistic support and expertise to respond to the unique needs of clients living with violence. Similar reports relating to state and territory governments redistributing Commonwealth funding, earmarked for the women's sector, have been made by Alliance members regarding emergency funding during COVID-19.

³ [ACOSS demand snapshot 2022.pdf \(acoss.org.au\)](#) The ACROSS survey found that 81% of staff in the domestic and family violence sector were burnt-out and that waiting lists had to be closed due to services not being able to meet existing demand. The same report found that cost-of-living pressures were the most common cited concern among service users.

experiencing violence, where potential homelessness is not a factor⁴ (such as young people living with their parents, or women who otherwise live independently but still experience violence in a relationship) there is no portal that captures their journey through various referral points. This is a significant gap that fails to appreciate how violence may present and impact on an individual at all stages of their life as well as undermining research and response efforts. Further to this point, we note that the findings of the Personal Safety Survey (2016) has dated significantly and contains numerous methodological gaps particularly in terms of respondents' cultural identity, sexuality and gender and surveying people living with disabilities in care facilities. Despite these flaws however, it continues to inform government policy and target setting. An audit of the existing national data suite is required to identify gaps and opportunities along with the development of a centralised data resource showing the extent and complexity of violence and service journey.

It is further recommended stakeholders and service providers are able to easily and freely access real-time data relevant to their location and remit in order to better plan for the delivery of services and to manage workforce.

Recovery and Healing pillar

Recovery is an intrinsic feature of the National Plan, critical not only in individual recovery but also in stopping the cycle of violence and giving survivors the best opportunity to rebuild their lives. Crucially however, its success relies on progress within the early intervention and response pillars.

The Alliance supports the Government's reform agenda against this pillar particularly in terms of the changes to the *Fair Work Act* and National Employment Standards to introduce paid domestic and family violence leave as well as responding to the *Respect@Work* report. We have also welcomed packages from the 2022-2023 Budget which expanded the Safer Places program.

⁴ Homelessness and housing demand, when co-presenting with experiences of domestic or family violence are captured through the national reporting requirements in SHIP and through the Report on Government Services. Outside of services capturing data for their own reporting requirements, there is no centralised data point for users of services at a higher level.

The objectives of the Recovery and Healing Pillar in the National Plan acknowledge the unique needs of the victim-survivor, but regrettably without comprehensive and whole of system investment in women's specialist services, we will struggle to see progress against this pillar that centres around the unique circumstances of each victim-survivor. In this regard, it is difficult to reconcile the commitment of the National Plan towards victim-centric recovery when, for example, Women's Legal Services Australia have noted a growing preference of funding mainstream community legal services to provide counsel and support to women experiencing violence, despite these services not being specialised and therefore, unlikely to meet the objectives of the pillar.



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