



National Women's
Safety Alliance

POLICY

POSITION:

BUILD AND RETAIN

A SUSTAINABLE

WORKFORCE FOR

DOMESTIC AND FAMILY

VIOLENCE SUPPORT

SERVICES

Proudly led by YWCA Canberra, the Working with Women Alliance (WwWA) is one of the five National Women's Alliances that play a key role in ensuring women's voices are central in the policy development process by providing evidence-based, intersectional gender equality advice and civil society expertise to government on areas of most impact and influence to Working for Women: A Strategy for Gender Equality.

The National Women's Safety Alliance is a portfolio under the WwWA that brings together a diversity of voices, expertise and experience to inform and guide national policy on women's safety.

POLICY STATEMENT: BUILD AND RETAIN A SUSTAINABLE WORKFORCE FOR DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE SUPPORT SERVICES

Executive Summary

The acceleration of gender-based violence has increased pressure on Australia's housing crisis and frontline services. Demand for support in the face of violence vastly outweighs the available supply and leaves women and children at great risk of homelessness or further violence.

Experiences of gender inequality increase the risk of poverty, limit opportunities to escape and recover from violence, contribute to housing insecurity and homelessness and result in lower superannuation balances and reduced financial stability in retirement.

This policy position statement highlights the urgent need for policies that prioritise women's access to safe, affordable housing, comprehensive income support, and sustainable frontline services as a response to extreme rates of gender-based violence. In Addition, it calls for pro-active policies that eliminate instances of violence in the first place.

Key Recommendations

Build and retain a sustainable workforce for domestic and family violence support services:

1. Implement a HECS-HELP Debt Forgiveness Scheme for Social Work and Human Services Graduates
2. Scale the "Wisdom in Practice" mentoring program nationally for social work graduates.



**National Women's
Safety Alliance**

Sustainable Workforce for Specialist Services: A Critical Investment in Women's Safety

The demand for specialist services supporting women experiencing domestic, family, and sexual violence has never been greater. Yet, Australia faces a critical workforce shortage in the social services sector, jeopardizing the ability of frontline organizations to provide life-saving support. Without a pipeline of skilled professionals, the safety and well-being of women and children are at risk.

The social services sector is grappling with a severe workforce shortage, putting essential services at risk. High turnover rates and burnout are rampant, driven by low wages and the demanding nature of the work. Without targeted financial incentives, fewer students are choosing careers in social work and human services, creating a long-term pipeline issue that directly impacts the availability and quality of support services.

Retention is just as critical as recruitment. Specialist services require experienced professionals who possess the skills to navigate complex trauma, crisis intervention, and risk assessment. However, the ongoing cycle of high turnover leads to inconsistent care, increasing strain on the remaining workforce and exacerbating burnout. This instability undermines the effectiveness of frontline services and diminishes the support available to women and children experiencing violence.

Investing in workforce sustainability brings both economic and social benefits. By alleviating the financial burden on graduates, a HECS-HELP debt forgiveness scheme would incentivise long-term commitment to the sector, fostering a more stable workforce. A pipeline of dedicated, skilled professionals means stronger support services, reduced reliance on emergency responses, and better long-term outcomes for those escaping violence.

Addressing this workforce crisis is also fundamental to achieving the objectives of The National Plan. Without significant investment in the people who deliver frontline services, the sector will struggle to meet growing demand, leaving women and children without the safety and support they need.

A HECS-HELP debt forgiveness scheme provides a clear, targeted solution to these challenges. It is a practical, cost-effective strategy to attract new graduates into the sector and encourage them to stay. This policy recognises the crucial role that social workers and human services professionals play in protecting vulnerable women and children and ensuring their long-term safety and wellbeing.



Implement a HECS-HELP Debt Forgiveness Scheme for Social Work and Human Services Graduates

The Australian Government should invest \$57.1 million over five years to establish a HECS-HELP debt forgiveness program for graduates who commit to at least four years in the social services sector. This initiative will help attract and retain skilled professionals, ensuring a sustainable workforce capable of delivering vital frontline services to women and children experiencing domestic, family, and sexual violence.

Fund a national rollout of the Wisdom in Practice program.

The Wisdom in Practice (WiP)^[i] program has demonstrated its effectiveness in embedding lived experience into the professional development of frontline family violence workers through a structured reverse mentoring model.^[ii] Given its success in Victoria, a coordinated national rollout of the program is recommended to ensure a consistent, survivor-informed approach to workforce development across Australia.

A national pilot of the program would require \$700,000, covering program delivery, mentor support, participant training, administration, and evaluation. This estimate accounts for the cost of mentor payments, professional development for practitioners, training resources, facilitation, and coordination across multiple jurisdictions.

The funding breakdown includes:

- **Mentor Payments and Support:** Remuneration for victim-survivor advocates (VSAs) to acknowledge their expertise and lived experience, alongside access to support services as per the DFSV Commission Lived Experience Council rates and recommendations.
- **Program Facilitation and Administration:** Fixed costs for staffing, participant coordination, training materials, and technological infrastructure to enable seamless program delivery.
- **Evaluation and Continuous Improvement:** Resources for ongoing monitoring, feedback collection, and assessment of program outcomes to refine the delivery model and ensure long-term effectiveness.

The program should be expanded to executive and senior leadership levels to ensure survivor perspectives inform organisational culture, policies and decision-making across the sector.^[iii] A national approach to the WiP program will drive workforce capability, cultural change, and improved responses to family violence.



References

[i] Bilston, G., 2024, *Wisdom in Practice: Reverse mentoring program overview*. Retrieved from <https://geraldinebilston.com/wisdm-in-practice/>

[ii] Keleher, H., 2023, *Wisdom in Practice pilot evaluation report*. Keleher Consulting.

[iii] Domestic Violence Victoria, 2020, *Code of practice: Principles and standards for specialist family violence services for victim-survivors (2nd ed.)*. Melbourne, VIC: DV Vic.



**National Women's
Safety Alliance**