



National Women's Safety Alliance

committed to ending **gender based** violence

Submission to the Proposed new rules to protect telco consumers experiencing DFV

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Submitted by

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About NWSA

Proudly led by YWCA Canberra, the Working with Women Alliance (WWWA) represents two key portfolios: National Women's Safety Alliance (NWSA) and National Women's Equality Alliance (NWEA). The WWWA connects the critical areas of gender-based violence prevention and the advancement of women's economic equality and leadership, bridging these important policy fields for greater impact.

The **National Women's Safety Alliance brings** together a diversity of voices, expertise, and experience to inform and guide national policy on women's safety. The NWSA, established in August 2021, connects the sector, experts, government, and victim-survivors with a shared vision to end violence against women. This will be achieved through consultation, research, and the collaborative development of expert policy advice to government.

More information about NWSA is available on our [website](#).

Executive Summary

The Australian Communications and Media Authority's *Telecommunications (Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Consumer Protections) Industry Standard* will provide essential protection for telecommunication consumers experiencing family and domestic violence.

Our commentary acknowledges the importance of the Telecommunications Industry Standard in ensuring a consistent approach to addressing and supporting those affected by domestic and family violence across the sector. While the Industry Standard introduces critical internal adjustments to improve responses when industry products are being used to perpetuate violence, it is essential to clarify the specific role telecommunications providers will play in supporting those experiencing DFV.

This submission makes recommendations to strengthen existing areas of the Industry Standard to ensure that the framework is effectively implemented.

Key areas for consideration include:

- **Supporting Frontline Services:** In developing the Industry Standard, the peripheral policy framework must consider the pressure that will be placed on frontline services in providing support to telecommunication customers who are experiencing DFV and being directed to their services via the Standard. There is also an anticipated impost in the rollout of their training programs. Frontline services are already under-resourced and hence the Standard should seek to utilise existing training programs.
- **Scaling and standardising DFV training:** The Industry Standard must ensure that training programs are not only comprehensive but scalable, accessible, and consistent across all personnel and consider offshore service centres. In collaboration with expert third parties, the development of a clear implementation plan is essential to equipping telecommunications providers with the skills needed to effectively identify potential instances of domestic or family violence and respond accordingly.
- **Demographic considerations:** The Standard must acknowledge distinct population groups that may be disproportionately affected by domestic violence. Reliable access to telecommunication services for those living in rural, remote, and regional areas should be explicitly embedded in policies and services.
- **System wide abuse:** The Standard needs to consider abuse across providers and consider amendments to the Privacy Act 1988 allowing providers to share

information when systems violence is reasonably suspected. Further, in reference to the Criminal Code Act 1995, to consider the breadth of how telecommunications can be systemically used to exert control or violence.

Recommendations

Supporting Frontline Services

The Industry Standard correctly seeks to provide support for affected persons but does not account for how an increased demand on frontline services – through delivering support, consultations, and training – will be managed. Many of these services are already operating above capacity, and without a clear plan, the Industry Standard risks further overwhelming a burnt-out sector.

Currently, the Industry Standard increases reliance on these services. In introducing the standard, the Australian Government must consider the sustainability and role of the frontline services sector in responding to referrals via the Standard.

Recommendations:

- Telecommunications providers should integrate existing training modules that can be delivered remotely.
- The peripheral policy settings must explore the flow-on impact to frontline services and respond accordingly.

Protecting Privacy of Telecommunication Consumers

Part 7 of the draft Standard prescribes how providers ought to record the information disclosed to them by customers in accordance with the *Privacy Act*.

Directives that are particularly important for people affected by DFV include the use of a ‘quick exit’ button on webpages and mobile applications, and the deletion of caller and browser history for people who need to contact frontline services discretely. We support proposals to delist calls to national service providers such as 1800RESPECT from itemized bills, and urge it be extended to Kids Helpline and MensLine.

Recommendations:

- Collaborate with both users and DFV experts to ensure safe and effective delivery of intended support services and remove the risk of unintended harm.

- Expand *Part 7, Section 16, Article 1e* to include additional national hotlines Kids Helpline, 1800 Yarn and MensLine from being delisted in itemised service bills.

Scaling and Standardising DFV Training for Telecommunications Personnel

With over 74,000 employees in the telecommunications sectorⁱ, the Industry Standard must ensure DFV training programs are scalable and effective. Uniform training, informed by experts and people with lived experience, is critical for ensuring consistent and high-quality responses across the industry, including offshore service centres. In designing industry training, we urge ACMA to outline the specific needs of telecommunication providers and their staff.

Recommendation:

- ACMA, in consultation with domestic violence sector experts, develop clear outcomes to be achieved via the delivery of industry wide training.

Improving Telecommunications Access for At-Risk Communities

Reliable access to telco services is necessary for those experiencing or escaping DFV, yet the draft Industry Standard does not fully consider the reliability and diversity of services in of regional, rural, and remote Australia.

Between July 2021 to June 2024, there were 51,854 complaints from consumers living in regional, rural, and remote Australia about coverage accessibilityⁱⁱ. Clearer benchmarks for service coverage should be considered and reflected in delivering the Industry Standard to areas with patchy connectivity.

Recommendation:

- Develop a regulatory framework that establishes clear benchmarks and standards for geographical coverage, including quality of service and data speeds.

System wide abuse

While the Standard recognises the need for financial hardship assistance for non-payment of debt, it does not adequately account for other forms of DFV-related telecommunications abuse. Coerced debt accumulation or the deliberate misuse of a person's devices to access criminal or exploitative material, to cause reputation harm, are also forms of systems abuse that should be considered.

Recommendations:

- Consider how systems abuse using telecommunication devices and services have relevancy to the Criminal Code Act 1995 as they relate to methods of abuse using telecommunications services.
- Expand Part 2 (8)(1)(d) to cover scenarios where a service is deliberately and maliciously used to accrue debt ensuring affected individuals receive the same entitlements and protections.
- Consider amendments to the Privacy Act 1988 allowing providers to share information when systems violence is reasonably suspected

ⁱ *Information Media and Telecommunications*. (2024). Jobs and Skills Australia.

<https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/data/occupation-and-industry-profiles/industries/information-media-and-telecommunications>

ⁱⁱ *Submission to the 2024 Regional Telecommunications Review*. (2024). The Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman. <https://www.tio.com.au/reports/submission-2024-regional-telecommunications-review#:~:text=Between%201%20July%202021%20to,cov%20outages%20and%20accessibility%20barriers>.