

Territory Families' Submission to the Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs Inquiry into Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence

1. The Northern Territory (NT) Government welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the latest inquiry into family, domestic and sexual violence, noting that previous input has been provided to similar inquiries conducted by the Senate and House of Representatives.
2. Domestic, family and sexual violence is a serious and life-threatening problem experienced throughout Australia that crosses all ages, cultural, ethnic and social backgrounds. It is a complex issue with many compounding factors and drivers. Particularly difficult circumstances are experienced in the NT:
 - a) Aboriginal women and children are disproportionately affected by domestic and family violence (DFV).
 - b) DFV comprises over 60 per cent of all assaults (for the 12 months ending February 2020). This equates to 3950 assaults involving domestic and family violence (on average 76 per week at a rate of 1609 assaults per 100,000 population).
 - c) The highest victimisation rate of DFV related assaults in Australia, which is at least 2.6 times higher than other states and territories.
 - d) The highest levels of sexual assaults across Australia with women and girls being 1.6 times more likely to be sexually assaulted than other women and girls in Australia.
 - e) An average of 80 Domestic Violence Orders applied for each week, with 86 per cent of applications made by police and 14 per cent private applications (based on 2017-2018 figures).
 - f) More than three quarters (77 per cent) of prisoners having had a prior apprehension by police for DFV. For nearly half of all prisoners (47 per cent) their most recent apprehension by police was for DFV (on prison census date of 28 February 2019).
3. The NT has a number of demographic and geographical issues which increase the challenges associated with service delivery:
 - a) The NT comprises one per cent of the Australian population, spread over 17 per cent of the Nation's landmass – including significantly remote areas with extreme weather patterns making access to services challenging for many families.
 - b) The NT has a significantly culturally diverse population with over 30 per cent of the population identifying as Aboriginal. There are up to 104 Aboriginal languages and dialects spoken across the NT and 77 per cent of Aboriginal Territorians live in remote areas. There are 96 remote Aboriginal communities in the NT and over 600 homelands.
4. Territory Families coordinates and leads the NT Government responses to domestic, family and sexual violence, leveraging its capacity to bring together a range of policy, advocacy and frontline service functions with a whole of life approach to supporting women, children and families.
5. The NT Government is committed to reducing the significant rates of DFV experienced across the NT. This requires strong coordination between first responders and a sustainable DFV service and support system delivered collaboratively by key partners, NT Police, Territory Families, the Department of the Attorney-General and Justice, the Department of Health, the Department of Education and the Department of Local Government, Housing and Community Development.
6. In 2019-20, Territory Families was allocated \$29.4 million for the domestic, family and sexual violence portfolio. Through this budget, Territory Families funds 32 services throughout the NT to deliver crisis accommodation and support for women and children escaping family violence, and to provide perpetrator interventions, as follows:

- a) 13 Women's Safe Houses operated by Territory Families to provide a neutral and safe environment within remote community (with funding contributed by the Commonwealth);
 - b) 16 Women's Refuges/Shelters and Safe Houses operated by non-government organisations, including projects for counselling, crisis intervention, outreach support and community education; and
 - c) three perpetrator intervention and men's behaviour change services.
7. End of year performance figures for 2019-20 have not been finalised. However, in 2018-19, key indicators showed:
- a) 5,806 clients were provided with crisis accommodation services in the NT;
 - b) 6,788 child protection notifications were associated with domestic, family and sexual violence; and
 - c) 1,045 child protection substantiations were associated with domestic, family and sexual violence.
8. In December 2017, the NT Government released the Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Reduction Framework 2018-2028 - Safe respected and free from violence (Framework). The 10 year Plan provides a strategic guide for the NT's response to domestic, family and sexual violence. The Framework can be accessed through the [Territory Families webpage](#).
9. The Framework sets out a comprehensive whole of government, whole of community approach to prevent and respond to domestic, family and sexual violence. It has five clear outcome goals against which actions, funding, effort and performance can be focussed. These five outcome goals are:
1. domestic, family and sexual violence is prevented and not tolerated;
 2. Territorians at risk of experiencing violence are identified early and provided with effective interventions;
 3. people experiencing domestic, family and sexual violence are protected and helped to recover and thrive;
 4. perpetrators are held accountable and connected early to responses that change their behaviours and reduce violence; and
 5. legislation, policy and funding models enable a responsive, high quality and accountable domestic, family and sexual violence service systems.
10. Work being progressed under this Framework aligns with activities under the current National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children and integrates with other NT policies and reform initiatives, including those targeting the impacts on children and youth. It also links with other government reforms, such as initiatives to reduce alcohol misuse due to its significant contribution to high levels of injuries and the number of deaths amongst women and children experiencing DFV.
11. In its lead agency role under the Framework, Territory Families aims to reduce and address the effects of domestic, family and sexual violence through the design and implementation of effective policy while working collaboratively with non-government organisations to deliver services.
12. Significant reforms in the last three years have included:
- a) the establishment of the Specialist Approach to DFV at the Alice Springs Local Court which commenced in July 2020;

- b) the passage of the *Justice Legislation Amendment (Domestic and Family Violence) Act 2020* which will commence on 29 July 2020, providing for the Court to order attendance at domestic violence programs as part of a Domestic Violence Order and creating a new Criminal Code offence of choking in a domestic relationship; and
- c) the trialling of a Specialist Court model in Alice Springs to increase the incentives and opportunities for people who use violence to change their behaviour.

13. In 2020, development of the service system is supported by additional funding for:

- a) 13 domestic, family and sexual violence prevention projects across the NT;
- b) delivery of the NO MORE violence prevention program;
- c) Safe, Respected and Free from Violence Prevention Grants to non-government organisations for local prevention projects;
- d) development and implementation of reform initiatives such as new information sharing laws including a risk assessment and risk management framework, to facilitate coordinated and timely responses for people at serious risk of harm from DFV;
- e) contributions to the national violence prevention campaign Stop it at the Start and work with other jurisdictions to develop a national sexual violence prevention campaign; and
- f) continuing support for the NT's membership to Our Watch and Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety to increase the evidence base around domestic, family and sexual violence at a national level.

14. The NT Government is also working to address the high rates in remote locations through the improved regional coordination in the Barkly and Big Rivers regions including the development of a hub of integrated specialist domestic, family and sexual violence services based in Tennant Creek

The First Action Plan under the Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Framework

15. In February 2019, Territory Families launched Action Plan 1: Changing Attitudes, Intervening Earlier and Responding Better (2018–21). The Action Plan can be found at [Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Reduction Framework 2018-2028 Action Plan 1](#). Implementation of the Action Plan has harnessed activities that include strengthening and improving the sustainability of the domestic, family and sexual violence sector. It progresses the development of DFV prevention, perpetrator intervention, and safety and recovery services for victims across the NT. The Action Plan is the first in a suite of three domestic, family and sexual violence action plans.

16. In 2019-20, the NT Government invested an additional \$6.49 million to support implementation of the first Action Plan. Priority projects being progressed include:

- a) developing the Territory's first Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Framework;
- b) developing a risk assessment and management framework and a common needs and risk responses tool, including consultation and sector testing;
- c) developing a workforce and sector development strategy to strengthen the responses of specialist and universal services – priority actions are being identified to strengthen worker capability and safety, an integrated sector, and sustainable organisations;
- d) increasing investment in DFV service providers funded by Territory Families through a dedicated grant funding program to support improved service provision, critical intervention and outreach, counselling, practice management and flexible support packages for victim/survivors;
- e) reviewing services in the Greater Darwin region to examine their effectiveness, integration, geographic and demographic reach – this review follows the delivery of service and service

systems reviews for the Barkly and Big Rivers regions, and service reviews in Tennant Creek and Katherine;

- f) investing in projects that prevent violence before it occurs and developing a primary prevention model and community of practice;
- g) delivering programs that address perpetrator behaviours; and
- h) continuing funding for the Family Safety Framework in six sites across the NT and strengthening the requirement for NT Government agencies to participate.

17.A Cross-Agency Working Group comprising representatives from government and non-government specialist DFV agencies and an Aboriginal organisation peak body operates to oversight implementation of the Action Plan. The working group drives collaboration, engagement, information sharing and problem resolution as Territory Families and its partner organisations implement.

Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Framework

18.The NT's first Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Framework was released in May 2020. The Framework provides direction to prevent and respond to sexual violence experienced by children, young people and adults, inside and outside the family including in public places and workplaces. It responds to recommendations from the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the NT and the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

19.The Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Framework can be found at [Northern Territory Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Framework 2020-2028](#) and priority actions for the year under six outcome areas are identified at [Framework's Priority Actions 2020-2021](#). Development of the Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Framework marks the first time in the NT that sexual violence has been addressed within the context of DFV. There is a strong focus on ensuring the voices of Aboriginal women and men are reflected throughout the Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Framework.

Gender Equality and Prevention of Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence

20.Research indicates that there are certain factors that consistently drive high levels of violence against women. These include beliefs and behaviours reflecting disrespect for women, low support for gender equality and adherence to rigid gender roles and relations. In recognition, the first NT Gender Equality Statement of Commitment has been developed.

The Impacts of COVID-19

21.As COVID-19 rapidly changes the world, women in particular are facing significant social, economic and health challenges.

22.To meet the changing needs of clients during the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic, Territory Families has actively supported the sector by communicating regularly, responding to urgent requests for advice and assistance to assist specialist domestic and family violence services.

23.In April 2020, the NT signed the National Partnership Agreement on Coronavirus Domestic and Family Violence Responses (the NPA), which provided \$1.171 million to the NT to support people experiencing domestic, family and sexual violence during COVID-19. Additional funding for contingencies and a demand-driven responses will be distributed between the jurisdictions on evidence of demand. This agreement provided funding to assist women and children in need to make safer emergency accommodation for women and children in remote communities, counselling through Sexual Assault Resource Centres, and community recovery projects. Territory Families is rolling out the first tranche of funding to assist services to recalibrate service delivery to meet demands including those arising from bio-security measures.

24. Data from the Department of the Attorney-General and Justice shows that from January to March 2020, the number of reported assault offences involving domestic violence was higher than the previous year. A substantial decline was observed in April 2020, likely reflecting the strict biosecurity and shutdown measures implemented across the Territory for COVID-19. By June 2020, services had started reporting increasing numbers of women requiring assistance including crisis accommodation. Some regional providers have reported an increase in the severity of injuries of women presenting to the services, based on increased tensions and stress in communities.
25. In the economic recovery space, the establishment of the Territory Economic Reconstruction Commission was announced in June 2020, to provide expert advice to the Chief Minister and Cabinet on accelerating an economic rebound and positioning for future growth.

Key Priorities Going Forward

26. 'One size fits all' national initiatives do not optimise outcomes for Territorians. Given the severity of similar circumstances experienced across Northern Australia, new ways of tackling issues across jurisdictions could be considered. This could involve strong leadership and collaboration from the Commonwealth with jurisdictions and would embed tailored, culturally responsive and community empowering strategies and solutions.
27. The NT's Framework articulates the need for concerted and sustained efforts to address long-term social and cultural change which will require long term and ongoing investment in the continuum of prevention and intervention, as well as developing mechanisms to measure the outcomes over time. This should include developing tailored primary prevention responses and growing workforce capability.
28. Suggested focus areas for the next National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children include:
- a) developing a sustainable model for responding to domestic, family and sexual violence in regional and remote communities including the need to establish and coordinate investment efforts across borders or jurisdictional regions with shared demographics and socio-economic conditions. Ensuring that national data collection is inclusive of regional and remote communities so that service delivery is appropriately informed is essential to this;
 - b) increased support for innovative justice models, especially in remote and regional settings, in which contact with the justice system is viewed as an opportunity for change. This may recognise that some women and children affected by DFV do not want to end their relationships and they are instead seeking more intensive support for themselves and their partner to change behaviour.
 - c) ensuring that initiatives and actions make a difference to disadvantaged cohorts such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, people from multicultural communities, people with disabilities and from the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Pansexual, Transgender, Genderqueer, Queer, Intersexed, Agender, Asexual, and Ally communities, including an application of cultural security principles;
 - d) further development of perpetrator and behaviour change programs and increased work on reducing the misidentification of the primary victim and the dominant aggressor in DFV matters. This could include developmental work on trauma-informed programs for women who use violence; and
 - e) development of further alignment of policy and programs on a regional and cross-jurisdictional level including access to legal services, stable housing, through-care and other appropriate support services. For example the policy and program areas funding specialist legal services may have greater impact with further integration to those funding other

domestic, family and sexual violence specialist programs and services. Likewise the delivery of robust and complementary programs in both community and prison settings could ensure there is continuity of service and approach.

29. Territory Families thanks the Committee for the opportunity to make this submission.