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This submission relates specifically to terms of reference (e) (g) and (i), and more generally to (b), (c) and (h).



**Addressing Aboriginal family violence lies at the heart of improving the wellbeing** of not only Aboriginal women and children but is central to underpinning the success of all other Aboriginal programs.

There is a dire need for a **more proactive community wide approach to educating and supporting the whole community about positive relationships**, alternatives to violence and the need to take collective action to confront what is essentially a culture of condoning violence.

**Change Em Ways is an example of a successful and innovative place-based response to working with Indigenous men who use violence.** The program has been developed by a local Aboriginal organisation, guided by a cultural reference group and based on research. Change Em Ways is centred on creating a culturally safe space – using On Country activities to build trust, taking a trauma informed approach that uses healing to support men to begin to take responsibility to become the fathers and partners their community needs. It has gained the strong support of community members and stakeholders.

**The effects of COVID-19 on Aboriginal family violence in the Kimberley are not clear,** anecdotal evidence suggests the impact has varied in different places. More time and research are required to understand the impacts.

In this submission the term ‘Aboriginal family violence’ is used to place the use and experience of violence in a broader context.

## Context

The Committee will be aware from the available statistics and information that family violence remains a significant challenge across Australia despite the increased resources provided in recent years.

### Geography and demographics

The Kimberley region is 16 percent of the land area of Western Australia and is approximately twice the size of the State of Victoria. The total population is around 40,000 people living across 6 towns and almost 200 Aboriginal communities. Approximately 40 percent or 16,000 people have Indigenous heritage.

### Levels of Aboriginal family violence

“The shouts of violence and pain are the soundtrack of our lives in this community – we all hear it and it is past time for it to change.”

Whilst the underlying levels of Aboriginal family violence are unlikely to be accurately represented in reported statistics, the statistics themselves are alarming:

- Some research shows that up to 70 percent of Aboriginal families have experienced Aboriginal family violence

- In the Kimberley data indicates that rates of reported Aboriginal family violence are between 2 and 9 times higher than in other regional or metropolitan locations in Western Australia.
- Studies show that Indigenous women living in rural and remote areas of WA are 45 times more likely to experience Aboriginal family violence compared to other women living in rural and remote areas. Indigenous Australian women are 35 times more likely to be hospitalised for family violence assaults than other Australian women

### Definitions of family violence and Aboriginal Family Violence

The concept of Aboriginal family violence draws on western definitions of family violence including recognition of multiple forms of violence and abuse, the core dynamic of coercion and control its gendered nature but place the use and experience of violence in a broader context (Hovane & Cox 2011). This broader context includes:

- The contribution of colonisation, including the widespread use of sexual violence against Aboriginal women by non-Aboriginal men
- Dispossession
- Cultural dislocation and the suppression and prevention of cultural practices
- Forced removal of children and separation of families

This context, and the continuing effects that policies and practices have on Aboriginal people across the Kimberley, are significant factors contributing to trauma, disadvantage, violence and the use of alcohol and other drugs in Aboriginal families and communities (NACCHO 2006). It is only with this context that the magnitude of the effects on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal families and communities can begin to be understood (Hovane & Cox 2011).

It is also important to consider the implications of the research conducted by scholars such as Blagg and Hovane, speaking to Aboriginal women in the Kimberley. They found that that “women want their relationships but not the violence, and therefore many women stayed in the relationship hoping things would get better”. Additionally, if there were children, especially boys, then women often believed that the children needed their father. Research shows some women in the Kimberley are unlikely to leave men because of deeply held associations with kin and Country, and fears that leaving the man would jeopardise a range of relationships and people. Some women, however, also spoke about leaving their abusive partners because they eventually realised their partner was not going to change and they had had enough. (cf Innovative Models in addressing violence against Indigenous women, ANROWS, 2018)

### Government reports, plans and programs

There are reports after reports at Federal, State, local government and community levels detailing the extent of violence in Aboriginal communities from the 1986 Western Australian Task Force on Domestic Violence to the Memmot Report entitled The National Crime Prevention Report on Violence in Aboriginal Communities in 2001.

In recent decades, various National and State governments have conducted research, prepared reports and funded or implemented programs aimed at reducing Aboriginal family violence in the Kimberley. In the last decade, the State Government through the Department for Child Protection and Family Support developed the Family and Domestic Violence Prevention Strategy (to 2022) within the National Plan. The Department consulted across the Kimberley which was recorded in the Family Violence in the Kimberley: Project Report in May 2015, commissioned in response to the high levels of reported Aboriginal family violence in the region. This report led to the Safer Families, Safer Communities, Kimberley Family and Domestic Violence Regional Plan 2015–2020. The plan

highlights a need to “move beyond crisis response” and implement policies that “work across all areas, including supporting safe communities, safe and coordinated services, and engaging and responding to perpetrators of Aboriginal family violence”. This remains a work in progress.

### Interventions for men who use violence

The report prepared for the 2015 Regional Plan found that there were no recurrently resourced or available services targeted at men who use violence, but only short-term trials. The report also found that the available legal or statutory responses were only suitable for a small proportion of men who use violence (usually those committing a criminal offence). The lack of available responses contributed to high rates of recidivism and undermined overall efforts to respond to Aboriginal family violence. Since this time the Change Em Ways Program developed by Mens Outreach Services Aboriginal Corporation, based in Broome, has been funded to deliver a men’s behaviour change program for Aboriginal men who reside in Broome.

### About MOSAC

For more than 20 years Mens Outreach Service Aboriginal Corporation (MOSAC) has provided a range of support services to men, their families and communities in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. Details about us and our programs can be accessed at [www.mensoutreach.org.au](http://www.mensoutreach.org.au).

The organisation was established at the insistence of Indigenous women on the reference group of the Marnja Jarndu Women’s Refuge in Broome, known for its innovative practices, such as its outreach service and its sensitivity to, and respect for, women’s cultural obligations.

We are a small team of 23 staff based in Broome and have four key programs in the areas of youth suicide prevention (life promotion), family and domestic violence, men’s health & wellbeing and a child & youth bike engagement program.

## Change Em Ways Men's Behaviour Change Program

Change Em Ways (CEW) is an innovative men's behaviour change program run by a local Aboriginal organisation aimed at increasing women and children's safety through support Aboriginal men to change their attitudes, beliefs and behaviour.

It is funded under the Safety and Wellbeing Program of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, (now National Indigenous Australians Agency) to 30 June, 2022. The program was initially launched in April, 2018.

### Format

Approximately 140 men have had some contact with the program, with around 15 to 20 men commencing each program. Men can self-refer, be referred by external service providers or attend as part of a Court order. The program is delivered three times a year and involves:

- 3 to 4 weeks of thorough assessment of potential participants, including the development of safety plans for women, children and men that intend to participate
- A 3 day On-Country camp prior to the commencement of workshops
- 8 week blocks of 3 days per week, including On-Country healing activities and in-classroom work for 64 hours workshop and 16 hours cultural and healing activities.
- Post program follow up of over 5 months – providing practical support, connecting men with other services, employment, counselling, and rehabilitation programs.

CEW uses a client management system and receives Domestic Violence Incident notifications from police for any of its clients. The program works with women and this is discussed below under a separate heading.

### Design process and elements

CEW is the only Indigenous MBC program created and run in the Kimberley. CEW is centred on cultural safety and culture as strength. It combines social and emotional wellbeing, healing and behaviour change elements. It has a trauma informed approach and works with men to explore the impacts of (intergenerational) trauma.

### Healing

Healing is seen as an integral to promoting safety and wellbeing and refers to recovery from the psychological and physical impacts of trauma. Healing is a process and not an outcome and may continue through a lifetime and across generations. Healing can take many forms and is underpinned by a strong cultural and spiritual base. It enables individuals, families and communities to gain control over the direction of their lives and reach their full potential. (Healing Foundation)

This approach avoids stigmatising men and avoids using labels such as *perpetrators*. It recognises that these men are often the victims of violence and carry their own trauma. This does not excuse behaviour but empowers men to begin to take responsibility for their actions and become more accountable to themselves and their families.

### Role of culture

A key part of the program is the role of On-Country activities – taking men out of town and supporting them to reconnect, reengage and reignite their cultural heritage. We strongly believe that for our work to have a chance of success it must be grounded in Aboriginal law and culture. The

day to day living and expression of Aboriginal law is 'culture', and the program is designed to reconnect and strengthen the cultural life of the men who participate.

#### Cultural reference group, research and continuous improvement

The program was developed under the guidance of a local cultural reference group, supported by a senior cultural consultant and staff have high levels of cultural knowledge.

The program is based on current and emerging research and effective programs in other jurisdictions. The CrossBorders program provided some early guidance and the CrossBorders team gave their time and advice generously. The CEW team also worked closely on the program model with Department of Corrections staff. The program approach is also supported by the research of Hovane and Blagg which identifies successful Indigenous-led Aboriginal family violence initiatives with common features, such as:

- Indigenous community leadership
- Willingness to work with and alongside men
- Developing trauma informed practices that acknowledge the intergenerational impact and legacy of dispossession

The program has also been guided by the National Minimum Standards NOSPI and the West Australian Practice Standards for Perpetrator Intervention. However, in some cases these standards have not been appropriate for the context, so Change Em Ways has had to, with careful consideration and expert discussion, adapt or modify how they are applied.

The CEW team have a positive relationship with the locally based staff at the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (NIAA) and have worked collaboratively to strengthen the program. When CEW has identified any gaps or challenges it has sought the assistance of external experts to assist. For example, Professor Vicki Hovane, a local Aboriginal woman with a PhD in psychology and leading researcher in the field, has reviewed each of the 15 workshop sessions and mapped out the therapeutic technique underpinning each session.

#### Outcomes

A priority of program outcomes is supporting women and children's safety. Contributing to this outcome, is the work to support men to start a healing journey, reflect on and change their behaviour and take on the role as partners and fathers, understanding their role in keeping the community safe, participating in cultural and community life and supporting community healing.

MOSAC remains realistic about how hard change is to achieve. An 8 week program in the context of 20, 30 or 40 years of behaviour is a short period of time. The program recognises that change is not linear, lapses occur, and small, barely noticeable steps may be the best indicators of the potential for sustained change. It remains too early in the work to assess long term behaviour change, however a client audit was recently completed and shows strong evidence of positive change for a significant number of men who have completed the program.

#### Ongoing improvement

Staff are committed to continually innovating to improve the program and have made changes along the way to reflect feedback from participants, observations they themselves have made and feedback and suggestions from stakeholders and external experts. For example, the program duration was initially much shorter, but has been extended to 8 weeks to provide sufficient time for the content and relationships of trust to develop.

MOSAC is committed to reviewing and improving the program where possible. Staff participated in the Rand Corporation review of the Third Action Plan of the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children. In addition, an independent evaluator has been commissioned to develop an evaluation framework and complete an interim evaluation report based on client audits conducted by staff, available external data and community and stakeholder interviews.

### Community and stakeholder support

The program has gained the confidence of community members, demonstrated through self-referral by participants, and community feedback. The program has developed a strong positive reputation with government agencies including police and courts, and service providers including legal services, health organisations and others. Representatives from different organisations are invited to attend and speak at relevant workshops. For example, the Officer in Charge of the Broome Police station attends the workshops on a regular basis, and participants who initially had reservations about interacting with police at all, have developed warm, respectful relationships – to the point that participants and police marched together during a White Ribbon rally. Similarly, local magistrates have adapted sentencing options to include referring men to the program. Staff have worked collaboratively with Child Protection Services and attended and requested a number of Multi Agency Case Management Meetings (MACMs) to encourage sharing of information about mutual clients.

### Staff and lived experience

The staff who work on the program are embedded in the community, either as local Aboriginal people or non-Aboriginal staff with strong links to the local community. This is a key part of the ability of the program to develop trust with community members and build a strong reputation as a culturally safe and inviting space for men who may want to participate. An additional benefit is that local staff are known in the community and regularly interact with the extended families of participants in previous programs. This gives some insight in to what is happening in the community and conduct of men who are working to change their behaviour.

MOSAC has enthusiastically supported staff development, encouraging team members to attend training and conferences where possible to improve their skills and understanding in this particularly difficult area of work. Staff have begun to develop peer networks with other Aboriginal run men's behaviour change programs across Australia, and this is a real opportunity to build peer networks to support the exchange of ideas on what works and support communities that are seeking to develop and implement their own programs.

Some of the staff have lived experience – as survivors of Aboriginal family violence, and in one case as an offender. Their experience brings a deep understanding, empathy and authenticity to the program that is recognised by participants and men and women who are involved with the program. It also creates some risks which have been acknowledged and well handled by MOSAC, through a robust supervision and support framework including the provision of high levels of mentoring, personal support, training and development opportunities and risk management strategies such as restricted co-facilitation. The contribution by staff with lived experience cannot be understated, however it is crucial that they are provided with an opportunity to develop skills in theory and practice and receive on-going support in what can be an environment that triggers trauma.

### Challenges

Given the nature of the work the program faces many challenges – the work is draining, change can appear slow and some of the men have chaotic lives that are subject to swift external interventions, such as the suicide of a close family member, that derail their ability to attend and stay focused.

During the program many of the participants begin to develop a routine, finding motivation to get out of bed and engage in activities. At the end of the program there is an opportunity to *seize the moment* and support the men to find opportunities that will continue the routine and support change. Often participants have few formal qualifications and a criminal record, so finding employment is difficult. Employment transition programs such as the now abolished Green Army provide an excellent practical opportunity for some men in the program. MOSAC does have a men's support group that meet regularly and is developing further programs to continue to engage with men. However, there is a real need to develop a community wide co-ordinated approach to building on the positive changes that occur during the program and provide opportunities for men to seize the moment of change.

## Working with women

The priority outcome of the CEW program is to increase women and children's safety.

Local cultural advice is that women as partners must be involved in any men's behaviour change program. For many women in the Kimberley, particularly in remote communities, it is simply not possible to leave when all their extended family is local, they have family and cultural obligations and they do not have the finances or practical support.

Women who are partners are also a key source of information on what kind of change, if any, is occurring in the behaviour of men who are attending or have completed the program.

CEW is not funded to for this work, and this needs to change.

Notwithstanding the lack of funding, MOSAC has made a number of attempts engage with women as partners and children to increase their safety and begin to deal with trauma. For example, developing a bush play initiative to work with children that have been exposed to violence to improve the relationship between mothers and their children or groupwork sessions with women.

There are challenges to engage with women who are partners; often they have been overwhelmed by an array of services contacting them after domestic violence has been reported, they may have grave concerns that their children may be removed. Concerns may also include that they themselves might be charged with a violence related offence, they feel at risk of retaliation from their partner or they are overwhelmed by the trauma, added to the other underlying issues they are confronting.

In research based on conversations with Aboriginal women in the Kimberley the women identified that "Aboriginal family violence cannot be addressed as an isolated issue but needs to be understood in the whole context of all the other issues that community members are facing... about issues in the social context as causes of Aboriginal family violence, such as intergenerational trauma and its many manifestations, and alcohol use." (Blagg and Hovane, 2018)

CEW recognises the need to interact with families in a safe space, working collectively and holistically with the whole family to begin to build trust and relationships. MOSAC has also sought funding to create a women's support group that is open to all women to help develop life skills and build trust and peer support to begin to look at healing. However, to date resources to support this work despite various grant applications have not been secured.

## Working with others – increasing co-ordination

Plans from the national to local level and replete with findings and goals around increasing coordination and collaboration between services is another area requiring improvement. The 2015



Kimberley Regional Plan notes “A siloed approach to community-based support, service provision and practice will compromise and undermine the effectiveness of all programs/interventions occurring across the Kimberley.” (page 12)

Family violence is often co-occurring with issues of physical health, mental health and wellbeing (including trauma), child protection involvement, homelessness, substance misuse, foetal alcohol syndrome, chronic disease, poverty, disability, suicide and self-harm and school drop-out (or low attendance). Family members may be interacting with a range of service providers that remain ignorant of these co-occurring issues or provide advice that only serves to exacerbate these issues.

Some steps have been taken to improve co-ordination and collaboration. CEW has worked with Child Protection Services (CPS) to call and hold MACMs (Multi Agency Case Management Meetings) for clients in the program that have children involved in the child protection system. These meetings have provided useful insights to all agencies and services attending. CEW believes there should be MACM’s for all men attending the program that have children to improve coordination.

However, the drive to collaborate is often left to individuals in different workplaces rather than it becoming the culture for all stakeholders in the system. As workers come and go, it creates a cycle of increasing and decreasing co-ordination and collaboration dependent on whether there are enough key workers committed to increasing collaboration. The Kimberley is beset by high worker turnover, particularly in intensively difficult areas like child protection, corrections and working with men who use violence. The lack of local workers, and high turnover frustrates not only service users but workers in other agencies or NGOs that regularly interact with new, unfamiliar and *new to the Kimberley* workers.

Simple measures, such as agreeing to adopt the same screening tools, rather than the existing situation where many different tools are used by different agencies or services to try to identify the same issues would begin to demonstrate a systemic approach to improving co-ordination. Similarly, ensuring there are enough appropriate forums to share information about mutual clients is crucial to creating joined-up services that work together to support community members and users.

## Impacts of COVID 19 lockdown

The Kimberley region had a relatively short lockdown period, with the initial state of emergency declared on 15 March 2020, the State border was closed on 2 April, and the Kimberley opened to the rest of Western Australia on 5 June. There has been no record of any community transmission, however with such a large percentage of the population considered vulnerable it remains an ongoing concern.

MOSAC undertook detailed COVID-19 planning and strategic work to ensure that services could be adapted and continue to be delivered where possible, and to develop innovative ways to maintain contact with clients (door to door visits from a distance / care package drop offs).

During the period of lockdown anecdotal observations by local police suggest levels of violence (not family violence specific) in Broome decreased dramatically. This may be due to:

- Return to communities – many people were assisted to leave to return to local communities
- Access to alcohol – access to alcohol was restricted in various ways
- Reduction in socialising – many people were concerned and stopped socialising, restrictions on gatherings were enforced

However, anecdotal evidence from remote communities suggest the experience there may have been different and they faced increased levels of violence. This may be a result of the influx of people from towns. It is also important to note that service delivery to communities has not returned to anywhere near normal levels (which are often grossly inadequate), so the reduction in access may have contributed to conditions in the communities and accurate reporting of data.

Overall, at the time of writing, it is still too early to get a good understanding, and an analysis of the statistics and some qualitative research would provide some guidance. The abrupt change to community life and function does provide an opportunity to research the impact of the restrictions introduced because of the pandemic and provide firm evidence to show that actions such as alcohol restrictions lead to a reduction in violence.

## Coercive control

We have found the concept of coercive control to be highly relevant to the work CEW does. The crisis driven approach that focuses exclusively on cooling off and short-term protection can miss early warning signs. Our experience is that patterns of behaviour involving coercive control are often red flags for escalating behaviour that leads to physical violence.

## Getting Aboriginal family violence right is crucial

“Violence is not just an Aboriginal problem, but unfortunately seems to be endemic in all societies, including the broader Australian society. Violence is undermining our life’s very essence, it is destroying us, and there are very few Aboriginal families that are not struggling with the debilitating effects of trauma, despair and damage resulting from their experiences with violence.

We are overburdened by our experiences of all these forms of violence. “

(Professor Mick Dodson)

MOSAC argues that CEW is one important part of improving the safety of women and children, but there must also be action and resources directed towards a whole of community change to achieve the goal of eliminating Aboriginal family violence.

As identified in Family Violence in the Kimberley: Project Report 2015

Due to the lack of services/interventions for perpetrators, limited access to and effectiveness of restraining orders and criminal justice responses, lack of coordination between services and community attitudes that normalise or minimise violence, responses to family violence in the Kimberley tend to be reactive, crisis driven and short term.

There is an urgent need for a more proactive approach to educating and supporting the whole community from school aged children, to workplaces, sports clubs and beyond about positive relationships, alternatives to violence and the need to take collective action to confront what is essentially a culture of condoning violence.

Women in the Kimberley have identified that “Aboriginal family violence cannot be addressed as an isolated issue but needs to be understood in the whole context of all the other issues that community members are facing... about issues in the social context as causes of Aboriginal family

violence, such as intergenerational trauma and its many manifestations, and alcohol use” (Blagg & Hovane, 2015)

Part of this approach also needs to include dealing with, as Professor Dodson says, the psychological violence experienced by Aboriginal people through racism, through misguided public policies, through exclusion and limited opportunities for economic integration and participation in Australian life.

This is not just our problem, this is everyone’s problem and we need determined leadership at all levels of government, proper prioritisation of policies to address Aboriginal family violence, cohesive approaches and resources invested for the long term to support communities to develop and implement their own solutions and in the spirit of subsidiarity.

Violence must be tackled as a priority, not part of some other secondary program, but as a central feature in Aboriginal social and economic policy across all of government- all of community priorities. (Dodson, 2003)

Addressing Aboriginal family violence lies at the heart of improving the wellbeing of not only Aboriginal women and children but is “central to underpinning the success of all other Aboriginal programs.” (Dodson, 2003) Once we start to make real headway in reducing violence we are also likely to see improvements in parenting and reductions in children in out of home care, an increase in school attendance and completion rates, a reduction in youth crime, an improvement in employment rates, improved mental and physical health.

MOSAC has been heavily involved in the White Ribbon community event which is open to and attracts people from all backgrounds as a show of solidarity in marching against violence. We also support the development of a champions for change program – identifying key public supports across a range of government, business, community organisations to share the message to end the culture of condoning violence.

In 2017 we supported a visit to Broome by Charlie King, well known NT Indigenous broadcaster and founder of the No More community campaign against Aboriginal family violence, which included hosting a business breakfast to promote the No More campaign and encourage clubs, businesses and other organisations to create their own FDV prevention plan.

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