



**Women's Domestic Violence**  
Court Advocacy Service NSW Inc

**Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee:  
Inquiry into the Delivery of National Outcome 4 of the National Plan to Reduce Violence  
Against Women and Their Children and the service provided by the 1800 RESPECT  
Domestic and Sexual Violence National Counselling Service.**

WDVCAS NSW appreciate the opportunity to provide a submission into the senate Finance and Public Administration Committee's inquiry into the Delivery of National Outcome 4 of the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Their Children in particular the service provided by the 1800 RESPECT Domestic and Sexual Violence National Counselling Service.

The Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Services NSW (WDVCAS NSW) is the peak, state wide organisation representing the 29 individual WDVCAS services across New South Wales, who support women and their children who are experiencing domestic violence. We support women who are seeking legal protection in the local and district courts and we support women and children at risk or harm or serious harm who are referred directly from Police following an incident of domestic or family violence. The Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Program also have four services which operate to support women and children in the Family Court. WDVCAS NSW operate from a human rights and feminist perspective to support better outcomes for women and children experiencing domestic and family violence.

WDVCAS services routinely refer clients to 1800 RESPECT and as professionals working in the area of violence prevention and response, workers also contact 1800 RESPECT for debriefing and counselling sessions, as a way of managing vicarious trauma.

WDVCAS NSW places great importance in the trauma specialist counselling provided by Rape and Domestic Violence Services Australia (R&DVSA), and are greatly appreciative of the support and service offered by this specialist women's organisation. We are therefore concerned by the proposed changes to 1800 RESPECT service delivery, particularly in relation to the quality of counselling moving forward.

Within this submission our concerns are raised according to the overarching themes of the inquiry's terms of reference.

**The adequacy and quality of counselling provided:**

**Privacy and confidentiality of clients**

- MHS has a poor record of maintaining the safety of client files. We are concerned that all organisations tendering for the 1800 RESPECT contract would have access to all of the client files.

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- We are also concerned that counsellors, as per the new contract, are not required to keep client file notes. This does not comply with commonly held practice requirements as outlined by many professional counselling associations, and could lead to significant gaps in service delivery for clients accessing and re-accessing 1800 RESPECT.
- We are also extremely concerned that phone recordings will be subject to subpoena without challenge. If this remains the case, our members will likely cease referring to 1800 RESPECT due to the significant risks this poses to our clients.

### Counselling model

- The R&DVSA Best Practice Manual for Specialised, Sexual, Domestic and Family Violence Counselling was first developed in 2004. The development of this evidence-based manual took two years, and drew on national and international literature and research and best practice regarding working with people who are experiencing trauma as a result of domestic and family violence and sexual violence. The manual is routinely and extensively reviewed, and updated to ensure the implementation of best practice. Moving forward, MHS has outlined that the 1800 RESPECT service will be provided in line with their counselling manual. It is unclear whether this has been formally developed as yet, but we are extremely concerned that it will not be as robust or evidence-based as the current R&DVSA counselling model.
- We are concerned that the new model of service delivery will refer clients based on counsellor availability. This may mean that clients who call 1800 RESPECT on multiple occasions may speak to a different counsellor each time, thus impacting the consistency of service provision and possible outcomes for that individual. This will be compounded by the lack of case file notes for workers to refer to.
- WDVCS NSW is concerned that the model of service proposed by MHS does not include the re-contacts service, developed by R&DVSA. This service works with those who are experiencing complex trauma commonly resulting from sexual assault in childhood and further sexual and domestic violence in adolescence and adulthood. Currently 600 clients are engaged with this service with 200 being current users. This is a service for some of Australia's most violently treated and vulnerable people which will no longer exist under the MHS model and is of particular importance to women from regional, rural and remote areas, who often lack access to free and accessible trauma specialist counselling services.
- We are also concerned that the recording of phone calls will dissuade clients from engaging in the service and receiving the service they require.
- 1800 RESPECT is a service frequently utilised by our staff experiencing vicarious trauma or in the prevention of vicarious trauma. We are concerned that workers under the new model will not have adequate levels of expertise in this area and that our workers in an under-resourced sector will no longer have access to 24/7 support for vicarious trauma.

### Efficacy and appropriateness of the triage model adopted in 2016

- WDVCS NSW are concerned about the appropriateness of the triage model. We believe that all workers engaging with clients should be trauma specialists, because of the risk to clients if they are not supported appropriately, as well as the risk to workers of vicarious trauma when working with this vulnerable client group. We do not believe that the triage

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model will add to the efficacy of the service. We understand that the previous model worked well but was underfunded and therefore unable to meet demand.

### **The infrastructure required for the provision of the service:**

#### **The procurement arrangements for the service, including contractual and tender arrangements:**

- The WDV CAS NSW is extremely concerned about the 1800 RESPECT trauma counselling service being run by a for-profit private company, Medibank Health Solutions (MHS). We are concerned that the ethics of the company are not in line with other women's services, and that they are profiting from women's experiences of rape, sexual assault and domestic violence. We believe that the service can be better provided by an established and well trusted not-for-profit women's specialist service. The practice of specialist women's services is underpinned by a human rights and feminist framework, and is supported by a large body of international research.
- Where contracts are in place, it is important that there is no 'gag' clause, to ensure transparency.
- In general, WDV CAS NSW support longer contracts e.g. 5 years, with strict guidelines and practices to ensure quality of service delivery during the period. Longer contracts allow organisations to attract and retain workers, plan adequately and offer best quality service.

### **The engagement of staff and contractors:**

#### **Qualifications and working conditions**

- We believe it is important that all calls are answered by an appropriately trained trauma specialist with tertiary qualifications in either psychology, social work or counselling.
- Sexual assault and domestic and family violence are very complex areas, and require workers with appropriate qualifications, skills and experience. There could be risks involved for clients if they are not supported by trauma specialists, such as inappropriate responses to disclosure, inability to identify safety risks and incorrect approach to suicidality.
- With respect to working conditions, we are concerned about the apparent lack of clinical supervision to be offered to 1800 RESPECT counsellors. Clinical supervision is an integral part of best practice when working in the field of trauma.
- In addition, WDV CAS NSW is concerned that shift arrangements will mean that staff will not be offered permanent shifts, and may work from home. Professional standards and ethical obligations are applicable to those providing the services, and they should be supported in order to provide the best level of service to clients. It is not appropriate for workers to be performing this work from home due to the explicit, highly traumatic and sensitive nature of the calls, and the inability for calls from home to be adequately monitored, confidential and for workers to be adequately supported.
- It is our understanding that while MHS will provide coaching to counsellors, orientation and training processes are to be outsourced, with no information available about which service would be provided this training, or indeed what such training would entail. It is essential that training provided to 1800 RESPECT counsellors is of a high standard, and provided by specialist women's organisations with skills in trauma, sexual assault and domestic violence.

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#### **Evaluation arrangements for the service:**

- WDVCS NSW is unaware of the evaluation arrangements that have been announced for the new system
- The oversight and quality assurance undertaken in relation to those providing the service should be thorough, involving targets and number of calls delivered, but also take into account they type of service provided and the quality of the service. WDVCS is concerned that a for-profit model may prioritise the swift completion of a higher volume of calls, however we understand that people experiencing trauma require complex and varied interventions.
- WDVCS NSW do not believe that calls should be recorded for quality purposes, as we believe that the risk is too great that clients may be dissuaded from utilising the service, and that recordings could be subpoenaed and used negatively against client wishes. Other performance tracking mechanisms can be utilised to ensure that the counselling provided is of a high quality, such as supervision and other mechanisms currently utilised by R&DVSA.

#### **Best practice for domestic and sexual violence counselling:**

- As previously mentioned, R&DVSA spent many years developing, honing and monitoring their Best Practice Manual for domestic and sexual violence related counselling. WDVCS NSW places trust in this document and the best practice utilised by their service.
- In addition, in the Governments and Medibank Health Solution's own literature, the service currently provided by R&DVSA is regularly identified as a world class best practice counselling service. While other services provide a trauma informed lens, R&DVSA provide a thoroughly trauma specialist service. The counsellors employed by this organisation all have impeccable qualifications, skills, and experience, and are well supported to provide appropriate responses to those who are experiencing significant trauma.

WDVCAS NSW and our members from 29 services across NSW are concerned by the implications of no longer funding 1800 RESPECT to perform the trauma counselling for 1800 RESPECT, and more broadly by the privatising vulnerable people's experiences of rape and domestic violence to the for-profit sector. As outlines, we routinely utilise the service as well as refer to it, and will cease to do so if our concerns are not addressed. Expert trauma counsellors are difficult to source, and if the workers of R&DVSA are made redundant, it be a great loss to the sector and to people experiencing rape and domestic violence.

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