

# Project update: Supporting a culturally responsive and accountable family violence sector

**April 2024**

## Project intention

The project is grounded in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' right to self-determination and culturally responsive, inclusive, and accessible family violence services, wherever they seek support. Djirra and Safe and Equal are working to support non-Aboriginal specialist family violence services to take tangible action towards this, informed by deep engagement with Aboriginal communities.

## About this update

This update provides an overview of the approach to the work, emerging insights and the next steps. The project was initiated in February 2023, and the first stage is expected to be completed by August 2024.

## Project funding

This work is resourced by Safe and Equal as a demonstration of the accountability of the peak body and their non-Aboriginal member services under the *Dhelk Dja Partnership Agreement* which recognises non-Aboriginal service providers as critical partners in delivering culturally safe services. It is not a funded activity under Dhelk Dja.

## Project update

The work is guided by a Steering Group, co-chaired by Djirra and Safe and Equal with membership including two Aboriginal members of the Victim Survivor Advisory Council and representation from Elizabeth Morgan House, Boorndawan Willam Aboriginal Healing Service, Good Samaritans Inn, Centre Against Violence, and FVREE.

We reviewed the policy landscape, identifying the relevant policies, standards and expectations in relation to the provision of culturally responsive services by the specialist family violence sector.

We then entered a listening phase to deepen our understanding of the current strengths and short falls in the provision of services to Aboriginal people experiencing family violence. We yarned with five Aboriginal women who have accessed family violence services, 38 staff across 13 Aboriginal family violence services (ACCOs) and 52 staff across 38 non-Aboriginal family violence services.

In recognising that interpreting and analysing data and forming conclusions is not a neutral process, we held a collaborative sense making workshop with the Steering Group. This approach was designed to avoid an extractive approach to the research and to support efforts to uphold data sovereignty. Through this process, 33 insights emerged.

## Emerging insights

These insights will continue to be refined as we test and strengthen the findings with project stakeholders.

### Strengths

Reflecting on examples of good practice by non-Aboriginal services in the provision of support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people provides an opportunity to consider how these can be applied more consistently and adapted in different services and regions. Aboriginal people and services have been calling for improvements to practice for years, and this is an opportunity for non-Aboriginal services to come with openness and commitment to driving the significant change that is needed to meet the needs of Aboriginal people.

Examples of current practices that strengthen and enable culturally responsive practice, pathways and collaborations are detailed below.

**Some accommodation services respond to Aboriginal people's right to maintain or restore cultural connections by developing robust safety plans with residents and supporting them to spend time away from the refuge.**

*"We have Aboriginal clients that may travel to different parts of Victoria or Interstate for Sorry Business. We try to support them, understanding that they might need some time away from the accommodation and return... We try to implement some pretty robust safety planning that enables them to return to Country."* –non-Aboriginal family violence service

**Some non-Aboriginal services have protocols in place that afford Aboriginal people a degree of priority, enabling timely access to assessment and support. This includes**

**protocols with Aboriginal services for direct referral between the services.**

*"Sometimes if we wanna refer to [local non-Aboriginal refuge], we'll refer to Safe Steps, but also cc' them in. They have a great comms. If they haven't been able to accept a referral for whatever reason, normally they will say have you tried XYZ? Have you tried this place? they're just really great."* – Aboriginal family violence service

**Some services described examples of strong collaborative practices between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal family violence services enabled by open communication, clearly defined roles and flexibility.**

*"Sometimes we joint case manage clients with [non-Aboriginal specialist family violence service]. Generally, they will do background stuff and we will have a client focus, so we would do the home visits, we do phone contacts. [This works well when] there's communication between us and whoever the other caseworker is... being very open with the client that there is another service involved. They don't have to go through numerous people, they are just in the background because they have more resources and bigger team."* – Aboriginal family violence service

**The provision of culturally responsive services is enabled by leaders who communicate honestly, are willing to listen and are genuinely committed to implementing the change required.**

*"The authentic commitment in the leadership team has impressed me and that goes all the way to the board. That's not to say there haven't been some pretty challenging conversations along the way, but the willingness to listen... to adapt internalised ideas of what success and achievement look like has made it a much more authentic process."* – non-Aboriginal specialist family violence service

**Engaging in critical reflection at organisational leadership and practitioner**



**levels enables an examination of power structures and dynamics that can undermine the provision of inclusive and socially-just services.**

*"[Our service] has started cultural self-reflective sessions... have found these very powerful and create space to talk about Aboriginal history that we are not aware of.... It is never something that is finished but always working toward trying to be culturally safe."* – non-Aboriginal family violence service

**Many non-Aboriginal services are implementing frameworks to guide their organisations' journey towards anti-racist and culturally responsive and inclusive services.**

*"Our Reflect RAP has just been endorsed by the board. We've submitted it to Reconciliation Australia. The process of developing it has been rich, robust and really good, sometimes hard, conversations. What emerged from the process...there's a willingness and desire to do better for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients. People rely heavily on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues, in partner organisations or within our own organisations-cultural load falling to them and non-Indigenous workers expressed lack of confidence and fear that they'll get it wrong."* – non-Aboriginal family violence service

**Some non-Aboriginal services described demonstrating allyship with Aboriginal communities through amplifying their voices and standing alongside them in their advocacy against harmful systems.**

*"Because we do have really close relationships we elevate the voices of mob .. particularly when it comes to things like the Poccum's Law. We do a lot of advocacy and elevate First Nations voices."* - non-Aboriginal family violence service

**Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities as a non-Aboriginal person requires hard work to build trust over**

**time, consistent demonstrations of cultural humility and self-reflection, and accountability and transparency, particularly in response to feedback.**

*"We are relational. Working in an ACCO, or anywhere with Aboriginal people. There's a responsibility in coming to work here. You need insights into your own behaviour and your impact on others."* – Aboriginal family violence service.

## Gaps

In identifying gaps and problems with service provision by non-Aboriginal family violence services, we aim to understand the practices and processes across the sector, while also making visible the strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. While for many people, this content will not be surprising, please read with care. It is a reminder that we live and work within oppressive white structures and colonial systems, and it is through the generosity of Aboriginal women and services, that non-Aboriginal people can understand these more deeply.

Examples of gaps that weaken culturally responsive practice, pathways and collaborations are detailed below.

## Aboriginal Self-Determination

**Without meaningful investment, Aboriginal-led frameworks get lost in the cycle of reform and policy making and their impact is never fully realised.**

*"If there's not a consistent set of guidelines for people to invest their time and energy into, how can we guarantee any kind of consistency or accountability across the non-Indigenous service sector? It feels like lost opportunity."* – non-Aboriginal family violence service

**The Aboriginal definition of family violence is not consistently embedded in practice of non-Aboriginal services.**



*“[There’s a] narrow definition of family violence, not the Dhelk Dja definition, even though that’s what it says on their website... there’s a disconnect between the definition and what happens in practice. We’ve had issues with our clients accessing [refuge] outside of that really narrow definition [of Intimate partner violence].”*  
– Aboriginal family violence service

**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are not always given the information they need to make an informed decision about the service they access. At times, choices are not upheld through assumptions or a lack of service capacity.**

*“People need to be given information on the type of support they can receive from a service. It’s not enough to ask ‘Do you want an Aboriginal service or mainstream?’, but what can they expect from the services and the type of support? People need to be given the opportunity to make an informed choice.”* – Aboriginal family violence service

## Practice and processes that are not flexible and person-centred

**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people look for signs of safety and inclusion, but actions speak louder than flags.**

*“I’m all for having flags displayed but it’s about the culture of the staff as a collective and how they interact with Aboriginal and Islander clients.”* – Aboriginal practitioner in a non-Aboriginal service.

**Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have distrust of non-Aboriginal services. It takes time to earn, build and maintain trust.**

*“Using a black service, the support and the caring is automatic .. our services nurture our people. Where white services, it’s a completely different feel all together. I feel awkward walking into a white service, to be honest. I feel there is no cultural feeling. It doesn’t matter what black service I walk into I know that there’s an Auntie or an Uncle or Cousin that’s always*

*going to be there for me at the end. Coming into white services, you don’t know who [you] can trust. Trust is a big issue, not just with me, but many of our people.”*– Aboriginal woman

**Some non-Aboriginal services are not always confident to explore community connections and understand their impact risk, safety and protective factors. This is a missed opportunity to build relationships and provide tailored support to Aboriginal people.**

*“Especially the importance of understanding community...the connections that this person has because when we talk about family violence for Aboriginal families, we know that kinship structures can be a little bit different, a lot stronger, more extended family, all those extra connections. But that can come with ...more risk as much as it can bring protecting factors as well.”* –Aboriginal family violence service

**For non-Aboriginal services, working at pace can inhibit flexible, person-centred and culturally responsive practice. It elevates other concerns (e.g. managing demand, targets, organisational processes) over the needs and rights of Aboriginal people experiencing family violence.**

*“Being able to get information from informal yarnning as opposed to having to rely on women having to specifically articulate exactly how a non-Aboriginal service wants to hear that information.”* – Aboriginal family violence service

## Systemic collusion

**Non-Aboriginal services are working on unceded Aboriginal land, in places, spaces, and contexts that cause/d direct harm to Aboriginal communities.**

*“We work from the Queen Victorian Women Centre.. white folks that come in and say. ‘Ohh I was born here.’ And mob had to give birth on the balcony because they weren’t allowed into the hospital. There’s a lot of harms associated for even the physical building, in itself is not*

*a safe space for folks to be.” –non-Aboriginal family violence service*

**Aboriginal women often delay seeking help from services due to legitimate and realistic fears of child removal. While specialist family violence services have a history of a rights-based advocacy with statutory agencies to uphold the rights of women, this is not always reflected in the experiences of Aboriginal women accessing these services. The establishment of the Orange Door network has also contributed to perceptions that position the specialist service sector in alignment or collusion with statutory agencies - particularly child protection and police - that continue to place the blame and responsibility for addressing the risk and harm to their children on mum, rather than the person using violence.**

*“The odds are all stacked against us. We’re a black family. We’re going through family violence.... you want to get out, you want to get the help. But the first thing we always worry about is our babies. The minute we disclose the fact that we’re gone through family violence, the department is notified. It took me six years to even tell... contact the police... I wanted out of the situation I was living in, but I was too scared because my babies. In the end, I lost them anyway... hold on for as long as I could and still couldn’t protect my children.” - Aboriginal woman*

**There is often a reliance from non-Aboriginal services on Police which does not acknowledge of the historical and ongoing harms to Aboriginal community caused by the justice and legal systems.**

*“There’s this reliance on police in safety planning or police intervention... doesn’t acknowledge the history of police, and what it can mean for people if they are the one to phone police. Mainstream wonder why they won’t get an IVO, but they’re scared to ring police ...and the Courts are not kind to the women. They need other ways that’s not calling police.” – Aboriginal family violence service*

**Aboriginal services described experiences of some non-Aboriginal services failing to enact anti-oppressive and trauma informed practices and labelling Aboriginal people.**

*“Some workers [say]... “she got aggressive”. Mainstream services are good at holding people to account for use of oppressive or blaming language about women. But when it comes to Black women, they won’t challenge their language. Find other language to say what’s happening – she’s frustrated, upset, disappointed. We’re sick of hearing it labelled whatever suits their words.” – Aboriginal family violence service*

**Regardless of whether service rules are intended to keep women safe, any requirements that Aboriginal women disconnect from community are often unrealistic and may harm them and result in them leaving the service.**

*“We bend the rules because the system ...all these services are set up without the understanding of the needs of Aboriginal clients. We really have to take the lead from them....[examples include] Curfews.. Staying out... people have Sorry Business... visitors because there’s a need for family at a certain point in their life.” –non-Aboriginal family violence service*

## Uncoordinated responses

**Aboriginal services experience a ‘handballing’ of the support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to Aboriginal services.**

*“When [non-Aboriginal services] handball a little too quick rather than giving [the Aboriginal person] options. They see an Aboriginal person and are so quick to send them to an Aboriginal service rather than taking time to understand what they want and need, and if this is the best service for that. Stop panicking when Aboriginal people walks in. Try and provide service like anyone else .. not put them in the too hard basket.” – Aboriginal family violence service*



**At times, a lack of facilitated referral and handover between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal family violence service creates challenges for providing adequate support and ultimately impacts the Aboriginal person's support and safety.**

*"When Safe Steps or Orange Door close, they'll send through the MARAM and when you try to speak to a worker it's kind of like 'What? They're closed now.' You can't really have those conversations sometimes... It's often just hard to actually get in contact with the worker or understand who the worker was."* – Aboriginal family violence service

**For the intent of coordinated and collaborative responses to be realised, it needs to be underpinned by two-way relationships, trust, good will and accountability. Aboriginal family violence services are not adequately resourced to respond to secondary consultations.**

*"We do our best to make contact with local ACCOs. We have had some really successful secondary consults that have brought in our thinking around scenarios. Sometimes establishing contact is difficult. We always attempt to, but it depends on whether or not we're able to connect." - non-Aboriginal family violence service*

**Aboriginal family violence services have experiences of extractive dynamics from non-Aboriginal family violence services and of having their expertise undermined.**

*"It's exhausting. Why do we constantly have to be fighting. We're sick and tired of not being respected or treated on the same level. You want to talk about flags and I want to talk about risk and safety of Aboriginal women. We're experts in that.... You don't occupy spaces where you aren't welcome." - Aboriginal family violence service*

**Many non-Aboriginal services recognise the critical importance having strong relationships with Aboriginal services, but**

**are unsure how to build and maintain reciprocal relationships that can withstand staff changes.**

*"We are looking to build relationships with Aboriginal services and want to make sure we are offering things in the region that's of value to them... reciprocal, mutually beneficial relationship, offering something of value or need... but not super confident how to negotiate that so looking for advice or insights for building those relationships. Feeling nervous about doing something wrong and accidentally damaging a relationship." – non-Aboriginal family violence service*

**Aboriginal family violence services have inconsistent experiences accessing resources managed by non-Aboriginal family violence services, in particular Personal Safety Initiative packages.**

*"We have mixed experiences with PSI coordinators across the regions. Some that are really hard work with and make you jump through hoops 'the camera will be too expensive, are you sure that's wise?' or experience of condescending questions 'do you think that's in the best interests of the client?' – not done in a way to unpack or tease out further information. It's done to say they know better than you. Whereas some go above and beyond to help." – Aboriginal family violence service*

**Some Aboriginal services working with men using violence report resistance from some non-Aboriginal services in response to information sharing requests.**

*"There's hesitance to share with us in relation to perpetrators. Occasionally we'll get some pushback in relation to information that we might be requesting. Particularly if you get a little bit old school view. It's vastly improved compared to what it was prior to the legislation coming in but we do come across some obstacles when we're trying to manage some risk." – Aboriginal family violence service*

## Workforce capability and sustainability

**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working in non-Aboriginal family violence services experience colonial load and could be better supported by their organisation.**

*“It’s a massive load for them. It becomes every stupid little thing to do with culture is suddenly your problem when you have one Aboriginal person who works in a non-Aboriginal organisation... but all of us are still constrained by our own organisational culture and demands and guidelines so it still limits the ability for somebody to stick within their practices”. – Aboriginal family violence service*

**Some non-Aboriginal services allow worries about doing the wrong thing to impede action. Ultimately, it is community that wear the burden of service’s lack of confidence.**

*“I get the fear around it. People were so scared of saying and doing the wrong thing. But that’s not my problem and it’s not our community’s problem. Do whatever the hell you gotta do to train yourself up because our community shouldn’t happen to be the ones that are paying for your lack of confidence in this space.” - Aboriginal family violence service*

**There is a lack of Aboriginal-led training tailored for the needs of the specialist family violence sector. For training to result in meaningful and sustainable change, learning must be reflected in organisational policy, practice guidance, processes and position descriptions.**

*“Tailored training to meet the diverse needs of staff, including those who are newer arrivals to Australia to build their knowledge and understanding... with a focus on colonisation, trauma-informed care and intersectionality.”- non-Aboriginal family violence service*

## Accountability

**To Aboriginal services, accountability means being open to feedback, acknowledging**

**mistakes, and importantly, demonstrating change or describing how change will be achieved.**

*“I don’t see much accountability...I sent an email saying things could have been done different and they sort of acknowledged emailing back saying, ‘yeah, we understand it could have been different.’ But since then, nothing has changed. It’s still the exact same. So there was acknowledgement. No change. No accountability”. – Aboriginal family violence service*

**There is a lack of accountability mechanisms embedded within essential systems frameworks.**

*“MARAM relies on collaborative practice. However, there is no requirement to engage or participate... lack of accountability to drive the level of engagement that’s needed. It’s not embedded through whole of practice accountability, without which it continues to be ad hoc in nature” – non-Aboriginal family violence service.*

**Strengthening the cultural responsiveness of the family violence sector is occurring within the existing colonial systems.**

*“Cultural responsiveness is just adapting and maintaining the dominant colonial system. The onus should be to decolonise frameworks” – non-Aboriginal family violence service.*

## What’s next?

**Commitment to action and accountability**

Having listened to the insights generously shared by Aboriginal women and service staff, it is now the responsibility of non-Aboriginal services to respond with tangible action. This project seeks to induce action that will build confidence in Aboriginal services that they have been heard and change will follow, while recognising Aboriginal services and individuals who are not responsible for correcting the wrongs of colonisation. The next stage of this project is to support non-Aboriginal family



violence services to design a collective commitment to action. Building on the collaborative approach to date, the commitment will be designed through workshops with sector leaders, with guidance from the steering group.

### **Sector forum**

Safe and Equal are sponsoring an event in August in collaboration with Djirra. The event will invite the specialist family violence sector to consider what has been learned during this project, recognise their part in an ongoing journey and commit to working collaboratively for positive change.

### **Get in touch**

Anna Wark is the Family Violence Project Lead based at Djirra and welcomes any questions you may have or opportunities to discuss your organisation's involvement ph: 0447 404 334 [awark@djirra.org.au](mailto:awark@djirra.org.au).

