



19 April 2021

Hon. Josh Frydenberg MP, Treasurer
Hon. Senator Marise Payne, Minister for Women
Hon. Senator Anne Ruston, Minister for Women's Safety
Hon. Senator Jane Hume, Minister for Women's Economic Security
Hon. Senator Amanda Stoker, Assistant Minister for Women
Contacted via email

RE: Extension of funding to address impact of COVID-19 on services responding to family violence and sexual assault in Victoria.

Dear Ministers

The three peak bodies for services responding to family violence and sexual assault in Victoria – Domestic Violence Victoria (DV Vic) and Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria (DVRCV),¹ No to Violence (NTV), and Sexual Assault Services Victoria (SAS Vic) – call on the Australian Government to extend the initial \$150 million COVID-19 funding provided to support Australians experiencing domestic, family and sexual violence due to the fallout from coronavirus during 2020.²

The interrelationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and family and sexual violence has been well documented. Monash Gender and Family Violence Prevention Centre research found that the pandemic had contributed to an increase in the frequency and severity of violence against women and children.³ The Queensland University of Technology similarly found that 86% of family violence case workers reported an

¹ Domestic Violence Victoria (DV Vic) and the Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria (DVRCV) have merged to form a new peak body for specialist family violence services (SFVSs) responding to victim survivors in Victoria.

² Prime Minister of Australia. (2020) *\$1.1 Billion to Support More Mental Health, Medicare and Domestic Violence Services*. Australian Government. <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/11-billion-support-more-mental-health-medicare-and-domestic-violence-services-0>

³ Pfitzner, N., Fitz-Gibbon, K. and True, J. (2020). *Responding to the 'shadow pandemic': practitioner views on the nature of and responses to violence against women in Victoria, Australia during the COVID-19 restrictions*. Monash Gender and Family Violence Prevention Centre. https://bridges.monash.edu/articles/report/Responding_to_the_shadow_pandemic_practitioner_views_on_the_nature_of_and_responses_to_violence_against_women_in_Victoria_Australia_during_the_COVID-19_restrictions/12433517

increase in the complexity of client needs during the pandemic, and 62% reported higher rates of demand.⁴ In their submission to the *Inquiry into family, domestic and sexual violence*, ANROWS stated that evidence suggests that ‘the health, economic and social crises that have followed COVID-19 have exacerbated pre-existing violence and led to the intensification of certain tactics of violence.’⁵ The Australian Institute of Criminology found that two thirds of women who experienced physical or sexual violence from a current or former cohabiting partner since the start of the pandemic experienced the onset or escalation of violence and abuse during the pandemic.⁶ Of those women in a cohabiting relationship, 8.2% experienced physical violence and 4.2% experienced sexual violence.⁷ The likelihood of experiencing coercive control was 1.4 times higher for women from non-English speaking backgrounds than for women from English-speaking backgrounds.⁸ In research conducted during the early stages of the pandemic, it was found that one in 10 LGBTIQ+ respondents were at risk of domestic or family violence.⁹ SAS Vic is aware that sexual assault occurring in the community and within families was not reported and women and children were living with perpetrators without any ability to report or disclose the abuse occurring.

The pandemic also changed patterns of perpetrator use of violence and perpetrator risk. DV Vic and DVRCV members reported higher levels of surveillance of communication devices and that perpetrators were weaponizing the pandemic by claiming to have COVID-19 or threatening to expose children to COVID-19.

The initial Coronavirus Domestic Violence Support Package provided a vital boost to family and sexual violence services during a critical period. The allocation \$130 million to state and territory governments was particularly useful, as it allowed each jurisdiction to disburse funds according to local priorities and systems. Victoria received \$31.5 million, which went towards frontline family violence and sexual assault victim survivor support services, including crisis responses, case management and counselling, and responses to diverse groups such as culturally and linguistically diverse and LGBTIQ+ communities and culturally safe responses for Aboriginal victim-survivors. Funding was also disseminated to local perpetrator interventions, including those targeting diverse cohorts and Aboriginal people who are using violence. Finally, the funding also supported sector capability building and workforce development during the pandemic period.

In addition to the funding provided to Victoria, the Men’s Referral Service (MRS) received Commonwealth funding for additional telephone support and counselling to men residing in every state and territory in Australia. This enabled MRS to significantly expand the capacity of the service to respond to calls and make referrals nationally.¹⁰ This funding also enabled the development and implementation of new models of

⁴ Carrington, K., Morley, C., Warren, S., Harris, B., Vitis, L., Ball, M., Clarke, J. & Ryan, V. (2020). *The impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Domestic and Family Violence Services, Australia*. QUT. <https://research.qut.edu.au/centre-for-justice/wp-content/uploads/sites/304/2020/11/Research-Report-Series-November-2020-COVID.pdf>

⁵ ANROWS, *Submission 132*, p.34.

https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Social_Policy_and_Legal_Affairs/Familyviolence/Submissions

⁶ Boxhall, H., Morgan, A. & Brown, R. (2020). *The prevalence of domestic violence among women during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Australian Institute of Criminology, <https://www.aic.gov.au/publications/sb/sb28>

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ Gibson, M., Kassisieh, G., Lloyd, A. & McCann, B. (2020). *There’s No Safe Place At Home: Domestic and family violence affecting LGBTIQ+ people*. Equality Australia & Centre for Family Research and Evaluation, Drummond Street Services. <https://equalityaustralia.org.au/resources/dvreport/>

¹⁰ This funding has recently been extended for a further 12 months.

support for men using violence and/or controlling behaviour for those on men's behaviour change program waitlists during the pandemic or who have become concerned about their behaviour during the pandemic. This funding is not ongoing.

While each of the three sectors we represent benefitted from the initial funding during a crucial period, the impacts of COVID-19 are far from over. The pandemic has significantly impacted on the three sectors we represent, with each reporting a significant rise in demand for services from victim-survivors of family and sexual violence and an increase in complexity of cases. The number of family violence incidents recorded by Victoria Police increased by 6.7% in 2019-2020 compared to 2018-2019, resulting in increased referrals to both specialist family violence services for victim-survivors and MRS. Between January and December 2020, the number of Victoria Police referrals to MRS increased by 14% compared to the year before. Likewise, the number of reported sexual offences increased by 10% between December 2019 and December 2020,¹¹ and there was a 68% increase in referrals to MRS for sexual incidents compared to the same period 12 months earlier. Based on data from September 2020, NTV reports that wait lists for men's behaviour change programs have increased to 40 weeks, with an average of two and a half months. This is on the back of already unsustainably high levels of demand in critically under-resourced sectors, leading to many services reporting that the additional funding provided by both the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments was absorbed by pre-existing unmet demand and growing waiting lists for support.

As Australia's recovery from the pandemic unfolds, its full impact on the frequency and severity of family violence and sexual assault is still to be realised and the true extent of demand for services is still unfolding – research has shown that help-seeking for family and sexual assault post-disaster is greatest during the recovery phase.¹² This will be exacerbated by the unequal distribution of the impacts of the pandemic based on gender, race and age,¹³ as well as the end of Jobkeeper and reduction in the pandemic Jobseeker rate. This is also occurring at a time when Australia is undergoing a reckoning on the extent of gender inequality and violence against women which is also driving increasing demand for crisis, case management and counselling services. In particular, this is resulting in increased demand for specialist sexual assault services in Victoria, with SAS Vic members reporting increases between 35% and 75% in the past two to three months. This has resulted in waiting list for specialist counselling services increasing to up to 6 months in some services. MRS is also reporting a noticeable increase in contacts from men worried about their sexual behaviours.

The services that make up the Victorian family violence and sexual assault sectors responded rapidly to the crisis created by the pandemic to ensure service continuity was maintained. Their ability to meet the challenges posed has been underpinned by a commitment to the safety and wellbeing of victim-survivors of family violence and sexual assault. Services are concerned that when the initial package of Commonwealth COVID-19 funding ends in June, the complexity of issues facing victim-survivors as a result of COVID-19 will

¹¹ Crime Statistics Agency. (2021). *Recorded Offences*. Crime Statistics Agency. Retrieved April 16, 2021 from <https://www.crimestatistics.vic.gov.au/crime-statistics/latest-victorian-crime-data/recorded-offences-2>

¹² Parkinson, D., & Zara, C. (2011). *'The way he tells it ...' Relationships after Black Saturday*. Gender & Disaster Pod. <https://www.genderanddisaster.com.au/info-hub/research-resources/>

¹³ Australian Government. (2020). *Gendered impact of COVID-19*. Workplace Gender Equality Agency. Retrieved April 15, 2021 from <https://www.wgea.gov.au/publications/gendered-impact-of-covid-19>; Mooi-Reci, I., & Risman, B. J. (2021). *The Gendered Impacts of COVID-19: Lessons and Reflections*. *Gender & Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08912432211001305>

continue, as will increasing demand for support from services and an already stretched workforce. Therefore, we urge the Australian Government to commit to further resourcing specialist family violence and sexual assault services to respond to the ongoing impacts of the pandemic. We note that this call is supported by Recommendation 13 of the *Inquiry into family, domestic and sexual violence*.¹⁴

While a commitment to this ongoing funding cannot wait, DV Vic and DVRCV, NTV and SAS Vic look forward to further discussions regarding responding to family violence and sexual assault in disasters and emergencies as part of consultations on the new National Plan.

We look forward to receiving your response at your earliest convenience.

Yours sincerely



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DV Vic & DVRCV



Jacqui Watt
Chief Executive Officer
No to Violence



Karen Hogan
Chair, Sexual Assault Services
Victoria

Cc. The Hon. Gabrielle Williams, Minister for the Prevention of Family Violence, Victoria.

¹⁴ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy & Legal Affairs. (2021). *Inquiry into family, domestic & sexual violence*. Commonwealth of Australia.
https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Social_Policy_and_Legal_Affairs/Familyviolence/Report