

**2021**

**THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE  
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

**Safer Families Annual Statement 2021**

Presented by  
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June 2021



Today, I am tabling the fifth annual Safer Families Statement. This statement is an opportunity to share with you the progress made on initiatives that support those in our community affected by domestic and family violence.

This year we have continued to progress reforms during the ongoing uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Understanding the emerging impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on people who experience domestic and family violence is ongoing.

Australian and international research has shown that some people will have experienced domestic and family violence for the first time during the pandemic. For others, violence they were already experiencing will have increased in frequency and severity during this time.

I recognise the ongoing impact of the pandemic on those who are experiencing domestic and family violence and the ongoing and significant impact of COVID-19 on the services that support the community.

In April 2020, the ACT Government committed \$3 million in funding for specialist homelessness and domestic and family violence sectors to expand service capacity and relieve additional pressure arising from COVID-19.

The government also provided \$1 million in grant funding via the Provider Support Fund to support community services organisations to adopt innovative ways to conduct essential business so providers could continue operations remotely.

I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the extraordinary work of all frontline services to maintain and even expand their services during COVID-19 whether it was providing online chat services, phone consultations

or other remote meetings - these services stayed open and continued to support the community.

On a national level, the Commonwealth Government recognised the increase of complexity and severity of domestic and family violence through the National Partnership Agreement on COVID-19 Responses. Funding supported a range of initiatives to respond to increases in domestic, family and sexual violence as a result of COVID-19, and to ensure services can continue to support those who need it most.

While the ACT continues to be well placed to respond to any additional impacts of COVID-19, we will continue to work closely with the sector to plan and prepare for the impact of COVID-19 on community members.

I would now like to highlight some of the significant achievements the ACT Government and community have made over the past twelve months.

### *An integrated Response*

We know that domestic and family violence requires an integrated, collaborative response from government and non-government service providers.

Integration is needed at a service level so that frontline services can easily work together to address the needs of families experiencing violence.

Integration is also needed at a system-wide level so the approach is consistent, considered and can respond to all those affected by domestic and family violence.

At a service level, we already have a number of examples of integrated service responses. Led by the Victims of Crime Commission, the Family Violence Safety Action Pilot is providing intensive case management for high-risk and complex cases of domestic and family violence. After less than a year of operation, the service is providing significant insights into how to effectively manage high-risk situations of domestic and family violence, prevent escalation to a point of crisis and to provide the specific support services needed by both the victim-survivor and perpetrator.

The pilot is supporting some of the highest risk cases of domestic and family violence in the community. Cases in which there is sexual, physical, emotional financial and psychological abuse. Cases in which support is needed from across the service sector to provide safe accommodation, support for children, interventions for perpetrators, legal assistance, and health services.

The pilot provides intensive case management, working with individuals and their support services. The pilot provides not only case coordination but also advice and support for services. The pilot is also providing case coordination and advice where other services are providing the intensive support but still require assistance to navigate the system for their clients.

This kind of intensive response is not needed for all cases of domestic and family violence but when the risk of serious harm is high, we need system and services to work together to keep families safe.

### *The Family Safety Hub*

The ACT Government is committed to a new approach to domestic and family violence. In addition to funding existing frontline services, the government has

committed to trialling new ideas, service supports and new or improved services to find what works for the ACT.

The Family Safety Hub is key to the delivery of this process. The hub has led the delivery of the ACT's health justice partnerships, upskilling the community sector to recognise and respond to financial abuse, consultations with young people experiencing family violence and the ideas and initiatives that are emerging from that consultation.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, the Family Safety Hub delivered a targeted campaign to make sure those in need knew services were operating during the pandemic. Through digital, social and print media, the message was clear - help is available, domestic and family violence services are open and if you need to leave an unsafe situation, COVID-19 restrictions do not apply.

### *Health Justice Partnerships*

Just over two years ago, we introduced a new service to the ACT. Three health justice partnerships are providing a unique style of wrap-around care and early intervention for people that are at greater risk of domestic and family violence – pregnant women and new parents.

The health and legal care provided through the partnerships is timely, trusted and accessible. Help is available when and where it is needed.

For many of the partnership clients, it has been this ease of access that has meant they have been able to get help. The majority of partnership clients have never sought help from a lawyer before, yet they have an average of four legal issues each. The most common of these issues relate to domestic and family violence.

The partnerships have become an important service in the healthcare system. The integration of a legal service with healthcare recognises the interaction between health problems and legal issues, particularly how detrimental domestic and family violence can be on mental health.

Most importantly the health justice partnerships are helping women find safety.

Partnership lawyers are representing victim-survivors in court and helping them to:

- seek Family Violence Orders to exclude the perpetrator from their home;
- manage child custody and support issues;
- find emergency housing or financial support; and
- understand visa issues and more.

When face-to-face consultations became impossible during COVID-19, the partnerships continued operating, meeting with clients on the phone and online, even seeking Family Violence Orders over the phone.

As the pandemic progressed, our Emergency Department saw an increase in the presentation of serious physical injuries caused by incidents of domestic and family violence. We extended the health justice partnership into the Emergency Department to provide immediate legal assistance to these very vulnerable clients.

I want to share with you one very powerful example of how the Health Justice Partnership works to make people safer. Last year, a woman who was seriously

injured in a domestic and family violence incident presented at an Emergency Department here in Canberra. With the support of a Health Justice Partnership lawyer, the woman was able to obtain a Family Violence Order via phone that day, which enabled her to return home safely to her children while the perpetrator was excluded from the residence.

Over 500 people have been assisted through the ACT's health justice partnerships. Considering that many of them had never previously sought help, this shows the value of this service for the community in providing early intervention and hopefully preventing a dangerous point of crisis.

### *Avoiding housing and financial crisis*

Financial abuse is a feature of domestic and family violence that can be hard to recognise, yet it can have a significant and grave impact.

Financial abuse restricts the options a victim has to find safety, be financially stable and be able to support themselves and their family.

Financial abuse can trap a victim in an unsafe situation they simply cannot escape.

For the service sector, being able to recognise the signs and ask the right questions is key to uncovering the abuse and providing the right support.

There are services and financial supports available for those affected by financial abuse, but the missing link has been the understanding of financial abuse in the service sector.

In partnership with Care Financial, there has been investment in developing specialised training for frontline services. This training provides staff in these services the ability to recognise financial abuse and then to refer a victim to the right service at the right time.

### *Hearing the missing voices of children and young people*

As I have spoken about before in the Assembly, the Domestic Violence Prevention Council delivered an important report to government about the needs of children and young people exposed to domestic and family violence.

This report shone a light on the unique needs of young people. They are affected differently than the adults around them. The report showed we need to change the way we design and deliver responses to meeting the needs of young people in the community.

It was an important and long overdue call-to-action.

I would now like to share with you the progress we have made towards the first of the recommendations from the Domestic Violence Prevention Council – that is putting the voices of children and young people at the heart of service design and delivery.

Last year, I was pleased to talk about the unique consultation undertaken by the Children and Young People Commissioner and the Family Safety Hub with young people in the community who have experienced domestic and family violence.

Seventy young people took part in these conversations. Many of them said they had never had the chance to talk about their experiences before.

The insights that have come from these consultations have highlighted the complexity of the experiences young people have when they are living with family violence.

Young people affected by family violence are working really hard all the time. They navigate situations adults would find difficult.

We heard from young people that the service system – designed by and for adults – does not meet their needs.

Sadly, it is exceedingly rare for young people to be directly consulted about their experiences of domestic and family violence. It is even rarer for them to be asked about what services and supports could help them.

We have changed this and now must act.

The insights from these consultations are informing new responses in the service sector and new ways of thinking about supporting young people.

We are working with frontline workers in the youth sector to make sure they can meet the expectations of young people. It is important people working with children and young people directly can recognise and respond appropriately to those experiencing domestic and family violence.

In addition, we are also embarking on work to:

- Build awareness of domestic and family violence amongst young people and direct them to the right supports, should they need them.
- Increase the awareness across the community of how domestic and family violence impacts on children and young people.

- Build the capacity of the sector to deliver responses to children and young people that recognises them as victims of domestic and family violence - in their own right.

The effects of domestic and family violence on children and young people are profound and continues long after the violence has ended. The development and delivery of new and improved services is an ongoing priority for the ACT Government.

The Domestic Violence Prevention Council recommended government increase the number and availability of therapeutic services for children. They also stressed the need for clearer referral pathways.

The Office for Mental Health has reviewed the services that support the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people. This has led to the development of an 'Online Youth Navigation Portal' that will soon provide individualised online and phone services for young people to support them with their mental health and wellbeing. Friends, family, and those who work with or support these young people, will also be able to use the navigation portal. Young people living with family violence told us about the difficulties they face finding supports and services, and this portal should assist them to find this assistance more easily.

The Domestic Violence Prevention Council also recommended work with the ACT's justice system to build the momentum around children and young people affected by domestic and family violence.

An ACT intermediary scheme has been established to assist children and young people from the initial point of police interview through to giving evidence at trial. Being supported throughout has the potential to improve children and

young people's experience of the justice system, while aiming to minimise any additional stress and trauma.

### *Domestic and Family Violence Training Strategy*

I would now like to share with you that the commitment to deliver domestic and family violence training to ACT Government staff is making great progress. I am pleased to report that all directorates have now commenced delivery of this training.

This training will equip government staff with the skills they need to recognise and respond to clients and colleagues experiencing domestic and family violence. The training is well underway with Foundation, Managers, Tier 1 and Tier 2 training levels available to all public servants, and we are receiving very positive feedback from frontline staff about this initiative.

This is so important because we know that those seeking help for family violence will turn to those they trust, so we need to make sure no matter where or who they turn to, staff are ready and skilled to respond.

In early 2020, in response to COVID-19, the face-to-face training was revised to include online approaches to delivery. Since lockdown has ended, we have been able to move back into a co-delivery model of face-to-face and online delivery.

Expert providers have now been contracted to deliver 87 face-to-face training sessions over the next eight months to public servants. The expert training providers include Women's Legal Centre, Domestic Violence Crisis Service and YWCA Canberra.

As part of the broader training strategy, Canberra Health Services is implementing the evidence-based Strengthening Health Responses to Family Violence model. In preparing the training and policy, Canberra Health Services has incorporated the draft ACT Domestic and Family Violence Risk Assessment Framework.

As part of implementing this approach, Canberra Health Services has established Strengthening Health Responses to Family Violence governance and working groups, developed policy and workplace procedures and importantly, delivered face-to-face and online training to strengthen organisational capability to respond to domestic and family violence.

Now that the delivery of domestic and family violence training is making significant progress, the ACT Government has engaged the Gendered Violence Research Network at the University of New South Wales to develop an evaluation framework for the Training Strategy.

### *We don't Shoot Our Wounded*

Late last year, the Domestic Violence Prevention Council's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Reference Group convened a community consultation to consider what recommendations would be made to government to shape our response to the We Don't Shoot Our Wounded Report.

The Reference Group has provided an initial four priority recommendations to the ACT Government that outline key focus areas for the development of services and supports for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

## *ACT Domestic and Family Violence Risk Assessment and Management Framework*

Shared language, understanding and a consistent approach to risk assessment is vital to identifying, prioritising, and responding to domestic and family violence risk. This approach helps to keep victims safe while holding perpetrators to account.

The ACT Government has continued to build this shared understanding through the development of a draft Domestic and Family Violence Risk Assessment and Management Framework.

The framework is included in the whole-of-government training strategy to ensure consistency across government and is being used as the foundation for the Family Violence Safety Action Pilot. The framework is incorporated in the domestic and family violence training, which the alcohol and other drug sector is implementing.

This consistency of language, understanding and approach is a fundamental piece of developing a consistent and integrated domestic violence service model for the ACT. The framework has been tested prior to its finalisation, including a maternal health service and the framework was reviewed by the drug and alcohol sector for consistency with their practices and approach.

A section in the framework on working with perpetrators of domestic and family violence has now been drafted and is currently with the perpetrator working group for final approval.

The results of framework testing and the development of the perpetrator section will be incorporated in preparation for the release of the final risk assessment framework this year.

### *Focus on Perpetrators*

I would now like to share with you some of the other work we are doing to respond to perpetrators.

While we must always strive to ensure there are supports for those impacted by violence, a focus on addressing perpetrators is crucial to preventing violence from happening in the first place.

The innovative Room4Change program run by Domestic Violence Crisis Service is one of Australia's only residential men's behaviour change programs and supports partners and children to stay safely in the home while men are engaged in the six-month program.

I am pleased to share that the preliminary evaluation of Room4Change has shown positive outcomes for participants and their families, and I look forward to the full evaluation when it is released this year.

In 2020, a Response to Perpetrators Working Group was established to progress two main areas of work:

- to create a set of principles and standards for Men's Behaviour Change Programs in the ACT and an accreditation process for those programs; and
- to develop the perpetrator section of the Domestic and Family Violence Risk Assessment and Management Framework.

I am pleased to report that the practice standards are currently in the final stages of development, and the working group is currently reviewing the section on working with perpetrators for inclusion in the Risk Assessment Framework.

The working group will soon commence developing next steps for responses to perpetrators, including consideration of an accreditation process for the practice standards for men's behaviour change programs.

An expert men's behaviour change organisation has been engaged to provide training for mainstream services on how to better identify and provide referrals for men who are using abuse in their relationships.

#### *Domestic and Family Violence Death Review*

There has also been significant progress on establishing the Domestic and Family Violence Death Review over the last 12 months.

This mechanism will review all domestic and family violence-related deaths and near lethal incidents in the ACT and advise on what is needed to prevent deaths and improve system-wide supports and services.

Work to establish a model for the Death Review is ongoing, with policy approval for the death review model now complete.

Legislative amendments to establish the Domestic and Family Violence Death Review and to enable information gathering powers are now progressing.

#### *National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Their Children*

At a national level, the ACT Government continues to contribute to a shared commitment with other governments across Australia to implement

*the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Their Children 2010–2022.*

The ACT is progressing well on the commitments made under the Fourth Action Plan of the National Plan. As the current National Plan comes to an end in 2022, myself and my colleagues in the National Cabinet Women’s Safety Taskforce are working towards developing the next National Plan.

In August 2020, the ACT Government made a submission to the Commonwealth Government House Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs Inquiry into Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence. This submission was an opportunity to influence the direction of the next National Plan and to share some of the insights gained as we progress our ambitious reform agenda.

#### *Responding to Sexual Assault in the ACT*

Finally, I would like to report on the ACT Government’s commitment to taking action to prevent and respond to sexual assault.

Women make up 86.6% of victims of sexual assault in the ACT and similar statistics are repeated across Australia.

The time has come for an evidence-based approach based on lived experience to inform work. The nature of sexual assault has changed over time and there will be work to determine what supports are currently in place across the system and where the gaps are to support victim-survivors.

The objective of this reform is to coordinate efforts across the community, the service sector, unions, and stakeholders to develop an effective, systemic, evidence-based response to sexual assault in the ACT.

To make sure this work progresses with the right representation and the right governance in place, three working groups will be established to focus on prevention, response, and law reform.

These groups comprise representatives from non-government organisations, unions, research bodies, the university sector and government representatives, who will set key priorities for future work and action by government.

These working groups will report into an overarching Sexual Assault Response Steering Committee to provide integrated comprehensive advice to government.

The ACT Government is committed to listening carefully to local experts to understand what the evidence shows us of what is already working well, where the gaps are and where we need build new programs of work.

As I have detailed today, the last year has seen us continue to deliver Safer Families initiatives and work with the community sector to reduce and prevent domestic and family violence.

I look forward to continuing this work to make Canberra a safer place for everyone as we move into the next phase of Safer Families that is inclusive of sexual assault reform.