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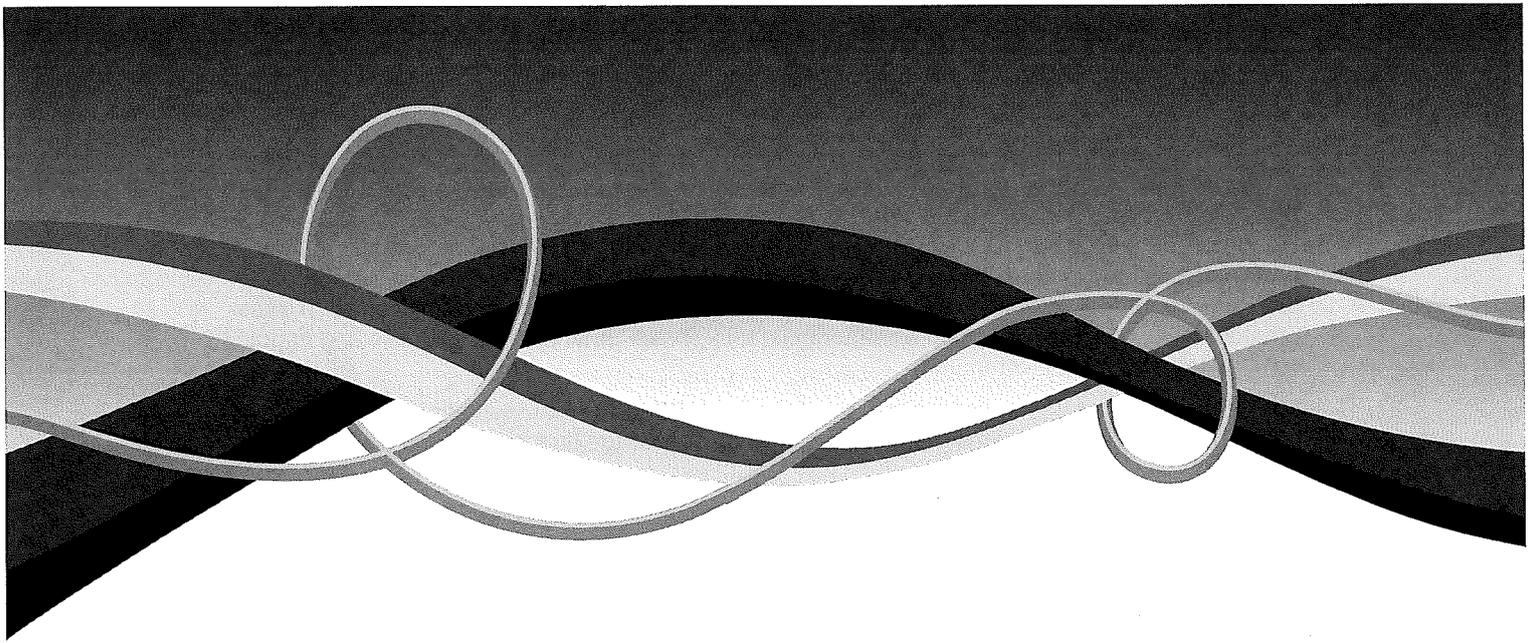
Mrs Giulia Jones MLA (Chair), Ms Bec Cody MLA (Deputy Chair), Ms Elizabeth Lee MLA,
Mr Chris Steel MLA

Inquiry into Domestic and Family Violence—Policy approaches and responses

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ACT Council of Social Service Inc.

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Submission to the

**Inquiry into Domestic and Family Violence –
Policy approaches and responses**

Standing Committee on Justice and Community Safety

September 2017

About ACTCOSS

ACTCOSS acknowledges Canberra has been built on the land of the Ngunnawal people. We pay respects to their Elders and recognise the strength and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and ongoing contribution to the ACT community.

The ACT Council of Social Service Inc. (ACTCOSS) is the peak representative body for not-for-profit community organisations, people living with disadvantage and low-income citizens of the Territory.

ACTCOSS is a member of the nationwide COSS network, made up of each of the state and territory Councils and the national body, the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS).

ACTCOSS' vision is to live in a fair and equitable community that respects and values diversity, human rights and sustainability and promotes justice, equity, reconciliation and social inclusion.

The membership of the Council includes the majority of community based service providers in the social welfare area, a range of community associations and networks, self-help and consumer groups and interested individuals.

ACTCOSS advises that this document may be publicly distributed, including by placing a copy on our website.

Contact Details

Phone: 02 6202 7200
Fax: 02 6288 0070
Address: Weston Community Hub, 1/6 Gritten St, Weston ACT 2611
Email: actcoss@actcoss.org.au
Web: www.actcoss.org.au
Director: Susan Helyar
Policy Officer: Eliza Moloney

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Table of contents

Acronyms	4
Introduction	5
Current policy approaches and responses	6
Funding issues and challenges	7

Acronyms

ACTCOSS	ACT Council of Social Service Inc.
ANU	Australian National University
NPAH	National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness
SHS	Specialist Homelessness Service

Introduction

The ACT Council of Social Service Inc. (ACTCOSS) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Standing Committee on Justice and Community Safety's Inquiry into Domestic and Family Violence—Policy approaches and responses.

ACTCOSS is the peak body for community organisations and people experiencing disadvantage in the ACT. We therefore have a strong interest in ensuring the safety of people experiencing domestic and family violence, including the delivery of support that adequately meets their immediate and long-term needs. In addition, we work closely with the women's services sector in the ACT, particularly through the ACT Women's Services Network. We are committed to ensuring the community sector is adequately resourced to provide the necessary services to women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence. We acknowledge the expertise of organisations within the women's sector, whose knowledge and experiences have informed this submission.

The issue of domestic and family violence has gained significant traction nationally and in the ACT over the past few years, however, funding and support gaps remain. ACTCOSS welcomes the government's work towards establishing a Family Safety Hub, established with consideration of those who have experienced violence, and we welcomed the funding for the Safer Families Initiative in the 2017-18 ACT Budget. We note the importance of domestic and family violence strategies focused on prevention, early-intervention, crisis and long-term support. Additionally, we note the importance of ensuring this work is trauma-informed, and responsive to the multiple and complex varying needs of people with disability, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, and culturally and linguistically diverse people.

ACTCOSS acknowledges that this is an inquiry into domestic and family violence, but we would like to note that further work must be done on sexual violence within the ACT. ACTCOSS has supported advocacy on greater attention to domestic and family violence, and we acknowledge the progress that has occurred. We note that it is important to ensure this focus on domestic and family violence is complemented by specific work to progress implementation of recommendations from the Evaluation of the ACT Sexual Assault Reform Program¹ and continuing to build community understanding of the complexities of sexual violence, how to prevent sexual violence and better meet the needs of survivors.

The recent report into sexual assault at universities resulted in particularly high results from the Australian National University (ANU). Both the victims/survivors and the perpetrators in these events are members of the Canberra community. Although the ANU is a national institution, the ACT Government should actively

¹ Australian Institute of Criminology, *Evaluation of the ACT Sexual Assault Reform Program (SARP): Final report*, Australian Institute of Criminology, 2013, viewed 21 September 2017, <<http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/current%20series/tbp/41-60/tbp051.html>>.

respond to the survey results with scope to consider that the results might be indicative of levels of sexual assault in the community more broadly.

Finally, as noted in the Women's Services Network submission, the Canberra Rape Crisis Centre has reported increasing and substantial growth in demand over the past few years.

Current policy approaches and responses

Productively and sustainably responding to domestic and family violence requires investment into prevention and early-intervention.

Research into respectful relationships education in Victoria notes that:

Early interventions with children and young people can have a lasting effect on their relationships in the future. Many children and young people are exposed to and influenced by violence in relationships and families, including in their own dating relationships, and violence-supportive attitudes, norms, and relations are already visible among young people.²

Respectful relationships education in schools is included in the Australian Government's National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children. This is also articulated in the ACT Government's plan, however, the YWCA of Canberra has noted that this tends towards anatomical and biological education.³

Ensuring these programs are delivered at school is essential to educating all children and young people about respectful relationships, and committing to early-intervention and prevention of domestic and family violence. Schools enable easy access to children and young people, and integrating respectful relationships in school settings can normalise non-violent relationships by working with students in their 'day-to-day' environments.⁴ School-based respectful relationships programs:

target a population understood to be at a stage of the life cycle when the risk of perpetrating or being subject to violence is high... Intervention at this stage has the potential to prevent problems in adulthood and therefore has long-term benefits.⁵

The principle of school autonomy in the ACT enables schools to individualise their 'Social and Emotional Learning' education. Some schools may therefore

2 Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, *Respectful Relations Education: Violence prevention and respectful relationships in Victorian secondary schools*, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Melbourne, 2009, p.4, viewed 20 September 2017, <www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/teachers/health/respectfulrel.pdf>.

3 Canberra Times, *Education a priority in light of school-based pornography ring*, Canberra, 2016, viewed 20 September 2017, <<http://www.canberratimes.com.au/act-news/education-a-priority-in-light-of-schoolbased-pornography-ring-20160818-gqvp0k.html>>.

4 VicHealth, *Preventing Violence Before it Occurs*, VicHealth, Melbourne, 2007, p.18, viewed 21 September 2017, <<https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/media-and-resources/publications/preventing-violence-before-it-occurs>>.

5 *ibid.*

not deliver respectful relationships education which is relevant to prevention of domestic and family violence.

The YWCA of Canberra has done significant advocacy on this issue, particularly noting the lack of central commitment to Respectful Relationships education that provides targeted, long-term funding for school-based Respectful Relationships education.⁶ As they note, Respectful Relationships education must address 'relationships, gender, consent and communication, decision-making, and intimacy and desire'.⁷ It is important that any education programs are relevant to the diversity of student experiences and needs, and provide tailored content that addresses the needs of students living with disabilities, LGBTIQ students, students who are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

ACTCOSS recommends that Respectful Relationships education as a prevention and early-intervention model should be a required program across all ACT schools. We recommend community organisations with expertise and connections to the different students groups outlined above are adequately resourced to deliver these programs.

Funding issues and challenges

Domestic and Family Violence and Homelessness are closely related. However, the current resourcing model for housing support for those seeking accommodation due to domestic and family violence uses a homelessness response, even if the presenting issue is escaping domestic violence. This positions domestic violence as a homelessness issue, when in fact homelessness is one of a number of issues that arise because of exposure to domestic and family violence.

ACTCOSS has been advised by some ACT women's services that this model does not adequately respond to the needs of women and families leaving domestic and family violence. For example, the current homelessness response cannot provide longer-term support beyond an immediate crisis response. Supporting women and children beyond-crisis is essential to addressing common experiences of trauma and facilitating recovery for adults, young people and children.

Furthermore, the current funding model is inadequate at responding to the needs of women who may have experienced domestic and violence but not presented to a specialist homelessness service (SHS). Domestic and family violence is complex, and women who make the decision to stay at home, rather than present to a refuge, should receive support. This is essential to the safety of themselves and their families, and it is dangerous and counterproductive to

6 Canberra Times, *Education a priority in light of school-based pornography ring*, Canberra, 2016, viewed 20 September 2017, < <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/act-news/education-a-priority-in-light-of-schoolbased-pornography-ring-20160818-gqvp0k.html>>.

7 *ibid.*

not provide more diverse support options if they do not seek homelessness services.

The Women's Services Network submission to this Inquiry notes support for 'women victims of violence' sits under the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH). However, recent changes to the NPAH have created uncertainty regarding how much of the funding allocations will specifically be used for domestic and family violence. The recent changes were closely monitored by the women's services sector, as domestic violence refuges 'are a key part of the ACT response to domestic and family violence and should continue to be supported by the Commonwealth as well as the ACT Governments' (excerpt from the Domestic Violence Crisis Network submission to this Inquiry). The insecurity of this funding, as well as its inability to provide for long-term support, compromises the ability for organisations to offer specialist women's services that are both relevant and effective.

ACTCOSS recommends the ACT Government conduct operational research and policy planning into the costs and benefits of long-term, specialist funding for domestic and family violence services outside a housing/homelessness funding model. Research should particularly be done into how this might impact women's services who offer housing support for women experiencing homelessness for domestic and family violence and non-domestic and family violence issues. We make this recommendation in recognition of the significant gap communicated to us by those working in the women's services sector, but we note that more in-depth work is required to map any changes, collaboratively with the housing and women's sectors, and particularly those who serve both.

In addition to providing better long-term support for women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence, and those who choose to stay in their homes, we note that further possible benefits might be:

- The women's services and housing sectors are not required to compete for funding
- Increase transparency of funding allocations, particularly in times of funding shift
- Allow the homelessness sector to better address the gap in support for women who are homeless not for domestic and family violence-related issues.

However, this work must ensure there are no significant negative effects to mainstream housing providers, such as a decrease in funding for homelessness services generally. As noted by the Productivity Commission's Report on Government Services report into SHS, funding for 'homelessness services' dropped from \$24.8 million in 2012-2013 to \$20.1 million in 2015-2016, in real terms, for the ACT.⁸

⁸ Productivity Commission, *Report on Government Services 2017: Housing and homelessness*, Productivity Commission, Canberra, 2017, table 19A.3, viewed 20 September 2017, <<http://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2017/housing-and-homelessness>>

Furthermore, we note that it is imperative to consider the consequences for housing providers who assist women who are homeless due to domestic and family violence, and women who are homeless not due to domestic and family violence, and that women who access homeless services who do not disclose domestic and family violence upfront, are not excluded from accessing support.

Recommendations

- Respectful Relationships education as a prevention and early-intervention model is introduced as a required program across all ACT schools. This education should be delivered by community organisations with expertise and connections to the different students groups outlined above, who are adequately resourced to do so.
- The ACT Government conduct operational research and policy planning into the costs and benefits of long-term, specialist funding for domestic and family violence services outside a housing/homelessness funding model. This research should particularly consider the costs and benefits to both the housing and women's sectors, with consultation of both groups.