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

2022 Annual Safer Families Statement

**Presented by
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Madam Speaker, today I am tabling the sixth annual Safer Families Ministerial Statement. This statement is an opportunity to share with you the progress made in the 2021-22 financial year to support those in our community affected by domestic and family violence. Before I go on, I want to note that sexual violence can also occur in the context of domestic and family violence. I will be speaking in the coming days on the issue of sexual violence. As such, today's statement will focus largely on domestic and family violence and the progress this government has made to improve the prevention of and responses to domestic and family violence.

This year, like the one before, has been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Australian and international research shows some people will have experienced domestic and family violence for the first time during the pandemic. For others, violence they were already experiencing increased in frequency and severity. The second half of 2021 and the first half of 2022 have been characterised by a prolonged lockdown, the emergence of the omicron variant, and a shift towards living with COVID-19. During this time, domestic and family violence was often referred to as the hidden pandemic, the emergency occurring behind closed doors, and affecting victims and their children at a time of heightened risk.

I acknowledge all those who have experienced domestic and family violence, and who continue to – today, I will use the term “victim-survivors”. I know this term does not work for everyone and I use it respectfully, knowing it can never encapsulate the breadth of experiences of this community. I wish to acknowledge the bravery and resilience of victim-survivors, who are actively resisting violence at every moment, even in the smallest of thoughts or actions. I acknowledge those who have sought help, and those who have not.

No matter what victim-survivors may do or not do, they are always deserving of safety, respect and support.

I acknowledge the extraordinary resilience, creativity, tenacity and compassion demonstrated by frontline services in continuing to provide – and even expand – supports during this time, when services experienced increased demand and increased complexity. As was highlighted by an ACT Government communications campaign, domestic and family violence services remained open and operating throughout lockdown and beyond. Thanks to this campaign, messaging was clear, that anyone who did not feel safe at home could leave at any time to seek help.

Madam Speaker, in the past year, the ACT Government has expanded our focus on domestic and family violence to include the **prevention and response to sexual violence in our community**. I note the tripartisan commitment to progressing work to address this issue, which demonstrates how unacceptable any form of sexual violence is in our community. Deep listening with community members and people with lived experience of sexual violence, non-government organisations and government agencies culminated in the December 2021 release of the *Listen. Take Action to Prevent, Believe and Heal* report. The report is now driving a series of reforms across government and the community sector over coming years. I am incredibly grateful to the many community members who participated in the consultation to develop the report – sharing one's lived experience is a challenging and deeply generous thing to do, and makes government policy far more powerful.

I will table the Government response to the *Listen. Take Action to Prevent, Believe and Heal* in the Assembly in the coming days. At that time, I will share more about our progress in responding to and preventing sexual violence. *This*

statement, however, will largely focus on initiatives to address domestic and family violence. Importantly, sexual violence can occur in the context of domestic and family violence too. These are interlinked issues, and both are forms of gender-based violence.

Madam Speaker, this year we have continued to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the ACT to **progress implementation of the *We Don't Shoot Our Wounded* report**. The report, originally released in 2009, details some of the experiences of domestic and family violence for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and families in the ACT. Sadly, rates of domestic and family violence experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people remain disproportionately high, and mainstream services do not always offer the responses that are needed. As the ACT Government, and as a nation, we have much work to do to address the harms that have and continue to be directed towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

In 2020, consultations with community, led by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Reference Group of the Domestic Violence Prevention Council, highlighted four recommendations from *We Don't Shoot Our Wounded* for priority implementation. In the past year, the ACT Government has begun implementing the priority recommendation to establish a dedicated service for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, for legal, advocacy, practical and healing activities. The service will, in the first instance, be based on a partnership approach with an existing service, with the aim to support an emerging new organisation. As contract negotiations are currently underway, I am not able to provide further detail, but I will take this opportunity to express my excitement for the development of this new service. I look forward to updating the Assembly on progress in next year's Ministerial Statement.

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

Prevention

In September 2021 the Legislative Assembly passed the *Domestic Violence Agencies Amendment Act 2021*, to establish a **domestic and family violence death review**. The death review will take a system-wide perspective to examine deaths and incidents of serious harm from domestic and family violence. It will identify systemic issues and make recommendations to improve responses and interventions to help prevent such deaths and harms in the future. In December 2021, Cabinet appointed the Coordinator-General for Family Safety as the first coordinator of the ACT death review. In 2022 we will begin collecting case data and seeking information from other ACT Government agencies to undertake an historic review as the first step. The establishment of the death review is a key prevention activity in the ACT, and an example of how prevention must occur not only at an individual level, but also a system level. The death review is supported by a **\$443,000** commitment in the 2021-22 Budget, with a further \$747,000 committed between June 2022 and June 2025.

Lived experience

Madam Speaker, people who have experienced domestic and family violence must be at the centre of our responses, not only in service delivery but also in policy. It can be incredibly difficult to share one's lived experience, but more and more victim-survivors are feeling empowered to do so. We in government must treat this knowledge as expertise and use it to inform our decision-making.

The stories of victim-survivors, and their lived experience expertise, informed the Commonwealth's *Respect@Work* report, handed down in April 2021. In the past year, the **ACT Government responded to *Respect@Work***, accepting in full, or in principle, all 12 recommendations for state and territory governments. We remain committed to working across the ACT community to implement these recommendations to promote respectful, safe and inclusive workplaces across the ACT. I look forward to continuing to work with our Commonwealth, state and territory colleagues to develop collaborative and coordinated responses to address and prevent workplace sexual harassment in the ACT and across Australia.

Within the ACT Government, we are now looking for more ways to **incorporate lived experience expertise into domestic and family violence policymaking**.

We aim to continue to strengthen the ways we work directly with victim-survivors to design a mechanism to formally incorporate their expertise into policy, in a way that is safe, meaningful and recognises the labour inherent in sharing one's lived experience.

Perpetrator accountability

Madam Speaker, while victim-survivors must always be at the centre of our approach, it is also crucial that we put a spotlight on those who are responsible for perpetrating domestic and family violence. Perpetrator accountability means that across our systems, we recognise the use of violence as a choice, eliminate practices that condone or excuse violence, and ensure there are consequences when people choose to use violence.

Sometimes when we discuss perpetration, we get caught up in questions of gender. I want to state here that while violence can be both used and

experienced by people of all genders, the facts are that it is mostly women, trans and non-binary people, and children who experience domestic and family violence. However, if we are to understand and respond appropriately, we must recognise that perpetrators of violence are overwhelmingly men.

Since 2016, the ACT Government has funded the **Room4Change program** run by Domestic Violence Crisis Service (DVCS). This includes **\$1.229 million** in the 2021-22 Budget. Room4Change is a 30-week men's behaviour change program, that also offers partner support. There is a residential component participants can opt into, which further helps partners and children remain safe in their own homes. In late 2021, DVCS released an independent evaluation of the program, which found the program was well-implemented and, if sustained by participants in the longer term, would likely result in fewer and less severe incidents of domestic abuse. Importantly, the evaluation found supported partners were highly positive about the program, feeling that it validated their experiences and empowered them. Many women who were supported through the program reported feeling safer due to Room4Change.

Another way we are holding perpetrators accountable is increasing community understanding of **coercive control**, an incredibly common but often-misunderstood form of perpetration. Coercive control is a pattern of controlling behaviours over time to create and keep power and dominance over another person, and is inextricably linked to domestic and family violence. While coercive control may never involve physical violence, its effects are devastating. One of the most common features of intimate partner homicides in Australia and across the world is the presence of coercive control in the relationship beforehand.

In 2020, I sought **advice from the Domestic Violence Prevention Council** on the question of whether to criminalise coercive control as a stand-alone offence in the ACT, as one way of addressing this behaviour and holding perpetrators accountable. After careful examination, the Council's advice was that prior to considering criminalisation, the ACT should consult further (particularly with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and vulnerable communities), conduct further research, and observe the implementation of criminalisation in other jurisdictions. Critically, the advice also recognised the importance of non-legislative mechanisms to address coercive control. We need our community and sector to be able to recognise coercive control, understand its seriousness, and provide appropriate responses. I have accepted the Council's advice.

Madam Speaker, beyond criminalisation, the ACT is taking other steps to better understand domestic and family violence and coercive control, that support these recommendations. For example, we are developing the ***ACT Domestic and Family Violence Risk Assessment and Management Framework***. The framework will drive more integrated and coordinated responses to domestic and family violence by ensuring all service providers share an understanding of domestic and family violence and its impacts, and can effectively respond to both victim-survivors and perpetrators. This will improve outcomes for victim-survivors who are most likely to disclose to a trusted service provider – but not necessarily a specialist domestic and family violence service. The Framework was developed and tested in consultation with the community services sector, and reflects best practice and research from around Australia and the world. A draft of the Framework is available online and a final version will be released this year.

In the past year, we also published the **ACT practice standards for men's behaviour change programs**. The standards were developed in partnership with the community, government and legal sector members of the *Working with perpetrators* working group and published on the ACT Government website in late 2021. They help organisations engaging with perpetrators to use best practice, shift accountability to those who are choosing to use violence, and support the provision of opportunities for perpetrators to change their behaviour. That working group will continue to explore the next steps for improving responses to perpetrators in the ACT.

We also supported the ACT's service system to better respond to, and hold perpetrators accountable through, **specialised training** delivered by expert providers, Stopping Family Violence. The training was met with great enthusiasm from participants across our service system, including the justice and legal sector, mainstream community sector and the health sector, as well as the domestic and family violence sector. Sessions were fully booked for April, May and June 2022. The training has helped the service system be more equipped to respond non-collusively to perpetrators and to better promote safety for victim-survivors.

We are also funding CARE Inc to support people experiencing **financial abuse**, which can be an insidious form of domestic and family violence. CARE also provides financial abuse training for the community services sector to help staff recognise and then respond to financial abuse experienced by their clients.

Intersectionality

Madam Speaker, our community in the ACT is diverse and changing. All sorts of factors about someone's identity and circumstances can affect their likelihood of experiencing violence, the way they might experience violence, and the types of responses they might need. Acknowledging the intersections between domestic and family violence and different aspects of people's identity, and recognising that they interact and are often compounding, allows us to better tailor and support the full breadth of our community.

In the past year, the ACT Government has continued to build on our 2019 and 2020 consultation with children and young people. The consultation allowed us to hear directly from children and young people about their experiences of domestic and family violence.

In building on these consultations and the other work to support children and young people progressed by the ACT Government I am pleased Madam Speaker, that a **new service for children** under the age of 12 will be designed and delivered in 2022-2023 in partnership with the community sector. Work has been underway in the past year to secure a provider, to develop the service, informed by evidence-based models from other parts of Australia and the world, and tailored specifically to the ACT context. I am incredibly proud of the innovative and ambitious work the ACT is doing to support children – particularly young children, who are so often overlooked – as victim-survivors in their own right. This program, which has its origins in the 2019 and 2020 consultation, is an excellent example of putting children and young people at the centre across all elements of a project.

We are also finding more ways to **support the ACT's culturally and linguistically diverse community in relation to domestic and family violence.**

In 2022, the ACT Government allocated **\$109,000** of funding under a

Commonwealth National Partnership agreement to Multicultural Hub Canberra, or MHub. MHub's women's service already runs programs to support multicultural women escaping or recovering from domestic and family violence. They will now be able to expand that service and provide further supports within the community, including strengthening ongoing advocacy to support women on temporary or uncertain visas. These visa arrangements can place women experiencing domestic and family violence in horrific situations with few options. Australia must do more to support women on temporary visas, and over the past year I have continued to advocate on this issue at the national level.

Domestic and family violence remains a whole-of-government issue, where we look for overlaps wherever possible – so that family safety is addressed through an intersectional lens. For example, the Second Action Plan (2022-2023) of the **Capital of Equality Strategy** includes a dedicated family safety action, in response to the high rates of violence experienced by and particular challenges to accessing quality and inclusive services for LGBTIQ+ communities.

Family safety is also included in the **Disability Justice Strategy**, and a **disability liaison officer** is embedded at Victim Support ACT, to support responses to victims of crime with disability, including victim-survivors of domestic and family violence. I am proud to be part of a government that takes the issue of domestic and family violence seriously across all facets of its work, and one that responds to intersectionality in a meaningful way.

Integration

Madam Speaker, integrated services and systems are key to an effective response to domestic and family violence. Integrated systems ensure victim-survivors are supported across their diverse needs, and that perpetrators remain in view. Integration can happen at all levels – from individual services starting to work together to support clients, all the way to sectors building partnerships to take a more holistic approach to addressing domestic and family violence.

In the past year, the ACT Government has supported greater integration in the domestic and family violence system in a number of ways. The continuation of the **Family Violence Safety Action Pilot** in 2021 with **\$249,000** of ACT Budget funding supplemented by \$143,000 of Commonwealth funds, has ensured the continuation of integrated case management for high-risk cases in 2021 and 2022. The Pilot is a unique, nation-leading service that brings together specialist domestic and family violence services, criminal justice agencies, victim support, housing services, and other government and non-government organisations to share information and provide in-depth case management where it is needed most. So far in 2022 the Pilot has expanded by engaging a new Aboriginal Liaison Officer, and a new Cultural Liaison Officer, to better respond to the intersectional needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and culturally and linguistically diverse, clients.

Another program showcasing integration across the domestic and family violence system is the **Health Justice Partnerships**. The partnerships bring lawyers into healthcare settings, where they can meet with and provide legal support to clients – mostly pregnant women and new mothers – experiencing domestic and family violence. In 2021, the ACT committed **\$4.1 million over four years** to embed the partnerships as an ongoing program. To date the

program has helped over 900 women, many of whom would not otherwise have accessed support and may not even have realised that a legal response existed for what they were experiencing. Seeing this program become ‘business as usual’ is a huge achievement for integration across the domestic and family violence system, and shows the impact our work can have over the longer term.

Madam Speaker, one example of how the Health Justice Partnerships are changing lives is that of a woman I will call Maya. Maya has five children and escaped domestic and family violence perpetrated by their father interstate. She was referred to the Partnership by a Child and Family Centre where she was attending a playgroup, after mentioning she had been served with court documents about the children but was too afraid to read them. During initial engagements, the program’s lawyer helped Maya understand the documents – a family court application – and the importance of responding. Maya’s Child and Family Worker supported her to engage in court proceedings, during which she was represented by the Health Justice Partnership lawyer. Despite being frightened of the process and of her ex-partner, the support from the Partnership meant that Maya was able to obtain parenting orders giving her sole parenting responsibility for her children. Maya now feels empowered to make decisions in her children’s best interest, and keep her children safe and stable in their home in the ACT.

We are also **reforming the Domestic Violence Prevention Council** to revitalise the strategic governance framework leading domestic and family violence responses in the ACT. In March 2022, I introduced a Bill in this Assembly to modernise the Council, and in recent days, that Bill was passed. Reforms to the Council will strengthen integration between the sector and government by

ensuring advice is timely, strategic, and directed by diverse expertise – so that it drives real impact for victim-survivors.

Workforce capability and support

Madam Speaker, none of the ACT's efforts to address domestic and family violence would be possible without the unwavering commitment of the ACT's domestic and family violence sector. There are thousands of clients and former clients out there whose lives would not be what they are today without these services.

Supporting capability within the sector is critical in ensuring our services can continue their critical work. The training courses I mentioned earlier, on responding to perpetrators, are one way in which the ACT Government is strengthening professional capability in relation to perpetrators. Capability building must also encompass more than simply the specialist domestic and family violence sector. All kinds of community services have trusted relationships with clients – and clients are likely to disclose experiences of violence where they already have that trust. We need to build capacity across all human services to recognise and respond appropriately to domestic and family violence. It is for this reason that some of the training we have supported over the past year has been targeted and available beyond the specialist domestic and family violence sector.

National work

Madam Speaker, my engagement with the Commonwealth in the past year has also supported the sector by securing supplementary funding. I was pleased to endorse the **National Partnership on Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence Responses** in late 2021. This will make available **\$4.2 million** of

Commonwealth funds over the two-year life of the Agreement to support innovation and frontline responses in our sector. The Agreement requires matched funding which will be met from existing Safer Families initiatives. I will continue to advocate for sustained investment from the Commonwealth to support local responses to domestic and family violence.

I participated in the **National Women's Safety Summit** in September 2021. When survivor-advocate Brittany Higgins was left off the delegate list for the Commonwealth, I invited her to attend as an ACT delegate. The summit was an opportunity for experts and advocates across the country to distil key priorities for national level domestic, family and sexual violence policy into the future. Following the summit, I also responded to calls from ACT delegates for a range of measures within the ACT.

I have also helped to shape the **new National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032**. Following engagement with the Commonwealth through the National Women's Safety Summit, I continued to provide feedback informed by what I have heard from across government, the sector, and most importantly, victim-survivors and their families. I have advocated for better, more meaningful, more resourced and more intersectional responses to domestic, family and sexual violence through the National Women's Safety Taskforce comprised of ministers from all jurisdictions. The ACT may be a small jurisdiction, but we have much to offer the national conversation as a result of our innovative programs, ambitious objectives and commitment to putting victim-survivors at the centre of our work.

Conclusion

Madam Speaker, as I have outlined in this statement, the past year has seen us continue to deliver Safer Families initiatives and work with the community sector to prevent and respond to domestic and family violence. It has also seen us incorporate responses to sexual violence into much of our work.

The past year has also seen government and especially the community sector overcome incredible challenges as COVID-19 has persisted. I again acknowledge those who have experienced violence during this time I again acknowledge and deeply thank all those who have helped keep our community safe from domestic and family violence during this time.. We have much work still to do. I look forward to continuing this work to make Canberra a safer place for everyone.

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