



NTCOSS Submission to the

**Inquiry into domestic, family and sexual
violence**

August 2020

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Northern Territory Council of Social Service (NTCOSS)

The Northern Territory Council of Social Service (NTCOSS) is the peak body for the Northern Territory (NT) Community and Social Services Sector and is a voice for people affected by social and economic disadvantage and inequality. The Community Sector in the NT is made up of community managed, non-government, not-for-profit organisations that work in social and community service delivery, sector development and advocacy. The Community Sector plays a vital role in creating social wellbeing for all Territorians and in building safe and healthy communities by providing services that enable people to access and participate in health services, education, employment, economic development, and family and community life.

NTCOSS believes that all people have the right to live a life free from violence, and is a strong advocate for putting an end to all forms of domestic, family and sexual violence (DFSV) in our communities and working to address the related social harms. It advocates for and with the specialist DFSV service sector in the NT to improve safety, wellbeing, economic and social justice outcomes for women and their families.

NTCOSS welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry into domestic, family and sexual violence. This submission will generally address a number of the Terms of Reference, while emphasising the NT context.

NTCOSS represents a varied service sector, with members bringing different experiences and perspectives relating to DFSV from across the region. NTCOSS acknowledges that a number of our member organisations with specific expertise in this area have also provided submissions. In particular, NTCOSS supports submissions by our Aboriginal community-controlled member organisations (ACCOs), including Tangentyere Council and Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Women's Council, and members that provide specialist DFSV services and legal services, including the Northern Territory Legal Aid Commission, who provided substantial input into this submission.

Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence in the Northern Territory

Domestic and family violence is a gendered crime,¹ with women and children disproportionately over-represented as victims. As reported by Our Watch, nationally on average one woman a week is murdered by her current or former partner, and one in three Australian women have experienced physical violence since the age of fifteen.²

The NT experiences the highest rates of DFSV in Australia.³ On average there are 61 domestic and family violence incidents per day and four domestic and family violence related homicides per 100,000 people per year.⁴ Aboriginal women are particularly impacted by this form of gender based violence, accounting for 89% of all DFSV victims in the NT.⁵

Challenges in addressing rates of DFSV in the NT are also impacted by geographical factors, with around 20% of the NT population living in Very Remote areas, and around 20% of the NT population living in Remote areas.⁶ Providing effective service responses to support victims and perpetrators of DFSV in Very Remote and Remote Areas is a unique and complex challenge, with undersupply of effective responses to DFSV a present risk.

As identified in *Change the story: a shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia*, while prevalence rates of DFSV vary for many groups of women, the differential impact of violence on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in particular is significant. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experience violence at roughly twice the rate of non-Indigenous women.⁷ Evidence suggests that the reasons for this are complex and multifaceted. For example, Our Watch has established that this violence is inextricably linked to broader colonial violence and the intergenerational aspects of dispossession, including the forced removal of children, the interruption of cultural practices – that mitigate against interpersonal violence – and the ongoing economic exclusion and disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (including intergenerational trauma and lateral violence).⁸

While particular cohorts of the community may be more vulnerable to DFSV due to compounding factors, this form of violence does not discriminate. Women and girls around the world experience additional disadvantages on the basis of age, income, ethnic or religious identity, geographic location, sexual orientation and gender identity, disability and immigration status (among a range of other factors).⁹

¹Australian Institute of Family Studies, 'Gender equality and violence against women', Australian Government, January 2020, accessed at <<https://aifs.gov.au/publications/gender-equality-and-violence-against-women/export>>

²Our Watch, 'Fact and figures', viewed January 2020, accessed at <<https://www.ourwatch.org.au/Understanding-Violence/Facts-and-figures>>

³ Territory Families, 'The Northern Territory Gender Equality Framework 2019-2024 - Consultation Document', 2019, Northern Territory Government

⁴ NT Government, '*Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Reduction Framework 2018-2028*)

⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2017, 4510.0 Recorded Crime – Victim, 2014-2016

⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2017, '2016 Census QuickStats', accessed Australian Bureau of <https://quickstats.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/RA74?opendocument

⁷ Our Watch, *Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia*, 2015

⁸ Our Watch, *Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia*, 2015

⁹ Equal Measures 2030, *Harnessing the Power of Data for Gender Equality*, 2019

It is well documented that DFSV is a key driver of poverty and disadvantage. It causes social isolation and exclusion, economic disadvantage (particularly regarding how changes in circumstances can impact income), and is the main reason women leave the home in Australia.¹⁰

Of the poverty rates in Australia, people living in Remote or Very Remote localities, experience much higher levels of poverty than those living in urban centres.¹¹ These high rates of poverty are experienced disproportionately across the NT, with Aboriginal people in particular overrepresented in homelessness and unemployment rates, and poor educational outcomes. As a result of this, vulnerable people face further challenges with damaging effects on people's, health, social wellbeing and long-term security, and poverty and disadvantage are becoming further entrenched in our communities.

National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children 2010-2022

Over ten years ago, the Commonwealth Government introduced the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022*, delivered through a series of four three-year action plans, designed to build on each other over time. In 2019, the Fourth Action Plan, the final plan in the series, was released. The Fourth Action Plan identified five national priorities:

- Primary prevention is key;
- Support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their children;
- Respect, listen and respond to the diverse lived experience and knowledge of women and their children affected by violence;
- Respond to sexual violence and sexual harassment; and improve support and service system responses.¹²

Despite the introduction of the National Plan and the related Action Plans, advocates report that rates of DFSV have not decreased in our communities.¹³ The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) reported that national population surveys demonstrate that rates of partner violence have remained stable since 2005, with the rate of women being hospitalised because of family violence and the number of people accessing services, including police, hospital, child protection and homelessness services also increasing.¹⁴

This national trend is evident in the NT, however DFSV rates have increased in some regions. The 12-month period from June 2019 - June 2020 displayed no marked decrease in rates of DFSV in the NT, while different regions saw varied changes in rates of offending. Alice Springs experienced an 18% increase in rates of DFSV related assaults, Tennant Creek 29%, Katherine -17% (with a 9% increase in sexual assaults) and Darwin -0.26%, averaging as a 7.54% decrease NT wide.¹⁵

¹⁰ Spinney 2012, *Home and safe? Policy and practice innovations to prevent women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence from becoming homeless*

¹¹ ACOSS and UNSW, *Poverty in Australia 2018*

¹² Australian Government, Fourth Action Plan – National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children 2010-2022, 2019

¹³ ABC News, 'Domestic violence still at 'unprecedented' levels despite hundreds of millions being spent', September 2019, accessed at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-09-05/an-australia-free-from-all-forms-of-violence-and-abuse-against/11470584?nw=0>

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ NT Police, Fire and Emergency Services, NT Balance Crime Statistics, viewed July 2020, accessed at <https://pfes.nt.gov.au/police/community-safety/nt-crime-statistics/nt-balance>

In 2019, it was reported that while the Federal Government had committed \$723 million over the course of the National Plan (on top of funding allocations from state and territory governments on their own programs), instances of DFSV were still at unprecedented levels.¹⁶

The Federal Government has also conceded that due to inconsistent data collection methods across Australia and between different states and territories, it is difficult to measure the extent of the problem and the impacts of DFSV on our communities.¹⁷

Recommendations

- Initiatives to address rates of DFSV in our communities must adopt an information sharing and data driven approach that assists cross-jurisdictional governments, law enforcement agencies and the Community Sector to accurately capture DFSV rates in our communities;
- Audits of previous Government inquiries from the past ten years that explored DFSV, as well as the family law system, should be conducted to measure their success and implementation rate;
- Further funding should be allocated to research DFSV, specifically emerging trends regarding DFSV and female incarceration rates, lateral violence and the long-term impacts of DFSV.

Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence – Improving Outcomes

The complexity of DFSV in the NT is compounded by numerous factors. The NT has a complex and culturally diverse population;

- The NT has the highest proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia;¹⁸
- Twenty per cent of the NT population was born overseas;¹⁹
- More than 100 Aboriginal languages and dialects are spoken in the NT;²⁰
- The NT has the highest rate of people experiencing homelessness in Australia; and²¹
- The NT has the deepest poverty rates, with nearly 45% of all Aboriginal households living below the poverty line.²²

The below recommendations draw on a broad evidence-base and are suggested paths to reform

¹⁶ ABC News, 'Domestic violence still at 'unprecedented' levels despite hundreds of millions being spent', September 2019, accessed at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-09-05/an-australia-free-from-all-forms-of-violence-and-abuse-against/11470584?nw=0>

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016 Census QuickStats, Northern Territory https://quickstats.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/7?opendocument accessed 18th June 2019

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Aboriginal languages in NT <https://nt.gov.au/community/interpreting-and-translating-services/aboriginal-interpreter-service/aboriginal-languages-in-nt>, accessed 18th June 2019

²¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness, 2016 <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/2049.0>

²² Land Rights News – Northern Edition in School of Regulation and Global Governance, 2017, 'Deepening Indigenous poverty in the Northern Territory', Australian National University <http://regnet.anu.edu.au/news-events/news/7002/deepening-indigenous-poverty-northern-territory>

of the current systemic approach to DFSV, adopting interventions that are adaptive, multifaceted and based in evidence with a focus on primary prevention and early intervention.

1. Primary Prevention and Early Intervention

Primary prevention and early intervention is a key focus of the Fourth Action Plan, and should continue to remain a priority focus area of any programs implemented following the end of the National Plan. As stated in *Change the Story*, primary prevention is a whole-of-population response that addresses the drivers of gender-based violence, including addressing the ingrained gendered societal bias that currently exists.²³

This requires investing in programs that effectively reduce the drivers of violence. The Fourth Action Plan, in referring to reporting by Our Watch, acknowledges that violence against women will remain static in the short and medium term, but is expected to decrease with improvements in equality and reductions in the drivers of violence. Considering the high levels of DFSV still being experienced in our communities, greater funding in this area is arguably needed.

Recommendation

- Increasing funding for primary prevention and early intervention programs that focus on addressing the drivers of gender-based violence within our communities.

Love Bites Training

Prioritising access to programs for young people that focus on healthy relationships as a form of primary prevention is critical when addressing the drivers of violence and gendered societal bias.

Love Bites is a successful Respectful Relationships Education Program specifically focused on DFSV and prevention, run by the National Association for the Prevention of Child abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN) for young people aged 15-17 years. It consists of two interactive workshops: one on Relationship Violence, and one on Sex and Relationships, followed by creative workshops and community campaigns.²⁴ Evolving out of the success of Love Bites, along with community feedback from across Australia that consistently included the need for respectful relationship education programs for younger students, Love Bites Junior is a respectful relationships education program that focuses on the development of respectful relationships for young people aged between 11-14 years old.

²³ Our Watch, *Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia*

²⁴ NAPCAN, *Love Bites*, viewed August 2020, accessed at <https://www.napcan.org.au/Programs/love-bites/>

Love Bites and Love Bites Junior training have been well received and credited by the Community Sector in promoting respectful relationships in an accessible manner. Despite the clear support and benefit of these programs, NAPCAN has received sporadic funding for its programs and has reported a lack of ongoing commitment.²⁵

Recommendation

- Further funding and resources be allocated to Community Sector providers to become accredited facilitators and deliver this training, including adapting the program to ensure it is appropriate to be delivered in Aboriginal communities and for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) cohorts.

2. Men's Behaviour Change Programs and Partner Support

Increasing funding to programs that focus on prevention, early intervention and addressing the root causes of violence, while providing adequate and appropriate support to victims and their families, needs to be prioritised when responding to DFSV.

DFSV does not occur in isolation and both victims and perpetrators experience intersectional issues that compound behaviours and experiences, such as trauma, drug and alcohol misuse, and homelessness. To achieve sustainable outcomes, intensive and long-term support needs a holistic wrap-around response.

Perpetrators should be held accountable and connected early to responses that change their behaviours and reduce violence. Increasing funding and resourcing and expanding the provision of Men's Behaviour Change Programs in the NT (currently of which two are run, one in Darwin and one in Alice Springs, with a reduction in funding in 2018) is crucially important to ensuring participants are supported to address behaviours within programs delivered to a high standard.

Men's Behaviour Change programs are underpinned by the need to continually assess and manage the risk to victims (including children), ensuring their safety and freedom. Men's Behaviour Change programs operate with the concurrent provision of safety planning and intensive support to the female partners of Program participants through a Partner Contact Worker provided by a suitable women's service.

The *Domestic and Family Violence Act 2007 (NT)* permits referral of a defendant to a rehabilitation program in specific circumstances, including that they consent to the order being made.²⁶ With a lack of Men's Behaviour Change programs available in the NT (with no programs for regional and remote communities outside of Darwin and Alice Springs), there are limited specialist domestic violence counselling services available for men. There is evidence to indicate that anger management programs are inappropriate first interventions for perpetrators, as they are not designed to deal with the underlying causes of violent and controlling behaviours, nor the accountability of perpetrators.²⁷

²⁵ NAPCAN, Where is the government funding for violence prevention?, June 2018, viewed July 2020, accessed at <https://www.napcan.org.au/media-release-napcan-where-is-government-funding-for-violence-prevention/>

²⁶ *Domestic and Family Violence Act 2007 (NT)* s24

²⁷ John Howard Society of Toronto, 'Difference between Anger Management and Domestic Violence Programs', available at <https://johnhoward.on.ca/toronto/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2014/09/Difference-between-Anger-Management-and-Domestic-Violence-Programs.pdf>

Men's Behaviour Change programs provide a holistic and in-depth exploration of behaviours and can be complemented with culturally appropriate counselling specific to men's needs. Due to limited current program provision and counselling services within NT, men who cannot afford specialist support privately may be unable to seek assistance to break the cycle of violence, placing community services under strain and further expense, and victims and their children at greater risk.

Long term, sustainable investment in therapeutic programs that focus on early prevention and intervention are a cornerstone of reform in regards to DFSV.

Case study

Fred has a lengthy criminal history spanning decades. He went to prison after assaulting his partner whilst she was pregnant. He undertook anger management and a parenting course in prison. He re-offended shortly after his release and returned to prison. Following his release he commenced taking medication to withdraw from an illicit substance, and commenced full time employment. Fred, who suffers from anxiety and depression, felt uncomfortable attending a group program and there was no specialist community service that could support him. Fred was able to study and work and eventually saved up and secured assistance through a private psychologist. He undertook intensive cognitive behaviour therapy and trauma counselling, coupled with a number of other therapies over the span of approximately a year. He has not reoffended since and now spends unsupervised time with his child.

Recommendations

- Immediate injection of funding to support Men's Behaviour Change programs and services in the NT, including provision in remote and regional contexts;
- Deliver specific funding to community services to provide specialised DFSV counselling for perpetrators who cannot access Men's Behaviour Change programs.

3. Women on Temporary Visas

Victims of DFSV who are listed as dependents on their partner or family member's student/ skilled migrant/ partner visa are especially vulnerable to DFSV. They often have limited supports and understanding of the Australian legal system, and are often solely dependent on their abusive partner for financial support and to meet the requirements of their visa to stay in the country.

Women in this situation are often unable to return to their country of origin due to the stigma and possible ostracism they would face in their community, as well as the financial burden associated with relocation.

There are limited community services currently available in the NT to support people in such situations. One such program is the Refugee and Migrant Settlement Services (RAMSS), which provides discrete support services and advocacy to secure pro bono assistance for migration matters from legal representatives/ migration agents for individuals who have lived in Darwin, Palmerston and the surrounding rural areas for less than five years.²⁸

Considering the diverse population of the NT and its geographical expanse, ensuring there is greater provision of services to assist refugees and migrants facing hardship across the NT, particularly in the context of DFSV, is important.

Case study

Seritah has come to Australia as a dependent on her husband's spouse visa. After being hospitalised for the third time and convinced her husband may kill her the next time, she decides to move to a women's shelter with her young child. She has not left earlier as she has made enquiries with Centrelink and understands that she will not be entitled to any benefits. She obtains legal advice and support from Domestic Violence Legal Service to secure a DVO.

[REDACTED] cannot access Centrelink benefits, cannot afford childcare and therefore cannot work. She cannot return to her country of origin as her family have made it clear they will not permit her to return home. Even if she were allowed, the Australian family courts may not permit the child to relocate overseas with the mother.

Recommendations

- Increase funding to legal assistance services to support victims to obtain generalist legal advice, migration advice and secure visas so that they are not trapped in situations of family violence;
- Ensure access to income, food and other essentials including temporary, crisis and public housing and healthcare for temporary visa holders escaping DFSV;
- Increase the funding and delivery of free interpreting services;
- Increase service provision and program delivery of services to assist refugees and migrants to access services within our communities.

²⁸ Anglicare NT, Refugee and Migrant Settlement Services (RAMSS), viewed August 2020, available at <https://www.anglicare-nt.org.au/service/refugee-migrant-settlement-services-ramss/>

4. Family and Advocacy Support Services

The Commonwealth Attorney-General-funded Family and Advocacy Support Services have been positively evaluated, assisting both victims and perpetrators of DFSV when appearing before the family courts to resolve their family law disputes. This program assists with both legal and non-legal social support assessments and referrals to ensure that risk is identified and assessed and appropriate supports are accessed. It is a holistic service delivery model that would benefit from receiving recurrent funding.

Recommendation

- Committed recurrent funding of the Family and Advocacy Support Services ensuring service delivery and access across regional, remote and urban communities.

5. Poverty – Cost of Living and Housing

In the past decade, despite continued campaigns to address gender inequality, the gap between women and men caught in the cycle of poverty has continued to widen.²⁹ This phenomenon is often referred to as the ‘feminisation of poverty’.³⁰ The feminisation of poverty has not risen from purely economic perspectives, but also as a result of the continued and ingrained societal biases that exists towards women. Women living in poverty are often denied access to resources that others in our society benefit from; they often will not have adequate access to healthcare and housing, and are less likely to be educated.³¹

Despite Australia experiencing consistent economic growth over the last three decades, poverty levels have remained entrenched at a high level – with more than 3 million people living below the poverty line in Australia, with women comprising 52% of a core group of all people experiencing poverty.³² Of the poverty rates in Australia, those living in remote or very remote localities, experience much higher levels of poverty than those living in urban centres.³³ These high rates of poverty are experienced disproportionately across the NT, with Aboriginal people in particular over represented in homelessness and unemployment rates, and poor educational outcomes.

Along with gendered crimes and the related impacts, economic instability is a key driver to women entering and/or experiencing poverty. Not only do women live with wage disparity, but they are less likely to hold permanent employment positions (often being employed on a casual basis).³⁴ Women disproportionately take on the majority of unpaid carer and domestic duties, including taking time off from work to raise children.³⁵ These factors not only apply financial strain and can be correlated to hardship, but have long term impacts, such as the inability to own assets along with accumulate/allocate superannuation.

²⁹ UN Women – The Feminization of Poverty, viewed 2019, accessed at <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/followup/session/presskit/fs1.htm>

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Oxfam, Our Approach, accessed at <https://www.oxfam.ca/what-we-do/how-we-work/our-approach/>

³² ACOSS and UNSW, *Poverty in Australia 2018*

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Australian Government – Gender Workplace Equality Agency, ‘Gender workplace statistics at a glance 2017-2018’, accessed at <https://www.wgea.gov.au/data/fact-sheets/gender-workplace-statistics-at-a-glance-2017-18>

³⁵ Ibid.

These economic drivers also mean that women may depend on support from partners/ family/ social welfare to help provide financial stability, and if circumstances change (such as relationship breakdowns, women having to leave the home or acting as a sole parent), it can have far reaching impacts on an individual's welfare. The historical, entrenched nature of gender inequality also means that older women are unfairly burdened, particularly when it comes to accessing appropriate services later in life.

Recommendations

- Acknowledging and addressing the role that poverty plays in gender inequality is crucial in any future development of initiatives to address gender-based violence, with emphasis placed on holistic, wraparound care and support for those in our communities experiencing disadvantage;
- Ensuring a whole of Government approach and commitment to the implementation of the Fourth Action Plan, relevant related state and territory initiatives and future steps to address DFSV, accompanied by adequate funding and resourcing across all regions of the NT. Building models to best practice, with cultural safety enshrined, and ensuring that the interlinked nature of social issues in the NT is at the forefront of program development will guarantee that communities benefit from the investment in such strategies.

Cost of Living

The high cost of living in the NT, particularly in rural and remote regions, is well documented.³⁶ NTCOSS has long advocated for reform to help alleviate these pressures, including a permanent increase to the rate of Jobseeker (Newstart) and other payments.³⁷

The most recent NTCOSS Cost of Living report highlights high fuel and electricity costs, unaffordable food costs in remote stores and a complete lack of affordable housing for those on income security in the urban centres of Alice Springs and Katherine.³⁸ In conjunction with this, compounding drivers of poverty unfairly burden cohorts within the NT who are statistically over-represented in regards to homelessness, DFSV and other social harms.

Recommendations

- A permanent and adequate increase to JobSeeker, Youth Allowance and other income support payments;
- NTCOSS recently supplied a submission to the Inquiry into food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities, with a list of recommendations to be implemented (Appendix A).

³⁶ NTCOSS, Cost of Living reports, viewed August 2020, accessed at <https://ntcoss.org.au/cost-of-living/>

³⁷ NTCOSS, Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Adequacy of Newstart and Related Payments and Alternative Mechanisms to Determine the Level of Income Support Payments in Australia, September 2010

³⁸ NTCOSS, 28th Cost of Living Report, August 2020

Homelessness and Housing

NTCOSS recently provided a submission to the House of Representatives Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs Inquiry into homelessness in Australia.³⁹ This submission specifically addressed the risk of homelessness of women and children affected by DFSV, one of the highest identified cohorts accessing homelessness assistance in the NT.⁴⁰

AIHW identified that in the 2018-19 period, 1 in 26 people in the NT received homelessness assistance, higher than the national rate (1 in 86).⁴¹ The top reason for clients seeking assistance was identified as domestic and family violence (46%), with the majority of clients identified as women.⁴² As survivors of DFSV are overwhelmingly more likely to be forced to leave the home to escape violence, this means women in these situations are forced into primary homelessness, or, in the majority of cases, continue living with the abusive partner.

Recommendations

- NTCOSS' recent Submission to the House of Representatives Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs Inquiry into homelessness in Australia has a list of recommendations to be implemented (Appendix B).

6. Family Law System and Inquiry

NTCOSS was disappointed at the decision by the Federal Government to conduct another inquiry into Australia's Family Law System in September 2019, despite not yet implementing any of the robust and comprehensive recommendations put forward in the Australian Law Reform Commission's (ALRC) Family Law System Review, released in April 2019.

Australia's family law system has long been regarded as under resourced, expensive and due to such factors, placing undue pressure on those utilising it, and is in dire need of reform. Further delaying such reform through the announcement of another Inquiry is detrimental to those navigating the current system.

In conjunction with the fact that the second inquiry was unnecessary, given the recent ALRC review, NTCOSS was dismayed and concerned at damaging comments made by a parliamentarian preceding the commencement of the Inquiry. Specifically, comments specifically suggesting that women are making "false accusations of domestic violence to stop men having access to children".⁴³ This sentiment was prominent throughout the hearing process, with the Deputy Chair and other members of their political party continually aligning with such rhetoric.⁴⁴

³⁹ NTCOSS, Submission to the House of Representatives Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs Inquiry into homelessness in Australia, 2020, Appendix A

⁴⁰ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Specialist Homeless services 2018-19, accessed at https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/a9055e27-8e4a-44d8-ad7c-9baf43c01415/NT_factsheet.pdf.aspx

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ ABC News, 'Family law inquiry given green light by Senate as Rosie Batty questions Pauline Hanson's role,' viewed September 2019, accessed at < www.abc.net.au/news/2019-09-19/rosie-batty-family-law-inquiry-pauline-hanson-bias/11523914 >

⁴⁴ Parliament of Australia, Hansard for the Inquiry into Australia's Family Law System; The Guardian Australia, 'Malcolm Roberts criticised after claiming 'many' domestic violence allegations made up', viewed July 2020, accessed at

Sentiment that implies women falsely accuse partners of DFSV is damaging and not supported by evidence. The drivers of violence against women are entrenched across society,⁴⁵ and are further epitomised by comments such as the above. The Fourth Action Plan specifically notes that a cornerstone of reform when looking at gender-based violence is addressing ingrained societal biases towards women and moving towards a more equitable society. It is deeply concerning to see attitudes in contrast to this being encouraged on a national platform, and resulted in a lack of confidence in the appointed Committee's ability to conduct the Inquiry and hear from victims in an unbiased manner.

Recommendations

NTCOSS supplied a submission to the Inquiry into Australia's Family Law system (Appendix C) with a number of recommendations, including;

- Endorsement of the Women's Legal Services Australia submission and 5 Step Plan - Safety First in Family Law - that identifies five steps to creating a family law system that keeps women and children safe;
- Commence implementing recommendations put forward by the ARLC in their Family Law System Review;
- Training for parliamentarians undertaking inquiries relating to DFSV.

7. Support for Victims Accessing Police Assistance

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Personal Safety Survey found that 82% of women who have experienced DFSV did not report to police.⁴⁶ Clearly, women are still reluctant to report DFSV. This reluctance can be further exacerbated by barriers to reporting, including; language and communication, lack of cultural understanding, lack of specialist police approaches to DFSV and training, fear of police due to factors such as intergenerational trauma/ historically poor relationships with marginalised communities and geographical factors such as remoteness.

NTCOSS and our members acknowledge that the police have a complex job, responding to a broad range of issues across diverse communities. Front line responders are often required to provide support to victims of DFSV in challenging circumstances, as do health services and other community service providers. Members report that currently, there are many victims of DFSV who are unable to access appropriate police services, which can place them in unsafe situations.

Embedding support workers within organisations that can provide urgent support for victims, and be a central point of referral to the multitude of services individuals often need to access, is of importance. Such supports are particularly necessary in remote communities, where people are limited in their options when seeking assistance.

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/mar/10/malcolm-roberts-criticised-after-claiming-many-domestic-violence-allegations-made-up>

⁴⁵ Australian Institute of Family Studies, 'Gender equality and violence against women'; Territory Families, 'The Northern Territory Gender Equality Framework 2019-2024 - Consultation Document', 2019, Northern Territory Government

⁴⁶ ABS 2017: Personal Safety Survey 2016

Case study

Rita is a 25 year old Aboriginal woman who is assaulted by her partner, Sam. She attends her nearest police station with Sam in hot pursuit. She sees an auxiliary officer and asks for help. The auxiliary officer advises her that there are no police officers in the station and she cannot make a statement. She eventually manages to leave the police station, goes home and locks her doors. Sam waits outside for her. After hours of waiting, the police arrive to take her statement, asking if Sam is around. Sam is no longer outside and the auxiliary officer has not made a note of observing Sam in front of the station. The police determine that there is insufficient evidence to issue a DVO against Sam. They advise Rita to apply for a DVO through a Domestic Violence Legal Service. Rita secures prompt assistance from this service, but is forced to re-tell what has happened to her and has lost confidence in the police.

Recommendations

- Provide training to police officers to not only respond to DFSV call outs, but enact safety plans and to triage victims to services that can best support them;
- Ensure access to social support workers at police stations (either on call/on site) to support victims while reporting and speaking with police;
- Support victims in a manner that respects cultural and linguistic diversity.

8. Coercive Control

Coercive control is the 'strategic course of gender-based abuse which some combination of physical and sexual violence, intimidation, degradation, isolation control and arbitrary violation of liberty are used to subjugate a partner and deprive her of basic rights and resources'.⁴⁷ The concept of coercive control identifies that intimate partner abuse is ongoing, chronic and routine, contrasting with incident-specific views of partner abuse which see it as consisting of acute, discreet incidences of violence,⁴⁸ with entrapment a significant consequence of this form of abuse.⁴⁹

NTCOSS members have reported an increase in both DFSV incidents and family law matters involving coercive control, and a lack of training and understanding (particularly within law enforcement) of the signs and impacts of coercive and controlling behaviours. Previously, the complexities of implementing the clinical practice of coercive control into a legal model have been raised,⁵⁰ however considering the long term ramifications of such behaviour, it is clear greater research into such implementation, appropriate training and other methods to address coercive and controlling behaviours must be explored.

⁴⁷ Buzawa et.al, Responding to domestic violence: the integration of criminal justice and human services, 2017

⁴⁸ Elliot, Research Brief – Coercive Control, 2017, Monash Gender and Family Violence

⁴⁹ Buzawa et.al, 2017

⁵⁰ Elliot, 2017

Coercive and controlling behaviours are entrenched in gendered and sexual inequalities, and it is regarded that preventing coercive control will require 'broad change to cultural, social and legal norms and inequalities'.⁵¹ Addressing coercive and controlling behaviours will require a collaborative approach across sectors, governments and health and justice systems.⁵²

Recommendations

- Funding for greater research (involving the specialist DFSV service sector) to examine the impacts of coercive and controlling behaviours and how to address them in a meaningful manner;
- NTCOSS supports the recommendations put forward by the Darwin Family Violence Network (DFVN) for methods to address coercive control being embedded within a broader strategy to respond to violence against women and children, accompanied by comprehensive training for police who would need to take a full history of violence in a relationship instead of the current incident-based approach.

9. Technological Abuse

NTCOSS members report that when victims of DFSV attend legal assistance services to seek support relating to family violence, clients are reporting that surveillance technology has been installed onto their phones and/or in their houses, but they are unable to remove these and there is a lack of services to provide this support.

Case study

Dimity calls the police to seek assistance for an officer to attend her house and remove surveillance technology as she is convinced her ex-partner has installed devices to monitor her and her children. The police advise that they are unable to provide this assistance and provide her instead with a referral for counselling. Dimity does her own research online and located one of the devices. She removes the device and attends the police station to show them. She is advised by auxiliary officer that as the device has been removed the chain of evidence has been destroyed, and even if she had been able to get the police to attend her residence, they would not have been able to prove that her ex-partner had installed in.

⁵¹ Buzawa et.al. 2017

⁵² Elliot, 2017

Members report that victims are attending services for assistance to have surveillance devices removed on a weekly basis. Whilst some services are funded to provide safe phones and can provide basic information about locating surveillance devices, these services are not skilled in providing assistance to clients to remove devices.

Recommendation

- Fund IT assistance through specialist DFSV service providers to assist victims to locate and remove devices from their residence and their personal technological devices.

10. COVID-19 Pandemic Response

Concerns that COVID-19 lock-downs during the pandemic response would result in higher instances of DFSV were reported across Australia,⁵³ with modelling demonstrating that globally in times of crisis/stress DFSV rates increase.⁵⁴ This increase is purportedly due to increased tension within relationships, along with the introduction of other risk factors such as trauma, financial hardship, alcohol and substance abuse.⁵⁵

Increased incidents of violence in a pandemic response call for changes to service models that can respond within a complex environment, while also meeting the needs of clients. Anecdotally, NTCOSS has heard from members that they have faced numerous complexities when addressing client needs during COVID-19, particularly in remote and regional contexts, compounded by the need to adapt service responses to comply with COVID-19 health protocols.

Areas of concern included;

- Difficulty in safety planning and evacuation from remote and regional hubs, particularly when necessitating a cross-border response from police and community service providers;
- Police responding to instances of DFSV in remote and regional areas while prioritising Chief Health Officer directives regarding isolation, border control and other lock down measures;
- Adapting service responses in crisis accommodation centres to meet the needs of clients while also protecting staff;
- Increased instances of clients accessing legal services for DFSV related incidents;
- Limited options for alternate, safe, transitional and long-term housing options for women and their children (including those leaving prison);
- Lack of emergency relief funding specifically to address housing and transport concerns.

⁵³ The Conversation, 'What governments can do about the increase in family violence due to coronavirus', April 2020, accessed at <https://theconversation.com/what-governments-can-do-about-the-increase-in-family-violence-due-to-coronavirus-135674>;

The Age, 'New reports of family violence spike in COVID-19 lockdown, study finds', viewed July 2020, accessed at <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/new-reports-of-family-violence-spike-in-covid-19-lockdown-study-finds-20200607-p55096.html>

Brown C, 2020, 'Isolated from COVID-19, endangered by domestic violence: The heightened risk of violence against women in the Northern Territory', Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research '

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Case study - before Covid-19

Female Late 20's, CALD background with 18th month old son.

The client attended the office with a support worker from YWCA, the interpreter attended in person to meet with her lawyer and the SSW from the family section.

Safety plans and warm referrals were able to be made in an environment that felt inclusive and safe. As the client had met with both her lawyer and the SSW she remained more engaged in the process both with her lawyer and with the safety concerns and continued safety planning. Meeting in person she was able to see that there was a genuine concern for her safety. As there were no social distancing restrictions she was also able to be placed in a supported safe house environment and still able to access external services, such as legal aid and face to face counselling and other community supports.

Case study – during COVID-19

Just as the Territory went into lockdown a young CALD mum with 14month old son sought help in leaving an extremely physical and emotionally abusive relationship. She had previously studied in Queensland and has a good command of the English language.

Due to the social distancing and restrictions that had come into place, all contact with this client was over the phone. The women's shelter was able to place her in a unit with her son and her sister who was living with her at the time, speaking with her daily while trying to find supports for her that could assist she spoke about her fears.

She had been given a safety phone so that she didn't have to continue with the barrage of calls from her son's father or either of their families who were overseas. She was frightened that she would be sent back to her country of origin as she was on a visa and the only assurances we were able to get for her was on the phone. She was in a unfamiliar unit, and she and her son could not go out and relied on others to bring food and basic supplies to them. She had only seen the women's shelter caseworker who accompanied them to the unit; the police who the husband had sent for a welfare check and her sister who was with her.

She received a lot of pressure from her family to return to the marriage and to give it another try. She received pressure from her in-laws even after she explained to them the abuse that had been in the marriage, to give it another try. She went back into the relationship, she explained to me it was too hard, she said that while she talked to people on the phone, she didn't know them, who they were, and it was really hard to believe that someone you have never seen is going to help you. While she appreciated what everyone had done for her the anxiety of what would happen next was too much. She found that the isolation of being without any family support or other supports except for her sister too much. She said that both she and her sister were not only worried about her situation but also that their parents were overseas and they had no way to help them if anything happened to them. Her husband also would say to her, I am worried about you and his son because of Covid-19, that he would not know if anything happened to them, it was a very scary time, he would be a better husband, but with what was happening in the world they should all be together. She has totally disengaged with all services and any attempts to contact her to see if she is alright have gone unanswered. Safety planning and risk assessment was carried out over the phone prior to her return to the home.

Recommendations

Noting the specific COVID-19 Emergency Funding announced by the Federal Government and the associated focus areas of this funding (including crisis support, safer housing and emergency accommodation and Men's Behaviour Change programs/perpetrator interventions), along with acknowledgement of the unique challenges in regional and remote locations, the Government's COVID-19 response should include:

- Increase in Emergency Relief Funding across the NT, specifically for women and their children leaving violence, and administered by specialist DFSV services;
- While examining safer housing and emergency accommodation, increase housing stock to ensure women and their children have somewhere safe to exit on a long-term basis (including women leaving prison);
- A permanent and adequate increase to JobSeeker, Youth Allowance and other income support payments;
- NTCOSS is a member of National Advocacy Group for Women on Temporary Visas Experiencing Violence, and has also endorsed specific recommendations regarding women on Temporary Visas through this platform.

Conclusion

DFSV is a longstanding, complex issue experienced across Australia – it does not discriminate. NTCOSS urges the Australian Government and relevant state and territory governments to prioritise the continuation of responses to DFSV that focus on primary prevention and early intervention, addressing the drivers of violence and gendered societal bias, creating stronger and healthier communities for all.



NTCOSS Submission to the

**Inquiry into food pricing and food security in
remote Indigenous communities**

July 2020

NTCOSS is a peak body for the Northern Territory (NT) community sector and is a voice for people affected by social and economic disadvantage and inequality. The community sector in the NT is made up of community managed, non-government, not-for-profit organisations that work in social and community service delivery, sector development and advocacy. The community sector plays a vital role in creating social wellbeing for all Territorians and in building safe and healthy communities by providing services that enable people to access and participate in health services, education, employment, economic development, and family and community life.

NTCOSS represents members that work with people and communities in remote and very remote regions, including members that work in cross border regions, such as the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands, as well as organisations that work with people living in Town Camps and Community Living Areas of the NT.

NTCOSS publishes a quarterly Cost of Living report, which examines changes in the cost of living in the NT, with a particular focus on cost of living pressures for low income, vulnerable and disadvantaged Territorians. In 2019, NTCOSS produced two Cost of Living Reports¹ with a focus on food costs and food security. Drawing on the NT Government's Market Basket Surveys and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Consumer Price Index (CPI), these reports provide an analysis of changes in food prices in key expenditure areas across the NT.

NTCOSS welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry into food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities. This submission focuses on a number of issues identified in the Terms of Reference, and includes information on the impacts of food pricing and food security for people living in Town Camps and Community Living Areas of the NT. These locations are on the outskirts of NT regional towns, including Katherine, Tennant Creek and Alice Springs, and can be considered remote. In the case of the Alice Springs Town Camps these locations are considered part of Alice Springs, but the service to Town Camps is inconsistent with the surrounding suburbs.²

NTCOSS recognises the specific expertise of members and external stakeholders that have a high level of contact with individuals who live in remote regions and Town Camps in the NT. In particular, NTCOSS supports submissions by our Aboriginal community controlled member organisations (ACCOs) including Tangentyere Council, and submissions from external stakeholders, the Aboriginal Peaks of the NT (APONT).

¹ NTCOSS *Cost of Living Reports* no.24 and 25 accessible at <https://ntcoss.org.au/cost-of-living/>

² p.5 Tangentyere Council 2019, submission to the Senate Inquiry into Newstart and Related Payments: Adequacy of Payments and Alternative Mechanisms to Determine the Level of Income Support Payments in Australia, accessed at <https://irp-cdn.multiscreensite.com/d440a6ac/files/uploaded/Senate%20Inquiry%20into%20Newstart%20and%20Related%20Payments.pdf>

The environment in which Remote Community retailers operate:

Around 20% of the Northern Territory population live in Very Remote areas, and around 20% of the NT population live in Remote areas (around 40% total).³ Aboriginal people make up 27% of the Remote Australia (NT) population, and 74.8% of the Very Remote Australia (NT) population.⁴ According to the ABS, people living in remote areas 'are much more likely to be living in an area in the lowest, most disadvantaged quintile'.⁵

There are 73 remote communities and around 500 homelands/outstations across the NT, some of which are in very remote areas.⁶ Outstations and smaller communities generally rely on stores in larger communities and regional centres for goods and services. Most remote stores operate in a monopoly environment as the sole provider of food and other consumer goods to communities, and play a 'critical role in the health and well-being' of communities.⁷ Beyond potential impacts such as lack of competitive food pricing and lack of choice, reliance on a sole remote provider may result in lower stability of food supply.

Location is a key feature of food supply, with larger supermarkets able to supply a full range of food and groceries at competitive prices. Conversely small 'corner stores' (small suburban supermarkets) are often characterised by higher, average prices, and do not provide the same range of foods. The often significant distance from major centres and supply hubs results in challenges such as high travel costs, long freight times, and disruptions to supply due to inclement weather and poor condition of roads and access channels.

Major supermarkets are inaccessible to many people residing in Town Camps and Community Living Areas. For example, in Alice Springs, the majority of Town Camps are more than 500 metres from a major supermarket; many Town Camps are located more than 500 metres outside the public transport radius; and many Town Camps are in closer proximity to takeaway stores and corner stores. Compounding factors such as lack of access to a private vehicle and irregular public transport, result in many Town Camp residents relying on corner stores for food and groceries.

Comparative pricing in other non-Indigenous remote communities and regional centres

The NT Market Basket Survey reports demonstrate (often significantly) higher average food prices in remote stores in the NT. The 2019 Survey reports that a healthy food basket in remote stores was 56% more expensive than in district centre supermarkets and 6% more expensive than in district centre corner stores. Surveys also show that prices in remote

³ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2017, '2016 Census QuickStats', accessed https://quickstats.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/RA74?opendocument

⁴ ibid

⁵ ABS 2019 '2076.0 – Census of Population and Housing: Characteristics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, 2016', Commonwealth of Australia

⁶ Bushtel, NT Government 2020 accessed at <https://bushtel.nt.gov.au/profile>

⁷ House of Representatives Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee, 2009, 'Everybody's Business: Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Community Stores', Commonwealth of Australia, accessed at file:///C:/Users/SarahHolder/Downloads/http_www.aphref.aph.gov.au_house_committee_atsia_communitystores_report_front.pdf

stores continue to rise at a greater rate than the prices in major supermarkets, and are above consumer price index (CPI) increases.⁸ From 2000 to 2019, the cost of the healthy food basket rose by an average 3.1% annually in remote stores and 2.1% in district centre supermarkets. The average CPI increase over this time was 2.7%.⁹

The Survey demonstrates a range of pricing across the de-identified sample stores, with the cost of a healthy food basket costing \$1,150 in one privately owned store, and \$680 in a store run by a store group.¹⁰ Without contextualised information on these stores (such as location and proximity to major supply hubs), it is not possible to understand the pricing differences between individual stores. However, such significant variations suggest that prices may be reduced in many remote community stores.

Recommendations:

The timely release and accurate data collection of reports into food security, including the NT Market Basket Survey, in order to use data to contribute to evidence-based policy.

Data on individual stores in the NT Market Basket Survey is not de-identified, in order to accurately understand differences in pricing and to assist in protecting against price gouging.

Further, the NT Market Basket Survey to provide a deeper analysis of data, including store/community size and distance from major centres.

Sufficient resources be provided to ensure all regions are covered by the biennial NT Market Basket Survey.

Barriers facing residents in Remote Communities from having reliable access to affordable fresh and healthy food, groceries and other essential supplies

Findings from Part 2 of the 2019 NTCOSS *Cost of Living* report on food pricing and affordability, indicate that whilst there are positive trends in the NT there are also pockets of significant hardship with respect to accessing, affording and consuming affordable and healthy food at levels required to sustain good health. Remote households clearly face excessive food costs and the gap between the cost of food in remote stores and major supermarkets is widening.

⁸ Northern Territory Government Department of Health, 2020, '2019 Market Basket Survey', NT Government, Darwin, accessed at <https://data.nt.gov.au/dataset/f6fb1b17-bce3-4217-a9ce-ccecd879ea/resource/af05efdf-6a53-44d8-9b38-a88df3d3a6c1/download/2019-nt-market-basket-survey-full-report.pdf>

⁹ ibid

¹⁰ ibid

Rates of food insecurity are highest in rural and remote areas of Australia, with Aboriginal people, single parent families and people on income support disproportionately affected.¹¹ Aboriginal people living in remote areas are more likely than those in non-remote areas to be living in a household that had run out of food and cannot afford to buy more (31% compared with 20%).¹² Food insecurity is associated with poor health outcomes, including higher risk of developing kidney disease, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, anaemia and some cancers, in people experiencing food insecurity.¹³

Poverty and the cost of food are key determinants of food insecurity. For some people in low income households, skipping meals or regularly going without adequate food can be a choice they make to ensure their children are fed, which compromises their own nutritional intake.

Low income, combined with high food costs result in many Aboriginal people spending a large proportion of their income on food. A healthy food basket purchased from an NT Remote Store will require 34% of the household income for a family of six (more than double the national household average of disposable income required for food and non-alcoholic beverage expenditure (13.9%).¹⁴ In some remote communities, a healthy diet cost more than half the disposable income of a family on income support¹⁵. Households in the lowest 20% of incomes are spending twice as much (25.4%) as a proportion of income as the richest 20% of households (9.4%) on food and non-alcoholic beverages.¹⁶

Aboriginal people are disproportionately represented in income support figures, particularly in remote communities where employment opportunities are scarce.¹⁷ In 2014 – 2015, the proportion of Aboriginal people whose main source of income was income support was highest in remote areas and very remote areas, with 65% of Aboriginal people receiving income support in very remote areas, compared with 43% in major cities.¹⁸ Income support

¹¹ Rosier K, 2011, 'Food insecurity in Australia: What is it, who experiences it and how can child and family services support families experiencing it?', Child Family Community Australia Practice Sheet, August 2011

¹² p.14 National Rural Health Alliance 2016, 'Food Security and Health in Rural and Remote Australia', Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation, Australian Government, accessed at <https://www.agrifutures.com.au/wp-content/uploads/publications/16-053.pdf>

¹³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2018, 'Housing Assistance in Australia', 28 June 2018, accessed at <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/housing-assistance/housing-assistance-in-australia-2018/contents/housing-in-australia>

¹⁴ NTCOSS, 2019, 'Cost of Living Report: Food Costs in the Northern Territory' Issue 24, July 2019

¹⁵ S86 Lee A et al 2016, 'Nutrition in remote Aboriginal communities: lessons from Mai Wiru and the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands' in *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, Vol.40 (Suppl.1) 2016 retrieved from <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/1753-6405.12419>

¹⁶ ABS 2017, 'Household Expenditure Survey, Australia: Detailed Expenditure Items', 2015-16, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra, accessed at <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/6530.0Main%20Features12015-16?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=6530.0&issue=2015-16&num=&view=>

¹⁷ NT Government 2020, 'Northern Territory Economy: Aboriginal labour force characteristics', Department of Treasury and Finance, accessed at <https://nteconomy.nt.gov.au/labour-market/aboriginal-labour-force-characteristics>

¹⁸ AIHW, 2019, *Indigenous income and finance*, release date 11 September 2019, accessed at <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/indigenous-income-and-finance>

payments such as JobSeeker (Newstart) and Youth Allowance have been below the poverty line for many years, and have not increased in real terms in 25 years.¹⁹

NTCOSS notes that the temporary measures introduced in response to COVID-19, including the Coronavirus Supplement and easing of activity requirements under the Community Development Program, has had a significant impact on poverty and food insecurity in remote Australia. NTCOSS members have reported that this increase has resulted in increased spending in remote stores, increased intake of healthy food items, and has significantly reduced applications to some service providers for support for food, fuel, clothing, blankets, and other emergency relief.²⁰ Conversely, biosecurity measures introduced in response to the COVID-19 health emergency, including people returning to and remaining in remote communities, and the interruption to supply chains to remote stores, led to increased pressure on food supplies and concerns of increased food insecurity in these communities.

Recommendation: A permanent and adequate increase to Jobseeker, Youth Allowance and other income support payments.

The Commonwealth Government's Remote Area Allowance (RAA) for recipients of income support, which was introduced to help meet the additional costs associated with living in remote areas, is set at a very low level, and has not increased in over 20 years. The RAA is not indexed, meaning that it does not keep pace with the rising cost of living, and cannot achieve the intended aim of meeting the additional costs of living in remote areas.

Recommendation: The RAA should be substantially increased, and should be set at a level that adequately addresses the increased cost of living in remote Australia. It should also be indexed, in order to keep pace with the rising cost of goods and services in remote Australia.

The NT is the only state or territory jurisdiction that does not offer electricity concessions to all Commonwealth Health Care Card holders, with many low-income individuals excluded from the Concession scheme. In the NT, electricity bills effectively have a regressive tax component, given that the Power and Water Corporation and Jacana are required to provide a Public Authority Dividend (PAD) to the NT Government each year (\$23.6M) for electricity as well as water. The PAD comes from revenue raised from household usage charges which are applied at the same rate regardless of the household's income. The higher a household's bill, the higher their effective contribution to the PAD charges will be, and these contributions represent a greater proportion of household income (regressive) for low-income households. The provision of an electricity concession to low-income households effectively provides tax relief for these eligible households, by compensating for the higher tax component they are contributing – but only some, not all, low-income

¹⁹ Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) 2018, 'Raise the Rate Fact Sheet', Strawberry Hills, NSW

²⁰ McFarlane B, 2020, 'Postcard from the field: COVID-19 in the Northern Territory', Arena Online, published 9 June 2020, accessed at <https://arena.org.au/postcard-from-the-field-covid-19-in-the-northern-territory/>

households, receive this tax relief. NTCOSS believes further exploration of this issue is required.

Recommendation: The NT Government extend electricity concessions to all Commonwealth Health Care Card holders, in order to ensure power is accessible, constant and affordable for food storage and cooking.

Overcrowded housing is a dominant issue in the NT with the highest rates of overcrowding in Australia (7% for public housing and 56% for 'state owned and managed Indigenous housing').²¹ Over a 15 year period (2000 – 2015) there was a 72% increase of families on the public housing waitlist for Greater Darwin and Alice Springs. In the NT, one survey found that only 38% of Aboriginal people reported living in dwellings of an unacceptable nature with access to food preparation and food storage facilities (62% not functional).²²

Overcrowding has a direct correlation to access to fresh and healthy food, with impacts on the capacity of housing and health hardware to cope with the number of residents, and the capacity of existing infrastructure for the safe storage and preparation of fresh food.

Recommendation: Strengthening the adherence to the National Indigenous Housing Guide, with its emphasis on safety and healthy living practices. These practices are underpinned by health hardware to support food preparation and storage.

A 'housing for health' approach is required in remote Aboriginal communities and Town Camps, that supports an environmental health workforce to implement evidence-based initiatives that improve health outcomes; implement a proactive, cyclical housing maintenance program for remote communities and Town Camps, that employs a local workforce; and, supports culturally led sustainable design of housing to address overcrowding.²³

Limited or no public transport options significantly impact on the capacity to access stores for people living in remote communities and Town Camps.²⁴ A higher proportion of Aboriginal people in remote and non-remote areas have less access to a motor vehicle compared with non-Indigenous Australians.²⁵ The logistics of the public bus systems in regional centres (where available) are often a barrier, through infrequent services and short operating times. In Alice Springs, most bus routes are uni-directional, meaning passengers may need to travel an entire route to access a supermarket 1km away. For many Town

²¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2019, 'Housing assistance in Australia', Cat. No: HOU 315, accessed at <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/housing-assistance/housing-assistance-in-australia-2019/contents/overcrowding-and-underutilisation>

²² Bailie R and Runcie M, 2001, 'Household infrastructure in Aboriginal communities and the implications for health improvement', *Medical Journal Australia*, 175 (7): 363 – 366, accessed at <https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2001/175/7/household-infrastructure-aboriginal-communities-and-implications-health>

²³ See 'Housing for Health: the guide' website, <http://www.housingforhealth.com/about/the-health-story/>

²⁴ Guenther J, 2019, *Child Friendly Alice Technical Report: About the children and families of Alice Springs 2019*. Alice Springs: Child Friendly Alice

²⁵ p.106 Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council, 2015, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework 2014 Report*, AHMAC, Canberra.

Camp residents, this results in spending scarce funds on taxis and mini-buses, diverting money from food, clothing, and other essential items.

Recommendations:

Conduct a study to identify gaps in regional centre public transport to ensure low income residents are able to shop at more affordable stores that are not within walking distance of where they live.

Provision of capped subsidies for NT Concession Scheme Recipients to use remote private transport services (e.g. Bush bus and Bodhi Bus) to regional centres to periodically shop for bulk food items and groceries.

Improved transport links in regional and remote areas.

As noted in the 2009 report on the Inquiry into remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Community Stores, food and other goods are transported across significant distances, in often extreme temperatures.²⁶ Where weekly transport is not possible, adequate storage is essential, with impacts on the freshness and variety of perishable items available in remote stores. Freight costs to remote locations are high, which results in higher costs for consumers. Freight subsidies may assist in reducing the cost of food for people in remote communities, however evidence given to the above Inquiry cautioned that these subsidies would be at risk of becoming absorbed by the market. It was recommended that freight subsidies should be applied at the consumer level, with additional oversight of pricing and charges to safeguard against profiteering.²⁷

Recommendations:

Introduction of targeted measures to reduce the price of healthy foods, including options for subsidised freight, food subsidies and subsidised wages in stores, to target remote areas affected by food insecurity.

Additional scrutiny of pricing and charges to safeguard against profiteering.

Food insecurity is a significant issue in remote Aboriginal communities and Town Camps and Community Living Areas across Australia. NTCOSS urges the Australian Government and relevant state and territory governments to prioritise the needs of Aboriginal people residing in these remote locations, in order that people have sustainable access to affordable, safe and nutritious food.

²⁶ House of Representatives Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee, 2009, 'Everybody's Business – Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Community Stores', Report, accessed at <https://www.aph.gov.au/binaries/house/committee/atsia/communitystores/report/everybody's%20business%20report.pdf>

²⁷ ibid

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Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs
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Canberra ACT 2600

Via email: spla.reps@aph.gov.au

Dear Secretary,

Re: Submission to the House of Representatives Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs Inquiry into homelessness in Australia

The Northern Territory Council of Social Service (NTCOSS) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the House of Representatives Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs Inquiry into homelessness in Australia.

NTCOSS is a peak body for the social and community service sector in the Northern Territory (NT), and an advocate for social justice on behalf of the people and communities who may be affected by poverty and disadvantage.

NTCOSS represents a varied service sector, with members bringing different experiences and perspectives relating to homelessness from across the region. NTCOSS acknowledges that a number of our member organisations with specific expertise in this area have provided submissions relating to the Terms of Reference, including the NT housing peak body (NT Shelter) and specialist services that provide accommodation and case management support to those at risk of or experiencing homelessness. This submission will pay particular attention to the risk of homelessness of women and children affected by domestic, family and sexual violence (DFSV) (point 6(a) in Terms of Reference), one of the highest identified cohorts accessing homelessness assistance in the NT.¹

The NT has 12 times the average rate of homelessness,² as well as experiencing the highest rates of DFSV in Australia.³ On average there are 61 domestic and family violence incidents on a typical day and four domestic and family violence related homicides per 100,000 people per year.⁴ Aboriginal women are particularly impacted by this form of gender based violence, accounting for 89% of all

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Specialist Homeless services 2018-19, accessed at https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/a9055e27-8e4a-44d8-ad7c-9baf43c01415/NT_factsheet.pdf.aspx

² NT Shelter, 'NT Shelter About', accessed at <https://ntshelter.org.au/>

³ Territory Families, 'The Northern Territory Gender Equality Framework 2019-2024 - 'Consultation Document', 2019, Northern Territory Government

⁴ NT Government, 'Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Reduction Framework 2018-2028

DFSV victims in the NT.⁵ The impacts of DFSV as a driver of poverty and disadvantage are well documented; they include social isolation and exclusion; economic disadvantage (particularly regarding how changes in circumstances can impact income); and is the main reason women leave the home in Australia.⁶

Overcrowded living arrangements that are prevalent in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the NT have significant ramifications relating to DFSV and homelessness. The 2007 *Little Children are Sacred* report drew direct links between the shortage of housing in remote, regional and urban parts of the NT and DFSV, and recommended critical mass construction in targeted communities as well as urgent repairs to existing housing stock.⁷ While both the NT and Commonwealth Governments have increased housing investment in the NT since 2007, extensive gaps still remain in housing infrastructure and government funded housing and homelessness services across the NT.⁸

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare identified that in the 2018-19 period, 1 in 26 people in the NT received homelessness assistance, higher than the national rate (1 in 86).⁹ The top reason for clients seeking assistance was identified as domestic and family violence (46%), with the majority of clients identified as women.¹⁰ As survivors of DFSV are overwhelmingly more likely to be forced to leave the home to escape violence, this means women in these situations are forced into primary homelessness, or, in the majority of cases, continue living with the abusive partner.

Priority areas of focus in relation to the risk of homelessness of women and children affected by DFSV:

1. Transitional and long term accommodation assistance
 - a. Appropriate and flexible funding streams for specialist services in the NT are required for provision of transitional and long term accommodation services, including accommodation and housing/tenancy support, to give victims of DFSV more options when leaving crisis accommodation;
 - b. Increased support, including through care, for female prisoners to access accommodation services, and other social supports, to help reduce the likelihood of re-entry into unsafe environments.¹¹
2. Prevention and early intervention strategies
 - a. Increased flexible funding for the development of integrated service models that focus on early intervention and prevention for individuals, families and communities;
 - b. Increased funding for outreach programs to improve responses that support victims of DFSV in their homes and communities providing flexible and accessible points

⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2017, 4510.0 Recorded Crime – Victim, 2014-2016

⁶ Spinney 2012, Home and safe? Policy and practice innovations to prevent women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence from becoming homeless

⁷ Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse 2007

⁸ NT Shelter 2019, Pre-budget Submission to the NT Government 2020 – 2021 accessed at https://ntshelter.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/NTShelter2020_21PreBudget_SubmissionNTG.pdf

⁹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Specialist Homeless services 2018-19, accessed at

https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/a9055e27-8e4a-44d8-ad7c-9baf43c01415/NT_factsheet.pdf.aspx

¹⁰ *Ibid*

¹¹ Stephanie Zilman (2017) 'Domestic violence: Women leaving prison 'need proper housing' to avoid abuse, service providers say' ABC report 26 May 2017, accessed at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-05-26/women-leaving-prison-need-proper-housing/8558914> and Bevis, M., Atkinson, J., McCarthy, L., & Sweet, M. (2020). *Kungas' trauma experiences and effects on behaviour in Central Australia* (Research report, 03/2020). Sydney, NSW: ANROWS

through which information about service provision, and follow-up contact are available.¹²

3. Addressing the 'housing affordability crisis in the NT'¹³ to give victims of DFSV more agency in leaving the home by
 - a. extending the NT Government's head-leasing initiative and the National Rental Affordability Scheme to meet continuing need;
 - b. reforming the Commonwealth Rent Assistance Scheme to ensure it significantly improves rental affordability for those on low incomes and is responsive to local housing market conditions;¹⁴
 - c. Maintaining an increase to the rate of JobSeeker (Newstart) and other related payments introduced during the COVID-19 response (in line with the national Raise the Rate campaign), allowing recipients to maintain an adequate standard of living;
 - d. Private rent assistance including bond loans, rental grants, rental subsidies and relief, and payment of relocation expenses for women and children affected by DFSV, where they are unable to remain in the home.
4. Addressing public housing shortages
 - a. Continued development of NT Housing Strategy to create a more effective system in the NT that assists women and children affected by DSFV;
 - b. Participating in the proposed Social Housing Acceleration and Renovation Program.¹⁵

Please contact NTCOSS if you require any further information on the above, via email admin@ntcoss.org.au or telephone on 08 8948 2665.

Kind regards,



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CEO
NTCOSS

¹² Kelly, L., & Humphreys, C. (2001) 'Supporting Women and Children in Their Communities: Outreach and Advocacy Approaches to Domestic Violence' in J. Taylor-Brown (Ed.), *What Works in Domestic Violence Intervention?* (pp. 231-271). London: Whiting and Birch.

¹³ AnglicareNT, *Affordable Housing Hard to Find in NT*, accessed at <https://www.anglicare-nt.org.au/news/affordable-housing-hard-find-nt/>

¹⁴ ACOSS, 'Surviving, not living: the (in) adequacy of Newstart and related payments' accessed at <https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/SurvivingNotLiving.pdf>

¹⁵ Community Housing Industry Association, 'Social Housing Acceleration and Renovation Program (SHARP)', accessed at <https://www.communityhousing.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/SHARP-Program.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1mVAcZS0brXfw5evX-uLtWhro4OgBgSsysUZwCldxyWv5sJpIV7jaLhE>

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31 January 2020

The Hon Kevin Andrews MP
Chair, Joint Select Committee on Australia's Family Law System
PO Box 6100
CANBERRA ACT 2600

By email: familylaw.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Chair,

Joint Select Committee on Australia's Family Law System

The Northern Territory Council of Social Service (NTCOSS) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Joint Select Committee on Australia's Family Law System.

NTCOSS is a peak body for the Social and Community Sector in the Northern Territory (NT) and an advocate for social justice on behalf of people and communities across the region who may be affected by poverty and disadvantage.

NTCOSS' vision is for a 'fair, inclusive and sustainable NT where all individuals and communities can participate in and benefit from all aspects of social, cultural and economic life'. NTCOSS' mission is to 'promote an awareness and understanding of social issues through the NT community and to strive towards the development of an equitable and just society'.

NTCOSS has a broad membership base, made up of non-government and community organisations, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and community councils, as well as other organisations and individuals committed to social justice issues for people and communities who are socially and financially disadvantaged in the NT.

NTCOSS recognises the specific expertise of members that have a high level of contact with individuals and their families who have had direct experiences relating to the family law system. NTCOSS acknowledges that a number of such organisations with specific expertise in this area have provided submissions relating to the Terms of Reference and supports such submissions, in particular the Northern Territory Women's Legal Services (NTWLS) and Women's Legal Services Australia - endorsed through member organisation the Central Australian Women's Legal Service (CAWLS).

In this regard, this submission will not directly respond to the Terms of Reference, but broader concerns that NTCOSS has relating to the inquiry.

- 1. The Government should, as a matter of urgency, respond to the raft of recommendations made in the Australian Law Reform Commission's (ALRC) report on its inquiry into the family law system, released in 2019.¹**
- 2. The Parliamentary Committee should consider and refer to the previously made recommendations before making any further recommendations.**

It is of great concern that despite the ALRC Family Law System Review being released in April 2019, the Government is yet to formally respond to the recommendations, and has instead chosen to progress with another inquiry.

The Committee has been tasked just under 12 months to report on the current inquiry. This is on top of the 18 months it has previously taken for the ALRC to complete its comprehensive review. Australia's family law system has long been regarded as slow moving, expensive and due to such factors, placing undue pressure on those utilising it, and is in dire need of reform.

While NTCOSS recognises that the Committee's inquiry will provide an opportunity for those with lived experience to provide evidence, further delaying necessary reform to the family law system through the carrying out of another inquiry will have negative impacts on those (in particular children and victims of domestic and family violence) who are currently navigating it.

- 3. NTCOSS has issue concerning public comments made by a Committee Member regarding "false accusations of domestic violence".**

NTCOSS is particularly concerned regarding comments made by a parliamentarian who has been selected as Committee Members of this inquiry regarding allegations of domestic and family violence, of consequence, comments specifically suggesting that women are making "false accusations of domestic violence to stop men having access to children".²

Domestic and family violence is a gendered crime,³ with women and children disproportionately over represented as victims. Any inquiry that deals with victims of domestic and family and/or sexual violence must consider these experiences.

As reported by Our Watch, on average one woman a week is murdered by her current or former partner, and one in three Australian women have experience physical violence since the age of

¹ Australian Law Reform Commission, 'ALRC Family Law System Review – Final Report', April 2019, viewed January 2020, accessed at <<https://www.alrc.gov.au/news/family-law-inquiry-final-report-released/>>

² ABC News, 'Family law inquiry given green light by Senate as Rosie Batty questions Pauline Hanson's role,' viewed September 2019, accessed at < www.abc.net.au/news/2019-09-19/rosie-batty-family-law-inquiry-pauline-hanson-bias/11523914 >

³Australian Institute of Family Studies, 'Gender equality and violence against women', Australian Government, January 2020, accessed at <<https://aifs.gov.au/publications/gender-equality-and-violence-against-women/export>>

fifteen.⁴ The NT experiences the highest rates of domestic, family and sexual violence in Australia,⁵ with Aboriginal women being more likely to be victims of this gender based violence, accounting for 89% of all DFSV victims in the NT.⁶

Reciting rhetoric that implies that women are falsely accusing partners of domestic and family violence is damaging and wrong. The drivers of violence against women are entrenched across society,⁷ and are further epitomized by comments such as the above. Government Action Plans are currently in place to assist in addressing these drivers and moving towards a more equitable society. Disappointingly, appointing parliamentarians who support such rhetoric does not instil confidence in the Committee's ability to conduct this inquiry and hear from victims in an unbiased manner, and is a direct contrast to the Government's stated commitment to reduce such violence.

4. Parliamentarians participating in the inquiry should be required to undertake training relating to domestic and family violence awareness and trauma to ensure that they are well equipped to not only participate in the inquiry, but understand the context within which Family Court matters are determined.

Reports that more than half of all cases within the Federal Magistrates Court and the Family Court of Australia deal with allegations of domestic and family violence, with many allegations looking to be at the "severe" end of the spectrum, responding to such allegations has been described as 'core business' in family law disputes.⁸

Due to this, the need to understand the complexities and dynamics of domestic and family violence, including the long term effects of trauma, is crucial to assisting Members in carrying out their roles within this inquiry.

Further, training will not only assist Members in engaging with individuals appearing before the inquiry (with both professional and/or lived experience), but help in developing appropriate policy responses.

Regards,



Deborah Di Natale
CEO
NTCOSS

⁴Our Watch, 'Fact and figures', viewed January 2020, accessed at <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/Understanding-Violence/Facts-and-figures>

⁵ Territory Families, 'The Northern Territory Gender Equality Framework 2019-2024 - Consultation Document', 2019, Northern Territory Government

⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2017, 4510.0 Recorded Crime – Victim, 2014-2016

⁷ Australian Institute of Family Studies, 'Gender equality and violence against women'; Territory Families, 'The Northern Territory Gender Equality Framework 2019-2024 - Consultation Document', 2019, Northern Territory Government

⁸ Moloney et al, 'Allegation of Family Violence and Child Abuse in Family Law Children's Proceedings – A pre-reform exploratory study', Research Report no. 15, 2007, Australian Institute of Family Studies, accessed at <https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/aifsreport15.pdf>