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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## **FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AXES FUNDING FOR PROGRAM THAT PROVIDES SAFE PHONES FOR DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SURVIVORS**

The Morrison government has formally advised WESNET that funding will be ceasing on 30 June 2020 for the Safe Technology for Women program which distributes smartphones to survivors of domestic and sexual violence across Australia.

Since 2016, the program has distributed nearly 20,000 phones to women in need - 31% to Indigenous women. The program helps women stay safely connected with support services by providing them with a new phone and \$30 credit. From July 2020, 600 domestic violence survivors each month will miss out on a new 'safe' phone.

The program trains frontline domestic violence workers to assist their clients to set up and use their new device and accounts safely, and has trained 276 'Safe Connections' agencies Australia-wide. It also provides an expert helpline for complex tech abuse cases for workers and survivors.

A new smart phone can offer a lifeline when a woman is planning her escape from a violent situation, or when she has left and is actively monitoring and maintaining her safety. In a 2015 survey of domestic violence practitioners, 98% reported seeing technology used as a tactic of abuse against the clients they support. It is common for women to receive abuse and threats via text and social media apps, or experience stalking by her abuser via gps location tracking or by accessing or controlling her online accounts. Unfortunately, it is also a common experience for an abuser to take or smash a woman's phone to prevent her from accessing support.

The Safe Technology for Women program has been delivered by the Women's Services Network (WESNET) since 2016, with the assistance of Federal government funding and Telstra's donation of nearly 20,000 phones and credit. This year, Australia Post joined the program and now pays for the postage to deliver the phones to Safe Connections agencies.

National Director Karen Bentley is fighting to preserve this essential service for vulnerable women and is calling on the government to reinstate the program's funding, *"this program is quite literally saving the lives of Australian women experiencing violence, and helping them to rebuild their lives with an uncompromised phone"*.

*“It’s a unique model and the government should be proud of it. The United Nations recognised Safe Connections in 2018 as best-practice in government, not-for-profits and business working together to address gender-based violence”.*

Earlier today the Department of Social Services was quoted in the media as saying that WESNET did not apply for the three grant rounds announced by the Government under the Fourth Action Plan. The fact is that WESNET was ineligible to apply for any of these grants: one is for capital funding to set up new crisis accommodation, one is designed to support men to take a leadership role to address the structural and gendered factors that drive and reinforce Violence Against Women, and the third was by invitation only, and WESNET wasn’t invited.

WESNET will be submitting a further proposal to the Minister for ongoing funding, but has been advised by the Department that unsolicited proposals will be considered ‘on merit’ while simultaneously advising that the current funding was one-off. *“We are not sure how much more evidence we can provide the Minister to demonstrate the value of the program. We recently sent a three-page letter outlining the impact of the program and how successful it has been”* Ms Bentley said, *“time is running out for WESNET, with funding ending in June next year, it is hard to keep up momentum and maintain our staffing.”*

A copy of the latest social impact report about the program is available on the WESNET website [here](#).

To secure the program’s future growth, Ms Bentley also hopes to attract further corporate sponsorship. This may suit organisations that would like expert assistance to make their tech products and services safer for women, and potentially organisations with products and services that might provide direct relief to women and children escaping violence.

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