

25 January 2024

## The Treasury

### PRE-BUDGET SUBMISSION

#### Who we are

Wesnet is Australia's national peak body for specialist women's domestic and family violence services. Wesnet represents a range of organisations and individuals including women's refuges, shelters, safe houses, and information/referral services.

#### Recommendation 1: Adequate funding to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children escaping domestic and family violence is urgently prioritised.

Wesnet is pleased to see the governments' support of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan 2023-25* alongside the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-32*. The recognition of the disproportionately high rates of family, domestic and sexual violence that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experience needs to be backed up with ongoing and significantly increased investment by governments in services and supports that are designed and delivered in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. This is a central and critical step towards achieving reconciliation.

#### Recommendation 2: Expand the capacity of specialist women's DFV services.

Victim-survivors of domestic and family violence urgently require universal access to essential services, including crisis support, information, referrals, court advocacy, case management, supported accommodation, legal advice and advocacy and income support. Perpetrators of domestic and family violence need universal access to accredited men's behaviour change programs.

The combined impact of Covid-19, natural disasters, cost-of-living pressures, labour shortages and the housing crisis on women's specialist services has been profound with demand for services growing along with acute workforce pressures. More women are needing help but experiencing greater difficulty in accessing it. In a recent survey of Wesnet members, the overwhelming majority identified 'managing workloads' and 'attracting staff' as their biggest workforce challenges, sitting alongside 'insufficient funding' and 'uncertain funding' as the dominant financial challenges.

Compared to other community service sectors, the specialist women's DFV sector is almost exclusively not-for-profit. While some of our members operate as a specialist unit within a generalist organisation, most of our member organisations are dedicated to assisting victim-survivors of gender-based violence. Regardless, they are all reliant on government funding, with limited supplementation by fundraising and philanthropic efforts. While 100 per cent of our members receive state/territory government funding, it is important to note that over half also reported receiving federal government funding. One of the big barriers to addressing workforce issues in the sector is the prevailing view that these services are solely a matter for state/territory governments. Most services rely on a mixture of funding streams which are often short-term or fixed term.

The National Plan and the government's commitment to 500 more DFV workers, while very welcome, does not overcome the critical and unmet need currently being experienced by service providers and women escaping violence. Urgent investment is required in this budget to expand the capacity of specialist women's services.

### Recommendation 3: Ensure all women and children escaping violence can access the Escaping Violence Payment quickly and easily.

According to recent reports, less than half Escaping Violence Payment (EVP) applicants receive the payment. The evaluation of the EVP - published last year - identified opportunities for adjusting the criteria and delivery of the payment to ensure that it was distributed more equitably and accessibly, particularly in regard to women who may be most vulnerable including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women with disabilities, women living remotely or rurally, and LGBTQIA+ people.

Expansion of the criteria must be urgently prioritised, as must ease of access. Women escaping violence often do not have ready access to documents or to funds and assets that may be held jointly with their abuser. Access to emergency funds is too critical to be withheld on the basis of bureaucratic requirements that are unnecessarily rigid or onerous.

### Recommendation 4: Fund the Women's Services Network (WESNET) as the peak national body for women's specialist services.

A national peak body is generally considered to be a non-government organisation which consists of member organisations of allied interests (Melville & Perkins, 2003), and which provides information dissemination services, membership support, coordination, advocacy and representation, and research and policy development services for its members and other interested parties' (Industry Commission, 1995).

With almost 350 eligible members across Australia, Wesnet performs these functions, benefiting the sector, the community and the government. Wesnet, along with the sister national peak body for sexual violence, the National Association of Services Against Sexual Violence, were funded as peak bodies in the 1990s but have not received peak-body funding since the Howard government defunded them after coming to power in 1996-97.

Nonetheless, Wesnet has continued to play a key role in assisting the government to achieve its objectives. Wesnet is, for example, currently part of the National Plan Advisory Group overseeing the second *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children* and is promoting and coordinating work across the sector to feed into the National Plan consultation and engagement processes. Wesnet is also a member of the advisory group

regarding the development of national coercive control principles, and on the ABS homelessness advisory group. We have been asked to provide evidence to a number of parliamentary inquiries, and our expertise is regularly sought out by government.

This function is entirely self-funded (apart from some minor sitting fees), which has limited our ability to more fully and effectively represent our members and participate in legislative and policy reform. We prioritise our work with government, but at some cost to other peak body functions such as standard-setting and workforce issues. A lack of government funding has also meant that significant resources have had to be dedicated to sourcing and applying for grants and corporate/academic partner- and sponsorships. The specialist domestic and family violence sector is one of the few service-delivery sectors without a funded, coordinated, cross-jurisdiction, non-government specialist sector voice. If, as stated, addressing family and domestic is a key policy priority for the government, it is imperative that Wesnet be better enabled and supported to carry out its essential role as the peak body for specialist domestic and family violence (DFV) services across Australia. The absence of government support - compared to other sectors - sends a strong signal to the sector that is inconsistent with a commitment to improving the safety of women and girls.

This recommendation should be considered alongside a funding request invited by, and made directly to, the Hon Justine Elliot MP, Assistant Minister for Family Violence, as attached. Wesnet strongly supports and is a co-signatory to this request, as the national non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representative body on the national meeting of specialist domestic and family violence peaks, representative networks and services.

## Recommendation 5: Fund the development of a national workforce strategy

Workers in specialist DFV services include support workers, managers, administration officers, case workers, receptionists, project officers, counsellors, psychologists, communications officers, advocates, child carers, researchers, lawyers, art therapists, accountants, property managers and tenancy support workers. Domestic and family violence workers are among the nation's most essential workers in terms of saving and rebuilding the lives of women and children, and yet they are also among the most precariously under-valued—and there are not enough of them. This is further compounded because, while the work can be very rewarding, it can also carry unique risks, such as physical risk from perpetrators and the emotional risk of trauma or re-traumatisation (many women workers are themselves victim-survivors).

Specialist staff in this sector have to understand trauma and address the multiple and complex needs of victim-survivors and assist clients navigate complex systems such as child protection, police, courts, immigration and income support. While many staff have tertiary and other qualifications, much of the specialist work they have to learn on-the-job as there is very little in the way of specialist education to meet these essential workforce requirements<sup>1</sup>. Meanwhile the demand for specialist training from Wesnet on areas like technology facilitated abuse and working with survivors using technology, continues to grow. There is good basic-level training from agencies such as DV-Alert and eSafety, however more advanced training for specialist women's services needs to be developed by specialists in the sector.

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<sup>1</sup> A recent survey of our staff confirms that most are training on the job due to lack of specialist training.

Wesnet is appreciative that the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children* recognises the central role of specialist workers. This is welcome but, to be successful, must be supported by a standalone national workforce strategy and national infrastructure. The Plan raises, again and again, the need for standards, quality assurance and best practice guidelines, but does not offer solutions in terms of how these can be managed nationally, nor how it will not add to the administrative burden when combined with the multiple and inconsistent quality standards currently in place across most jurisdictions. Wesnet data shows that 84% of our members have funding that is contingent on meeting State-based quality standards, and yet these are generic and, in our view, not sufficient for evidence-based practice when working in the specialist domestic and family violence sector.

We have a world class government funded research organisation, ANROWS, producing the evidence base, but very little capacity in the sector to turn this into practice.

There needs to be a national workforce strategy - along with a funded peak body - to ensure cohesive and co-ordinated approaches to building workforce capacity and capability. Recognised national standards, accreditation and quality assurance mechanisms need to be developed to properly articulate - and modulate - the level of professionalism within the sector and to assist in fair and adequate wage-setting processes.

### Recommendation 6: Fund a national DFV workforce census.

There is currently a significant gap in national data and research with respect to the specialist DFV services workforce. While Wesnet carries out an annual member survey, this is aimed largely at membership services, is answered by management, and has not had the capacity to yield longitudinal results regarding workforce characteristics in any detail. In contrast, the [Victorian specialist family violence workforce census](#) (Family Safety Victoria 2021) is aimed directly at informing state-wide workforce strategy. The results of the Victorian census indicate, for example, that:

- Roles held within the specialist family violence response workforce were highly varied in terms of working hours and contract conditions, and over half also worked additional unpaid hours at least 'sometimes'.
- While the specialist family violence response workforce had completed training across a range of topic areas, overall confidence in their level of training and experience was moderate.
- Many within this workforce had experienced stress due to high workload.
- Four-in-ten workers reported that they had plans to leave their current role in the next 12 months, relating mostly to career prospects and lack of advancement opportunities, and stress or other negative influences on their health and wellbeing.

More nationwide information is needed about the workforce in specialist DFV services. A national census - similar to the Victorian specialist family violence workforce census - should be undertaken at regular intervals. This could be the responsibility of the new DFV Commissioner - or Wesnet as the national peak body - but must be funded to ensure a sufficiently high level of rigour and adequate resourcing for its implementation.

## Recommendation 7: Fund research and evidence, specifically targeted around women's specialist domestic and family violence services.

There is a distinct lack of qualitative and quantitative research regarding characteristics of, and outcomes achieved by, the specialist women's sector (both on its own, and in comparison to non-specialist services).

The current inability to rigorously articulate the value of specialist services - and therefore gain adequate funding and support - also hampers Australia's ability to meet its international obligations. The UN Women's *Handbook for National Action Plans on Violence against Women* notes that "specialist crisis services responding to victims/survivors of violence against women should be run by independent and experienced women's nongovernmental organisations providing gender-specific, empowering and comprehensive support to women survivors of violence, based on feminist principles". A focus on so-called efficiencies of direct service delivery through larger generalist organisations continues to not only compromise women's safety, but also Australia's international standing.

While Wesnet has had a key role in developing the evidence-base, and has been an active partner in many research projects, we do not receive government funding for our peak body function, and our capacity to fund and initiate research is limited. Our ability to advocate for our members and, ultimately, achieve improved outcomes for women and children escaping violence would be enhanced immeasurably with the backing of reputable, recent research. The Australian Women Against Violence Alliance (AWAVA) compiled an excellent policy brief, but this is now over eight years old with much of the source research considerably older.

Specialist women's domestic and family violence services are an essential component in the prevention of, and response to, violence against women and children. Wesnet and/or ANROWS needs to be provided with discrete funding for research and evaluation that supports the DFV specialist service sector.

## Recommendation 8: Fund WESNET to develop standards and resources relating to private security companies providing in-home security checks

Through various technology trial initiatives funded under the Women's Safety Package, there has been a significant expansion of private sector security companies working with survivors of domestic and family violence (DFV). Anecdotally, Wesnet has been approached by a number of members concerned about some of the behaviour and motivations of private sector security companies. There has also been recent published research echoing these concerns.

Our concerns were echoed in a recent monograph specifically focussing on the role of private security and domestic violence. In his 2019 book *Private Security and Domestic Violence : The Risks and Benefits of Private Security Companies Working with Victims of Domestic Violence*, Dr Diarmaid Harkin raises the following risks in private security firms providing in-home security audits and upgrades including CCTV, duress alarms, and 'bug' detection, to DFV victim-survivors:

- No accreditation standards required to be working with the vulnerable DFV population.
- No specific complex trauma training for security workers.

- No standardised costs, leaving DFV services vulnerable to profit-driven, exploitative and opportunistic quotes in order to access more of the Government funded program.
- Poor quality or faulty security products and services.
- The “live and real risk that perpetrators of domestic violence could be operating in this industry”, as the scale of abuse in Australia means many perpetrators in the population.
- Significant possibility that security workers with criminal history (including DFV convictions) will gain access to DFV victims.
- Underreporting by victims and difficulty in successfully prosecuting perpetrators, means many perpetrators have no DFV conviction, and as such, are undetectable.
- Unethical and insensitive conduct including sexist comments, confidentiality breaches, preying on the victim’s trauma and insecurities by exaggerating risk to ‘upsell’ security features, and initiating relationships with victims outside the protection of the referring DFV support service.

Overall, the advice is that there is an urgent need for extreme caution in exposing vulnerable DFV victim-survivors to commercial security providers. As a first step Wesnet recommends the development of sector-driven standards to apply to private security providers working within the DFV sector, with the aim of rewarding and encouraging ethical behaviour to keep women and children safe. Wesnet would be ideally suited to take a lead role, given its expertise in the technology safety field, its peak body status and its reputation in the sector.

Failing this approach, Wesnet is similarly ideally placed, should funding be allocated, to undertake work to assist the sector with reviewing and monitoring security and other services so that agencies seeking to purchase services from the private security sector can have independently reviewed information, and a safe space for agencies to share and report their experiences of using private security services. Additionally Wesnet could oversee the development of best practice guidelines for operators working with survivors as well as advice and resources to agencies about selecting suitable services.

WESNET thanks you for the opportunity to make a pre-budget submission. If you would like to discuss the contents of the submission further, please contact me using the details below.

Yours sincerely



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