



Advocating for freedom
from violence

WOMEN'S SAFETY NSW

Impact of COVID-19 on Women and Children
Experiencing Domestic and Family Violence and
Frontline Domestic and Family Violence Services

Summary Report

26 March 2020

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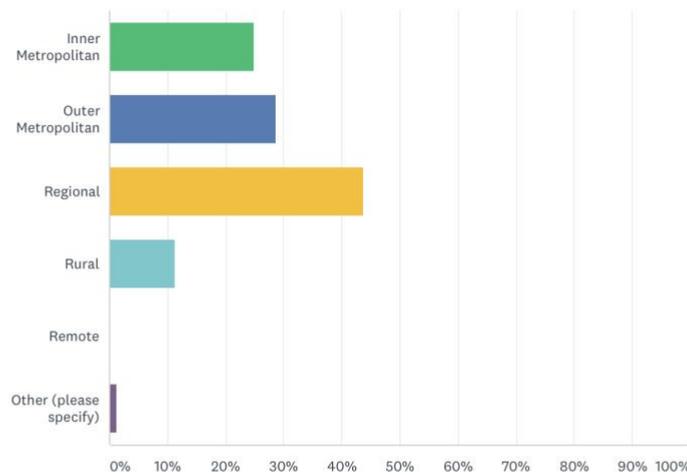
1. Introduction

Women’s Safety NSW has undertaken a survey of frontline workers, Coordinators and service providers to ascertain how the COVID-19 outbreak is affecting Domestic and Family Violence (DFV) responses in NSW and to request feedback on what urgent measures are needed to effectively respond to the crisis at this time.

This report summarises the findings of this survey which has been completed by 80 frontline workers (73) and service providers (7) in metropolitan, regional and rural locations right across NSW, including WDVCS workers, Aboriginal Specialist Workers, Multicultural Specialist Workers, Safety Action Meeting Coordinators, Court Advocates, Information and Referral Officers, Family Advocacy Support Service workers, case workers, Staying Home Leaving Violence workers, counsellors, women’s refuge and accommodation support workers, women’s health centre workers, outreach workers, Managers and CEOs.

Are you based in a metropolitan, regional or rural location?

Answered: 80 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
▼ Inner Metropolitan	25.00%	20
▼ Outer Metropolitan	28.75%	23
▼ Regional	43.75%	35
▼ Rural	11.25%	9
▼ Remote	0.00%	0
▼ Other (please specify)	1.25%	1
Total Respondents: 80		

2. Key Issues Facing DV Survivors

It is anticipated that COVID-19 and current widespread social isolation measures will significantly impact the extent and nature of DFV. 41.7% of survey respondents reported that they have already perceived an increase in client numbers since the outbreak of COVID-19. Numerous respondents noted that, whilst they had not yet noticed a change in the volume of clients, they were *expecting* to see an increase in clients, especially those with complex issues, in the near future. Others reported that they had seen a decrease in the number of client referrals since the outbreak, and noted concerns that women experiencing DFV may be engaging with support services at lower rates than usual due to the barriers they may be experiencing as a result of isolation and social distancing measures.

Survey respondents identified the following as being key issues affecting clients in the context of COVID-19:

- 65.2% identified insufficient service availability
- 49.2% identified women prioritising material needs and concerns over their own safety
- 44.9% identified escalating and worsening violence
- 36.2% identified that women were reporting violence and abuse related to the COVID-19 crisis (e.g. financial pressures or other stresses)
- 15.9% identified violence beginning to occur for the first time

Further, 70.8% of survey respondents reported they have already perceived an increase in the complexity of client needs since the outbreak of COVID-19. Other factors contributing to the complexity of issues women and children are experiencing include:

- Clients being in isolation for extended periods with intimate partners contributing to an increase in violence
- Increased risks to health and safety for women attempting to leave abusive relationships
- Children being home from school putting increased pressure on clients
- Increased violence from young people who used to be in school or extended family members such as adult siblings
- Lack of emergency relief options
- Limited referral options
- Decreased service availability, and inability of services to provide face-to-face support. Many clients cannot safely access support over the phone as a result of being in isolation with an abuser.
- Increased rates of unemployment and delays in receiving Centrelink payments means many clients are without income
- Limited access to essential supplies due to strain on supermarkets
- Border closures preventing clients from relocating interstate, which in some cases are the family or support networks they have.

- Increased rates of homelessness, lack of emergency accommodation, and inability to search for temporary rental accommodation due to new restrictions
- Decreased court services and confusion as to new processes
- Concerns that AVO conditions are inappropriate in light of changed living arrangements, and increased difficulty varying conditions due to court closures
- Reduced ability to apply for property recovery orders due to court closures
- Escalating anxieties and stress about the spread of COVID-19 contributing to the existing stresses of domestic violence
- Pubs closing and bottle shops remaining open is resulting in people hoarding alcohol for consumption in the home environment, which in some cases is leading to increased risk of violence
- Standard safety planning advice issued by services loses relevance in the context of COVID-19
- Support services and police still adjusting to new protocols means clients may be misinformed or given irrelevant advice

2.1. Service gaps for clients

The outbreak of COVID-19 complicates women and children's experience of DFV and poses challenges to the frontline services that respond to it. The Survey respondents identified several key service gaps impeding the protection of women and children during COVID-19:

- Access to support/ case management to support them in their complex needs (72.9%)
- Access to income and material needs (71.4%)
- Access to ongoing accommodation (61.4%)
- Inconsistent police responses (60.0)
- Access to support through online means where it is not safe to make phone calls- e.g. through online chat forums (45.7%)
- Access to temporary accommodation (58.6%)
- Access to safe technology (a safe phone etc) (42.9%)
- Access to information in language (for immigrant and refugee women) (24.3%)

In addition to these key issues, workers and services called for increased support for clients in the following areas:

- Assistance and supports for women with children who are no longer attending school due to COVID-19
- Additional resources to assist with child support
- Improvement in the quality of police referrals
- Increased transport options for women in need

- Additional funding to assist women needing to access reproductive healthcare and pregnancy terminations, due to an expected spike in unplanned pregnancies
- Access to face to face support for clients who are high risk or unable to receive support remotely due to homelessness, being in isolation with an abuser, or unsafe technologies

3. Key Issues Facing Services

The advent of COVID-19 and shutdown of non-essential services has placed added strain on frontline DV services. The following key issues were identified by service providers as affecting their work:

- 78.9% were adapting to working from home
- 71.8% experienced additional pressures and stress on staff
- 69% were implementing changes to procedures
- 43.6% found there were insufficient referral options
- 19.7% were dealing with staff absenteeism
- 12.3% found they had insufficient capacity to meet client demand

The following obstacles to effective service delivery were also identified:

- Balancing increased pressures of providing support to at-risk clients with protecting the health and safety of staff
- Increased financial burden of transitioning to staff working from home
- Mixed messages from the government
- Uncertainty as to whether frontline services are deemed essential services
- Uncertainty about when and/or if increased funding will be available
- Staff being required to learn new technology to be able to work from home

3.1. Additional Support required for Service Providers

Services will struggle to manage the rising demand for assistance and increasing complexity of client needs without being provided additional support. Service providers require additional resources, funding, and instruction to ensure they are able to support women and children affected by domestic violence without compromising the health and safety of staff. Survey respondents identified the following support mechanisms as necessary to aid services during the COVID-19 crisis:

- 63.2% identified additional resources to assist with setting up workers to work from home.
- 52.6% identified additional funding for increased external supervision for staff during a period of increased stress and trauma

- 42.1% identified clear guidance and expectations on requirements in relation to working from home measures and safe workplace requirements during COVID-19 for consistency across the sector
- 42.1% identified additional resources to assist with making the workplace safe in the context of COVID-19.
- 21.1% identified additional staffing resources to assist in keeping workloads manageable

4. Key Issues Facing Workers

Staff working for frontline services are further affected by changed working conditions and the added complexities of supporting vulnerable clients in the context of COVID-19. Workers are required to balance these professional challenges with the personal stresses and restrictions stemming from the current health crisis. Staff identified the following key issues affecting their work during COVID-19:

- 52.2% experienced higher pressures at work
- 52.2% had feelings of isolation while working from home
- 43.5% experienced difficulties working from home or staying safe at work
- 17.4% felt they had insufficient capacity to meet service demand

4.1. Transitioning to Remote Service Provision

A core issue affecting frontline workers in the context of COVID-19 is the rapid shift to a remote service model. 70.8% of surveyed workers reported that they were now working from home some or all of the time. A further 73.6% reported that their service is no longer providing any form of face-to-face services to clients. For many workers, the transition to working remotely has been an abrupt one and has presented challenges to productivity and staff wellbeing. 38.8% of surveyed workers said they faced barriers working from home. These include:

- Reduced resources e.g. access to printing, scanning, hard copy client files
- Working whilst having children at home who are in need of care and home schooling
- Poor internet connection
- Limited access to work laptops and phones
- Communication difficulties between staff
- A sense of isolation and disconnection from the team
- Inability to get client signatures on necessary documents
- Distractions from background noise, children, pets, competing demands on time etc.
- Lack of privacy and concerns about protecting client confidentiality
- Working while sharing accommodation with others leads to space issues, with some workers having to operate from bedrooms etc.

- Bringing stressful and often emotionally draining work into the home environment affects mental health
- Reduced ability to debrief with co-workers leading to increased vicarious trauma for staff

4.2. Workplace Health and Safety Measures

Despite the widespread move towards remote service provision, many services are continuing to function with some or all staff coming into the workplace. These services have adapted their standard procedures to introduce social distancing measures and increased hygiene to the workplace. 84.5% of survey respondents reported they have effective measures in place to address health and safety in the workplace. These measures include:

- Having minimal staff coming into the office
- Staff wearing facemasks, and having antibacterial gel and wipes supplied in the workplace
- Wiping surfaces down thoroughly
- Informational posters about hygiene, symptoms and infection risks around the office
- Court attendance limited to an as-needs basis when client attendance is required
- Limiting interactions with clients to phone and zoom appointments
- Staff members having their own office/workspace to limit contamination risk
- Development of a comprehensive COVID-19 risk management plan

65.3% of survey respondents also reported that they have effective measures in place to address health safety for face to face service provision, including handwashing and maintaining at least 1.5 metres away from clients as per social distancing regulations.

4.3. Additional Support Required

It is evident that, despite being resilient and adaptive to the challenges presented by the COVID-19 health crisis, frontline workers are in urgent need of increased support. Additional safeguards and resources are required to enable staff to continue with their crucial work, whether this is being done remotely or from within the workplace. Survey respondents identified key areas for improvement that would enable them to better cope with the challenges presented by COVID-19:

- 61.4% wanted regular opportunities to engage with their team remotely
- 53.9 identified need for adequate equipment to work from home safely
- 38.5% wanted additional external supervision
- 33.9% wanted regular opportunities to engage with the WDVCS network remotely

- 29.2% wanted reduced pressure on staff workloads
- 24.6% wanted additional training and professional development
- 18.5% identified need for improvements to their workplace to make it safe during COVID-19

5. Need for Government Response

The spread of COVID-19 has had unprecedented impacts on those experiencing domestic and family violence and has put significant pressure on the services and staff working to help those in need of support. It is imperative that urgent support measures be put in place by the government to allow crucial frontline services to continue operating safely and effectively.

An increased supply of essential resources is a key measure that must be brought into effect without delay. 69% of survey respondents identified a need for a resource package to set up workers to work from home (e.g. providing laptops, software, headsets and other equipment) and to adapt workspaces to make them safe during COVID-19. 42.3% also identified a need for additional staffing resources to assist with working with clients with complex needs during COVID-19 and beyond.

The following additional measures were noted as being necessary to support services during this critical time:

- Additional funding for increased sick leave to ensure essential staff are not left without income if affected by COVID-19
- Additional funding to cover the set-up of additional IT systems and other mechanisms required for services to function remotely
- Supply of essential resources such as PPE, hand-sanitiser, soap and toilet paper to staff still operating from the workplace
- DV frontline services to be formally recognised as an essential service, as currently their status remains unclear
- Greater cooperation with police to support DFV victims, and undertaking extensive DVSAT to accurately reflect the extent of the situation and level of risk

6. Concluding remarks

Women's Safety NSW thanks the NSW Department of Communities and Justice, Women NSW, Legal Aid NSW and all our government and non-government sector partners for the opportunity to share this important feedback from our member services who are responding to this crisis on the frontline.

We appreciate the efforts being made by all at this time and look forward to working with you achieve a swift and effective response to this crisis which supports our vital



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specialist domestic and family violence sector and the women and children who rely upon it for their very safety.

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Women's Safety NSW receives NSW Government funding, administered through Legal Aid NSW