

WOMEN'S SAFETY NSW

UPDATE: Impacts on COVID-19 on Domestic and Family Violence in NSW

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1. Introduction

Last week, Women's Safety NSW published a report detailing the impacts of COVID-19 on domestic and family violence (DFV) and the frontline services who respond to it. A survey was undertaken of frontline workers, coordinators and service providers across the state to establish their concerns.

This week, Women's Safety NSW has again surveyed frontline workers and service providers about the evolving challenges which are arising amid the current health crisis.

Whilst this new information stems from a smaller sample size of respondents (40), it reinforces the key issues emerging in the wake of COVID-19, and indicates clear patterns in the way the pandemic is beginning to impact on women and children experiencing domestic and family violence.

2. Key Points

- Frontline services continue to report increasing client numbers since the outbreak of COVID-19
- A majority of survey respondents report an increase in the complexity of client issues since the outbreak of COVID-19
- Concerningly, there was a substantial increase in the percentage of survey respondents who identified violence being reported for the first time.
- There was also a significant increase in the percentage of workers who were seeing women reporting violence relating specifically to COVID-19.
- Furthermore an increased percentage of respondents identified insufficient service availability as a key issue facing clients.
- Access to additional support/casework to support complex clients, and access to income and material needs remain the two most significant service gaps for women followed by temporary accommodation and safe technologies for women.
- Frontline workers continue to struggle with changes to procedure, and face barriers when working from home. Resource packages and additional staffing is urgently needed.

3. The Impact on DV Survivors

It is evident that COVID-19 and increasingly restrictive social distancing measures are having a profound impact on women and children across NSW. **Of the workers surveyed in the past week, 50% reported that they have**

perceived an increase in client numbers since the outbreak of COVID-19. **75% of respondents reported they have already perceived an increase in the complexity of client needs** since the outbreak. These figures are slightly higher than those in the initial survey.

It is likely too early in the crisis to assess the full scope of impact COVID-19 will have on rates of DFV and on the ability of women to access support services. However, these surveys provide an early indication that the demand on these services will be on the rise over the coming months as the community is subjected to isolation and social distancing measures.

Many workers who had not yet perceived an increase in clients noted that they expected to see an increase in the near future as isolation regulations begin to tighten. **Others raised concerns that victims of domestic violence did not have sufficient access to information about which services were still open and able to provide support. A common concern raised was that women being kept in isolation with an abuser had limited capacity to seek help from home.** On this issue, respondents made the following comments:

“My thoughts are PINOPS [victims] may not be able to contact services if confined to home with POI [perpetrator], therefore unable to obtain support.”
– Assistant-Coordinator, WDVCAS, Regional

“It’s harder to speak with clients as POI’s [perpetrators] are home so not safe to complete assessments so we are seeing more women decline assistance...” - Worker, WDVCAS, Inner Metropolitan

A majority of respondents this week continued to observed client issues becoming increasingly complex in the context of COVID-19 (75% this week compared to 70.8% last week) and 50% identified escalating or worsening violence (compared with 44.9% last week). Concerningly, there was a substantial increase in the percentage of survey respondents who identified violence being reported for the first time (47.5% this week compared to just 15.9% this time last week). There was also a significant increase in the percentage of workers who were seeing women reporting violence relating specifically to COVID-19, rising from 36.2% last week to 50%. Furthermore, 75% of recent respondents identified insufficient service availability as a key issue facing clients, in contrast with 65.2% of respondents to the initial survey.

Other issues affecting clients identified by recent respondents include:

- Clients placed at increased risk due to significant numbers of DV defendants being released on bail under emergency COVID-19

procedures and victims and WDVCSs not being notified as to the bail application, the court outcome, or the defendant's whereabouts so as to assist with safety planning.

- Increase in clients with mental health issues and greater demand for counselling services
- Abusers threatening to infect their partner with COVID-19
- Increased severity of incidents of abuse
- Difficulty contacting women as they are at home with an abuser and unable to talk
- Increase in technology-facilitated abuse e.g. phone hacking and harassment
- Inability of services to advocate for AVO changes due to the recent changes announced by the Chief Magistrate regarding AVO matters
- Rising financial concerns and pressures for women
- Difficulty accessing Centrelink services
- Women struggling to find accommodation
- Higher rates of DV involving children and young people
- Higher numbers of 'at-risk' referrals and first-time referrals

Workers provided the following feedback about the increasing complexity of the issues affecting their clients:

"Insufficient access to Court information impacting on information going to victims regarding bail status, delaying this information can significantly impact on women's safety especially at this time with resources limited and access to alternative housing options should the offender be released from custody." – Worker, WDVCS, Outer Metropolitan

"People are less able to distance themselves from a situation, and less likely/willing to consider relocating or orders that excluded violent family members from the house as they need additional support financially and with childcare." - Intake and Referral Officer, WDVCS, Metropolitan

"Clients seeking to relocate... have not been able to move as there are no house inspections allowed... Court processes are also going to now be dragging out even more which continues the anxiety and stress for clients." - Worker, WDVCS, Inner Metropolitan

"I have noticed an increase in contact with clients already undertaking case management for a range of reasons, specifically matters going to Court for bail applications. This is significantly impacting on women's well-being and feelings of safety, this increases my workload and, as such, impacts on the work done with other or new clients." - Worker, WDVCS, Outer Metropolitan

“There is a heightened trauma response in many clients with their usual supports unavailable.” – Coordinator, WDVCS, Regional

“Accessing services has changed and as such this is impacting on service delivery and turn around time for normal processes that would be easily accessible prior.” - Worker, WDVCS, Outer Metropolitan

“Whilst the court is implementing some safety measures, such as limiting how many people enter the court complex at one time, it also means that if victims and defendants do turn up at court, they are congregating outside the courthouse in one space.” - Worker, WDVCS, Metropolitan

Frontline workers have made it clear that the current system is unable to properly meet the needs of increasingly vulnerable women and children. The service gaps most commonly identified by workers remained unchanged across the two groups of survey respondents, with the two most significant service gaps being identified as:

- Access to **support/case management** to support clients in their complex needs **(77.5%)**
- Access to **income and material needs (72.5%)**

Access to ongoing access to **accommodation** was the third most commonly identified service gap, with **70%** of recent respondents identifying need in this area. **There was also increasing recognition of the need for safe technologies** to protect women, with **57.5%** of recent respondents calling for this kind of assistance, up from 42.9% of initial survey respondents. This increase is likely a response to the changing dynamics of DFV in the context of COVID-19 and the increasing ability of abusers to isolate victims through technology-facilitated abuse.

4. The Impact on Frontline Services and Workers

Recent survey results confirm that frontline workers are continuing to feel the pressures of rising client demands, and face significant obstacles when adapting to remote service provision. **80% of respondents indicated they were working from home** some or all of the time, which is consistent with the responses from last week. However, where only 38.8% of respondents to the initial survey reported they faced barriers working from home, **60% of recent respondents reported they were facing challenges working remotely. Adapting to changes in procedure was the most commonly identified issue** affecting services, with **82.5%** of recent respondents struggling with this

change. There were also increases in the percentage of workers experiencing **higher pressures** at work (**62.5%** compared to 43.6% last week) and **isolation** working from home (**70.0%** compared to 52.2% last week).

Barriers identified by recent respondents include:

- Lack of access to basic office resources
- Issues with technology
- Lack of access to critical court information
- Workers being required to personally take on the costs of printing etc.
- Distractions at home, including having children who require care
- Extra hours needing to be worked due to increased complexity in client needs
- Reduced ability to collaborate with the team to develop solutions
- Poor internet connection and phone service
- Reduced ability to collaborate with key agency partners in police, courts and other government and non-government agencies

Workers surveyed shared the difficulties they have encountered transitioning to remote work:

“It’s a high pressure job at the best of times. This is making me work harder and better, but I do get worried that I might miss something important given we are isolated from our team, and we thrive on that support network in the pressure bubble we work in.” – Worker, WDVCS, Outer Metropolitan

“The Department [Communities and] Justice needs to provide sufficient access to Justice Link even outside of COVID-19 to ensure we can provide up to date and accurate information to victims on the matters pending before the Court. The clerks at the service centre and the Local Courts are great at their job however are gate keep[ers] of information that we often need where we have to fight for information even relating to the details of bail conditions and copies of ADVO's, for example if we request a Court result and a copy of an ADVO from the call centre we are directed to make an additional request to the specific Court for a copy of the ADVO. This additional resource for WDVCS workers would allow us to do our work better, faster and more accurately and save the call centre from answering all our emails often daily for Court results.” Case Worker, WDVCS, Outer Metropolitan

“Living in a small apartment... protecting client confidentiality means that one of us must spend the entire day in the bedroom.” – Worker, WDVCS, Outer Metropolitan

“Privacy is an issue as other family members and children are also working from home.” - Intake and Referral Officer, WDVCS, Regional

“With so much uncertainty, the stressors have increased. We understand that everyone may be experiencing additional stress factors, such as loss of income, everyone being in one space, no break, children at home, worries over basic/essential items. These factors can also apply to frontline workers and things need to be put in place to ensure that the workers are psychologically/mentally safe to continue providing the much needed support during this time.” - Coordinator, WDVCS, Inner Metropolitan

5. Urgent Need for Response

The report issued last week indicated a critical need for a swift and effective government response to the issues that have been raised. The most recent survey indicates that the need for such a response has only continued to increase. **82.5% of recent respondents identified a need for a resource package to set up workers to work from home** (e.g. providing laptops, software, and other equipment) and to help make workspaces safe, in contrast to 69% last week. **51% identified a need for additional staffing resources to assist with working with clients with complex needs** during COVID-19 and beyond, up from 42.0% last week.

In addition to the issues already raised, workers identified an urgent need for the following measures to protect workers and their clients:

- Protective packs to be issued to all workers
- Safe phones to be made available to women in need
- Increased crisis accommodation and housing
- Additional resources to be put towards research regarding the ongoing impacts of COVID-19
- Access to emergency funds and food/essentials for women at risk
- AVO matters to be prioritised as a matter of community safety

6. Concluding Remarks

As the current health crisis continues to unfold, the safety of women and children must remain an absolute priority for Australian governments. These most recent survey results confirm the key issues facing women and children in light of COVID-19, and indicate that the complexities of DFV are rapidly increasing. There is an urgent need for additional support and funding of

frontline services to enable them to cope with the challenges presented by the COVID-19.