

MEDIA RELEASE

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Lockdown restrictions a relief to some, but new report reveals increasing numbers of domestic violence victims at “serious threat”

Women's Safety NSW has released a new report today which shows domestic violence is again escalating as COVID-19 social isolation measures lift.

Forty-three (43) domestic and family violence specialists from 20 services across metropolitan, regional, rural and remote NSW were surveyed on 25-27 May 2020, and revealed that since the lock-down period, more victims of violence and abuse are reaching out for assistance, making plans to escape, and experiencing escalating risk.

Key Findings

- 41.9% of specialists reported an increase in client numbers since the COVID-19 restrictions began to lift.
- 47.6% reported an increase in the percentage of high-risk cases since COVID-19 restrictions began to lift.
- 43.9% identified women reporting that violence and abuse escalated during the COVID-19 lockdown.
- 61.0% identified women reporting that it is harder to engage with services and processes, such as court processes, at this time.
- 41.5% reported more women planning to escape the violence.
- 39.0% reported women still finding it hard to engage with services safely.
- 36.6% reported women prioritising material needs and concerns over their own safety at this time.
- 29.3% reported insufficient service availability.

“These are some pretty sobering results” say Women's Safety NSW chief executive officer, Hayley Foster. “Not only are we seeing more higher-risk cases, but we're being made aware that many victims of violence and abuse don't know where to go for help.”

“Our serious threat matters have actually doubled during the COVID-19 period when compared to last year. It's been a really high-risk time for women,” says Sandra Sheridan, Assistant Coordinator of Mid Coast Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service.

Foster says specialist domestic violence workers are worried that the violence is going to get worse as more and more women seek to assert their independence after being under 24/7 surveillance by their abuser.

“Some of the women we're supporting have literally been walking on eggshells for weeks, giving in to his every demand and find other alternatives so as to prevent him

from lashing out at her and the kids- trying to stop even the smallest thing setting him off using whatever means they can whilst being home trapped in the same space,” says Melissa Luong, Burwood Women’s Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service.

A number of key service gaps have been identified by domestic and family violence specialists in the report, including access to ongoing accommodation, casework to assist clients with complex needs, and income and material supports, in addition to more consistent policing and court responses.

“The number one service gap before COVID-19 was case management support for clients so they can achieve lasting safety and break the cycle, and this service gap is all the more apparent now. It’s heartbreaking,” says Coordinator of the Hunter Women’s Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service, Suellyn Moore.

“It’s extremely concerning that some of women we’re supporting have lost their jobs, can’t afford their rent and have returned to live with the perpetrator to give their children the stability of a home. They don’t want to go through the insecurity of temporary accommodation and refuges are regularly full. They are seeing returning to the perpetrator as the best choice, and that is very worrying,” says Catherine Gander, Chief Executive Officer, West Connect Domestic Violence Service.

The report also calls for *“immediate government action”* to promote specialist domestic and family violence services, streamline referral pathways from the major counselling telephone helplines to local services, make support available through webchat and start co-locating specialist domestic and family violence workers in doctor and medical clinics.

“Some victims don’t feel safe to report to Police, some may not recognise domestic and family violence for what it is, and a specialist worker may be able to detect this and enlighten and empower victims and advocate for and refer them to relevant services” says Multicultural Specialist Worker, Regional Women’s Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service (survey respondent).

Women’s Safety NSW continues to advise the NSW Government on the remaining allocation of Commonwealth announced funds to support domestic and family violence response efforts during COVID-19.

Says Foster, *“We’ve been really pleased so far that Governments at all levels are listening. This is without doubt an urgent problem that is not going away anytime soon, and we all need to work together to make sure we are operating as swiftly and effectively as possible. The key findings in this report from frontline domestic and family violence specialists is absolute gold when it comes to advising on where precious funds need to be directed. Let’s treat it that way.”*

Tanya Whitehouse OAM, Coordinator of Macarthur Women’s Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service says key message is that specialist domestic and family violence services need to be listened to: *“In working on the ground as a domestic violence specialist service, I can clearly state that we have had increases in client numbers over the COVID-19 period compared to 2019. It is vital that decision makers involved in*

allocating much needed funds to domestic violence service providers such as the women's domestic violence court advocacy services statewide hear the experts in this. As a service we are concerned about the near future and the workload that may come from those women who were not previously safe to get support and are now reaching out. The services working in this field are the experts in this and must be listened to."

About:

Women's Safety NSW is a peak representative body for women's specialist domestic and family violence services. Our purpose is to advocate on behalf of our members for women's safety, justice and wellbeing in the context of domestic and family violence through policy, practice, law reform and cultural change.

Our full members – Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service workers – supported 51,383 women across NSW last year through:

- NSW's integrated response to domestic and family violence, Safer Pathway, in 43 metropolitan, regional and rural locations;
- The Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Program in 117 local courts across the state; and
- The Family Advocacy Support Service in Family Law Registries.

Our associate members are women's specialist domestic violence workers working in a variety of services including staying home leaving violence, women's health, women's supported accommodation, women's counselling, and women's legal services.

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Frontline domestic and family violence specialist workers also available for comment on request.