

## MEDIA RELEASE

### **Calls for NSW child protection reforms to better target support for families impacted by domestic violence**

Immediate Release: Wednesday, 17 December 2020

Today Women's Safety NSW published their [submission](#) to the NSW Committee on Children and Young People's [Inquiry into the Child Protection and Social Services System](#) which calls for a better targeting of support for families impacted by domestic and family violence.

Whilst domestic abuse is cited as the most common reason for calls to the child protection helpline, there are concerns that the child protection system and the services set up to support families are not geared up to effectively respond to domestic and family violence in a way that supports non-offending caregivers, holds the person using abuse to account, and focuses on child safety. Furthermore, significant gaps exist in the availability of domestic and family violence services for children and young people impacted by violence and abuse.

***“We need to recalibrate our child protection system to understand and respond effectively to situations of domestic and family violence,”*** says Hayley Foster, Chief Executive Officer of Women's Safety NSW. ***“And we need to recognise children and young people as victim-survivors of violence and abuse in their own right.”***

In a survey with forty-three (43) frontline domestic and family violence specialists and twenty-five (25) victim-survivors of domestic and family violence across metropolitan, regional, rural and remote NSW, Women's Safety NSW found that **84% of the frontline specialists felt their local child protection agency had only a moderate amount, a little or no understanding of the dynamics, patterns, impacts and complexities of domestic and family violence.** Ninety-one percent (91%) of the victim-survivors reported that they felt not very or not at supported by the child protection agency.

In the words of Carrie\*, a victim-survivor aged 40-49 years from a rural area, ***“They told me to [just] contact them if the children started having contact with their father again. I was left feeling very vulnerable, confused and very much in the dark. I didn't really feel supported.”***

Eloise, a 50-59-year-old victim-survivor in a regional area relayed that the child protection agency ***“completely went behind my back. I was told to just pick up and move to another place.”***

Models for improving child protection responses in situations of domestic and family violence do exist. [The Safe and Together Model](#) developed by David Mandel in the United States provides a framework for domestic violence-informed policies and practices which dramatically improve child protection responses in the context of domestic and family violence. In Australia, this work has been further developed and successfully trialled through the [Pathway and Research In Collaborative Inter-Agency working \('PATRICIA'\)](#) project, the [Invisible Practices: intervention with fathers who use violence \('Invisible Practices'\)](#) project, and the [Safe and Together Addressing Complexity focusing on children \('STACY'\)](#) project, all of which has been supported by the Australian National Research Organisation for Women's Safety ('ANROWS') and partnering agencies.

The critical problem is that these approaches require investment for them to be rolled out across the state.

***"It's time for us to examine our priorities," says Foster. "Children's safety and wellbeing must go to the top of the list."***

Frontline specialists and victim-survivors of domestic and family violence also identified a worrying gap in specialist domestic and family violence services for children and young people, with **58% of the frontline domestic and family violence specialist surveyed indicating that there are no specialist child focused domestic and family violence services available in their local area**, or in parts of their local area, and **59% of the victim-survivors surveyed indicating that their child/ren did not have access to targeted support** after being impacted by domestic and family violence.

***"This is a critical gap," says Ms Foster. "Children should not be left to navigate their safety and recovery from violence without specialist support."***

To bridge this gap, frontline specialists and victim-survivors of domestic and family violence both **recommend existing domestic and family violence services be funded to employ child focussed, trauma-informed workers** to provide targeted support for children and work more collaboratively with the child protection agency.

Women's Safety NSW holds concerns that a lack of investment in specialist support services for children and young people who have experienced domestic and family violence leaves them exposed to further trauma and intergenerational cycles of abuse.

Dani\*, an Aboriginal woman 40-49 years of age in an Outer Metropolitan area identified her child ***"mimicking or repeating the behaviour of the abuser"*** as being the main impact of them witnessing the violence. Whilst Lilly, a disabled woman aged 40-49 years in a Rural Area identified ***"trauma, including depression, low self-esteem, anxiety, eating disorders, and poor coping mechanisms"*** as being the main impacts for her children. Both of these women were not offered child-focussed

specialist support for their children to help them heal and recover from the abuse they had experienced.

*“The reality is, if we don’t invest in supporting children and young people in the context of domestic and family violence, we will not only be abandoning this generation of vulnerable children to suffer in silence, but we won’t break the cycle of abuse for our future generations”,* explained Ms Foster.

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**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 136 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.