

# Outreach with and for Aboriginal women experiencing domestic and family violence: a practice guide

## ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide has come from research with three independent women's specialist services and the work they do with and for Aboriginal women experiencing domestic and family violence (DFV). In the course of the research, Aboriginal women contributed as workers, board members, clients and community members.

The guide shares learning from the research. It is not a checklist. The learning comes from two regions in Australia—central Australia and Canberra. The learning focuses on helping Aboriginal women as victims/survivors of DFV but may also be useful for victims/survivors from other backgrounds.

This guide focuses on the practice of **assertive outreach** for individuals in crisis situations, and also on **outreach** in non-crisis situations. Other guides discuss safety planning and advocacy. In reality, there is a lot of overlap to how these three practices are used within women's specialist services with and for Aboriginal women. The practices should be grounded in services that are committed to continual learning, to building understanding of and involvement with local contexts, and to being culturally informed. Women's specialist services are generally independent and focus primarily on helping women and children. They include shelters, crisis lines, outreach, case management, and advocacy services, amongst others.

## Outreach and domestic and family violence specialist services

Women's specialist domestic and family violence (DFV) services have long histories of community development and education, and of encouraging self-help and self-determination. These many forms of activity come under the broad heading of outreach. Outreach is described broadly as comprising:

...responses that support domestic violence survivors in their homes and communities providing accessible and flexible points where information about service provision, and follow-up contact are available. (Kelly & Humphreys, 2001, p. 231)

Outreach responses or services emphasise the “importance of a public access point in the community”. It is often associated with specific services such as helplines, women's advice sessions, or drop-in centres. Outreach is also described in

action terms such as “reaching out”, “responding”, “extending to”, and “flexibility” (p. 241). Outreach is stressed as a way to contact “hard-to-reach populations”. The key features of outreach are:

- “Accessible services based in communities, staffed by people who are specialists in domestic violence;
- access to information and support as early as possible;
- targeting groups of women who are hard-to-reach;
- developing links to support and maintaining connections;
- service users defining their own needs rather than provision being ‘service led’; and
- active support in the community during separation or leaving a refuge.

- Pro-active methods are sometimes, though not always a feature” (Kelly & Humphreys, 2001, p. 242).

These approaches to outreach are generally developed and implemented with broad social aims of building awareness, and growing trust and mutual understanding. These approaches also create pathways into communities for communicating service information, to enable service users and communities to influence and shape service responses, and to fashion ways to overcome barriers (De Prince et al, 2012). Outreach can involve visibility, availability, and discretion.

## Assertive or pro-active outreach

Most outreach activities seek diverse and multiple public access points; but these continue to rest on contact initiated by community members. Versions of DFV outreach that make pro-active contact have been controversial on a number of grounds: that they breach personal privacy, that they are not freely chosen, and that they undermine empowerment. For Aboriginal women whose personal and family privacy was and continues to be routinely breached by a range of government and non-government providers, these are a particularly critical concerns (Watson, 2007).

However, by its very nature, DFV can isolate women and disrupt their connections to family and others. It can diminish and make a woman “feel less than”. Violence creates and maintains states of crisis. Proactive or assertive outreach can challenge the grip that violence has but can also “support ways of living beyond the harms, to remake the self and (re) build social connection” (Kelly & Meysen, 2016, p. 2). Thus, assertive outreach practice is a particular service choice that responds very directly to the nature of DFV and to the various impacts it has on women’s lives and choices. Within assertive outreach practice, respect and protective concern remain part of the ethical practice of workers.

At a basic and everyday level, proactive or assertive outreach practices can be described as various actions and activities to enable contact and communication with women and vice versa. These include initiating follow-up contact; visiting a woman in her home environment or another safe place; being able to speak with her on the phone outside of 9-5 working hours; going with her to important appointments; communicating in diverse ways, including via social media; and to talking (with her permission) with her family and friends about her

safety and support needs. Proactive outreach can follow on from a police or other formal referral. These types of outreach practice will vary depending on particular service models. However, they can be critical to women becoming safer (see practice guide 2).

It often surprises me that a worker can ring up and get an outcome for a client, which a client cannot get for themselves. An agency’s voice is stronger than an individual’s voice. Our service does have a lot of respect in the community. Based on that respect, we can get a better outcome.<sup>1</sup> (Crisis worker, Canberra)

## Multi-level outreach

A narrow understanding of outreach as a “program” can obscure the diversity and range of activity undertaken by women’s specialist DFV services. Outreach is multi-levelled and can encompass practices, activities, community development, and service structures themselves.

1. Outreach practices comprise things that specialist workers do on a day-to-day basis including work done with or for clients, or with other workers and organisations.
2. Outreach activities are things that a service organises on a routine or ad hoc basis for its workers to do.
3. Outreach community development or community collaborations are activities a service does outside of the normal or routine that are often or mostly done in and with the “community” (itself a multi-layered entity).
4. Outreach in service structures means the strategic or structural approach to creating access for women to multiple sources of help and support. The type and variety of outreach shows considerable breadth.

Research with women’s specialist DFV services working with and for Aboriginal women experiencing DFV found a wide range of type and variety of outreach (Table 1).

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations derive from the new research undertaken for this project.

**Table 1** Type and variety of outreach by women’s specialist DFV services

<p><b>Outreach practices</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proactive contact/proactive visits</li> <li>• Being generous with time</li> <li>• Seeking and giving information, options, advice</li> <li>• Seeking and giving information about progress of case with police, prosecution, court, probation</li> <li>• Seeking, providing, facilitating resources (funds, security upgrades, etc.)</li> <li>• Accompanying women (to banks, Centrelink, housing, etc.)</li> <li>• Using interpreters</li> <li>• Asking questions that open up about aspects of her life, not about DV</li> <li>• Dropping by with groceries</li> <li>• Using “hooks” or incentives such as vouchers, clothing</li> <li>• Supporting parenting by accompanying to schools, etc.</li> <li>• Making appointments</li> <li>• Taking women to appointments</li> <li>• Looking for women who are worried about or who are missing</li> <li>• Seeing the woman in the street and chatting</li> <li>• Meeting and getting to know others working in different sectors or organisations</li> </ul>
<p><b>Outreach service activities</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing mobile phones/phone cards</li> <li>• Workers do proactive contact/follow-up contact (specified, structured, routine, required)</li> <li>• Home visits (with or without appointments, with ex-shelter residents or those staying at home)</li> <li>• Allowing off-site appointments/accompaniment (e.g. hospital, GP, police, court, housing)</li> <li>• On-call crisis home visits with police attendance at incidents</li> <li>• Creating/maintaining networks and referral</li> <li>• Pop-up information shop in shopping, recreational, or cultural spaces</li> <li>• Court assistance/accompaniment</li> <li>• Evacuations out of unsafe situations/communities</li> <li>• Routine community visits</li> <li>• Contact and information sessions in other sites (e.g. health centres, clinics, maternity groups)</li> </ul>

<p><b>Outreach as community development/collaboration</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information sessions</li> <li>• Joint meetings with other social and community service providers</li> <li>• Visiting other organisations/making links</li> <li>• Raising awareness/community education/campaigning (e.g. 100 Voices, Quilt Project)</li> <li>• Shared or joint training and learning</li> <li>• Group activities (e.g. walking group, art, pampering)</li> <li>• Participating in community activities (e.g. NAIDOC, Harmony Day, Refugee Week, Sorry Day)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Outreach in service structures</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Helplines (24/7 and other)</li> <li>• Drop-in office in a community/everyday setting</li> <li>• Public access point in courthouse</li> <li>• Brokerage funds (for supplies, transport, clothes, kids' stuff, etc.)</li> <li>• Available transport options</li> <li>• Multiple contact/entry points</li> <li>• Formal collaboration with police first responders</li> <li>• Providing different emergency accommodation options (shelter, motel, other crisis accommodation, "kick-out" orders)</li> <li>• Collaborations with men's behavioural change programs/activities</li> <li>• Early interventions (e.g. with children and young people)</li> <li>• No waiting lists/demand-led service models</li> <li>• Being independent organisations</li> <li>• Community controlled/community meetings/AGM</li> <li>• Law and culture activities</li> </ul>

Source: Putt, Holder, & O'Leary (2017)

## Outreach with and for Aboriginal women facing domestic and family violence

Women's specialist services that conduct this range and diversity of outreach will necessarily need to accommodate it in terms of finance, human resources, and other pressing priorities. Aboriginal women as individual clients value this flexibility and responsiveness (Holder, Putt, & O'Leary, 2015). However, practical help and services that are engaged at differing levels with the communities they service are crucial.

Different issues and factors may contribute to the capacity and ability of the services to conduct this necessary range of outreach. First is specialist services' long-term involvement in their localities and with the communities they serve. Second, the independence of women's specialist services allows them flexibility and a significant degree of agility to respond and act as reasonably close to needs and issues. A final issue is the extent to which funding agreements allow sufficient "give" to enable a high degree of responsiveness, and longevity to that responsiveness, from women's specialist services.

Reaching out to women in places and communities that are marginalised and disadvantaged is critical both to help and respond to those victimised by DFV, and to working with communities and others for longer-term prevention.

## Resources and sources

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ANROWS acknowledges the traditional owners of the land across Australia on which we work and live. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elders past, present and future; and we value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, culture, and knowledge.

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