

A new approach to programs for families and children

An ANROWS submission to the
Department of Social Services

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ANROWS

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Content warning: This submission includes the names of Aboriginal women who have died. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised that this may cause distress.

An opportunity to prioritise a DFSV lens across a national program

The Australian Government's investment in child and family programs is critical to supporting progress under key policy frameworks including *The National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032* (the National Plan), *Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031* (Safe & Supported) and *The National Agreement on Closing the Gap* (the National Agreement).

The proposed reform of this program creates a significant opportunity to ensure all elements of the model are designed to prevent and address the harms of domestic, family and sexual violence (DFSV). Reforms related to needs-assessment and evaluation are also a key opportunity to ensure alignment with the *Australian National Research Agenda to End Violence Against Women and Children 2023-2028* (the Australian National Research Agenda).

Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS) supports the Department's vision and direction for this reform. The program's focus on flexible and longer-term funding is a strong step forward, addressing long-recognised structural barriers to child, family and community safety and wellbeing.

To build on the strong direction, we see an important opportunity to ensure the reform continues to advance efforts to reduce DFSV. We welcome the opportunity to work alongside the Department by contributing and translating evidence to strengthen this shared effort.

Recommendations

Core recommendation: Apply a DFSV lens across the program.

Supporting recommendations:

1. Strengthen the DFSV focus across the program priorities.
2. Enable structural reform necessary to support First Nations self-determination.
3. Build workforce DFSV literacy and capacity to support victim-survivor safety, including through work with people using violence
4. Draw on the Australian National Research Agenda to inform needs-based funding assessments.
5. Align reporting and evaluation strategy with the Australian National Research Agenda.

Core recommendation: Apply a DFSV lens across the program

Our recommendation is for the Department to embed a DFSV lens across the program. This lens should guide the program's vision, outcomes, funding decisions, service design and outcome measurements. The following recommendations are designed to support this aim.

Why adopting an explicit DFSV lens is critical

Applying an explicit DFSV lens will strengthen the reform by aligning this critical national investment with two key challenges identified under the National Plan: increased support needs of victim- and compounding systemic disadvantage.

Australia has made steady progress in raising awareness of gender-based violence and rejection of harmful attitudes (Coumarelos et al., 2023). This awareness is driving increased help-seeking – a trend visible in the Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) Personal Safety Survey data (ABS, 2016; 2021-2022). Regardless of whether people are using violence or experiencing harm as victims/survivors, people seek help in diverse ways. These range from friends and families to health and housing services (Hegarty et al., 2022). Our nationally funded programs are an opportunity to ensure our systems can meet the aspiration of “no wrong door”.

Services responding to this growing need are further stretched by systemic disadvantage in some communities and rising pressures like housing affordability, psychosocial distress and changing online risks (O'Connell et al., 2025). These factors further exacerbate the DFSV risk and dynamics and require services to respond to complexities, often without the adequate training or resourcing.

A clear DFSV lens will strengthen this comprehensive reform respond to both individual help seeking and the multiple systemic factors that increase risk of violence. Our research and experience highlight the following key evidence-informed principles in the program structure:

- **Apply rights based approach:** Rights-focused service design is critical to violence-informed responses (ADFVDRN, & ANROWS, 2024; Morgan et al., 2023; Robinson et al., 2022). The program's vision and outcomes must reflect Australia's international human rights obligations, including the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, and the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.
- **Centre the voices of lived expertise:** Partnering with children, young people, and families with lived experience is critical to ensure that the measurement tools and definitions of success are firmly anchored in their needs and rights. This includes, but is not limited to, children's rights to participate, the rights to accessible services, self-determination, language and culture.
- **Reduce barriers to DFSV help-seeking:** Barriers for adult victim-survivors include shame, lack of awareness about services that can help and confidentiality concerns (Hegarty et al., 2022, p. 61). Men using violence face barriers such as shame, normalising violence, and confidentiality, communication and access concerns (Hegarty et al., 2022, p. 101). Ensuring DFSV-informed supports across entire suite of universal and targeted services, can help overcome these barriers.

1. Strengthen DFSV focus in program priorities

Overall, we strongly endorse the four priority areas in the Discussion Paper (p.4). We offer the following evidence-informed suggestions.

Priority Area 1: Early investment in family wellbeing, disadvantage and reducing need for later interventions

The priority could be strengthened by explicitly including the prevention of violence and the distinct needs of children and young people. This addition would improve alignment with key frameworks, like *the National Plan* and *Safe & Supported*, and respond to evidence that children and young people's needs are often underserved.

A revised wording could read: "Invest early to improve the wellbeing of children, young people and families, break cycles of disadvantage, prevent domestic, family and sexual violence and reduce the need for later interventions."

Key areas of interest

The three cohorts in the "key areas of interest" (Discussion Paper, p.4) align with evidence of people who face increased risks related to DFSV.

We encourage the Department to ensure the program focuses on identifying and responding to DFSV risk for all children, young people and families. The priority groups should be understood as those facing higher risk, rather than the only groups the program supports. This can be strengthened by applying the National Risk Assessment Principles for domestic and family violence across the whole program. (Toivonen & Backhouse, 2018; with an [updated version](#) forthcoming in 2026).

While we acknowledge the challenges in prioritising specific groups, we also encourage the Department to consider an explicit focus on adolescents. Adolescents, and especially those who use family violence in the home (AVITH), are significantly underserved with very low numbers of service engagement (7% of young people surveyed using AVITH; Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2022). Supporting them may reduce the likelihood of intergenerational violence and minimise the impact of this violence on other family members (Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2022).

We encourage further consideration of how the program will meet and measure success across the diverse needs of the communities it serves. This includes language and cultural needs and tailored responses to LGBTIQ+ people, people with disability and people living regionally and remotely.

Priority Area 2: Connected, co-located and integrated services

We welcome the prioritisation of connected services that work together to meet children, young people and families' needs. Research highlights the need for and benefits of collaborative practice approaches to support holistic responses to DFSV. These includes:

- **Specialist expertise in services:** Specialist expertise in DFSV can support safe rapport building and engagement, participation, and the identification of strengths and needs, including risk of harm. Specialist responses to children and young people must be developmentally appropriate, include support for unaccompanied young people and provide guidance for providers on when parental consent is required (Ellard et al., 2025).

- **Safe use of whole-of-family approaches:** These are an important innovation in enhancing visibility of those who have used, or are at risk of using violence (Hamilton et al. 2025). They support the safety of all family members, including children as victims in their own rights and those experiencing intersecting risk factors (e.g. alcohol and other drugs, mental health), and engage individuals to challenge DFSV attitudes and behaviours directly. (e.g. following the Safe & Together model; Tsantefski et al., 2021).

These approaches must always be used in ways that protect victim-survivor safety and autonomy. If not attuned to DFSV risks, they can unintentionally reinforce the use of control and silence victim-survivors. This risk is heightened where there is cultural or religious pressure to keep the family together.

- **Shared understanding:** Genuine collaboration relies on a shared understanding of rights-based practice, DFSV, and trauma. This involves reviewing the different service system approaches and frameworks to identify and resolve tensions (Quadara et al., 2020).

Priority Area 3: Services informed by, and responding to, community need

We support the Department’s focus on ensuring services are informed by and respond to community needs. Recent evaluation evidence generated by ANROWS emphasises the importance of place-based approaches, especially in rural and remote communities (Hamilton et al., 2025).

We share the following considerations to support the reform’s success:

- **Remote and regional funding needs:** Long-term funding, greater investment and flexible delivery models are required to support local recruitment, retention and training in remote areas. The program should consider the impact of remoteness on collaboration, knowledge sharing, and resourcing (e.g. added cost of travel).
- **Community endorsement:** Applicants should be assessed on proven prior experience of delivering the specified services at a high standard of quality to the community/priority group identified. The program should require contact details of community leaders/other relevant community representatives to verify the scope and quality of previous service provision and identify areas for improvement.
- **Lived Experience:** Program design and governance should foreground the voices of people with Lived Experience to ensure services genuinely meet community needs (Lloyd et al., 2023). We encourage embedding a robust commitment to Lived Experience engagement that ensures Lived Experience experts participate in decision-making at the highest levels. The program must build in time and resources for their involvement as early as feasible (Suomi et al., 2017).

2. Enable structural reform to support First Nations self-determination

We strongly support the prioritisation of funding for ACCO-led service delivery. This is a meaningful opportunity to fully act on the Commission's assessment that shared decision-making alone is insufficient and that self-determination must be the ultimate goal (Productivity Commission, 2024, p.5).

Self-determination and equitable outcomes require structural reform of funding and contracting processes. The following insights are predominately drawn from First Nations-led research and our experience evaluating services, including ACCOs, across multiple jurisdictions:

- **Flexible and sustainable funding:** Equitable, flexible and long-term funding is needed to enable ACCOs to address social and structural inequities that limit women, children and young people from seeking safety from DFSV. This includes addressing gaps in housing, refuge access and brokerage funds to access healing and support services unavailable locally (Morgan et al., 2023).
- **Decolonising workforce models:** Current approaches to workforce development operate within a colonising structure that causes harm (Cullen et al. 2022). ACCOs have developed and implemented promising approaches informed by the local contexts within which they work and should be supported to implement these models.
- **Cultural safety requirements:** ANROWS' evaluations recommend developing greater cultural safety requirements in contracts for non-community led DFV services including mandating training through ACCOs or Aboriginal organisations and mandating cultural supervision to workers who work in frontline services with First Nations people (Hamilton et al. 2025).

3. Build workforce DFSV literacy and capacity to support victim-survivor safety, including through work with people using violence

The diverse supports funded under the program create an opportunity for the Department to lead national violence-informed professional capacity-building across the service spectrum. Building a workforce that can provide consistent, safe and culturally responsive responses across the service system requires a multi-faceted approach, focusing on:

System integration and consistency

- **Shared frameworks and decision-making:** Implementing consistent, evidence-based DFSV risk frameworks and formal, multi-agency arrangements (e.g. shared case coordination, common tools and clear decision-making processes).
- **Shared risk identification and response models:** Enabling the workforce to identify and safely respond to DFSV risk factors across the service spectrum, manage the risk of collusion with a person using violence (Healey et al., 2018), and better recognise coercive control.
- **Collaborative and safe co-location:** Designing co-located service models with clear processes for closer partnership and flexible, warm referrals. These models must protect the confidentiality and safety of victim-survivors and avoid inadvertently placing them at risk (Hamilton et al. 2025).

Targeted and culturally responsive care

- **Centring children and young people:** Building capacity to meet the unique needs and safety of children and young people, including those experiencing DFSV and/or using violence (Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2022). This includes building skills for practitioners working primarily with parents and caregivers in intersecting support services (Humphreys et al., 2020).
- **Culturally responsive and collaborative practice:** Increasing access to culturally specific DFSV prevention and early intervention supports, including through culturally responsive child specialist workers (Settlement Services International & Myriad Kofkin Global, 2023).

Supported pathways and ongoing support

- **Safe and supported referrals:** Establishing clear pathways where services can share information safely and provide warm referrals, preventing victim-survivors from needing to repeat their story or coordinate multiple services on their own.
- **Continuity of care:** Ensuring a continuation of support when they move to different locations, so that history, safety planning and therapeutic work moves seamlessly with them (*Inquests into the deaths of Miss Yunupinju, Ngeygo Ragurk, Kumarn Rubuntja and Kumanjayi Haywood*, 2024).
- **Resourcing brokerage support:** Ensuring victim-survivor needs – including housing – are prioritised, resourced and made visible in the funding arrangements of services.

4. Draw on the Australian National Research Agenda to inform needs-based funding assessments

The Department should fund providers to complete needs assessments that describe the problem, explain what contributes to it, and outline the needs of the different groups they support, broken down by gender, age, economic status, sexuality and other relevant factors.

Leveraging existing data

We welcome the Department's proposed use of existing data to assess community need, which aligns with the Australian National Research Agenda. ANROWS-funded research shows how these datasets are valuable resources for identifying areas of complex need (e.g. where families are experiencing co-occurring issues) and system gaps (e.g. service access delays; Luu et al., 2024; Orr et al., 2022). The Australian National Research Agenda also calls on the use of Lived Expertise, practitioner knowledge, Indigenous methodologies, and listening to the voices of children, while they are still children (Lloyd et al., 2023).

The benefits should be balanced with the following risks:

- **Human error, bias and demographic gaps:** Interpretation must carefully consider the context in which data was collected and adhere to privacy laws and ethical codes of research.
- **Manipulation of data:** Externally driven research can push data into frameworks it wasn't designed for, leading to findings that stretch or misrepresent what the data can reliably show. (Dr Rebecca Buys, ANROWS webinar, [Making better use of existing administrative data](#)).
- **Systemic racism and discrimination:** Using administrative data collected about First Nations people need to be carefully considered alongside opportunities for improvement. For example, identifiers are not collected consistently, or people may not feel safe or comfortable to disclose their Indigenous status.

5. Evaluation and reporting aligned with the Australian National Research Agenda

We welcome the Department's aim to simplify reporting while achieving program-wide outcomes and better qualitative data (Discussion Paper, p.6). We urge that the program's reporting and evaluation goals be adequately resourced and aligned with the national research priorities and approaches to end DFSV.

Explicit funding, governance and accountability

- **Dedicated resourcing:** Services must be explicitly funded to embed quality reporting practices and data capture practices in their work, including workforce training and systems integration, especially for ACCOs. (Carlson et al., 2024).
- **Indigenous Data Sovereignty:** The program must recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia often have no control over how their data is collected and used (Lloyd et al., 2023). Data sovereignty, as recognised internationally in human rights instruments, the programs should resource ACCOs to collect and govern their own data.
- **Sector wide learning:** Aligning with insights from recent ANROWS evaluations, the Department should publish all evaluations to support transparency, accountability and continual improvement (Hamilton et al., 2025) and promote standardised data collection across services enabling broader more impactful analysis.

Measuring effectiveness and centring lived experience

- **Lived Experience centred measurement:** Outcome measures and data capturing processes need to centre on the perspectives of those with Lived Experience. Evaluation should be meaningful and clearly aligned with objectives, rather than attempting to measure everything (Hamilton et al., 2025).
- **Alignment with the Australian National Research Agenda:** Measuring effectiveness should be informed by diverse knowledge methods including practitioner expertise, lived experience and Indigenous methodologies. (Lloyd et al., 2023).
- **Supporting demographic visibility:** Evaluation needs to capture and assess program effectiveness for diverse and specific cohorts (LGBTIQ+ people, culturally and racially marginalised people, people with disability, people who use violence and children).
- **Longitudinal focus:** The program must support services to track longer-term outcomes, moving beyond pre- and post-service outcomes to understand the lasting impact.

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ANROWS is an independent, not-for-profit company established as an initiative under Australia's *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022* (the National Plan). Our primary function is to build the evidence base that supports ending violence against women and children in Australia.

ANROWS is embedded in the National Plan architecture and will continue to deliver and develop this function across the next decade under the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032*. Every aspect of our work is motivated by the right of women and children to live free from violence and in safe communities. We recognise, respect and respond to diversity among women and children, and we are committed to reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Primary (core) funding for ANROWS is jointly provided by the Commonwealth and all state and territory governments of Australia. ANROWS is also, from time to time, directly commissioned to undertake work for an individual jurisdiction, and successfully tenders for research and evaluation work. ANROWS is registered as a harm prevention charity and deductible gift recipient, governed by the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC).

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