



MEDIA STATEMENT

For Immediate Release: 23rd March 2020

Domestic violence set to escalate with COVID-19 – services across the state on alert and families at risk

Specialist frontline domestic and family violence and women's health workers are on ready alert for higher rates and increasingly serious cases of domestic violence as COVID-19 forces significant proportions of the population into isolation and places financial strain on families reliant upon income from insecure work.

From across the state we are hearing from a number of specialist women's health and domestic and family violence services that the way they deliver services are changing to adapt to the ever evolving COVID-19 virus. Most services have many staff working from home wherever possible, ensuring services continue to be offered via telephone and video conferencing facilities. We know that some homes will become extraordinarily dangerous and terrifying for women and children at risk of, or currently experiencing, domestic violence. State-wide services such as DVConnect will continue to be there to support 24/7.

"As of this week we will see an increase in working and supporting clients by phone only" says The Centre For Women & Co. CEO, Stacey Ross. "We have heard that some services are still attending court whilst others, including our service, have pulled that support and can now only offer over the phone support. It is causing distress and anxiety among women and children as well as our frontline teams."

DVConnect, CEO, Beck O'Connor, says *"We have serious concerns about women's limited ability to make contact with services face to face or thinking they cannot escape from life threatening danger while under imposed home isolation or quarantine. We also have significant concern that men may not actively be seeking or attending change behaviour programs over the coming months, so we need to rapidly implement or ramp up alternative ways of keeping men engaged, discussing strategies for managing their behaviour while in isolation and accountability for their choice to use violence"*.

Queensland Domestic Violence Service Network and the Women's Health Service Alliance and its members warn that women and their children experiencing domestic and family violence who are in quarantine are going to be the most affected. "We are extremely concerned that women who have to quarantine and are unable to have direct contact with specialist staff will have limited options to access safe accommodation, justice processes and will remain in violent homes." says Cathy Crawford, Coordinator, The Townsville Women's Centre. The situation could/will worsen exponentially if the virus spreads to service agencies or crisis accommodation facilities themselves. "However, it is extremely important to know that while face to face services are limited contact can be made via the phone, Facebook, website and support will be provided." Says Cathy.

"All it takes is for one person to become sick or come into contact with someone who has contracted the virus for all the wheels to fall off" says Stacey Ross. "This could result in women and children across



an entire region not having access to face-to-face crisis support, court support for their domestic violence matter, or a women's refuge effectively having to close its doors to new referrals as it goes into lock-down."

Services and women's refuges are doing everything they can to avoid this happening. On the Gold Coast, CEO, Rosemary O'Malley, Domestic Violence Prevention Centre said *"from Monday 23 March all of our advocates will be working from remote locations to ensure we are playing our part to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and to 'flatten the curve'. It's 'Business as Unusual' and we remain committed to supporting and responding to women throughout the COVID-19 outbreak. During this time, we are paying extra attention to specialised Safety Planning to account for women having less opportunity to engage with DV Support agencies if they are self-isolating with abusive or coercive partners (to make the most of the opportunities they take), and with the realisation that perpetrators may be present when we contact women"*.

However, with the virus spreading as quickly as it is, women's services across Queensland fear it is only a matter of time before we start seeing services go into lock-down.

Beck O'Connor, says *"this means governments need to act quickly and proactively, we need focused and proactive Government health advice about options for escape, should further targeted lock-downs occur and to urgently address the funding required for specialised transport and quarantine accommodation options. Expecting people to just endure violence and abuse is unacceptable."*

Furthermore, services from across the state believe that there are a number of areas in which we think governments can immediately step in to increase safety for women and children at this particular time, and this is in addition to the immediate reforms we have been calling for at the national level as part of the Fourth National Action Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children.

Our collective call to action to both state and federal governments include -

TV and social media campaigns - "Everyone has the right to be safe in their own home"- services are here to support you... (either/both incorporated with public health messaging and/or stand-alone focus on safety/DFV) - targeting both victims/survivors and people using violence and giving avenue to seek help/change behaviour.

Increase funding for ads and service capacity for key helplines -

- 1800RESPECT
- Men's Referral Service
- Kids Helpline
- Mensline
- Safety Net Australia

Strengthen civil protection orders - via coordination with policing in jurisdictions

- Victims need to be able to rely upon these for their protection.
- Consideration should be given to making orders that allow women and their children to remain safely within their homes with abusers removed.



Increased investment in safe at home programs - (federal government to increase from \$18 million to \$180 million and states to match so that DV victims and their children who want to be supported to stay home safely aren't forced into homelessness)

For women on temporary visas experiencing violence to have access to Medicare, PBS, income support if jobs are lost due to COVID-19, and one-off economic support payments (\$750), similar to those already rolled out to other vulnerable groups.

Funding for Refuge to increase staffing to provide specialist outreach support where necessary remotely and if appropriate to support women and children being placed in temporary accommodation.

Funding for Specialist DFV services to increase staffing to provide additional safety planning and support to be prepared to meet increased demand in services and provide support remotely where necessary.

Increased funding for safe phones and sim cards through the Safer Technology for Women Program Funding.

Ensure all Hospital and Health Services have pathways and funding for access to termination of pregnancy and contraception and confirm terminations as essential reproductive healthcare, not elective.

At a time when large parts of the community are being forced into isolation it is important to remember that for some, the most dangerous place for a woman or a child to be in this Country is in their very own homes. One in four women will experience physical violence from an intimate partner in her lifetime, and one in six girls and one in nine boys will be sexually assaulted before the age of 15 years, in most cases by a male person known to them.

QDVSN and WHSA members intimately understand the complexities of this work and are calling on all levels of Government to ensure, where appropriate, consideration should be given to the funding of specialist services which support women and children to remain safe in their homes, to assist with security upgrades, financial and/or rental assistance, liaison with police and ongoing support and case management.

"These are trying times for so many" says Stacey. "But if we act now, if we are prepared and well supported by governments and work together with our communities, we can reduce the risks for women and children who are going to be at serious threat over the coming weeks and months."

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ABOUT:

Queensland Domestic Violence Service Network (QDVSN) is a network of Queensland regional Domestic Violence Services, the Centre for Domestic and Family Violence Research and the Immigrant Women's Support Service. QDVSN works collaboratively and strategically to advance understanding of, and works to eliminate gender, structural, political, economic, legal and cultural inequalities and inequities which result in gender based violence in all its forms. QDVSN provide peer support, information sharing and debriefing within our membership and is a change agent by providing education, a reference point and a collective voice to Government, non-government and member services on State and National issues relating to domestic and family violence.

Women's Health Services Alliance (WHSA) consists of the regional and state-wide services funded to provide women's health and wellbeing services in Queensland. Delivering robust and cohesive women's health and wellbeing services throughout Queensland. Our objectives include advocating as an expert body for Queensland women's health and well-being and be a voice to government on women's health and wellbeing service delivery and policy. We aim to maintain a proactive role in the continuous development of the Alliance community-based service models through information sharing and collaborative projects and collaborate, network and provide peer support for all Alliance members.

CONTACT: Stacey Ross, Chief Executive Officer | 0427 721 025 | stacey@centreforwomen.org.au

CONTACT: Sophie McCashin, Director – Practise | 07 3156 2321 | sophie@dvconnect.org