

Darwin 12th August 2026

Submission to the Department of Social Services (DSS), Commonwealth of Australia, in relation to the consultation on the Second Action Plan under Australia's National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032 (the National Plan)

To: The Hon Tanya Plibersek MP, Minister for Social Services

This submission is from ARDS Aboriginal Corporation in partnership with Yolŋu leaders in Galiwin'ku working with families impacted by family, domestic and sexual violence (DFSV).

ARDS representatives participated in the consultation held in Darwin on 7th July 2026 and welcomed the opportunity to share perspectives on this issue. This submission outlines the points we raised during the consultation, expands on them further, and includes additional comments.

A little bit about ARDS

ARDS is a Yolŋu led cross-cultural specialist organisation that has operated across Northeast Arnhem Land communities and homelands for the past 50 years.

ARDS' purpose is to increase Yolŋu control of all aspects of Yolŋu life through equal and genuine access to information, resources and decision-making. This work is delivered through five departments:

- **Community development & empowerment** - under the guidance of local ŋalapaŋ (elders), we work to strengthen local capacity, confidence and control in areas such as health, social and emotional wellbeing, and parenting and families. We assist Yolŋu families and communities to navigate and negotiate with government and dominant culture institutions. We develop ways for Yolŋu and Balanda systems to work together.
- **Law and Justice** – we work to ensure that Yolŋu Rom (law and culture) is respected and recognised by dominant culture institutions. Our work includes first language mediation services, Law and Justice groups and community courts and youth diversion and restorative justice services.

- **YolŲu region language centre** – our team supports local language custodians in keeping language strong. This includes through intergenerational language transmission activities, resource development, language documentation, translation, training and language advocacy.
- **YolŲu Radio and Multimedia** – broadcasts to YolŲu communities and homelands. We create a range of creative media products and activities that celebrate YolŲu identity and strength and provide access to crucial information and stories in people’s first languages.
- **Cultural Competency Training** – developed to meet high demand for accessible and practical training for organisations and individuals working in East Arnhem Land, with ARDS offering a range of training formats to suit different organisational and personal learning needs.

Our approach is founded upon genuine and in-depth learning between Balanda and YolŲu worldviews and incorporates a contemporary understanding of culturally competent practice. By combining this skilled cross-cultural practice with adept language work, ARDS is able to effectively facilitate meaningful communication across cultures.

Over more than 50 years, ARDS has developed a strong reputation with government and private sector partners and enjoys broad community support amongst YolŲu in Northeast Arnhem Land.

Context – Where we are coming from (statement by Nyomba Gandangu and Rhoda Dhurrkay – elders from Galiwin’ku, Northeast Arnhem Land)

- We are the YolŲu people from Northeast Arnhem Land. We are g  na (independent). Not all First Nations peoples are the same. As YolŲu people, we have many dh  ruk (languages), many b  purru (clan nations), many communities, and many w   a (homelands). All of them are part of who we are, how we think and how we understand the world around us. The approaches we use are unique to our people; they work for us and are grounded in our law.
- English is not our first language, the balanda (non-YolŲu) law is foreign to us. Balanda systems and ways of thinking can be confusing for us. We work hard each day to span that gap and walk in both worlds. But when it comes to healing our people, we know this is grounded in YolŲu law and culture. As YolŲu, we are experts of our own lives.

How we work, our values

At ARDS we work in ways which align with YolŲu Rom (law and culture) and place YolŲu knowledge, priorities and skills at the forefront of our practise. We hold a set of values, grounded in YolŲu Rom, which guides us each day and means we are coming from YolŲu common ground. Those values can be viewed in our organisational [strategy](#).

For the purpose of this submission, we will focus on the following principles only:

- **GurruŲu (kinship)** is the foundation of our work. Our GurruŲu means we are all connected and we have lots of family who have responsibilities to us and our clans. GurruŲu underpins our common ground, it governs and maintains our culture, unity and sense of deep belonging and identity. GurruŲu is rooted in YolŲu law (not lore) and incorporates songlines, dance, stories, place, the natural world and art that carries ancient customary knowledge for maintaining health, connection and wellbeing of everyone, and everything. When used as tool in our projects, GurruŲu provides opportunities for restoring healthy relationships, and family and domestic violence prevention, as well as for healing and rehabilitation.
- **YolŲu led:** ARDS is a YolŲu-led organisation, with YolŲu Board Directors representing each of the Northeast Arnhem Land communities where ARDS works. ARDS has a co-governance model, with Julia Wormer as CEO and interim Co-CEO Sylvia Nulpinditj. Strong YolŲu leadership guides the dhukarr (path) for our djäma (work). We work YolŲu to YolŲu and are committed to working across both YolŲu and balanda worlds.
- **Räl-manapanmirr:** we work together, everybody has a role both YolŲu and balanda (non-YolŲu). We travel slowly in the ȷipalȷipa (traditional canoe) at a pace which suits YolŲu. We don't travel in the speedboat at a fast pace where we miss important things or people. Working together and slowly in the ȷipalȷipa, means that we are always learning, and can address the deep-rooted issues that our communities face.

In Galiwin'ku we have a project called Dälkum YolŲu GurruŲu (strengthening YolŲu kinship). It is built on the foundation of GurruŲu to address challenges of DFSV in preventative and community-led ways. This work is built from the ground up. GurruŲu provides the foundation that a person is never alone and that there are always many people, homelands, and animals in the world around that care and support us.

Gurruṯu is being strengthened through following:

- Mägaya Rom, a foundational YolŲu law describing a state of peace and cessation of hostilities.
- Napuṅga’wuy YolŲu djämamirr, we work through YolŲu mediation techniques
- Working from YolŲu common ground, where all YolŲu meet – our common ground / Go-du-ṅärra (inside the parliament) this is a deep and sacred concept of law and connection
- Cultural practices such as ringitj (traditional clan alliances), manikay (songlines), buṅgul (ceremonial dance) and milkarri (ceremonial, ancient song, poem, map, crying)
- YolŲu observance and intuition

Through this, we find the Mägaya Dhukarr (path of peace).

The complexity of DFSV, what entrenches it and ideas to overcome the challenges

The challenges of DFSV are like dhukun. It’s like rubbish in our spirit. We have identified these conditions as being significant contributors causing or further entrenching the issue of DFSV:

- Intergenerational trauma and living continually in a colonised world that threatens our law and culture
- Overcrowded housing
- Not enough food, hunger
- Financial stress and abuse related to finances
- Lack of transportation and services to be on country

Solutions to counter these stressors are:

- YolŲu leadership in initiatives for our people
- Going on country and being rejuvenated and reconnected to culture and law
- YolŲu-led centre/safe space for men and women

Urgent need for more housing in remote communities across the NT

As was raised during the consultation, **the urgent need for more housing is a pressing issue that cannot be understated.** The delegation invited ideas for resolving the tension around how potential new housing should be allocated. We suggest that solutions must be developed separately and collaboratively with each community. In Galiwin’ku, for example, a safe house for women and children already exists, while a

shelter for men has been requested for a long time. This may look different from residential housing. Other communities, such as Gapuwiyak, have urgent needs for residential, visitor and safe housing. There are elder groups that can be engaged through a YolŲu process, which would mean that there is genuine consultation with the right people, who understand the needs of their community.

Fly-in-fly-out (FIFO) in contrast to the recognition of a capable local workforce

During the consultation, it was raised that FIFO workers are an expensive necessity and that more funding, including for accommodation, needs to be provided. We agree that working in remote communities is expensive, but we would like to offer a different perspective:

- At present, there remains a need to bring people into communities at times for specialist skills or roles. However, the FIFO model often rests on an assumption that all, or most, skills are external to community. In this submission, we have outlined the key role local leadership and expertise play, and we advocate for those local skills not only to be recognised but also to be supported and adequately resourced. This means learning about local YolŲu governance, and investing in and supporting local leadership, and local employment. The reality is, that local leaders are community first responders, often working day and night without payment to address issues within their communities. This is often invisible or not recognised by outsiders, who are not fluent in local language, culture and protocols. This will require a rethinking of employment structures and priorities, but this shift is necessary for the YolŲu-to-YolŲu approach outlined above to work. ARDS currently employs 71% YolŲu staff in comparison to 29% balanda (non-YolŲu) staff, which is key to the work we do, however there needs to be more investment in employment opportunities for YolŲu People which recognises the 'invisible work' that happens on a daily basis in communities.
- Each new person who comes to community requires a significant investment of time and energy to learn local culture, language and customs. This is a gap that ARDS has been addressing by delivery of the ARDS Cultural Competency Training. Please refer to the information about ARDS for more information in relation to this training. External people who do not understand local complexities may be ineffective or, in the worst case, may cause harm. YolŲu people have shown incredible generosity and resilience by continuing to provide this crucial teaching in addition to CCT training, often unpaid and unrecognised

for its value. The longer non-YolŬu people can remain in community, the more this burden is reduced, and the more relationships can move toward meaningful collaboration that builds capacity both ways (bala-räli). Better still, when YolŬu are able to fulfil these roles, local experts are doing the work, likely in a more effective and efficient way than an external person could.

- YolŬu people, especially community leaders, are often extremely stretched because their leadership and wisdom are needed across many areas of community life and at all times of day, both within and outside paid employment. More resources should be invested in caring for these team members and in enabling emerging leaders to develop the skills required for future roles while learning from their elders. Caring for these team members includes practical supports such as transport and housing, which are often overlooked. These important areas are often difficult to fund for Aboriginal Corporations such as ARDS as we don't receive core funding from the government. Core funding would allow for better infrastructure and systems to support local leadership. When local leadership is not recognised and resourced, there is another young person who doesn't see the possibility of their own future, how they can follow in the footsteps of their leaders and navigate two-worlds work.

Suggestions to improve reporting practices

Based on our experience with another project in the YolŬu community of Gapuwiyak, we would like to acknowledge that DSS has proven to be a flexible funding partner. We see further opportunities to improve reporting practices in the following ways, and we would welcome these ideas being shared across departments:

- Focus on monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) strategies that are meaningful for project teams and participants. We advocate for participatory evaluation tools and approaches that enable local teams and community members to define what success looks like, rather than having success pre-defined by outsiders.
- Ensure that evaluation is funded as part of project funding.
- Moving away from measuring outputs as the main indicators of success and instead focusing on outcomes and systemic change. In YolŬu contexts, we advocate for community-based, narrative and open-ended strategies to measure progress toward those outcomes. We also advocate for systems thinking and an appreciation of the multi-layered complexity of issues and opportunities, grounded in local understanding of how these factors contribute to, or alleviate, pressure. This goes hand in hand with trust in local leadership.

Local leaders are best placed to navigate these complexities, including where quick or sensitive decisions are needed, and this responsibility should be supported and resourced.

We would be happy to share more about the cross-cultural MEL strategy we have developed internally and apply across projects in our organisation.

- MEL and empowerment are inherently linked. We advocate for genuine Yolŋu participation and leadership throughout the process, because defining success and assessing whether progress is positive are expressions of power. This power should sit with the people the work is designed for and impacts most directly.
- Genuine co-design of projects and associated outcomes takes time. Project teams and community members cannot reasonably undertake this work in the lead-up to a funding application, because it would require a significant unfunded investment of time. We suggest that detailed co-designed project plans and outcomes be developed as part of the funded project, with teams given time at the commencement of a funding round to work through this. important strategic step collaboratively and at a realistic, community-led pace.
- Allow alternative methods of reporting. Our teams develop theories of change that guide implementation and are used to evaluate progress. We do this work as a team so we can identify areas for growth. Reporting against these theories of change would be more authentic than the current Annual Work Plan (AWP), which creates additional work primarily for the department. We are not advocating for less accountability; rather, we are advocating for accountability that is more meaningful to Yolŋu and enables teams to focus their energy where it is most effective. We have also provided video and audio reporting in past projects. These are welcome and accessible reporting formats for our teams. However, they are usually accepted only in addition to existing reporting structures, which again creates extra work for an already stretched workforce and requires limited resources to be spent on advocacy that may or may not be heard.

Invitation

ARDS has appreciated the opportunity to discuss our concerns, learnings and strategies to support families experiencing violence during the consultation in Darwin. To allow for a Yolŋu-led consultation, we would like to invite the The Hon Tanya Plibersek MP, Minister for Social Services and representatives to Galiwin'ku. [REDACTED] and [REDACTED], who you have met at the consultation would welcome to continue the conversation and share with you, possibly alongside other local leaders and community members, what this work looks like in their context.

Summary

This submission has been prepared by ARDS in collaboration with Yolŋu leaders from Galiwin'ku. The submission outlines the complex environments DFSV work in remote locations is trying to navigate. We talked about best approaches ARDS has identified, tried and tested and is utilising today. Locally led and culturally grounded methods to prevent DFSV as well as approach healing for affected families has proven to work. We outlined what stressors exacerbate the impacts of DFSV and what approaches provide solutions. Remote housing is a key aspect in this and has been further elaborated on. Additionally, recognising and enabling local staff has been raised as both an economical as well as effective counter solution to FIFO work.

Lastly, we discussed ideas about how evaluation and reporting could be improved not only for DSS and its grantees but also for other government departments. Essentially, the approaches outlined heavily draw on culturally safe and locally Yolŋu led solutions just like we draw on for our operational work too.

We respectfully invite the Minister and departmental representatives to visit Galiwin'ku and continue this conversation directly with Yolŋu leaders, families and community members.