

Joint Submission to inform the Second Action Plan of the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032

Submitted by McAuley Community Services for Women and the University of Melbourne

Based on learnings from the Safe at Home trial

Introduction

On behalf of the Victorian Safe at Home partnership and Governance Group, McAuley Community Services for Women and the University of Melbourne welcome the opportunity to contribute to the development of the Second Action Plan of the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032. This submission draws on the implementation and preliminary evaluation of the Safe at Home trial, an integrated family violence response operating in Geelong and the Barwon region. It is informed by practice experience, emerging evaluation findings, lived experience expertise and the work of a multi-disciplinary partnership committed to testing a more coordinated, whole-of-family approach to family violence.

Safe at Home was designed from a systemic understanding of family violence as a [complex social problem](#) that cannot be addressed through isolated service responses. The trial, codesigned with lived experience, deliberately tests how services can be integrated around the needs and experiences of families, rather than expecting victim-survivors to navigate disconnected systems. Its design logic is based on the recognition that violence impacts housing, finances, parenting, legal matters, education, health, employment, social participation and community connection and that meaningful safety and recovery require coordinated responses across these domains.

The central argument of this submission is that victim-survivors, children and young people, and people who use violence benefit most from integrated, coordinated, sustained and flexible responses that begin earlier and work with all family members. Yet service responses are too often fragmented, short-term and difficult to navigate. The Second Action Plan provides an important opportunity to recognise and resource models that respond to the interconnected impacts of violence, prevent homelessness, strengthen economic security, support children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right, and engage people who use violence in ways that strengthen safety and accountability.

About Safe at Home

Safe at Home is an early intervention, whole-of-family model that shifts the focus from expecting women and children to leave their homes to be safe, to supporting them to remain safely in their homes and communities wherever possible. The model brings together specialist family violence (including behaviour change), legal, financial and child and family responses around a shared commitment to maximising safety, preventing homelessness, strengthening women's economic security, strengthening accountability and improving system integration.



A distinguishing feature of Safe at Home is that it works with adult victim-survivors, children and young people, and people who use violence concurrently. Rather than responding only after violence has escalated into homelessness, court involvement or child protection intervention, the model seeks to intervene earlier and provide coordinated, practical support across the areas of life most affected by violence. Areas of support include safety planning, housing stability, legal and financial advice, support for children, engagement with people who use violence, and coordinated case management that reduces the burden on victim-survivors to navigate multiple disconnected systems.

The trial is being independently evaluated by the University of Melbourne. While numbers remain small, early findings and practice insights suggest that integrated, flexible and sustained whole-of-family responses can improve safety, strengthen recovery, reduce homelessness and support longer-term outcomes for families affected by family violence.

“It has changed my life. It was the exact help that I needed, available at just the right time for me to leave my abusive relationship and give my daughter and myself a better life.”

The Safe at Home implementation partnership

The Safe at Home trial is delivered through a partnership led by McAuley Community Services for Women, with Meli as the primary service delivery partner and the University of Melbourne as the evaluation partner. Legal and financial support is provided through Westjustice and Barwon Community Legal Service, with First Step Legal providing specialist legal assistance for people who use violence.

The Governance Group brings these partners together with Family Safety Victoria, Victoria Police, Child Protection, DFFH, and lived experience representatives to provide strategic oversight, guide implementation, interpret emerging findings and identify system improvements. Together, the partnership combines specialist family violence (including behaviour change), legal, financial, child and family, research, child services and lived experience expertise to test an integrated, whole-of-family response in Geelong and the Barwon region.

Emerging learnings from the first year

Safe at Home supported 29 households in its first year. These households included 61 children and young people, 29 adult victim-survivors and 27 adult people using violence. Although the trial is still in its early stages, emerging outcomes are encouraging and point to the value of coordinated, sustained and flexible support. Early **housing outcomes** suggest that, where the right supports are in place, women and children can



remain safely in their homes and communities or make planned moves to safer housing rather than being forced into crisis-driven relocation.

The trial is also showing that **longer periods of engagement** allow victim-survivors to access the family violence, legal, financial and housing advice they need to make informed decisions about safety, separation, parenting, finances and recovery. This kind of support is particularly important where violence has affected multiple areas of a person's life and where short-term, crisis-based responses are not enough.

Safe at Home also highlights the importance of **whole-of-family practice**. Adult victim-survivors, children and young people, and people who use violence often interact with different parts of the service system, but their experiences and risks are connected. Working with family members through coordinated and accountable responses creates opportunities to improve safety, reduce fragmentation, strengthen accountability and better respond to the needs of children and young people.

Drawing on preliminary evaluation findings, lived experience expertise and practice insights, this submission argues that the Second Action Plan should invest in integrated, whole-of-family responses that begin earlier, continue for longer and are properly resourced to work in practice. These responses would prevent homelessness, strengthen economic security, recognise children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right, engage people who use violence safely and accountably, and fund the coordination function required to enable genuine integrated service delivery.

Summary of key Recommendations from this submission

1. Invest in integrated whole-of-family responses as a national family violence model

Fund and scale integrated, whole-of-family family violence responses that work with the whole family – including adult victim-survivors, children and young people, and people who use violence. These responses should coordinate family violence, legal, financial, housing and wellbeing supports, reduce service fragmentation, strengthen accountability and improve outcomes for all family members with the coordination and backbone functions funded to ensure integration works in practice.

2. Prioritise earlier intervention and outreach before crisis, homelessness and system escalation

Adopt a nationally consistent approach to early intervention that ensures victim-survivors can access support before they are forced to leave their homes, enter homelessness, become involved in court proceedings or have interventions from agencies such as child protection.

This should include:

- proactive outreach and community engagement
- rapid access to family violence, legal and financial support
- engagement with people who use violence
- support for children and young people
- investment in regional, rural and remote outreach.

3. Recognise housing stability, homelessness prevention and women's economic security as core family violence outcomes

Embed housing stability, homelessness prevention and economic security as fundamental pillars of family violence prevention, response and recovery.

This should include:

- investment in Safe at Home approaches
- financial counselling and economic recovery support
- legal assistance
- employment pathways
- debt relief and financial abuse responses
- support that enables women and children to remain safely connected to their homes, communities and support networks wherever possible.

4. Recognise and invest in children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right

Ensure children and young people are recognised, funded and supported as victim-survivors in their own right.

This should include:

- specialist children's practitioners embedded in family violence responses
- child-centred workforce capability
- investment in educational engagement, wellbeing and recovery
- stronger partnerships between family violence services and Child Protection
- meaningful participation of children and young people in policy, program and service design.

5. Build a coordinated and sustainable system that reduces re-traumatisation and strengthens accountability

Create policy, funding and workforce settings that support sustained, integrated responses across services and systems.

This should include:

- enabling victim-survivors to "tell their story once"
- improved information sharing and coordinated case management
- long-term and flexible support periods
- workforce investment and capability building
- stronger responses to coercive control, systems abuse and technology-facilitated abuse
- evidence-informed responses for people who use violence that strengthen accountability and victim-survivor safety.

Priority Area 1: Victim-Survivors of Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence

Safe at Home provides evidence that victim-survivors need integrated, coordinated, sustained and flexible responses that begin as early as possible and continue for as long as required.

As stated by a lived experience advocate, “the healing response begins with first contact.” Earlier access to support through schools, health services, legal services, community organisations and other trusted community connections can significantly reduce barriers to help-seeking and create opportunities to intervene before violence escalates.

Victim-survivors want services and systems that protect lives, preserve housing, secure economic assets, interrupt financial abuse, reduce legal escalation, prevent homelessness, support children’s wellbeing and recovery, and minimise the burden of navigating multiple disconnected systems while experiencing violence.

Emerging evidence from Safe at Home demonstrates that trust-building, safety planning, recovery and long-term decision-making are strengthened when women have access to flexible, sustained support that can be paced according to their circumstances and adjusted over time as needs change. As lived experience advocate Diana Connell reflected, “healing doesn’t happen in a few appointments.” **Longer periods of support** enable victim-survivors to navigate the legal, financial, housing and emotional impacts of violence.

“Having someone to call in these times means the world to me.”

Housing security should be recognised as a core family violence intervention. Maintaining safe housing enables women and children to remain connected to their schools, employment, support networks, health care and community. Preventing homelessness is not simply a housing outcome; it is a violence prevention and recovery strategy. Housing instability often compounds trauma, financial insecurity and social isolation, whereas housing stability creates the foundation for recovery and resilience.

“I felt more empowered and heard every time I met with the service, helping me move forward stronger and feel better.”

While numbers are still small, early housing outcomes from Safe at Home are encouraging. Of the nine adult victim-survivors who exited Safe at Home during the first year, eight maintained their housing (along with their 12 children), while one woman and her child made a planned move out of region. In five of the nine exiting households, the



couple separated during the Safe at Home response, with the person using violence moving to alternative housing.

Economic security must also be elevated as a central family violence issue. Economic abuse remains one of the most powerful mechanisms through which violence is maintained and one of the greatest barriers to safety. Long-term recovery requires access to financial counselling, legal support, income security, employment pathways and practical assistance to rebuild financial independence.

Data indicates that Safe at Home adult victim survivors may experience higher levels of economic vulnerability than the broader regional population with only **55%** of adult victim-survivors and **59%** of people using violence employed, compared with the region's employment rate of 78.7%. Women are more likely than the men using violence in Safe at Home to be engaged in part-time work instead of full-time work. In the first year of the trial, 23 women accessed the integrated Restoring Financial Safety legal and financial counselling response which has resulted in removal of \$26,686 of financial burden, accrued due to the direct impacts of family violence.

The Second Action Plan should also respond more effectively to **coercive control**, **technology-facilitated abuse** and **systems abuse**. Increasingly, victim-survivors experience ongoing harm through post-separation coercive control and abuse within parenting and family law contexts, child protection involvement, service systems and digital technologies. Parenting disputes can become a site of continuing control, particularly where people using violence use legal or service systems to undermine safety, prolong conflict, challenge protective parenting or maintain access to victim-survivors and children.

Recommendations for Priority Area 1

The Second Action Plan should:

1. Invest in proactive outreach and early intervention approaches that **engage victim-survivors before crises escalate** including in regional and remote communities where outreach is resource-intensive. This should include:
 - community engagement and awareness-raising, particularly with communities that have not traditionally sought help
 - swift access to family violence support, safety planning, legal advice and financial counselling
 - intensive, outreach support to those at risk of homelessness and further violence

2. **Fund integrated, whole-of-family service models that reduce the burden on victim-survivors to navigate fragmented systems**, bringing together specialist supports for adult victim-survivors, children and young people, and people who use violence through funded partnerships, coordinated case management, appropriate information sharing and connected service delivery, while protecting consent, privacy, legal privilege and safety.
3. **Support longer-term and flexible periods of engagement** that reflect the realities of safety, recovery and healing, rather than short-term, crisis-driven models.
4. **Recognise housing stability, homelessness prevention and women's economic security as core family violence responses**, and fund models that support women and children to remain safely connected to their homes, communities, schools and support networks wherever possible, while expanding access to financial counselling, legal assistance, employment pathways, income support, debt relief and other economic recovery supports.
5. **Strengthen responses to coercive control, technology-facilitated abuse and systems abuse**, recognising these as deliberate tactics that can continue after separation through legal processes, parenting disputes, child protection, service systems and digital technologies.

Priority Area 2: Prevention and Early Intervention

The strongest early intervention responses are those that reach families before violence escalates into homelessness, court involvement, statutory intervention or long-term trauma.

In the family violence context, early intervention means providing practical, coordinated support as soon as risk, harm or controlling behaviour is identified — not waiting until a woman or child is forced to leave home, enter crisis accommodation, seek court protection or become involved with statutory systems. This includes family violence support, safety planning, legal advice, financial counselling, housing support, parenting support, child and youth responses, and safe, accountable engagement with people who use violence.

The co-design of Safe at Home identified that effective early intervention needed to extend beyond adult victim-survivor responses alone. It needed to include children and young people experiencing violence, people who use violence, and the practical conditions that shape safety, including housing stability, economic security, family relationships and community connection. Safe at Home provides an example of what an all-of-family early intervention response can look like in practice.

Safe at Home shows that early intervention can do more than respond to immediate risk: it can stabilise housing, strengthen parenting capacity, reduce financial and legal escalation, support children's wellbeing and create safer conditions for separation, co-parenting or recovery.

"I have never felt alone. It is the kind of team who are there for you when you need them most."

Emerging evidence from the trial indicates that the coordination of early, whole-of-family interventions may help prevent escalation of family violence issues into more complex system responses, including child protection and family law proceedings. By supporting safety, parental capacity, and family functioning earlier, the model has the potential to reduce reliance on adversarial processes to resolve matters such as parenting and co-parenting arrangements.

By strengthening safety planning, parental capacity, housing stability and access to legal and financial advice earlier, the model can help families address risks before they become entrenched in crisis, court or statutory systems. In some matters, Child Protection has closed involvement during the Intake or Investigation phases where Safe at Home was actively working with the whole family to address risk and build safety.

Early intervention with infants, children and young people experiencing family violence, combined with trauma-informed healing and recovery supports, may also reduce the

likelihood of their own future use of violence and contact with the justice system. By addressing the impacts of violence early and strengthening protective relationships, Safe at Home aims to disrupt intergenerational patterns of violence and support healthier developmental and relationship outcomes over time.

The Safe at Home trial has also highlighted the need for a shared national understanding of early intervention. Different parts of the system often define early intervention differently: family violence services may focus on intervening before risk escalates, legal services may focus on resolving issues before they proceed to court, and statutory systems may focus on preventing escalation into child protection or criminal justice responses. A clearer national definition would support more consistent policy, planning, referral pathways and service design.

Recommendations for Priority Area 2

The Second Action Plan should:

1. **Adopt a nationally consistent definition of family violence early intervention** that includes intervention before crisis, homelessness, court escalation, child protection involvement and long-term harm.
2. **Prioritise the funding of early intervention pathways through trusted universal and community settings**, including schools, maternal and child health, legal services, financial counselling, housing services, community health and culturally specific organisations.
3. **Invest in practical early supports** including safety planning, legal advice, financial counselling, housing support, parenting support and child and youth responses.
4. **Ensure early intervention models include safe and accountable pathways for engaging people who use violence**, where this can be done without increasing risk to victim-survivors.
5. **Fund whole-of-family early intervention models** that work with adult victim-survivors, children and young people, and people who use violence through coordinated partnerships.

Priority Area 3: Children and Young People in Their Own Right

Children remain invisible within adult-focused service systems unless they are explicitly recognised, funded and supported as victim-survivors in their own right.

Despite growing recognition of this principle, many systems remain predominantly focused on adult victim-survivors and don't have the resources to adequately recognise children's unique experiences, needs and recovery journeys. Children's wellbeing, development and future life outcomes are profoundly affected by family violence. Even when they are not the direct target of abuse, the person using violence may sabotage their partner's efforts to parent and protect the children, and there may be damaging effects on the family functioning and ecology.

Recognising children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right also requires that their perspectives inform the policies, programs and services designed to support them. This means creating safe, age-appropriate and well-supported opportunities for children and young people to contribute to service design, implementation and evaluation, rather than relying only on adult accounts of their experiences.

Children's safety and recovery are strengthened when they can remain connected to supportive relationships, school, stable housing and community networks.

The table below shows school engagement of the children currently in the safe at home trial

Education engagement status	Number
Attending school with no engagement concerns and no support required	18
Attending school, with support required	6
At risk of disengaging	3
Not enrolled or not attending	3
Unknown	1

These early figures suggest that most school-aged children and young people in Safe at Home were engaged in education, while also showing that a smaller number required additional support or were at risk of disengagement. This reinforces the need for dedicated attention to educational stability within family violence responses.



Strengthening stability across these life domains should be viewed as a critical outcome of family violence intervention.

Supporting children affected by family violence is also a critical early intervention and prevention strategy. Research shows that childhood experiences of family violence can have serious and lasting impacts and are associated with increased risk of adolescent family violence for some young people.¹ Early intervention with children creates opportunities to reduce harm, strengthen protective relationships and help disrupt intergenerational patterns of violence.²

While the Safe at Home model was designed to recognise children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right, the trial highlighted the challenges of consistently providing direct responses to all children and young people without dedicated specialist resourcing. Importantly, many children benefited from substantial indirect support through increased safety, housing stability, improved parental wellbeing, coordinated responses across services and strengthened family functioning.

However, the trial also demonstrated that specialist children's practitioners are essential to ensuring children's individual experiences, views and needs are consistently visible within assessment, safety planning and intervention processes. Not all children and young people will choose to engage directly with services, nor should direct engagement be considered the only indicator of a child-centred response. Specialist children's practitioner capability helps ensure children's rights, wellbeing and recovery remain central within integrated whole-of-family responses, whether through direct therapeutic engagement, coordinated work with parents and caregivers, or advocacy across the broader service system.

In response to this learning, Safe at Home has reallocated resources to introduce a Specialist Children's Practitioner in the second year of the trial. This experience points to the need for investment in specialist children's practitioners embedded within adult victim survivor services, supporting earlier identification of children's needs and more tailored responses to their safety, wellbeing and recovery.

The trial has also highlighted the value of whole-of-family approaches that work with the person using violence alongside victim survivors, rather than through siloed service responses. For children who continue to have contact with, or relationships with, their fathers, this approach can support better outcomes by ensuring interventions with fathers are grounded in the lived experiences, needs and safety of their own children. This enables more individualised and meaningful behaviour change work, moving

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Children and young people, 23 April 2026.

² Fitz-Gibbon, K. et al., Adolescent family violence in Australia: A national study of prevalence, history of childhood victimisation and impacts, ANROWS, 2022.

beyond generic psychoeducation about the impacts of violence on children to a deeper understanding of the effects of violence on their own children and their parenting role.

All practitioners working with families affected by family violence should be equipped with a strong understanding of the impacts of violence on children and young people and the skills to respond effectively. Stronger partnerships with Child Protection are also needed to support earlier intervention where concerns emerge and to ensure families receive the right level of support at the right time.

Recommendations for Priority Area 3

The Second Action Plan should:

1. **Recognise children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right and invest in specialist child and youth family violence capability**, including dedicated child and young person practitioners embedded within family violence services, recovery supports tailored to children's experiences and needs, and broader workforce development so all practitioners can identify, respond to and advocate for children's safety, wellbeing and recovery.
2. **Prioritise and fund integrated whole-of-family family violence responses that keep children's safety, wellbeing and recovery at the centre**, while working concurrently with adult victim-survivors, children and young people, and people using violence. Such approaches strengthen safety and accountability, support child-centred behaviour change work with parents, and improve outcomes for children who continue to have relationships with their fathers.
3. **Fund the full range of responses required to support children's safety, wellbeing and recovery**, including direct therapeutic and casework support, indirect work through parents, caregivers, schools and early childhood services, and early intervention focused on educational engagement, housing stability, wellbeing and recovery.
4. Strengthen pathways and shared **responses between Child Protection and family violence services**, supporting earlier intervention, clearer role delineation, and more coordinated support for families where risks to children emerge.
5. Embed **meaningful participation of children and young people** in policy, program and service design, ensuring responses are informed by their experiences, perspectives and priorities.

Priority Area 4: People Who Use Violence

Australia cannot end family violence without strengthening responses to people who use violence.

Engagement with people who use violence should be recognised as a core family violence intervention that directly contributes to victim-survivor safety. There are early indicators in Safe at Home that purposeful, persistent and accountable engagement can increase accountability, reduce risk and create opportunities for meaningful behaviour change before violence escalates further. Early engagement, clear expectations for participation, and coordinated responses across all family members appear to create better conditions for safety, accountability and positive long-term outcomes than intervention delivered when people using violence have developed persistent and protracted patterns of violence.

“The support is amazing, and there are resources available that I wish I knew about earlier.”

Successful engagement requires practitioners to understand the factors that matter to the individual, including parenting, family relationships, employment, community connections and personal aspirations. These can become important motivators for accountability and change. Behaviour change interventions are most effective when integrated with broader supports that address legal, housing, health and social issues that may influence engagement and outcomes and when they address the key drivers that support a person to use violence.

The impact of violence on children must remain central to accountability and behaviour change work, including work that addresses fathering in the context of family violence. Interventions should support fathers who use violence to understand family violence through the lived experience of their own children, and to take responsibility for how their behaviour has affected their children’s safety, emotional wellbeing, development and trust in the parent-child relationship. This includes accountability for how violence undermines their capacity to parent safely, support each child’s individual development and maintain safe, respectful relationships with their children.

Emerging insights from Safe at Home suggest that this work may be most effective when delivered through whole-of-family interventions that engage victim-survivors, children and people using violence concurrently, so behaviour change work is grounded in the experiences and safety needs of the individual’s own children rather than general education about the impacts of family violence.

The experience of Safe at Home’s legal partner for people using violence, First Step Legal, highlights the important role accessible early legal advice can also play as a

behaviour change and accountability intervention. Safe at Home's experience suggests that people using violence have limited understanding of intervention orders, legal obligations and associated consequences. Accessible legal advice, for people who use violence can strengthen compliance, support accountability and reduce adversarial responses, particularly when legal services are integrated with case management to provide consistent messaging and coordinated support. However, this must be funded and designed in ways that preserve victim-survivors' access to independent legal advice, including where conflict-of-interest rules prevent a local community legal centre from assisting both parties.

Safe at Home also demonstrates the value of a case management approach that addresses both the enablers of behaviour change and barriers to engagement. Factors such as mental and physical health, alcohol and other drug use, unemployment, past history of violence, housing instability and social isolation can significantly influence an individual's capacity to engage in accountability and behaviour change efforts. Addressing these factors alongside accountability-focused interventions can support more sustained engagement and better long-term outcomes.

Recommendations for Priority Area 4

The Second Action Plan should:

1. **Invest in evidence-informed responses for people who use violence**, including early intervention, case management, legal assistance, behaviour change and complementary support services that address the drivers and context of violence.
2. **Invest in integrated whole-of-family family violence responses** that engage victim survivors, children and young people, and people who use violence concurrently, enabling coordinated interventions that strengthen safety, accountability and long-term family wellbeing outcomes.
3. **Expand access to early legal advice and integrated legal responses for people who use violence**, recognising legal services as a key intervention that can strengthen understanding of legal obligations, support accountability and reduce escalation into more adversarial system responses.
4. Strengthen family violence interventions that **centre the impacts of violence on children and young people**, including approaches that support people who use violence to take responsibility for the effects of their behaviour on their own children, parenting relationships and post-separation parenting.



5. Invest in **timely holistic and tailored responses that address barriers and enablers to behaviour change**, including housing instability, mental and physical health, alcohol and other drug use, employment, financial stress and social connection.
6. **Build workforce capability** to undertake safe, accountable and effective work with people who use violence, including through training, supervision, reflective practice and specialist practice support.

Priority Area 5: System Integration and Workforce

*The solutions to family violence "don't just sit in one organisation, they sit in the relationships between organisations." (Diana Connell – lived experience advisor).
Effective responses are built through collaboration, shared accountability and coordinated action rather than organisational silos.*

Too often, women and children move between family violence services, housing providers, courts, police, legal services, child protection systems, financial services and health providers without any single service having visibility of the whole picture. This fragmentation can increase risk, delay support and place responsibility on victim-survivors to coordinate their own safety.

When systems operate separately, no single service may see the full pattern of coercive control, escalating risk, housing instability, legal pressure, financial abuse and impacts on children. This can mean warning signs are missed, responses are delayed and the responsibility for connecting information across services falls back onto victim-survivors. A more integrated system would make coordination, information sharing and continuity of support shared responsibilities across services, rather than leaving victim-survivors to manage them.

Safe at Home demonstrates what this can look like in practice. Access to integrated legal and financial support has been a particularly important feature of the model, with 79% of women participating in the trial referred to Restoring Financial Safety and 23 women accessing the response during the first year. These supports helped address the legal, financial and practical impacts of violence alongside family violence casework, rather than requiring women to seek disconnected assistance from multiple services. Integrated legal responses should also be funded to ensure victim-survivors can retain access to independent advice, including where conflict-of-interest rules prevent one legal service from assisting both parties and alternative legal pathways are needed in the region.

Coordinated responses also reduce the need for victim-survivors to repeatedly retell their story to multiple services. A genuinely integrated system should minimise re-traumatisation, improve continuity of support and ensure information follows the person, rather than requiring victim-survivors to carry the burden of recounting traumatic experiences across disconnected systems.

"They supported me in every aspect and area; I never felt alone."

Successful coordination requires more than referral pathways. It requires investment in partnership infrastructure, collaborative leadership, governance, shared accountability, workforce development and relationship-building between organisations. These

activities are often treated as administrative overheads when they are, in fact, essential components of effective family violence responses.

Workforce capability is also vitally important. The future workforce must be equipped to work across the needs of victim-survivors, children and young people, and people who use violence, while retaining access to specialist expertise where required. Whole-of-family practice represents a significant cultural and practice shift that requires investment, leadership and ongoing workforce development.

Lived experience and peer work should be recognised as part of the workforce and system architecture required for effective family violence responses. Safe at Home has a peer worker built in as part of the model which is in the process of being implemented. The peer worker is expected to help build trust, reduce the isolation and shame that often accompany family violence, support more accessible engagement with services, and ensure the response remains grounded in the realities of victim-survivors' lives. It's vital that peer work is properly resourced and safely embedded, from role clarity, training, supervision, remuneration, and organisational support. Lived experience was also a core part of the service design/co-design process and remains an integral part of the governance of the trial.

Economic security also illustrates why system integration matters. Economic abuse, debt, disrupted employment, financial dependence and housing instability often sit across multiple service systems, yet are central to safety and recovery. Integrated responses are needed so financial counselling, legal assistance, housing support, and employment pathways operate as connected parts of the family violence response, rather than as separate and difficult-to-navigate interventions.

Recommendations for Priority Area 5

The Second Action Plan should:

1. **Fund system integration as core family violence infrastructure**, including coordination, partnership development, shared governance, collaborative leadership and backbone functions that enable services to work together around families rather than through disconnected programs.
2. **Invest in coordinated family violence partnerships across specialist family violence, housing, legal, financial counselling, health, child and family, community and justice sectors**, recognising that safety, recovery, accountability and homelessness prevention require coordinated responses across multiple systems.

3. **Build national workforce capability for whole-of-family and integrated practice**, ensuring practitioners are equipped to work safely and effectively with adult victim-survivors, children and young people, and people who use violence, while retaining access to specialist expertise, supervision and practice leadership.
4. **Create sustainable workforce and service conditions that support longer-term, flexible and relationship-based responses**, including manageable workloads, secure funding arrangements, adequate staffing, supervision, outreach capacity and investment in workforce retention, particularly in regional, rural and remote communities.
5. **Improve information sharing, coordinated case management and integrated service delivery so victim-survivors are not required to repeatedly retell their story**, while ensuring privacy, consent, legal privilege and safety considerations are appropriately protected.
6. **Embed shared accountability for outcomes across systems**, including family violence, housing, legal, child protection, justice, health and income support systems, so responsibility for safety and recovery does not sit with victim-survivors alone.
7. **Invest in lived experience and peer work roles as part of the family violence workforce**, including appropriate processes, support and definition to ensure expertise can be safely and meaningfully embedded in service design, delivery, evaluation and system improvement.

Conclusion

The strongest lesson emerging from Safe at Home is that family violence cannot be addressed through fragmented, short-term responses.

Victim-survivors need integrated, coordinated, sustained and flexible support that begins early, responds to the needs of all family members, prevents homelessness, strengthens economic security and supports recovery over time.

Children must be recognised as victim-survivors in their own right. Responses to people who use violence must be accountable, coordinated and focused on safety. Housing stability, legal assistance, financial support and family violence responses must operate as connected parts of a single system rather than separate interventions.

The Second Action Plan presents an important opportunity to embed these principles nationally. Investment in integrated whole-of-family approaches, including Safe at Home responses, would help reduce violence, prevent homelessness, improve outcomes for children, strengthen accountability and create lasting change for women, children and families across Australia.

McAuley Community Services for Women and the University of Melbourne acknowledge the contribution of Safe at Home Governance Group members to the development of this submission, including:

- Meli - Safe at Home primary service delivery partner
- Westjustice - Safe at Home funded legal partner
- Barwon Community Legal Service - Safe at Home funded legal partner
- First Step Legal - specialist legal assistance for people who use violence
- Victoria Police
- Department of Families, Fairness and Housing
- Family Safety Victoria
- Lived experience advisors

Appendix

Safe at Home progress report

Summary data from year 1 of the trial

Progress report

1 JUL 2025 – 30 JUNE 2026

What is Safe at Home?

In February 2025, McAuley Community Services for Women launched a three-year Safe at Home trial, in the Geelong and Barwon region. This is in partnership with local service provider, Meli, and community legal providers, Barwon Community Legal Service and Westjustice. The trial is funded by the Victorian State Government and is designed to test a new way of responding to family violence that prioritises early intervention and focuses on homelessness prevention.

The model has been co-designed with lived experience and frontline workers and is underpinned by a systems-based approach to service integration. It offers early, rapid, flexible and comprehensive support to all members of the household.

How Safe at Home works

Safe at Home was designed to deliver a coordinated multi-disciplinary response tailored to individual household needs, including:

Earlier intervention and rapid response

Prioritising early engagement with families to reduce escalation and mitigate risk before crisis.

Whole-of-household engagement

Delivering coordinated support that addresses the needs of women, children and the person using violence.

Flexible and sustained support

Providing flexible support options over an extended period of time to adapt to changing risk and recovery needs.

Specialised responses for children and young people

Recognising children as clients in their own right and delivering age-appropriate interventions.

Support for people who use violence

Access to case management and referrals to behaviour change and legal services for people who use violence.

Access to legal, financial and counseling support for victim survivors

Legal and financial case work across a range of legal matters and including work to reduce debt and gain compensation.

Practical and Interventions

Including home modifications, safety planning and practical assistance.

Economic and housing stability measures

Supporting financial independence and preventing homelessness.

“It has been extremely helpful in navigating me to the help I need to get back on my feet. Having someone to call in these times means the world to me”

Data snapshot

Reach and program delivery

Total participants supported

117

Total households supported

29

Cultural diversity breakdown

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander..... 5

From multicultural communities..... 26

Nationalities..... 16

Born in Australia..... 90

Total hours of support

3,652

Women’s safety and stability

Risk level at entry

79% elevated
10% serious
7% at risk
3% other

Average age

39

Remained in their home of origin or within local community

97%

Supported to separate but retained their housing

46%

Employed

55%

Nights in crisis accommodation

0

Children’s safety and stability

Total children supported

61

Number and age of children supported

15 12 8 8 10 7 1
0-2 3-5 6-8 9-11 12-14 15-17 18-20
Years of age

Total engaged in school

87%

People using violence

Total engaged

9

Those kept in view for dynamic risk assessment and to support victim survivor safety planning

100%

Victim survivors consented for people using violence to be contacted for support

12

Employed

59%

Living in same housing as the victim survivor currently

14

Nights in temporary accommodation

4

Safety outcomes at exit

Planned separations during trial

56%

Personal Safety Initiative upgrades applied to homes

2

Risk for women reduced between entry and closure

56%

Housing stability at exit

Women remaining in their home of origin

89%

Women making planned move within community

0

Women making planned move outside community

11%

Restoring financial safety

Total referrals for women to funded legal partners

23

Financial burden removed

\$26,686

“Safe at home has undoubtedly been a great experience for me. They have supported me in every aspect and area; I have never felt alone.”

Early learnings and implementation enhancements

Delivering Year 1 of the Safe at Home trial has highlighted a number of areas in which implementation was more challenging than had been anticipated. These are distinct from broader systemic barriers and relate to implementing a true whole-of-house response addressing the needs of every member of the family. They include:

The legal complexity of working with both victim survivors and the people using violence in the same intervention.

Legal confidentiality requirements can slow coordinated responses, as separate support for victim survivors and people using violence involves multiple legal representatives across criminal and family law.

The trial has two funded legal partners and Memorandums of Understanding with two others.

Defining what constitutes 'early intervention' in practice.

The Safe at Home team is working to identify when people experiencing violence become homeless and intervene earlier, with financial stress seen as a key early warning sign. However, existing definitions of early intervention in the family violence context don't provide sufficient guidance and will vary depending on perspective.

Engaging directly with children and young people to understand their experiences.

A service gap has been identified, with limited engagement with children and young people, reducing the ability to tailor support. This highlights the need for a more child-centred, trauma-informed approach alongside navigation of consent and safety.

To address this, the partnership will trial a Specialist Children and Young Person's Practitioner to strengthen engagement and improve outcomes.

What's next?

Building on year one, the next phase of the Safe at Home trial will focus on implementing new responses to people using violence, children and young people and will continue to work on systems change or improvement. The evaluation will begin, with the first interim report due December 2026.

There will be a trial introduction of a new partner into the model (First Step Legal) to link men with a legal service for family violence and family law matters. There will also be the introduction of a newly developed Safe at Home outcomes tool to support participant-led reflection and track changes in safety, wellbeing and behaviour over time, while helping practitioners tailor support and demonstrate the impact of the Safe at Home response.

Ongoing monitoring will assess housing stability, safety outcomes for clients, cost-effectiveness and scalability to inform future expansion.



Scan the QR code for further information on the Safe at Home trial