



**Submission: Consultation on the Second
Action Plan (National Plan to End
Violence against Women and Children
2022-2032)**

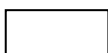
Department of Social Services

July 2026

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National Rural Women's Coalition

Submission in response to the Consultation Paper in support of the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032

Acknowledgements

The National Rural Women's Coalition (NRWC) acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work and live. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past, present and future. We value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures, and knowledge. We extend our respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who for thousands of years have preserved the culture and practices of their communities on Country. This land was never surrendered, and we acknowledge that it always was and always will be Aboriginal land. We acknowledge that Australian governments have been complicit in the entrenched disadvantage, intergenerational trauma and ongoing institutional racism faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must lead the design and delivery of services that affect them for better life outcomes to be achieved.

About NRWC

The National Rural Women's Coalition (NRWC) is a grass roots organisation, established in 2002, that provides a collaborative, powerful national voice for women living in rural, regional, and remote Australia. We are a coalition of five peak rural alliances comprising the Australian Local Government Women's Association, Australian Women in Agriculture, National Rural Health Alliance, Women in Seafood Australasia and Transport Women Australia Limited. For over 20 years, we have worked to ensure better social, economic, and environmental outcomes for women in rural and coastal townships, in rural communities and in primary production throughout Australia.

Executive Summary

The National Rural Women's Coalition (NRWC) is calling for a targeted response to ending violence against rural, regional and remote women and their families. Rural, regional and remote women are at higher risk of becoming the victim of domestic, family or sexual violence (DFSV) and face several structural barriers to accessing adequate services. State-based data shows higher rates of domestic and family violence outside metropolitan areas, and hospitalisation rates from DFSV increase with remoteness. First Nations women (of whom a greater proportion live outside metropolitan areas) are at significantly heightened risk of DFSV.

Responding to violence against women and children is difficult in regional, rural and remote areas for several reasons, including lack of services, privacy concerns in small communities, geographical barriers including lack of access to and cost of transport, and the existence of 'boys clubs' that can serve to protect perpetrators and make reporting and responding to violence much harder. The lack of critical support services such as housing and childcare further entrenches the disadvantage for rural women.

While technology provides the opportunity to offer services online or via phone, connectivity problems in many areas, as well as the use of technology to control, threaten and hurt women, both present significant barriers to relying on technology to provide essential services.

As part of developing the Second Action Plan, NRWC is calling for investment in integrated, multi-disciplinary service models that are best placed to overcome the physical and financial barriers of providing services in rural, regional and remote areas.

NRWC'S recommendations are

- Development of standalone **strategy for rural women's safety** that identifies models that can overcome structural barriers to accessing services for rural women and their families.
- Increased investment in **crisis and public housing** in identified housing deserts or crisis areas across regional and rural Australia
- Investment in design of wholistic **natural disaster responses** that include mental health and DFSV prevention
- Funding to establish new **early childhood education and care (ECEC) centres** in identified 'childcare deserts', ideally co-located with key industries or employment providers.
- Specific funding allocation to ensure culturally safe **First Nations ECEC** centres in key identified locations.
- Introduction of Australia-wide **DFSV practitioners in police forces** across rural, regional and remote areas where wrap-around services are less likely to be available
- Investment in community-embedded, **multi-disciplinary DFSV service** centres that can lower the costs through shared spaces and resources.
- Support for **Aboriginal-led community DFSV service centres** across remote and very remote Australia to ensure culturally appropriate responses and support.
- Expansion of **patient transport schemes** to include domestic violence support services

1. Victim-survivors of violence against women and children and other forms of gender-based violence: strengthening a whole of society and life-course approach to prevention, early intervention, response, recovery and healing with a focus on victim-survivors from all communities and backgrounds.

Rural regional and remote women and their families are at significantly higher risk of experiencing violence. They require tailored policy solutions that acknowledge the unique geographic and social barriers to reporting and responding to domestic, family and sexual violence (DFSV) in rural areas.

In 2023-2024, the rate of family and domestic violence hospitalisations was significantly higher in more remote areas. People living in very remote areas were hospitalised at a rate 41 times higher than those in major cities, with 841 hospitalisations per 100,000 compared with 21 per 100,000.ⁱ Rates were 55.3 in outer regional areas, and 326 in remote areas.

While there is little current national data to demonstrate DFSV is more prevalent in rural areas, recent state-level data indicates it is higher. In NSW, state crime data shows the state's 10 worst locations for domestic violence are consistently in regional and rural areas, rather than metropolitan or urban centres.ⁱⁱ Victorian data is similar – 2023-24 data shows family violence incidences occur in regional areas at almost twice the rate of metro areas.ⁱⁱⁱ A study over 100 intimate partner femicides in Queensland showed these were more prevalent in rural areas.^{iv}

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are at a significantly increased risk of experiencing domestic violence. As noted in the Consultation Paper, First Nations people are overrepresented as both victim-survivors and perpetrators of domestic and family violence. Despite making up just 3% of the adult female population, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women comprised an average of 16% of adult female homicide victims each year since 1989–90. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are also disproportionately hospitalised for assault-related injuries (32 times higher than non-Indigenous women).^v Because approximately 59 per cent of First Nations people live outside major cities and First Nations people make up roughly 30 per cent of the population in remote and very remote areas^{vi}, addressing violence against First Nations women and children is a critical concern for NRWC.

There are systemic and social barriers to effective policy responses to DFSV in rural and remote areas. These include privacy and confidentiality concerns, physical isolation from DFSV services, as well as lack of housing, transport, childcare and other essential services.

These barriers are caused by the geographical and financial limitations that affect service provision outside metropolitan areas. Like many other policy areas, such as health care and childcare (which are in themselves critical to support women experiencing DFSV) a one-size-fits-all, metro-centric approach will not adequately address these barriers.

Recommendations:

- Development of standalone strategy for rural women's safety that identifies models that can overcome the structural barriers to accessing services for rural women and their families.

2. Prevention and early intervention: embedding initiatives where people live, work, learn and connect to address the gendered drivers of this violence; address substantive influences on perpetration and risk such as harmful substance use, gambling, and adverse childhood experience; support attitudinal and behavioural change to prevent harm before it occurs; and to prevent

escalation. It also requires collaboration and integration across sectors to strengthen primary prevention and early intervention approaches.

Rural regional and remote women and their families are more likely to be affected by several risk factors that can drive DFSV, such as alcohol abuse, lower financial security, and experience of natural disasters.

People aged 14 or over living in Remote and Very Remote areas and Outer Regional areas are approximately 1.4 times more likely to consume alcohol at risky levels compared with those living in Major Cities (AIHW 2024a). Compared with non-Indigenous people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are at least 1.2 and 1.3 times more likely, respectively, to consume alcohol at levels that pose a health risk.^{vii} Alcohol and substance abuse is strongly linked to DFSV. In 2021–22, almost half (47%) of the women who had experienced male perpetrated sexual assault in the past 10 years believed alcohol or another substance contributed to the most recent incident.^{viii}

Experiences of natural disasters is also linked to increased rates of assault and violence.^{ix} People living in rural regional and remote Australia are more likely to have lived through fire, flood or drought. University of Melbourne research has found that rural people were 12 times more likely to have experienced a distanced since 2018, compared to people living in a major city.^x This is likely to continue with climate change predicted to increase intensify many weather events.^{viii}

People living regional, rural and remote Australia have lower incomes and net household worth that those living in major cities and unemployment rates are typically higher outside metropolitan areas.^{xiv} Financial stress, employment status (or job loss) and poverty can all be factors that can contribute to DFSV.^{viii}

Lack of appropriate housing to support women leaving DFSV situations is a critical concern in rural and remote areas. According to Homelessness Australia, domestic and family violence is the leading cause of homelessness for women, with 45% of all women and girls seeking homelessness assistance identifying family and domestic violence as a cause.^{xi} A recent Victorian report found that the housing crisis meant 20 per cent of victim survivors were unable to access crisis accommodation.^{xii} This issue is more pronounced in rural and remote areas where rental accommodation is expensive and limited, and where there is less public housing available.^{xiii} This issue is reflected in the high levels of overcrowding and high rates of people living in social housing in Remote and Very Remote areas, and elevated rates of homelessness that are found in Outer Regional, Remote and Very Remote areas.^{xiv}

Recommendations

- Increased investment in crisis and public housing in identified housing ‘deserts’ or priority areas across regional and rural Australia
- Investment in design of wholistic natural disaster responses that include mental health and DFSV prevention

3. Children and young people in their own right: centring children and young people’s voices, rights, and safety across prevention, early intervention, response and recovery, and providing tailored, age and developmentally appropriate support for children and young people. This priority includes young people who use violence (in the home and/or in intimate partner relationships, including the use of sexual violence).

One of the biggest barriers preventing survivors of domestic violence from leaving abusive partners is the financial ability to support themselves and their children. Victim-survivors need affordable,

flexible, and reliable childcare, housing, and transportation to create a pathway to safety and stability for themselves and their children. Without access to childcare, survivors are unable to look for work, attend job interviews, or go to work or school.^{xv} Additionally, high quality childcare can be protective of children who might be experiencing violence at home, by improving access to support services, reducing contact with perpetrators and offering the opportunity for strengthening of emotional wellbeing.^{xvi}

The NRWC notes that women living in rural, regional and remote Australia do not have consistent access to ECEC. An estimated 1.1 million Australians living in rural Australia do not have access to ECEC (and effectively live in 'childcare deserts').^{xvii} Underperforming ECEC centres are more common in lower socio-economic and rural, regional and remote areas in comparison to the inner-city.^{xviii} Conversely, families experiencing socio-economic disadvantage and those living in regional and remote locations are under-represented in services rated high-quality.^{xvi} While new policies guaranteeing access to three days of childcare are positive, they do not address the problem of access. Rural, regional and remote women experiencing violence cannot access this service if high quality childcare centres do not exist within reasonable distance from their home or work.

Recommendations

1. Funding to establish new ECEC centres in identified 'childcare deserts', ideally co-located with key industries or employment providers.
2. Specific funding allocation to ensure culturally safe First Nations ECEC centres in key identified locations across rural, regional and remote Australia.

4. People who use violence: advancing prevention, early intervention, response, and recovery and healing throughout the life course on both family and domestic violence and sexual violence, supporting earlier identification, and multi-sector approaches to accountability and behaviour change, for example (but not limited to) strengthening policing and justice sector responses.

People who live in regional and remote communities face unique barriers to accessing justice, with access to fewer services than their metropolitan counterparts. Courts and tribunals do not sit in regional and remote communities as regularly as they do in cities (or at all) and services increasingly rely on digital solutions to overcome the tyranny of distance.^{xix} Recently ABC News reported that 20 courthouses across regional Western Australia are set to close due to lack of appropriate security measures. Regional and remote community legal centres travel very long distances to provide outreach services to meet the needs people who live in geographically isolated communities. In some areas, access to police may be an issue, with many rural and remote areas with no local police station and significant staff shortages across many jurisdictions.^{xx} Even where services exist the only service may be culturally unsafe for First Nations people, or there may be a conflict of interest so they can't access their local service. Waitlists can be several weeks to months. Or funding might limit supports to short periods of support like 6 to 12 weeks which does not allow for the complexities of RRR living to be addressed in that time. Rural and remote communities are disadvantaged by funding models that rely too heavily on population data, don't accurately reflect the true cost of delivering services outside of metropolitan areas, and don't aim to provide full geographic service coverage.^{xix} While technology can support access legal services remotely, unreliable or expensive phone and internet connections are still a barrier.^{xxi}

These structural barriers make it much more difficult for women to access support through the legal system, from reporting incidences to the police, to speaking to a lawyer, to attending court. Travelling not only adds significant cost but access to transport may be an insurmountable barrier for women experiencing DFSV. Without a vehicle, or access to public transport, or with the knowledge they are being tracked, travelling to access legal support may be close to impossible.

Road quality in rural regional and remote Australia and with 'dry weather' only access a reality for many living rurally. Women without driving licences, a vehicle in their name (often in company names) escaping violence face the issue of driving illegally causing further legal issues.

Reliance on technology to provide services in regional areas is problematic in the context of the emergence of digital coercive control. Perpetrators may withhold access to technology or be monitoring their victim's online activities.^{xxii} In rural or remote locations where women are more physically isolated this can be an even more significant problem, as she may not easily be able to borrow a friend or neighbour's phone or access a public computer. The literature identifies a significant gap in understanding of digital coercive control, including by police and magistrates^{xxiii} and how this affects rural and remote women accessing services must be considered.

Additionally, rural regional and remote women are more likely to face barriers engaging with police and authorities for reasons related to privacy, the existence of 'boys club' culture in small towns and lack of specialist trained local police officers. One study that looked at digital coercive control in rural areas identified the way more conservative or traditional views on gender roles in small communities can protect a perpetrator. Some participants contended that their abuser had established a reputation as a 'good guy' and found allies that assisted him and colluded, endorsed, excused or denied his actions. The report identified that perpetrators drew on in their communities, through their leisure activities, religious and work affiliations (such as with police officers).^{xxiv} Even without directly supporting a perpetrator, small communities can lead to women being less likely to report violence because they are much more likely to be known to the health worker or police officer. This can contribute to underreporting violence caused by fear that reports of abuse will not be taken seriously, or from fear of judgement.^{xxv}

Lack of appropriate specialist services could be addressed through the implementation of better staffing arrangements in state and territory police forces. For example, Queensland Police have introduced DFV and Vulnerable Persons Units in all police districts and Domestic and family violence (DFV) practitioners have been embedded in police stations across Queensland to provide a specialised response to victim-survivors.^{xxvi} Better training in understanding and responding to DFSV, including digital coercive control, could also be provided to legal authorities like magistrates as well as police in rural and regional areas.

Recommendations

- Support for Australia wide DFSV practitioners to be introduced in police forces across rural, regional and remote areas where wrap-around services are less likely to be available

5. System integration and workforce: safe and effective prevention, early intervention, response and long-term recovery including justice and health sector responses, drawing on an integrated system and a connected and capable workforce that utilises trauma and violence-informed approaches across multi-sector services and programs

DFSV service provision for rural regional and remote women requires a different approach to metropolitan areas. Siloed services, that although may refer to each other and work together, are not viable in rural areas because it is not financially sustainable for individual services to all provide full-service coverage in these areas. NRWC supports the development of innovative, integrated service models that look to co-locate various service providers together and share staff and resources across areas to provide better services closer to home.

Short term funding arrangements, competition for funding, siloed services, as well as persistent gaps in service provision all contribute to creating barriers to providing adequate services in rural, regional and remote areas. One study noted gaps when it came to housing services, services for children who had experience DFSV and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific services.^{xxix}

New policy approaches are needed for regional rural and remote areas. Examples of this include mobile services that travel to rural and remote areas on a regular basis, and investment in community led, multi-disciplinary services that can lower individual operating costs through sharing resources and staff. Integrated and flexible multi-disciplinary service models are recognised as the most effective way to deliver health care in rural areas.^{xxvii} DFSV responses require a mixture of justice services, counselling, housing and healthcare services. A similar, collective response should be taken to address violence against women in rural areas. An interim support measure is to upskill existing staff including police officers, magistrates and health care workers like GPs and nurses. A program like this has been introduced in South Australia for health workers to help respond to sexual violence cases.^{xxviii}

Additionally, thought should be given to ways to overcome travel costs, including expanding state-based patient travel schemes to include travel to access DFSV services and legal and justice system support. Limited and costly public transport is a critical barrier to accessing services for rural, regional and remote women.^{xxix}

In Indigenous communities, specialist and community-controlled services are critical to ensure culturally appropriate care can be provided. This is already being developed in the Northern Territory^{xxx} and the NRWC supports its expansion across all rural and remote Indigenous communities.

Recommendations

- Support for community-embedded, wholistic legal, health and social supports services that can lower the costs of operating in smaller areas through shared spaces and rotating rosters across regions.
- Support for Aboriginal led community DFSV response centres across remote and very remote Australia with high indigenous populations to ensure culturally appropriate responses and support.’
- NRWC supports expansion of patient transport schemes to include domestic violence treatment service

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