



Lifeline Australia, DV-alert and 13YARN submission:

Our Ways – Strong Ways – Our Voices: National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Family Safety Plan

Introduction

Lifeline Australia, DV-Alert and 13YARN welcome the opportunity to feed into the development of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Family Safety Plan through the Our Ways – Strong Ways – Our Voices consultation.

This submission draws largely on the experience and expertise of our First Nation frontline workers, particularly within the DV-alert First Nations program, particularly the DV-alert First Nations Lead, Kerry Wall.

We acknowledge that when we say 'First Nations' we are inclusive of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as all are First Nations People.



Lifeline Australia, DV-alert and 13YARN acknowledge the Traditional Owners of Country and their continued connection and caretaking for Country, Lands, Seas, Waters, Animals and Vegetation, for thousands of generations.

We pay our respects to all custodians, their cultures as well as to the Past, Present and Future Elders.

We acknowledge that First Nations sovereignty of this country was never ceded, and that it always was, and always will be, Aboriginal land.

Lifeline Australia

Lifeline Australia is a national charity providing people experiencing emotional distress with access to 24-hour crisis support and suicide prevention services. We are committed to empowering people in Australia to be suicide-safe through connection, compassion and hope.

In addition to 24/7 crisis support services over telephone, text and webchat, and online resources through our website, Lifeline also provides face-to-face community services through our more than 43 Centres across Australia. These services include counselling, including financial and gambling counselling; aftercare and postvention support; bereavement groups; frontline training; disaster relief; domestic violence workshops and rapid response services.

A number of other services also fall under the Lifeline banner, including:

- 13YARN - the 24/7 national support line for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in crisis;
- DV-alert – frontline training to help workers and the public recognise, respond to and refer cases of domestic and family violence.
- In 2023, DV-alert also launched ‘Small Business, Big Impact: How to Support Employees Experiencing Domestic and Family Violence’, a podcast for small businesses to help them to better support employees experiencing domestic and family violence.
- Mensline - professional 24/7 telephone counselling support for men with concerns about mental health, anger management, family violence (using and experiencing), addiction, relationship, stress and wellbeing.
- Suicide Call Back Service – a nationwide service providing 24/7 phone and online counselling to people affected by suicide.

DV-alert

DV-alert is a federally funded, nationally recognised domestic, family and sexual violence (DFSV) response training program that supports frontline workers (paid and volunteer) and offers public awareness workshops for the community to recognise the signs of DFSV, respond appropriately and refer to needs-matched services. DV-alert is funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services as a key initiative under the [National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032](#).

DV-alert has three First Nations workshop streams:

- DV-alert First Nations RA1-2 (Inner and Outer Metro areas)
 - <https://www.dvalert.org.au/2-day-workshops>
- DV-alert First Nations RA3-5 (Rural and Remote areas)
- DV-alert First Nations 1-Day Focus Workshop
 - <https://www.dvalert.org.au/workshops-courses/1-day-focused-workshops/1-day-focused>

DV-alert First Nations workshops are facilitated by experienced Lifeline network trainers and assessors and First Nations Subject Matter Experts dedicated to ending violence against First Nations women and children. Our First Nations workshops provide a culturally safe space for frontline workers to learn, connect and be empowered to recognise and respond confidently to those at risk of or experiencing DFSV. DV-alert workshops are available at no charge to frontline workers and community.

Many people experiencing DFSV may not directly access specialist DFSV services. They often interact with other service providers in various sectors. By offering training to non-specialist frontline workers and community members, we can equip them with the knowledge and skills to identify, respond to and refer First Nations women and girls who are experiencing or are at risk of DFSV. This collaborative approach creates an extensive network of support that fosters safety for First Nations women and children across diverse service settings.

13YARN

13YARN is the first national crisis support line for mob who are feeling overwhelmed or having difficulty coping and provides crisis support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The line offers a confidential one-on-one yarning opportunity with a Lifeline-trained Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Crisis Supporter. 13YARN empowers our community with the opportunity to yarn without judgement and provides a culturally safe space to speak

13YARN is an Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander crisis support line funded by the Australian Government with the support of Lifeline and developed in collaboration with Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia. It is run by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Q1: What are the key priorities and actions the Family Safety Plan should focus on to create real and sustainable change for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families?

Funding Models

The hub and spoke funding model has been widely used to provide services to rural, remote, very remote and outlying First Nations communities by positioning service providers in a central location, usually within a denser population area. While this model can help in extending the reach of services, it also presents several challenges and negative aspects with regard to rural, remote, and very remote First Nations communities, particularly in terms of availability, continuity, relationship-building, and trust.

- **Limited or unavailable services**
 - Services might only be accessible during specific times or on certain days. This is particularly detrimental in addressing DFSV, where timely interventions can be crucial.
 - Service providers often allocate minimal time, typically one day per week or fortnight. When accounting for drive time, return journeys, and staff breaks, these

brief visits result in only one or two individuals receiving assistance, reducing the impact of allocated resources.

- **Frequent rotation of workers**
 - Different workers attend First Nations communities at various times, diminishing opportunities for First Nations people to establish trust, build rapport, and disclose DFSV with service providers.
 - Frequent changes in workers means that women experiencing DFSV need to re-tell their stories and re-establish connections with new workers repeatedly, which can be emotionally exhausting, traumatising and may discourage them from seeking help.
- **Lack of cultural competency**
 - Workers who are not permanently based in these communities may not have the opportunity to build strong relationships and gain an in-depth understanding of the cultural norms and specific challenges faced by First Nations victims and survivors. This can lead to less effective service provision and a disconnect between service providers and the communities and people they serve.

Addressing these issues requires prioritising consistent and culturally competent service delivery, fostering strong relationships between service providers and community members, and ensuring essential services are readily available when needed.

DV-alert can also support service delivery by upskilling people within rural, remote and very remote First Nations communities to recognise, respond to and appropriately refer people experiencing DFSV, increasing the opportunities for prevention and intervention.

In addition, 13YARN is widely promoted within First Nations communities and at relevant events and conferences. As a 24/7 telephone helpline, 13YARN provides constant support for First Nations people at the end of the phone. While the line open for anyone who is in crisis or distress, as with the Lifeline helplines many of the calls relate to family and relationship issues, including DFSV.

Truth Telling

Incorporating truth-telling into the foundation of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Family Safety Plan is crucial for ensuring that the strategies and actions developed address the complex challenges faced by First Nations communities and are trauma-informed, culturally safe, and responsive to the unique experiences and needs of First Nations people and families.

It is crucial that truth-telling incorporates all aspects of violence against First Nations people, particularly women and children, and acknowledges the strength of First Nations women and girls in the face of adversity. Truth-telling fosters a deeper understanding of the systemic injustices, intergenerational trauma, and ongoing impacts of colonisation that have contributed to family safety issues within First Nations communities. By engaging in open and honest dialogue about the past and present experiences of First Nations women and girls, truth-telling can help to build trust and strengthen relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, government and service providers.

Voice

It is essential to prioritise the voices of lived and living experiences of First Nations peoples in shaping the Family Safety Plan. This can be achieved by engaging in meaningful and ongoing consultation with communities, Elders, and representatives from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and organisations. Their insights and perspectives should be central to identifying priorities, developing strategies, and informing decision-making processes.

Self-determination

The Family Safety Plan should support First Nations peoples' right to self-determination, and the ability to freely determine their status, economic, social, and cultural development. This can be achieved by ensuring that First Nations people contribute to the design and delivery of service provision and resources necessary to address DFSV. The plan should also promote the development of community-led solutions that reflect the diverse needs and aspirations of different First Nations communities.

Agency

The Family Safety Plan must prioritise the agency of First Nations peoples by recognising their capacity to make decisions, act independently, and exercise control over their lives. This includes ensuring that individuals, families and communities are empowered to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives. It also involves supporting the development of leadership, skills and resources within First Nations communities to enable them to drive and sustain positive change.

Representation

It is essential that all First Nations women who identify as women, including cisgender women, and First Nations people who are gender and sex diverse, be considered when discussing violence against First Nations women, girls, and children. DFSV cannot be excused or justified under any circumstance. All people experiencing violence, regardless of gender, need compassionate and highly responsive support, and perpetrators must be held accountable for their actions.

Housing

Women's ability to leave dangerous situations of DFSV is often limited by financial constraints resulting from DFSV and shortages in crisis accommodation, social housing and other long-term housing options, particularly in rural, remote and very remote locations. For First Nations women and girls this is exacerbated by historical dispossession and ongoing disadvantage which has restricted First Nations people's ability to accumulate generational wealth and pass on assets through inheritance.

Financial abuse is also a critical issue that impedes First Nations women's ability to secure safe and appropriate housing, particularly when they are financially dependent on their abusers or lack the financial resources and literacy to access alternative means. This form of abuse can manifest in various ways, including controlling access to bank accounts, income, or assets; forbidding employment or education opportunities; exploiting cultural or family expectations around shared resources; taking out loans and contracts in their partner's name; and Centrelink authority.

This form of abuse directly impacts a woman's capacity to leave an abusive relationship and access safe housing. Without financial autonomy, First Nations women find it difficult to secure rental properties, afford bond payments, or meet the ongoing costs of maintaining a safe home for themselves and their children.

Sexual Violence

In Australia, the vast majority of rape cases do not result in prosecutions, and this is particularly true for First Nations women, girls and children who often face systemic discrimination within the criminal justice system. As a consequence, First Nations women, girls and children may undergo re-victimisation and encounter adverse repercussions.

This alarming reality highlights the urgent need for comprehensive reform and culturally sensitive approaches to support First Nations women, girls and children and ensure that sexual violence cases are handled justly and effectively.

Connections between poverty and the heightened prevalence of violence, which can result from the challenging conditions that people living in poverty experience or are exposed to. This intricate relationship extends to First Nations communities and DFSV plays a significant role in perpetuating impoverishment and exacerbating existing socioeconomic disparities.

Addressing these interlinked issues necessitates a comprehensive and culturally sensitive approach to tackle the root causes of violence, poverty and inequality, ultimately promoting the wellbeing and empowerment of First Nations communities.

Police and legal responses

Navigating legal procedures, such as obtaining protection orders or resolving tenancy disputes, can be overwhelming and challenging, particularly when victim survivors are also living with trauma and safety concerns. Police and legal responses to DFSV, including family law proceedings, can inadvertently expose women and children to continued violence or inadequate protection.

Key priority issues that must be addressed to better support First Nations women and children experiencing DFSV include:

- Improving police responsiveness and training
- Strengthening the enforcement of protection orders
- Reforming family law proceedings to include trauma-informed practices
- Providing accessible legal assistance
- Enhancing collaboration among service providers, including police, legal professionals, social services and support organisations.

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Family Safety Plan should incorporate the development of inclusive support systems, including within police and legal systems, that address the specific needs of First Nations women, girls, and children, acknowledging the diversity of their experiences and providing appropriate resources and interventions.

Men's behaviour change

Many First Nations women value the significant role First Nations men play within kinship, networks and community structures. Recognising the importance of addressing men's behaviours and supporting their healing journey is crucial in the collective effort to end violence against First Nations women, girls, and children. It is essential to note, however, that not all violence against First Nations women, girls, and children is perpetrated by First Nations men, as it can also stem from men of other cultures and ethnicities.

To effectively address this issue, the following aspects should be considered:

- **Cultural Competence:** Implement culturally sensitive approaches that acknowledge the distinct experiences and challenges faced by First Nations men while recognising that violence can be perpetrated by men from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds.
- **Healing Programs:** Develop and support healing programs that are specifically tailored for First Nations men, fostering self-reflection, personal growth, and a commitment to non-violent behaviour.
- **Cross-Cultural Education:** Promote educational initiatives that raise awareness of violence against First Nations women, girls, and children, emphasising that it can be perpetrated by men from different cultural backgrounds.
- **Strengthening Community Connections:** Encourage First Nations men to actively participate in community-led violence prevention efforts, fostering a sense of responsibility and shared commitment to the safety and well-being of First Nations families.

Q2: If there were no barriers, how would your community address DFSV?

If there were no barriers, First Nations communities could effectively address DFSV by implementing holistic, culturally-centred approaches that focus on healing, prevention and empowerment.

The following strategies could be employed:

- **Community-led initiatives:** Develop and implement community-led programs that are grounded in First Nations knowledge, values and practice and which are tailored to the specific needs and strengths of each community, fostering a sense of ownership and collective responsibility.
- **Cultural healing:** Promote cultural healing programs that reconnect individuals and families with their cultural identities, incorporating traditional healing practices, storytelling, and ceremonies, to foster resilience and address the root causes of violence.
- **Education and awareness:** Implement comprehensive, culturally appropriate education programs that raise awareness about the impacts of violence and promote healthy relationships, communication and conflict resolution skills.
- **Trauma-informed support services:** Ensure the availability of trauma-informed and culturally safe support services, including counselling, crisis intervention and advocacy, to address the immediate and long-term needs of victims survivors and their families.

- **Safe and affordable housing:** Provide access to safe, affordable and culturally appropriate housing options for individuals and families affected by violence, recognising the importance of a stable living environment for healing and recovery.
- **Community networks and resources:** Establish strong community networks and resources that enable early intervention and support for those at risk of experiencing or perpetrating violence, fostering a sense of community connectedness and belonging.
- **Collaborative partnerships:** Build partnerships between First Nations communities, government agencies and non-governmental organisations to ensure a coordinated and comprehensive response to violence, drawing on the strengths of each partner.
- **Justice system reform:** Work towards justice system reform to ensure that first Nation people have access to culturally safe and responsive processes that prioritise the safety and healing of victims while holding perpetrators accountable for their actions.

Moreover, a policy reform agenda focused on eliminating barriers to addressing DFSV in First Nations communities would require comprehensive changes in legislation, funding and systemic approaches. Key aspects of such an agenda could include:

- **Policy and legislative changes:** Review and amend existing laws and policies to better protect the rights and safety of First Nations Women, girls and children experiencing DFSV. This includes strengthening legal protections, ensuring equal access to justice and providing culturally appropriate support throughout the legal process.
- **Funding allocation and flexibility:** Increase funding for DFSV prevention and response initiatives in First Nations communities and ensure that funding is flexible enough to accommodate the unique needs and priorities of each community.
- **Systemic and institutional change:** Address systemic discrimination and racism within institutions, such as the justice and child protection systems, to ensure that First Nations people are treated fairly and have equal access to support services.
- **Collaboration with First Nations communities:** Ensure that policy development and implementation processes involve meaningful collaboration with First Nations communities, recognising their expertise and lived and living experiences in addressing DFSV.
- **Culturally competent service provision:** Implement culturally competent training and standards for service providers to ensure that DFSV support services are culturally safe, trauma-informed and tailored to the unique needs of First Nations communities.
- **Data collection and monitoring:** Improve data collection and monitoring systems to better understand the prevalence and impact of DFSV in First Nations communities, allowing for evidence-based decision-making and targeted interventions.
- **Prevention and early intervention strategies:** Develop and implement evidence-based prevention and early intervention strategies that address the root causes of DFSV in First Nations communities, promoting healing and well-being.

Given current housing challenges, investing in and expanding the housing infrastructure, especially in rural, remote and very remote First Nations communities, can help to address existing housing needs and improve the wellbeing of residents.

A strategic and collaborative approach to housing development can ensure that these benefits are realised, ultimately enhancing the quality of life for First Nations community members.

Q3: What does culturally appropriate and holistic service provision look and feel like?

Culturally appropriate and holistic service provision for First Nations women and girls experiencing DFSV is built upon respect, understanding and inclusion of First Nations cultures, values and practices.

An example of this is the DV-alert Indigenous Workshops, which align with the RRR model – Recognise, Respond and Refer - but introduce an emphasis on a fourth ‘R’ – Respect. This ensure that the model is carried in a way that respects First Nations people, culture, beliefs and practices and supports support voice, self-determination and agency for First Nations women experiencing DFSV.

Crucially, the training program is designed by First Nations people from the ground up, making it a true Aboriginal-led training program.

Similarly, 13YARN, the national crisis helpline for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, was codesigned and developed by Lifeline Australia and Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia along with leading Aboriginal mental health professionals, stolen generation representatives, lived experience representatives, youth, elders and community groups.

The underlying concept of 13YARN is of self-determination and independence, with the service managed, codesigned and delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and partners.

Both of these important programs have been developed with community involvement and are delivered by and for First Nations people to ensure they are culturally safe, trauma-informed and accessible and that they promote self-determination and prioritise the safety of all First Nations people.

Q4: How can governments and mainstream services best support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (including workforce and clients), services and solutions?

Australian governments and mainstream services can support First Nations people, including both the workforce and clients, by implementing strategies that focus on:

- **Community-led solutions:** Recognise and invest in community-driven, culturally appropriate programs and services that prioritise prevention, intervention and healing and which acknowledge the expertise of First Nations peoples in addressing violence within their communities.
- **Cultural competency training:** Ensure that all government and mainstream service providers receive ongoing cultural competency training to improve their understanding of First Nations cultures, histories and experiences, including FDSV Training.

- **Flexible and adequate funding:** Provide flexible and adequate funding for First Nations organisations and services, ensuring they can respond effectively to the unique needs of their communities.
- **Partnerships and collaboration:** Build strong, genuine partnerships between governments, mainstream services and First Nations communities, fostering truth-telling, collaboration and knowledge-sharing to inform policies and programs.
- **Data collection and evaluation:** Collect and analyse disaggregated data on DFSV in First Nations communities to inform evidence-based policies and programs. Evaluate existing services and initiatives to ensure their effectiveness and culturally appropriate delivery.
- **Holistic support services:** Provide comprehensive and culturally safe support services for First Nations victims and survivors of DFSV, addressing their emotional, physical and cultural needs.
- **Perpetrator intervention programs:** Develop and implement culturally appropriate perpetrator intervention programs that hold individuals accountable for their actions and provide opportunities for behaviour change, rehabilitation and, if incarcerated, reintegration into their communities.
- **Legal and justice system reforms:** Implement reforms within the legal and justice systems to address systemic barriers, biases and discrimination faced by First Nations peoples, ensuring equal access to justice and protection under the law.
- **Education and awareness campaigns:** Promote educational initiatives and public awareness campaigns that challenge harmful gender norms, promote respectful relationships and encourage bystander intervention to prevent DFSV.

In addition, the Australian government can further support First Nations peoples by working to close the gap between First Nations peoples and other Australians. This should include focusing on collaborative, long-term strategies that address the underlying social determinants of health and wellbeing, including poverty, education, employment and access to services.

Recognising that self-determination and community-driven solutions are essential for sustainable change, the government should prioritise the voices and expertise of First Nations peoples in policy development and implementation.

Q5: How should the service system respond to the intersectional needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities?

People from diverse communities encounter distinct experiences of DFSV compared to the broader population. These differing experiences are frequently influenced by societal attitudes and beliefs, leading to structural barriers and long-term disadvantages for marginalised groups. For First Nations women and children, continuous exclusion from policies, programs and structures impacting their lives has resulted in heightened vulnerability and obstacles that impede their ability to live free from violence.

- **Addressing systemic barriers:** Promoting equity and justice for First Nations communities require the dismantling of systemic barriers, such as racism, sexism and ableism, within the justice system and broader society.
- **Integrated service delivery:** Services should be integrated and coordinated, ensuring that First Nations women and children can access comprehensive and culturally appropriate support.
- **Intersectional policy development:** Policies should be developed with an intersectional lens, acknowledging the overlapping identities and experiences of First Nations women and children.
- **Cultural competency and safety:** All services and programs must prioritise cultural competency and safety, recognising the distinct cultural needs and experiences of First Nations communities.