

The Treasury

PRE-BUDGET SUBMISSION

Who we are

WESNET is Australia's national peak body for specialist women's domestic and family violence services. WESNET represents a range of organisations and individuals including women's refuges, shelters, safe houses, and information/referral services.

Fund the Women's Network (WESNET) as the peak national body for women's specialist services.

A national peak body is generally considered to be a non-government organisation which consists of member organisations of allied interests (Melville & Perkins, 2003), and which provides information dissemination services, membership support, coordination, advocacy and representation, and research and policy development services for its members and other interested parties' (Industry Commission, 1995).

With almost 350 eligible members across Australia, WESNET performs these functions, benefiting the sector, the community and the government. Particularly in the context of the draft *Second National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children* and the government's investment in women's safety and domestic violence support in the 2021-22 Budget, WESNET will continue to play a key role in assisting the government to achieve its objectives. WESNET is, for example, currently part of the National Plan Advisory Group and is promoting and coordinating work across the sector to feed into the National Plan consultation and engagement process.

WESNET is uniquely positioned to harness the rich on-the-ground experience of specialist women's services, providing leadership in developing Australian best practice domestic and family violence early intervention and prevention programs, and frontline practitioner education and support. The collective knowledge of WESNET's members informs research and provides the foundation on which emerging domestic violence practices, policy and law reform should be shaped.

Peak bodies are an ‘indispensable intermediary between community and government in relaying the needs of their communities’ (Melville, 2003) as well as an efficient means for government to disseminate information and promote legislative and policy reform.

At present, WESNET receives no government funding for its role as a peak body. It is one of the few service-delivery sectors without a funded, coordinated, cross-jurisdiction, non-government specialist sector voice. If, as stated, addressing family and domestic is a key policy priority for government, it is imperative that WESNET be better enabled and supported to carry out its essential role as the peak body for specialist domestic and family violence services across Australia.

Continue and expand funding WESNET’s Safe Connections program and ensure funding certainty beyond the 2022-23 Budget.

In addition to its role as the national peak body for women’s specialist services, WESNET is Australia’s NGO expert working at the intersection of technology and violence against women. WESNET established and runs Safety Net Australia, a core service that empowers and protects Australian women from abusers who utilise technology to surveil, monitor, stalk, and invade privacy with the goals.

WESNET’s Safe Connections program uses a network of over 250 family violence services to provide victims with free Telstra smartphones, \$40 of prepaid credit and information on the safe use of technology to assist with building a life free from violence. The Safe Connections program has given 31,151 new phones donated by Telstra to women since 2014, and every month assists around 500 women and families escaping family violence, around 31% (rising to 36% in the last 6 months) of whom are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. A 2018 evaluation of the program found that it is “an empowering program that is contributing to the safety of women who have experienced family and domestic violence” and that it is “an outstanding example of a multi-sectoral collaboration that is highly effective and much needed.” Safe Connections has been recently highlighted as leading practice in several international fora and conferences.

Additionally, WESNET’s Technology Safety Specialists delivered 52 webinars on tech safety during the last financial year, including 35 for our Safe Connections Agencies, and a further 15 on a wide range of topics including the latest on stalkerware; working with children and young people and tech abuse; social media and survivors; and a special training session for the Forcibly Displaced People Network on the interaction of technology, refugees, and diverse sexual orientation and gender identities. In total, WESNET trained 1,706 practitioners and participants in 2020-21. In total, WESNET has trained over 11,713 participants at 399 training events since 2015.

While Safe Connections is currently supported by funding from the Australian Government Department of Social Services, there has been a significant growth in demand for services associated with technology safety. For example, across 2020-21, WESNET’s Safety Net Australia team responded to 4,440 calls and emails, mostly from frontline workers and their clients requesting assistance. The client caseloads WESNET’s Technology Safety

Specialists managed were predominantly high-risk and technically complex technology abuse cases, as new technologies emerged as tools of abuse during the pandemic.

The Safe Connections program is cornerstone to WESNET's ability to provide immediate and direct assistance to frontline workers and women experiencing violence. It is essential that the Safe Connections program be re-funded and that funding certainty be provided beyond the 2022-23 Budget.

Fund WESNET to develop standards and resources relating to private security companies providing in-home security checks

Through various technology trial initiatives funded under the Women's Safety Package, there has been a significant expansion of private sector security companies working with survivors of domestic and family violence (DFV). Anecdotally, WESNET has been approached by a number of members concerned about some of the behaviour and motivations of private sector security companies. There has also been recent published research echoing these concerns.

Our concerns were recently echoed in a recent monograph specifically focussing on the role of private security and domestic violence. In his 2019 book *Private Security and Domestic Violence : The Risks and Benefits of Private Security Companies Working with Victims of Domestic Violence*, Dr Diarmaid Harkin raises the following risks in private security firms providing in-home security audits and upgrades including CCTV, duress alarms, and 'bug' detection, to DFV victim-survivors:

- No accreditation standards required to be working with the vulnerable DFV population.
- No specific complex trauma training for security workers.
- No standardised costs, leaving DFV services vulnerable to profit-driven, exploitative and opportunistic quotes in order to access more of the Government funded program.
- Poor quality or faulty security products and services.
- The "live and real risk that perpetrators of domestic violence could be operating in this industry", as the scale of abuse in Australia means many perpetrators in the population.
- Significant possibility that security workers with criminal history (including DFV convictions) will gain access to DFV victims.
- Underreporting by victims and difficulty in successfully prosecuting perpetrators, means many perpetrators have no DFV conviction, and as such, are undetectable.
- Unethical and insensitive conduct including sexist comments, confidentiality breaches, preying on the victim's trauma and insecurities by exaggerating risk to 'upsell' security features, and initiating relationships with victims outside the protection of the referring DFV support service.

Overall, the advice is that there is an urgent need for extreme caution in exposing vulnerable DFV victim-survivors to commercial security providers. As a first step WESNET recommends the development of sector-driven standards to apply to private security providers working within the DFV sector, with the aim of rewarding and encouraging ethical behaviour to keep

women and children safe. WESNET would be ideally suited to take a lead role, given its expertise in the technology safety field, its peak body status and its reputation in the sector.

Failing this approach, WESNET is similarly ideally placed, should funding be allocated, to undertake work to assist the sector with reviewing and monitoring security and other services so that agencies seeking to purchase services from the private security sector can have independently reviewed information, and a safe space for agencies to share and report their experiences of using private security services. Additionally WESNET could oversee the development of best practice guidelines for operators working with survivors as well as advice and resources to agencies about selecting suitable services.

Urgently invest in dramatically expanding the capacity of specialist women's services.

Victim-survivors of domestic and family violence urgently require universal access to essential services, including crisis support, information, referrals, court advocacy, case management, supported accommodation, legal advice and advocacy and income support. Perpetrators of domestic and family violence need universal access to accredited men's behaviour change programs.

The impact of COVID-19 on women's specialist services has been profound with demand for services growing along with acute workforce pressures. An increase in domestic violence in the early months of the pandemic was widely reported by Australian media, founded largely on local reports and international research. In response, the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) commissioned a survey of 15,000 women in May 2020 finding that for many women the pandemic did coincide with the onset or escalation of violence and abuse. Two-thirds of the women surveyed responded that violence had started or escalated during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

As well as increasing social isolation and decreasing social movement, lockdowns compelled many women to spend more time with offenders. The AIC found some services reported challenges in accessing and engaging with women due to lockdown and movement restrictions—some imposed by health directions, some by perpetrators.

In other words, more women needed help but experienced greater difficulty in accessing it. This echoes reports from many WESNET members who added that contributing factors—such as increased financial stressors and alcohol use—during the pandemic exacerbated perpetrators violence against their victims. More recent research by ANROWS (2021), in line with the findings of the AIC and WESNET surveys, found that police data, service provider surveys and victimisation surveys all suggest a pandemic-related increase in intimate partner violence (IPV), changes in the dynamics of IPV, and that overall safety concerns were significant barriers to help-seeking.

The forthcoming National Plan, while welcome, does not overcome the critical and unmet need currently being experienced by service providers and women escaping violence. Urgent investment is required in this budget to expand the capacity of specialist women's services.

We are also actively contributing to other essential measures as part of the development of the Second National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children and have sought not to duplicate those measures in this submission.

WESNET thanks you for the opportunity to make a pre-budget submission. If you would like to discuss the contents of the submission further, please contact me using the details below.

Yours sincerely,

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WESNET acknowledges and pays respects to the Traditional Owners and Custodians of all the lands on which we live and work.