



5 October 2017

Committee Secretary  
Finance and Public Administration References Committee  
Department of the Senate  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600  
AUSTRALIA

**RE: Inquiry into the Delivery of National Outcome 4 of the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Their Children**

Women's March Sydney is a volunteer social justice organisation based in Sydney, Australia.

Women's March Sydney's active organising team comprises over 70 volunteers. Together with our online community of 5,000, we advocate for an intersectional approach to gender equality in health, economic security, representation and safety. Since our initial march in January 2017, we have staged I Can't Keep Quiet (a global community choir event with the aim of raising the voices of women), Women's March In The Park (a day of action for women's health and abortion law reform that brought together feminist groups across Sydney) and a Walk For Peace in conjunction with our sister Women's March groups in London, Geneva and Paris to mark the International Day of Peace. As an intersectional organisation with a focus on equality, our group has continued to meet weekly to organise ongoing local actions in support of social justice, empowering women to engage with their elected representatives. We are nonpartisan and nonprofit, and hold a particular interest in women's rights. We actively advocate against violence against women and their children.

*Our History*

Women's March was originally born in the United States following the 2016 election of Donald Trump in response to the negative and discriminatory rhetoric of his campaign. On the 21st January 2017 we marched in solidarity with the original Women's March group in Washington,

and hundreds of sister marches around the world across all seven continents. Although the origins of the group were due to a US based event, the issues of women's rights, inequality, and discrimination are ones that resonate worldwide. Women's March Sydney drew 10,000 concerned people who marched to raise their voices against sexism, bigotry, and racism.

### *Crisis Point*

Violence against women is an **increasing** epidemic in Australia :

- The number of sexual assault victims increased from 21,948 in 2015 to 23,052 in 2016 (ABS 2017)
  - This number has increased for the fifth consecutive year (ABS 2017)
- 1 in 5 women since the age of 15 has experienced sexual violence (ABS 2012)
- Australian women are more likely to be sexually assaulted by a person they know than a stranger; 15% assaulted by a person they knew compared to 3.8% (since the age of 15) (ABS 2012)
- Among women aged between 18 to 44 years, family violence poses a bigger health risk than smoking, drinking, and obesity. Family violence is estimated to contribute five times more to the burden of disease among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women than non-Indigenous women.<sup>1</sup>

Given these statistics, and the community unrest we find ourselves in following a week in which three women died of intimate partner assault,<sup>2</sup> it is paramount that support services for women who experience family and sexual violence be adequately funded and delivered in a way which **prioritises their safety, and the safety of their children.**

We believe that the 1800RESPECT service needs to deliver on the following:

- Women contacting the service should immediately speak to a trained specialised domestic violence trauma counsellor. They should not speak to an unqualified phone operator who then decides the level of 'seriousness' their situation warrants and refers them elsewhere or transfers them. Domestic violence situations are often complex, and can sometimes have occurred over a period of many years. It is therefore highly unlikely that an assessment of how serious the situation is can be made in an initial brief phone conversation. A triage model is unacceptable for this type of service.

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<sup>1</sup><https://anrows.org.au/publications/compass-0/preventable-burden-measuring-and-addressing-the-prevalence-and-health-impacts>

<sup>2</sup> Georgia Dent, "Three women killed in one state in one week is a crisis", Women's Agenda, 3 October 2017 <https://womensagenda.com.au/latest/three-women-killed-in-nsw-in-a-single-week-is-a-crisis/>

- Women contacting the service should feel secure that their personal details and the information they disclose remain private, that their call will not be recorded without their permission, and any information they do disclose cannot be accessed by anyone else within the organisation without consent. The current FAQ section of the 1800RESPECT website advises that:

“We will not give your information to anyone else unless:

- You have given permission for us to do so
- You or someone else is in immediate danger
- We are required to do so by law”

(<https://www.1800respect.org.au/help-and-support/telephone-and-online-counselling/>)

It is unclear on what basis the decision to pass information along will be made, and who the information will be passed along to.

- The service provided should not be measured by industry standard call centre measures, such as the length of the call or number of calls taken. The ABC reported in March 2017 that Social Services Minister Christian Porter stated that call wait times were down and abandonment rates of calls were decreasing<sup>3</sup>. However, no information is available on how this was achieved- were staffing numbers significantly increased to accommodate the additional calls? Or are women accessing the service being rushed off the phone, transferred to other services, or being placed on hold for long periods? Women calling 1800RESPECT need the utmost support and care, not to be treated like a number.
- The 1800RESPECT service needs to ensure that women who identify as LGBTIQ+ are properly supported:
  - 44% of students who identified as bisexual and 38% of students who identified as gay, lesbian or homosexual were sexually harassed in a university setting in 2016, compared with 23% of students who identified as heterosexual (AHRC 2017)
  - Trans and gender diverse students (45%) were more likely to have been sexually harassed in a university setting in 2016 than women and men (AHRC 2017)

We understand that Rape & Domestic Violence Services Australia (R&DVSA) have recently withdrawn from the 1800RESPECT Trauma Counselling Service<sup>4</sup> based on concerns the organisation had with the sub contract and Medibank Health Solutions (MHS) service model. As an organisation that advocates for women’s rights we find this **highly** concerning. R&DVSA have operated a successful rape and sexual assault phone counselling service for over 50

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<sup>3</sup><http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-03-22/rape-domestic-violence-services-centre-facing-possible-closure/8359008>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.rape-dvservices.org.au/1800RESPECT>

years. Their model is internationally recognised as the best practice delivery model for this type of service. Their sole purpose is to put a stop to sexual assault and domestic violence,<sup>5</sup> and one of the ways in which they aim to achieve that is by providing a specialist trauma counselling service.

We are not satisfied that 1800RESPECT can deliver on the goals set above if they do not incorporate the best practice service model and decades of experience provided by R&DVSA.

### *Key Recommendations*

1. The adequacy and quality of counselling provided by the 1800RESPECT service must remain at or improve upon the level of best practice provided by R&DVSA.
2. Any increased efficiencies or volume of calls taken by the 1800RESPECT service must not be implemented at the cost of traumatised women's mental or physical health and safety.
3. Those who access the 1800RESPECT service ought to be served by a qualified domestic violence counsellor who meets appropriate professional standards and ethical obligations. An unqualified triage call centre operator is inappropriate and could further traumatise those accessing the service.
4. We are of the opinion that a for-profit model is inappropriate for a national domestic violence phone counselling service. However, should this model be implemented against our recommendation, we would expect rigorous and transparent reporting and monitoring to ensure that a best practice domestic violence counselling service is maintained. Anything less than robust evaluation arrangements would be to put traumatised women in grave risk.
5. Women contacting the 1800RESPECT service should at all times feel secure that their personal details and the information they disclose remain private.

### **Women's March Sydney**

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.rape-dvservices.org.au/About-Us/Our-Mission>