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Committee Secretary
Senate Legal and Constitutional Committees
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Dear Committee Secretary,

Family Law Legislation Amendment (Family Violence and Other Measures) Bill

I am writing to express my support for the changes to the *Family Law Act* proposed in the Family Law Legislation Amendment (Family Violence and Other Measures) Bill 2011, and to recommend that further changes be made to the Bill to ensure that the family law system does not jeopardise the safety of children and parents who are victims of violence.

I strongly support the measures proposed in the Bill to provide better protections for people who have experienced family violence within the family law system and believe that the proposed amendments are essential to placing the safety and protection of children and family members at the forefront of the *Family Law Act*.

We are seeing women who have been "encouraged" by Family and Community Services to leave the violent relationship or risk losing their children due to the impact of domestic violence on the children. These women then are accessing our Womens refuge with their children and shortly after are served with court papers saying that the father wishes to have either outright care or joint care in the majority of cases. These women are then told that if they deny their ex-partner contact they are in breach of orders and/ or are uncooperative. How are mothers supposed to protect the children in these cases?

Support for key changes

In particular, I strongly support:

- Broadening the definition of 'family violence' to include elements of coercion and control, a wider range of behaviour and removing the objective test of 'reasonableness' so that family violence can be properly considered whenever the victim actually fears for their safety
- A broader definition and understanding of child abuse that includes exposure to violence

- Prioritising family violence when considering what is in the best interests of the child
- Removing the 'facilitation' aspects of the 'friendly parent provision'
- Repealing section 117AB about costs orders relating to false allegations or denials of Violence

Further changes that are needed

I believe that a number of further changes are necessary to better protect the safety of children and their family in the family law system. In particular, I recommend that:

- The safety and protection of children should be prioritised above all else. Its priority should not be subject to proving an inconsistency with other considerations.
- The Act should make it clear that exposure to family violence is a form of family violence and that it applies to behaviour by the person perpetrating violence, and not the victim of the violence.
- There should be no presumptions in family law – every family should be treated as unique. This means that there should be no presumption of equal shared parental responsibility and the courts should not be required to start from any particular care arrangement.
- The Act should protect the safety of the primary carer as this increases children's safety.

Conclusion

Based on my own experiences and the evidence presented in numerous research reports over the last few years, I strongly recommend you support the amendments suggested in this letter and the expeditious passage the Family Law Legislation Amendment (Family Violence and Other Measures) Bill 2011.

Yours sincerely,

Belinda Kotris

General Manager