



Delivery of National Outcome 4 of the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children

Submission to the Senate Standing Committee
on Finance and Public Administration Inquiry

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SUMMARY

safe steps Family Violence Response Centre is pleased to have the opportunity to respond to the Senate Standing Committee on Finance and Public Administration's Inquiry into *the delivery of National Outcome 4 of the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Their Children 2010-2022*.

Along with DV Connect Queensland, Women's Safety Services South Australia, and Rape & Domestic Violence Services Australia, **safe steps** is one of four not-for-profit women's services to successfully contract to deliver specialist trauma counselling on behalf of 1800 RESPECT from 29 October 2017. Following the decision of Rape and Domestic Violence Services Australia (R&DVSA) not to continue with their tender application under the new model, the 1800 RESPECT specialist trauma counselling service will now be delivered by three state-wide services with over 100 years' combined experience delivering specialist services to women and their children who have experienced family violence and sexual assault. **safe steps** Family Violence Response and Women's Safety Services South Australia both work within the domestic and family violence response space, whilst DV Connect Queensland also delivers a sexual assault response and Men's Behaviour Change program. These three services have also had more than nine years' experience working closely together as part of SafeNET Australia, the national network of state-wide domestic and family violence crisis services. 1800 RESPECT is also an associate member of SafeNET Australia.

We view the new 1800 RESPECT trauma counselling provider panel as a model which truly brings together the expertise of not-for-profit women's services at a national level, aligning directly with the original vision of National Outcome 4 of the National Plan and its recommendation that the 1800 RESPECT service should be expanded and integrate state and territory services to deliver a high-quality, accessible and responsive trauma counselling service where the first response is the right one.

At **safe steps**, our fundamental mandate is to end violence against women and their children. We do this through a range of programs which extend far beyond crisis response: in addition to our 24-hour, 7-day telephone crisis service, our work as the state-wide coordinator of crisis and refuge accommodation placements and the operation of our own safe house, **safe steps** delivers:

- Two Court programs – remote witness facilities for the Melbourne Magistrates' Court, and Federal Government funded Family Advocacy and Support Services in the Melbourne branch of the Family Court of Australia;
- Flexible support packages to help women put security and other infrastructures in place to leave violent relationships;
- The Victorian Government's Safe at Home after hours program;
- A Survivor Advocate program, giving a voice to the survivors of family violence;
- Major prevention initiatives and events including the Candlelight Vigil and the Walk Against Family Violence;

- Education programs which bring greater awareness to family violence across the community; and
- Policy, advocacy, research and thought leadership.

New activities in development also include the use of technology to provide more effective support, including Attend Anywhere telehealth services and YourCase App to support women in Court. **safe steps'** involvement in delivering specialist trauma counselling on behalf of 1800 RESPECT aligns entirely with our whole-of-organisation vision as defined in our Strategic Plan (attached as an Appendix) to:

- RESPOND: Empower women, young people and children experiencing family violence and secure their safety
- PREVENT: Work to prevent family violence by fostering social change and system reform
- RECOVER: Support survivors to thrive in their communities and continue to live free from violence.

In preparation for the commencement of the new 1800 RESPECT on 29 October 2017, hiring is well underway for a new team of expertly trained and qualified specialist trauma counsellors to be based in our offices in Melbourne. These counsellors will receive the same level of extensive training, and their work will be applied the same rigorous scrutiny, as any specialist trauma counsellor hired by 1800 RESPECT through R&DVSA to date.

We have been disappointed to see some inaccurate representations of the 1800 RESPECT service delivery model in the public domain. We are absolutely committed to ensuring that the women, their friends and families who call 1800 RESPECT experience no discernible change in their ability to access and rely on the service from 28 October to 29 October and beyond. We are committed to working in partnership with Medibank Health Solutions and our fellow panel providers to deliver a service staffed by highly-trained specialist trauma counsellors, where the safety of the women and children we work for is the priority and where best practice is at the heart of everything we do. Any public assertion otherwise only poses a risk to the women and children who rely on the integrity of our national sexual assault, domestic and family violence counselling service.

We agree that there are areas where the 1800 RESPECT model can continue to be refined to consistently provide the best possible service to women and their children, and we believe that the best way to achieve these improved outcomes is by being part of the delivery of the service. In this submission, we recommend that the first point of triage be staffed by the state based specialist family and domestic violence services such as **safe steps** using their qualified specialist trauma counsellors who will have the option to either continue the counselling conversation, or transfer the caller to crisis, emergency or other service where relevant. This is in keeping with the feedback provided to KPMG as part of their recent review into 1800 RESPECT.

We are excited to be part of the next iteration of 1800 RESPECT and look forward to delivering a high-quality, accessible and responsive service that has at its heart, the safety of women and their children.

INTRODUCTION

ABOUT SAFE STEPS FAMILY VIOLENCE RESPONSE CENTRE

safe steps Family Violence Response Centre is Victoria's state-wide first response service for women, young people and children experiencing family violence. We are committed to ensuring all women and children are able to live free from abuse, and our ultimate goal is the elimination of family violence. We work towards this through a respond-recover-prevent framework, which is underpinned by our three strategic pillars of empowerment, influence and sustainability as outlined in our strategic plan (attached in the Appendix for reference).

RESPOND: We empower women, young people and children experiencing family violence and secure their safety through our 24/7 phone response and specialist support services

PREVENT: We work towards a community free from family violence through education, system reforms and by fostering social change initiatives

RECOVER: We support survivors to overcome trauma so they can thrive in their communities and continue to live free from violence.

As with all of **safe steps'** work, our policy and advocacy efforts respond to the three elements of Respond. Prevent. Recover. We are firmly grounded in a feminist framework, and recognise that family violence is inherently gendered, perpetrated in the vast majority of instances by men, against women. However we also recognise the intersectional ways in which power, control and privilege impact across diverse cohorts which result in increased levels of violence.

safe steps also has a national reach through our membership of SafeNET Australia, the network of state-wide domestic and family violence crisis services across Australia. SafeNET Australia's aim is to increase the efficiency and validity of services provided to all Australian women and children experiencing domestic and family violence.

In August 2017¹, it was announced that, along with two other SafeNET Australia members, DV Connect Queensland and Women's Safety Services South Australia, and the existing providers Rape and Domestic Violence Services Australia, **safe steps** Family Violence Response Centre had been invited to provide specialist trauma counselling service for 1800 RESPECT, the national sexual assault, domestic and family violence counselling service.

THE SENATE INQUIRY

The Senate Standing Committee on Finance and Public Administration has been tasked with inquiring and reporting against the following:

The delivery of National Outcome 4 of the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Their Children 2010-2022, 'Services meet the needs of women and their children experiencing violence,' insofar as that Outcome is given effect by the 1800 RESPECT Domestic and Sexual Violence National Counselling Service ("the service"), with particular reference to:

- a. the adequacy and quality of counselling provided, including:
 - i. the funding made available for counselling,
 - ii. the counselling model and associated counselling practices,
 - iii. the protection of privacy and confidentiality for those who use the service,
 - iv. the efficacy and appropriateness of the triage model adopted in relation to the service in 2016, and
 - v. the infrastructure required for the provision of the service;
- b. the procurement arrangements for the service, including contractual and tender arrangements;
- c. the engagement of staff and contractors, including:
 - i. their qualifications and working conditions,
 - ii. the professional standards and ethical obligations applicable to those providing the service, and
 - iii. the oversight and quality assurance undertaken in relation to those providing the service;
- d. evaluation arrangements for the service;
- e. best practice for domestic and sexual violence counselling; and
- f. any other related matters.

safe steps Senate Inquiry 1800 RESPECT October 17

safe steps Family Violence Response Centre is unable to respond to all of these areas of Inquiry as some fall outside the scope of our purview as a specialist family violence response and trauma counselling service. In this submission we will, however, address the following points:

1. How the new arrangements sit alongside the recommended outcomes of the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children, and in particular National Outcome 4
2. The efficacy of the triage model
3. The protection of privacy and confidentiality for users of the service
4. The engagement of staff who will be providing specialist trauma counselling
5. The experience of the services contracted to provide best practice domestic and sexual violence counselling

We look forward to having the opportunity to expand upon these points further in the face-to-face phase of the Inquiry, and invite members and representatives of the Standing Committee to contact us directly should you wish to discuss our submission further.

THE NATIONAL PLAN – NATIONAL OUTCOME 4

ABOUT THE NATIONAL PLAN

The National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children (“the National Plan”) articulated six National Outcomes necessary to ensure the target of “a significant and sustained reduction in violence against women and their children” over the 12 years spanning 2010 to 2022². These are:

National Outcome 1 – Communities are safe and free from violence

National Outcome 2 – Relationships are respectful

National Outcome 3 – Indigenous communities are strengthened

National Outcome 4 – Services meet the needs of women and their children experiencing violence

National Outcome 5 – Justice responses are effective

National Outcome 6 – Perpetrators stop their violence and are held to account.³

Whilst this submission deals principally with National Outcome 4 in line with the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry being undertaken, we will draw on the other National Outcomes.

The National Plan is a product of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), envisioned as a partnership between the States and Territories alongside the Commonwealth. It holds as a central principle the view that “involving *all* governments *and* the wider community is necessary to reducing violence in the short and longer terms. No government or group can tackle this problem alone.”⁴ This principle is evident throughout the document and arises at various points within discussion of National Outcome 4. In particular it is embodied in the Immediate National Initiatives recommended alongside Strategy 4.1:

Strategies	Key actions by Australian governments during 2010 to 2013	Responsibility	Immediate national initiatives
Strategy 4.1: Enhance the first point of contact to identify and respond to needs	<p>Deliver high quality integrated national helpline and online support services which meet national benchmarks.</p> <p>Reduce the need for victims to retell their story through improved information sharing and integrated case management.</p> <p>Extend the use of best practice risk assessment and management frameworks to identify and respond to violence against women.</p>	Commonwealth, states and territories	<p>Expand the 1800 RESPECT: Domestic and Sexual Violence National Counselling Service, to provide back up support to frontline workers such as allied health, child care etc. who may (receive disclosures of) domestic violence and sexual assault and do not know what to do.</p> <p>Develop national standards and integrate 1800 RESPECT with state and territory services to ensure victims are able to be transferred in a timely way to relevant local services.⁵</p>

THE NEW MODEL STRENGTHENS COLLABORATION BETWEEN 1800 RESPECT AND STATE-BASED CRISIS RESPONSE SERVICES

For some time, the state and territory-wide services have felt that there was room for improvement in the way that 1800 RESPECT as the national specialist trauma counselling service, integrated with their work as direct crisis response services. With Medibank Health Services (MHS) advising that approximately 30% of callers to the national trauma counselling services are being transferred through to the state and territory crisis lines, this is an important relationship to continuously nourish.

We are of the strong opinion that the new model, which brings together three (and originally sought to involve four) expert state-based not-for-profit services with specialist experience delivering family violence and sexual assault responses – operated for women, by women – is in direct alignment with the recommendations of the National Plan. It represents an expansion of the service and an integration with state and territory services in a much stronger way than the service has been previously positioned to do, whilst it was based out of one state alone. If anything, in this regard the shift in contracting arrangements which has triggered this Senate Inquiry demonstrates a stronger response to the recommendations of the National Plan, rather than a shift away from it.

TOTAL FUNDING FOR 1800RESPECT HAS GROWN - NOT CONTRACTED

Another area of concern which the Senate Inquiry has sought to address is whether Commonwealth funding is sufficient to deliver 1800 RESPECT. Funding for specialist trauma counselling delivered by independent women's services, provided through 1800 RESPECT has not been reduced as a result of the new contract arrangement. In total, funding for 1800 RESPECT will in fact increase around \$5 million between 2016-17 and 2017-18 financial years. The proposal to expand the physical location of the service beyond New South Wales results in the creation of new roles for family violence and sexual assault specialist trauma counsellors in the States of Victoria, South Australia and Queensland.

We agree that the impact of the new contract arrangement on the existing team of qualified specialist trauma counsellors in New South Wales is regrettable. We were very much looking forward to the opportunity to work alongside R&DVSA to deliver a truly national approach to 1800 RESPECT. There is sincere, across-the-board, interest around how the team of trauma counsellors who were employed in New South Wales can be accommodated and we understand that conversations around this are ongoing.

Like any not-for-profit women's service, we agree fundamentally that the vital services we and our colleagues nationwide provide to protect, represent and support women and their children, can always be strengthened with the provision of additional funding. Whether Commonwealth funding is sufficient to achieve the National Plan's goal of a significant and sustained reduction in violence against women and their children by 2022, is a much broader question than that which the Senate Standing Committee is proposing to consider through this one Inquiry. As a preliminary observation, we would note that the State of Victoria 2017-18 Budget included \$1.9 billion over three years to address the recommendations of the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence. In comparison the 2017-18 Australian Federal Budget included around \$55 million in new spending that will create additional capacity family violence prevention, response and legal assistance⁶.

THE EFFICACY OF THE TRIAGE MODEL

A TRIAGE MODEL IS BEST PRACTICE

In keeping with the findings of *Time for Action: The National Council's Plan for Australia to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children 2009-21*, Discussion of National Outcome 4 in the National Plan and the first three-year Action Plan strongly emphasises the need for a “first door approach” which seeks as its outcome that the first door should be the right door:

“Strategy 4.1: Enhance the first point of contact to identify and respond to needs

When violence occurs, victims and their children need access to support services that are high-quality, accessible and responsive. Women should not have to tell their story multiple times to multiple services. The first response should be the right one.”⁷

Additionally, where services are inaccessible or unavailable to women who are seeking a direct response this is never a best practice outcome, and can lead to negative outcomes such as women losing confidence in a service or feeling unable to receive the support that they may urgently need.

In practice, a triage model can provide an effective way to achieve both outcomes of delivering an accessible and responsive service, and a “first response, right response”. **safe steps** Family Violence Response Centre implemented a triage model of Rapid Risk – Assessment – Case Management in 2015, in order to provide a more streamlined and responsive service in the face of ever-increasing demand. We did this because triage allows us to separate out the key components of responding to the immediate and ongoing needs of women and their children experiencing family violence. It allows staff to develop expertise in one area of practice. It also manages the flow of demand by commencing with a brief but comprehensive rapid risk process, followed by a more in-depth, allotted time of assessment to fully evaluate and respond to the woman’s needs. The triage approach has helped us to continue to be responsive to client needs even as the number of calls we received in 2016-17 exceeded 90,000.

The implementation of a triage model for 1800 RESPECT came about in response to a KPMG review conducted in 2016 which also recommended a set of baseline standards in regard to average call wait times, staffing levels, meeting high demand, after-hours response, referral and feedback⁸. The KPMG review was in line with Strategy 4.1 of National Outcome 4 in the National Plan, but happened also to coincide with a period of increased demand such that wait times had risen to an average of 10.3 minutes and 67% of calls were going unanswered⁹. For the wellbeing of the women and their friends and family members who rely on 1800 RESPECT, this self-evidently needed to be addressed urgently. The current triage model came into effect for 1800 RESPECT as of 16 August 2016¹⁰. Subsequently, in August this year the Minister for Social Services reported that average call wait times had decreased to 37 seconds, with 81% of all calls answered within 20 seconds and 93% of calls answered overall.

TRAINED TRAUMA COUNSELLORS ARE NEEDED AT THE FIRST POINT OF TRIAGE

Concerns which have arisen in the past year have not been with the existence of a triage model as a principle – many organisations like ours employ a triage model and find that it works – but rather have been with the fact that the first point of triage is not staffed by the same specialist trauma counsellors that callers are later transferred through to.¹¹ Alongside the other two organisations which have been contracted to provide 1800 RESPECT specialist trauma counselling from 29 October 2017, **safe steps** Family Violence Response Centre has been consistent in expressing our preference that our trained specialist trauma counsellors from the state-based crisis services answer all calls at the first point of triage and then either continue the specialist trauma counselling response, or refer on to another service as necessary.

We believe that a specialist trauma counsellor is better placed to employ the full range of skills required to accurately assess risk and need at the first point of contact, in a fast-paced high-pressure environment. Our specialist trauma counsellors employ a more comprehensive, though still brief safety risk assessment which should form part of the first point of triage. We further believe that having specialist trauma counsellors handle the first stage of triage would negate the perception that women have to get past a “hurdle” requirement in order to access a qualified specialist trauma counsellor, and would also better respond to the principle adopted since the release of *Time for Action* that the first response, should be the right one.

The UN Women *Handbook for National Action Plans on Violence Against Women* (2012) recommends the following:

“while the state should play an important role in establishing and funding services, it is often not the most appropriate body to run the services. Where possible, specialist crisis services responding to victims/survivors of violence against women should be run by independent and experienced women’s non-governmental organisations providing gender-specific, empowering and comprehensive support to women survivors of violence...”¹²

Both the current, and former Governments have demonstrated their commitment to this principle by contracting specialist, expert women’s services to deliver family violence and sexual assault trauma counselling on behalf of 1800 RESPECT. However this commitment must continue to have a whole-of-service reach which extends to all stages of the triage process. **safe steps** Family Violence Response Centre has taken the approach that the best way to advocate for this, our preferred outcome, is from within – and we will continue to do this alongside our panel partners as the new providers of 1800 RESPECT specialist trauma counselling services.

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY OF 1800 RESPECT USERS

INFORMATION SHARING

As specialist women's services already operating in the family violence and sexual assault space with over 100 years' combined experience, we know all too well how critical it is to maintain privacy for our clients. Women must be able to trust the service and have a fulsome understanding of how the information that they provide will be used to support their safety and wellbeing.

Sharing information between specialist services whose job it is to respond to the safety and counselling needs of women and their friends and family is very different to breaching confidentiality. The Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence had this to say on information sharing:

“The various services that work with and help protect women and children must engage effectively with each other as well as with services that work with men who use violence. Inter-agency communication, referral and information sharing are essential to responding to risk and to continuing case management.”¹³

The sharing of client file notes between the three panel providers on a centralised system is critical to maintaining continuity of care where clients choose to call the service more than once. It is likewise vital that we are provided access to the client files of people who chose to access the 1800 RESPECT trauma counselling service through the outgoing contract provider prior to 28 October 2017, in case they make contact again from 29 October 2017. To not provide these files and therefore disrupt the provision of seamless client care across a change of counsellors would be unconscionable.

It is important to note that clients of 1800 RESPECT will continue to have the option of receiving counselling anonymously or using a pseudonym, as the majority of clients currently do.

THE RECORDING OF CALLS

There has been some concern expressed around the recording of client calls and the manner in which these recordings will be used. The provision to record client calls is very common in telephone-based services and critically important. Where permission is provided by the client, we record calls to **safe steps** Family Violence Response Centre. There are a range of reasons for doing this:

- to provide a back-up of important client information that the professional may have missed recording during the call;
- to support the clinical supervision and professional development of our staff so that their client response is constantly improving;
- to provide a factual response to complaints, where they arise; and
- recordings can also occasionally be utilised to disclose where there is significant present risk to the client.

Of course, we notify all callers that they will be recorded prior to the call taking place, and provide the option to decline to be recorded. This is exactly the same for 1800 RESPECT. Additionally, we understand that a majority of 1800 RESPECT callers actually elect not to provide their personal details, or to adopt a pseudonym. This provides an additional layer of confidentiality for these clients, even where they agree to the recording of their call.

In addition to all of the standard reasons for recording the call, 1800 RESPECT provides the option to enact a “call trace” function. This empowers specialist trauma counsellors to immediately alert police where they have reasonable belief that the caller intends to cause harm to themselves or others.

THE ISSUE OF SUBPOENAS

Another one of the concerns which has been raised in recent weeks is around the potential of the new 1800 RESPECT model to result in perpetrators being able to successfully subpoena MHS for access to client files. The issue of subpoenas being recommended to perpetrators as a legal avenue to gain access to confidential client information is one with which professionals in the family violence crisis response sector have already been grappling with for some time. In fact, **safe steps** Family Violence Response Centre raised this issue in our May 2017 submission to the *Parliamentary Inquiry into a better family law system to support and protect those affected by family violence*:

“RECOMMENDATION 7: THE ISSUING OF SUBPOENAS FOR ACCESS TO SPECIALIST SERVICE CLIENT FILES

That measures are introduced to discourage perpetrators and their legal representatives from the practice of issuing subpoenas to specialist family violence services for confidential client files.

safe steps has observed a recent trend of legal representatives advising perpetrators to subpoena specialist family violence services for access to client files in order to uncover the location of their children and/or former partner. Our own organisation has been subpoenaed for this purpose five times in the past month. Whilst each of these subpoena applications was unsuccessful, demonstrating the strength of our organisation’s confidentiality measures, the process of defending our clients’ files against subpoenas creates a significant administrative and financial burden for small specialist not-for-profit organisations.

It is also a deeply concerning prospect that should a subpoena application for information from a specialist family violence service be successful, it may open the floodgates to applications of this nature, critically damaging the vulnerable trust relationship between family violence specialist providers and the clients we protect.

To subpoena a family violence specialist organisation represents another example of perpetrators attempting to exercise power and control by using the legal system to financially and emotionally distress their former partners and the services that are assisting them out of violence. It should be ensured that legal representatives are discouraged from this practice and that every other method of seeking information should be exhausted prior to a legal representative taking the step of seeking to subpoena a specialist family violence service for access to a confidential client file.”

As indicated, **safe steps** receives up to five subpoenas a month and whilst the process of defending our clients against these subpoenas can often be a demanding and resource-intensive process, we view it as absolutely critical to our role of providing a safe and confidential service to women and children.

safe steps Senate Inquiry 1800 RESPECT October 17

Having said all of this, perhaps the most critical point to note is that **safe steps** currently receives subpoenas in our capacity as a crisis response service. Vitally, we are aware – as indeed the former trauma counselling providers would also be - that an additional layer of protection applies to counselling services in that the recordings or file notes of counselling conversations are the subject of legislated privilege in each relevant jurisdiction of Australia. As such, counselling communications are protected from production in Court proceedings. In light of this knowledge, the issue of a subpoena for the confidential client files of a trauma counselling service such as 1800 RESPECT would likely be a primarily futile exercise. Nevertheless, we have discussed this matter with MHS and they have assured us that should they ever receive a subpoena for a client file, they would utilise all resources available to them to defend the matter vigorously.

ENGAGEMENT OF SPECIALIST TRAUMA COUNSELLING STAFF

Perhaps the most disappointing of the claims which have been made by some parties in recent weeks have been those which question the experience and dedication of the new team of specialist trauma counselling staff. These exceedingly qualified individuals work in a high-pressure environment and deserve the utmost support and respect.

DEVELOPING THE NEW 1800 RESPECT TEAM

All staff employed as specialist trauma counsellors for 1800 RESPECT are required to hold a minimum three-year degree qualification in counselling, psychology, social work, behavioural services or equivalent; a minimum of three years trauma specialist counselling experience (preferably telephone counselling) or full time equivalent experience in specialised sexual assault, domestic and family violence counselling; and be eligible for membership of the Australian Association of Social Workers, the Australian Psychological Society or Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia. These are identical qualifications to those required of any new staff member commencing with the existing 1800 RESPECT trauma counselling team managed by R&DVSA.

Our staff will be supported through Clinical Supervision in addition to the coaching provided by MHS.

The **safe steps** 1800 RESPECT team will be employed entirely separate to our existing Victoria-wide crisis response team and situated within a different location within our offices. The fact that both services are experiencing growing demand is therefore irrelevant to our ability to deliver each service to an excellent standard. This arrangement also ensures that we are able to develop a team and management culture which is appropriate to the 1800 RESPECT trauma counselling environment and quite unique to the **safe steps** team, whilst simultaneously being able to draw on each other's knowledge and advice.

As part of our contractual arrangements, all three panel providers have stipulated that all phone counsellors will be located onsite in our physical offices. This provides us with optimum opportunity to deliver clinical supervision, create a positive workplace culture and to proactively manage staffing allocations.

The new panel provider model has created 16 FTE roles for specialist family violence and sexual assault trauma counsellors and leaders in Victoria, 16 FTE roles in Queensland and 16 FTE roles in South Australia. This represents the substantive creation of new employment for women in the specialist workforce in three States. Just as was the case for R&DVSA, these workforces will be represented at an industrial level by the Australian Services Union.

VICTORIAN AND NATIONAL INDUSTRY REFORMS

We are in a unique position in Victoria to be at the forefront of some of the most ground-breaking reforms to the family violence and sexual assault workforce in Australia's history, following the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence. Some of these reforms include:

- The development of a 10 Year Industry Plan to provide a more systematic approach to workforce planning and developing our specialist family violence sector – our CEO, Annette Gillespie, is a member of the taskforce leading this plan;
- The creation of a Centre of Workforce Excellence to play a key role in research, identify core skills and capabilities across workforces, promote best practice and contribute to the development of formal workforce training;
- An investment in family violence and sexual assault industry planning to address areas such as staff retention, health and wellbeing issues and vicarious trauma;
- Minimum qualifications for all Victorian workers who respond directly to family violence and sexual assault; and
- The requirement for workforces to implement Cultural Safety Plans for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients, the Rainbow Tick for LGBTIQ+ clients and other measures to ensure diversity is respected and represented.

The Third Action Plan of the National Plan also called for the development of “an evidence-based national workforce agenda to support frontline services and improve responses to violence against women and their children”¹⁴. This would include “identify(ing) gaps and challenges faced by these workforces and recommended actions that could be undertaken by employers and funding bodies to strengthen the workforce”¹⁵. As part of the Third Action Plan, COAG determined that the working group to progress this action would be led by Victoria¹⁶.

All of these reforms mean that any Victoria-based family violence and sexual assault workforce is well-placed to take advantage of improvements to best practice workplace development and support. It means that Victorian organisations will be the nationwide industry leaders for providing workplaces for family violence and sexual assault prevention, response and recovery staff.

PROVISION OF BEST PRACTICE FAMILY, DOMESTIC AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE COUNSELLING

safe steps Family Violence Response Centre, DV Connect Queensland and Women's Safety Services South Australia are each expert at what they do – delivering trauma-informed practice to women and their children who have experienced family violence and sexual assault. Our partnership with MHS offers an unparalleled opportunity to combine this expertise with their world-recognised leadership in the form of technology, infrastructure and supervision. This arrangement allows us to each focus on what we are best at to deliver a truly cohesive standardised national service.

Amongst the opportunities presented by the partnership with MHS are the following resources which will complement those already in place within our three state-wide services:

- Standardised Blue Knot Foundation training in trauma-informed practice;
- Additional clinical staff to support our team leaders at a high level;
- A Customer Relationship Management and telephony system of the very highest standard; and
- On-call supervision to resource and support staff at the point of immediate need.

In our experience of best practice, the standard amount of time that is allotted for a 1800 RESPECT specialist trauma counselling call is sufficient to provide a therapeutic response together with time for the staff member to take records of the call and receive feedback and response.

The Practice Model for continuous improvement of 1800 RESPECT is being developed by MHS in full consultation with the three panel providers. We feel that we are able to lend our expertise strongly to this document and the best practice that it informs.

We feel confident that the 1800 RESPECT model is set up to ensure an environment is created in which to foster best possible outcomes.

CONCLUSION

“The new organisations joining the panel are well-respected, not-for-profit, state-based domestic violence crisis services. No-one would question their experience in providing excellent and crucial support to women in crisis, including information and referral services. I've visited some of those services myself, and I've seen firsthand the excellent work they do with victims and survivors of family and domestic violence.” – Terri Butler MP, Shadow Minister for Preventing Family Violence.¹⁷

In conclusion, **safe steps** Family Violence Response Centre would like to reiterate how excited we are to have the opportunity to work alongside Women’s Safety Services South Australia, DV Connect Queensland and MHS to deliver a cohesive national service which emphasises the strengths of each of the four partners in providing best-practice family violence and sexual assault safety and counselling options for women and their children. The potential to standardise a national best-practice response to women at this scale and drawing on this level of expertise is, in our opinion, unprecedented. We have responded herein to concerns which have been raised by some sections of the public in recent weeks and moving forward, would caution against any further moves which will prompt unnecessary hesitation or ill-ease in the women and their loved ones who rely on a consistently excellent 1800 RESPECT trauma counselling service. The first priority for us all must be to rally behind the delivery of a national service which responds to the safety and recovery needs of the women of Australia and their children.

We are looking forward to continuing to grow and develop the 1800 RESPECT model beyond 29 October 2017 and welcome the outcomes of this Inquiry as an opportunity to provide further feedback and support to 1800 RESPECT’s onward journey.

¹ The Hon Christian Porter MP, Minister for Social Services (10 August 2017) ‘Government welcomes new approach to 1800 RESPECT’, <https://christianporter.dss.gov.au/media-releases/government-welcomes-new-approach-to-1800respect>

² Commonwealth of Australia (2012) ‘Safe and Free from Violence: National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children, including the first three-year Action Plan’, https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/08_2014/national_plan1.pdf p10.

³ Commonwealth of Australia (2012) ‘Safe and Free from Violence: National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children, including the first three-year Action Plan’, https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/08_2014/national_plan1.pdf piii.

⁴ Commonwealth of Australia (2012) ‘Safe and Free from Violence: National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children, including the first three-year Action Plan’, https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/08_2014/national_plan1.pdf pii.

⁵ Commonwealth of Australia (2012) ‘Safe and Free from Violence: National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children, including the first three-year Action Plan’, https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/08_2014/national_plan1.pdf p24.

- ⁶ Commonwealth of Australia (2017) 'Budget 2017-18), <http://www.budget.gov.au/2017-18/content/>
- ⁷ Commonwealth of Australia (2012) 'Safe and Free from Violence: National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children, including the first three-year Action Plan', https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/08_2014/national_plan1.pdf p23.
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APPENDIX: SAFE STEPS STRATEGIC PLAN