



Australian Government

Australian Government response to the
Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee
report:

Delivery of National Outcome 4 of the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against
Women and Their Children (1800RESPECT)

March 2018

Introduction

The Australian Government welcomes the Finance and Public Administration References Committee (the Committee's) report to the Inquiry into the delivery of National Outcome 4 of the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children 2010-22 (1800RESPECT).

The Australian Government is committed to ensuring people who are experiencing or at risk of domestic and family violence or sexual assault are able to access the high quality support they need, when they need it, through 1800RESPECT.

The Inquiry considered the adequacy and quality of counselling, procurement arrangements, staff engagement, evaluation activities and best practice for domestic and sexual violence counselling. The report makes eight recommendations relating to staff training, qualifications, experience and work arrangements; funding and procurement of the service; program evaluation; and privacy.

The Australian Government supports the eight recommendations made by the Committee, noting that many are already an established part of standard business practices, or have been implemented.

Inquiry into the Delivery of National Outcome 4 of the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Their Children (1800RESPECT)

Recommendations made by the Committee

1. The committee recommends that the Government ensure that 1800RESPECT first response triage counsellors and trauma counsellors have adequate qualifications and experience and an appropriate work environment. Specifically that:
 - The 1800RESPECT first response triage service is staffed only by counsellors with a minimum three year tertiary degree in counselling or equivalent and a demonstrated minimum three years' experience in specialised counselling in family domestic violence and sexual assault counselling and working with clients from diverse backgrounds and locations.
 - The committee recommends that the government review the working arrangements for first response counsellors employed by Medibank Health Solutions, and intervene to ensure that:
 - first responders receive appropriate initial and ongoing training;
 - appropriate clinical supervision is provided;
 - the practice of working from home cease; and
 - policies and procedures aimed at protecting clients, and also those aimed at protecting responders from vicarious trauma, are implemented.
 - More broadly, the committee recommends that the government consider whether having a principal contractor, rather than the specialist services themselves, providing first responder services represents value for money and best-practice.

Supports.

The Australian Government supports the recommendation that first response triage counsellors and trauma counsellors have adequate qualifications and experience, and an appropriate work environment.

The Australian Government notes that first responders already have a mandatory three-year tertiary degree in counselling or equivalent, and two years counselling experience, and that there is no evidence to suggest that qualifications of the first response counsellors should increase from the current two years experience in a relevant field to three years.

The Australian Government notes that policies and procedures are already in place aimed at protecting clients, and also those aimed at protecting responders from vicarious trauma. The Australian Government supports opportunities to explore how these protections can be enhanced as part of ongoing improvement of the service.

The Australian Government can confirm first response counsellors receive appropriate initial and ongoing training to a very high standard through a recognised industry leader, NSW Blue Knot Foundation.

All first response counsellors have access to professional development, internal training, an education allowance, and also receive regular individual and group clinical supervision.

Further, the Australian Government notes that robust mechanisms are already in place to ensure the ongoing quality of this counselling service remains high, including:

- a National Sector Advisory Group which provides input on the ongoing operations and future directions of 1800RESPECT, with representatives from a diverse range of organisations across the sector

- a comprehensive clinical governance framework that is subject to regular review by MHS and the panel organisations, to ensure ongoing relevance and continuous improvement in the provision of best practice trauma counselling
- recording and quality review of calls that allows for the random selection of interactions to be assessed against an agreed standard
- IT infrastructure including the telephony and electronic clinical record system to ensure clients receive continuity of service
- workforce planning to ensure sufficient staff are available to answer calls when needed
- clinical governance meetings to review program data, trends, policies and protocols, as well as Performance and Improvement Committees to provide strategic and operational overview of 1800RESPECT service and weekly operational meetings.

The Australian Government has provided extensive evidence about the administration and implementation of this program to this Inquiry and to numerous Senate processes such as Senate Estimates.

The Australian Government supports further consideration of working from home practices, and value for money and best-practice procurement arrangements. It will look closely at this model through an evaluation of 1800RESPECT which is currently underway.

2. In respect of the trauma specialist counsellors, the committee recommends:

- that sufficient funding be made available for the telephone counselling function of the 1800 RESPECT to ensure that there are sufficient specialist trauma counsellors to meet current and future demand for counselling, having regard to both quantitative and qualitative performance measures.

Supports.

The Australian Government supports the recommendation noting that it considers extensive funding is currently available, including increases along with the first response model of an additional \$11.24 million from 2016-17 to 2018-19, and additional funding that accompanied the introduction of panel arrangements, taking the 2017-18 funding to over \$19 million.

From 2010-11 to 2019, \$106.12 million has been allocated to deliver 1800RESPECT. This funding has been used to fund the ongoing operations of the service as well as a series of targeted enhancements to the operating model, allowing more people to access support when they need it. Additional funding accompanied the introduction of panel arrangements on 29 October 2017, which takes the total annual funding of 1800RESPECT from \$14 million in 2016-17 to over \$19 million in 2017-18. This includes \$7.76 million provided for Trauma Specialist Counselling, across the panel of not-for-profit panel organisations, an arrangement, in which the previous subcontracted provider was invited to participate.

In recent years, the demand for the service has continued to increase and the Australian Government continually monitors the appropriateness of funding to ensure people who are experiencing or at risk of domestic and family violence or sexual assault are able to access the high quality support they need, when they need it, through 1800RESPECT.

3. The committee notes that many of the procurement and accountability issues revealed in this inquiry are the remit of the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) and strongly recommends that the government management of the program and its procedures is reviewed by the ANAO.

Supports.

The Australian Government supports accountability and transparency and welcomes activities that support improvements in public sector performance. The Australian Government notes that no material canvassed in this report provides evidence of any breach of Commonwealth rules and guidelines. It further notes the program will receive further extensive scrutiny through the evaluation, which is currently underway, and will require Departmental resources to manage, as will the implementation of new panel arrangements.

4. The committee recommends that the Department of Social Services develop an evaluation schedule for the 1800RESPECT program and release a high level evaluation plan that includes the quantitative and qualitative performance measures the contractors and sub-contractors will be measured against.

Supports.

The Australian Government supports transparent and robust assessment of 1800RESPECT to inform the continuous improvement of this important service. In recognition of this commitment an evaluation process is already underway, with both qualitative and quantitative measures.

5. The committee recommends the Department of Social Services brief its staff and contractors on their legal and contractual requirements in program management and Senate Standing Orders.

Supports.

The Australian Government supports the recommendation that all staff and contractors are adequately briefed and trained on legal and contractual requirements in program management and Senate Standing Orders. The Department of Social Services advises that sufficient processes are already in place to support staff and contractors to fulfil these requirements. The Department also advises that its officials worked closely with legal advisors and experienced program managers at all stages in the design and implementation of the 1800RESPECT program.

Legal counsel was also sought and acted upon throughout the inquiry to ensure Departmental officials were briefed on, and able to comply with, Senate Standing Orders while ensuring that appropriate consideration was given to protecting the legitimate legal rights and interests of private organisations and persons involved in the 1800RESPECT program.

6. The committee further recommends that the government consider whether the principal contractor model, as currently arranged, represents value for money and best-practice. Specifically, the committee recommends that the government consider whether the value of the contract management services provided by Medibank Health Solutions (MHS) justifies the public funding provided to MHS for that purpose, or whether that is a function that would be better provided by government, with MHS retaining responsibility for the technological (telephony and online) aspects of the program.

Supports.

The Australian Government supports the recommendation that the Government support value for money and best practice approaches to implementation. These objectives will be considered as part of the evaluation of 1800RESPECT.

7. The committee recommends that the Department of Social Services require Medibank Health Solutions to develop 1800RESPECT specific privacy information that clearly explains how personal information will be recorded and maintained. The privacy information will detail what the individual's options are, including opting out of recordings and remaining anonymous.

Supports.

The Australian Government supports this recommendation, noting that details about how people's personal information will be handled, used and managed when they contact 1800RESPECT is already available on the 1800RESPECT website, and that privacy information has recently been updated to include information on call recording. Monitoring the adequacy of information available to users is a standard business as usual practice. Since the Senate Inquiry, MHS has reviewed its privacy information to now specify that callers have ability to use the service anonymously; why personal information is collected; what personal information is used for; who personal information is disclosed to; and how a person is able to access their personal information. An Interactive Voice Response on the 1800RESPECT phone line now also explains that callers have the option to not record their call and the option to listen to the privacy policy in more detail. The Australian Government supports further and continued development of this material.

MHS has always been obliged under its contract with the Department to handle personal information and provide privacy information to individuals in accordance with the Privacy Act 1988 as if it was the Department. These obligations are standard to all Departmental contracts and grant agreements, and are required to be included in contracts so that the Department can also meet its own legislative requirements under the Privacy Act. These obligations include that MHS must develop sufficient privacy policies, systems and processes for 1800RESPECT that comply with the Australian Privacy Principles.

8. The committee recommends that the Department of Social Services (DSS) require Medibank Health Solutions (MHS) to develop a clear statement for the 1800RESPECT website detailing:

- how MHS manages information, voice records and files; and
- relevant information on the extent and limitations of privacy and confidentiality in a manner that they potential callers can fully understand.
- that the DSS develop a clear, written protocol on handling of subpoenas and applying
- that staff are informed of these protocols and their requirements.
- that this protocol is made available on the 1800 RESPECT website.

Supports.

The Australian Government supports this recommendation. Complying with subpoenas is a legal obligation, and MHS and the Department's approach is to act in the best interests of the alleged victims whilst complying with the law.

The Australian Government notes that the 1800RESPECT website currently includes content on information management, privacy and confidentiality. Continuous monitoring of the adequacy of information provided to users is already a standard business as usual practice, and the Australian Government supports that information be expanded and that information on voice records and file information be introduced. The Australian Government notes that MHS has a publically available policy on their website describing their approach to handling subpoenas. The Department of Social Services will require MHS to develop a protocol for handling subpoenas by March 2018 that is specific to the 1800RESPECT service and for this to be made available on the 1800RESPECT website.