

Meeting of the COAG Women's Safety Council

30 March and 2 April 2020

COMMUNIQUÉ

The COAG Women's Safety Council held its inaugural meeting via teleconference on 30 March 2020, which was followed by a second teleconference on 2 April 2020. Ministers agreed an approach to address the impact of COVID-19 on women and children experiencing, or at risk of, family and domestic violence, and on the specialist service providers that support them.

The Council was co-chaired by the Commonwealth Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister for Women, Senator the Hon Marise Payne, and the Commonwealth Minister for Families and Social Services, Senator the Hon Anne Ruston.

Action Plan to meet the needs of people experiencing violence during COVID-19

The Council welcomed the Commonwealth Government's emergency \$150 million investment to bolster family and domestic violence supports given the expected increase in violence against women as a result of living changes forced by COVID-19. This funding will help ensure services can continue to support those who need it most over the next six months.

The investment is strengthened by the continuing efforts and enhancements made by state and territory governments in responding to family and domestic violence including emergency and crisis accommodation, counselling and outreach programs, and men's behavioural change programs. The Council also welcomed other jurisdictional responses, including passing urgent legislation to ensure the safety of women and children during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Discussions also centred around the ways that the Australian Government's \$150 million can be drawn on in support of state and territory based frontline services.

As an immediate response, the Australian Government will provide \$32.5 million to states and territories to help meet urgent needs.

The Council agreed that each state and territory would direct this funding to meet the needs of those experiencing violence, in particular through the following areas:

- safer housing and emergency accommodation,
- counselling and outreach,
- crisis support and helplines,
- men's behaviour change programs and other perpetrator interventions,
- assisting frontline services to manage the demand and explore new technology-based service delivery methods, and
- responding to the unique challenges in regional, rural and remote locations.

The Council agreed to continue monitoring the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and work together to allocate a further \$97.5 million over the next six months to where it is most needed.



The Council committed to work with the Commonwealth Government to deliver a national information campaign that encourages Australians experiencing violence to reach out for help, and give clear information on where they can access support. The Council also welcomed continuation of state and territory campaigns where they are in place. The Council also acknowledged that all jurisdictions should continue to prioritise distribution of multi-lingual written information in public spaces. The Council also agreed that all jurisdictions would continue to provide readily accessible referral information for appropriate family and domestic violence support services when distributing public materials on COVID-19, including online.

The Council noted the work of the Council of Attorneys-General, which is considering the impact of COVID-19 on the accessibility and enforcement of domestic violence orders. The Council agreed the importance of having a cross-portfolio approach to keeping women and their children safe.

Further work will be undertaken in coming weeks to agree further funding arrangements and future actions between the Commonwealth, states and territories.

The impact of COVID-19 on women and children experiencing family and domestic violence

The Council acknowledged that while it is critical for Australians to stay home to control the spread of COVID-19 and keep the community safe, for many women home is not a safe place to be.

While the COVID-19 outbreak is having a major impact on all Australians, measures in place to restrict the spread of COVID-19 are expected to increase the risk of violence against women and their children. In particular, quarantine and self-isolation measures may further exacerbate the risk for women and children in their homes with a perpetrator of violence. The Council also recognised that women may face increasing risks of abuse when they are online and that other external stressors are likely to act as a compounding factor, including health and economic concerns.

The Council acknowledged that the impacts of COVID-19 disproportionately affect many women, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, women on temporary or other visas, women with disability and women living in regional and remote areas. The violence and barriers to accessing support experienced by these women may be exacerbated by COVID-19 responses, including travel restrictions, social-isolation, and limits to family and cultural connectedness. The Council also recognised children will be impacted by COVID-19 and face increased risks of violence, neglect, online abuse and social-isolation. This will require responses that are age-appropriate, child-centred and tailored to their specific needs and stages of development.

Impact of COVID-19 on service providers delivering critical support to women and their children

The Council noted the growing demand for services and increased complexity in cases. Many frontline services, including women's support groups and men's behaviour change programs, have transitioned or will need to transition to online or telephone based services. This poses further challenges to managing the safety and privacy of people seeking support.

Next National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children

Ministers discussed COAG's recent commitment to commence consultation on the next *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children* in Alice Springs in 2020. To progress this important work in the context of COVID-19, the Council noted that adjustments would be required in light of travel restrictions, social distancing requirements and the diversion of community and sector efforts to managing the immediate risks to women's safety.

Help is available if you, or someone you know, is experiencing violence. In the case of an emergency call 000. For information, support and counselling contact 1800RESPECT (1800 737 732) or visit www.1800respect.org.au, or Mensline at www.mensline.org.au

