



Co-convened with Embolden SA

Sustainable Workforce Roundtable

Background

The Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission (the Commission) convened a Sustainable Workforce Roundtable, in partnership with Embolden SA, in Adelaide on 24 September 2024. Around 60 representatives participated, with representation from government, domestic and family violence (DFV) organisations, specialist sexual violence service providers, legal services, Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCOs), and providers of prevention and perpetrator intervention programs.

A strong and sustainable workforce is a priority issue for governments and the sector, with sustainable workforce development identified as a key action under the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022–2032* (the National Plan).

The First Action Plan 2023–2027 highlights the important of workforce: **“We will work toward developing and sustaining a strong national workforce by addressing workforce planning, workforce preparation and pathways, sector governance and coordination, working conditions and professional development.”** (Page 31)

Further, Action 3 states **“Increase and strengthen the capability of mainstream and specialist workforces to deliver quality services, activities and programs across the four domains, including those that are tailored to respond to the unique experiences of all victim-survivors.”**

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan also identifies workforce capacity and capability develop as a key short-term priority (page 51).

In its first Yearly Report to Parliament, the Commission noted the need for a national workforce strategy:

“Workforce capability development needs national leadership, prioritising the specialist domestic, family, and sexual violence workforce. Since addressing domestic, family and sexual violence is a key element of work across many sectors, capability development and integration with these workforces is an opportunity to improve system responses.” (Page 13)

What we heard



Priority areas for action

Roundtable attendees identified the following as key actions to prioritise.

- 1. Strong support for a national workforce strategy**
- 2. Recognition of the importance of Family Violence and Sexual Assault specialisation**
As well as the need for a focus on building these specialist workforces.
- 3. Recognition of the unique challenges facing ACCOs and their workforce**
- 4. Building the capability of mainstream service providers**
Key to improving the capacity of the system to delivering better outcomes.
- 5. Leadership and professional development**
Critical to retention in specialist workforces.
- 6. More flexible approaches to funding and funding models**
Informed by local knowledge would lead to greater outcomes.

1. Strong support for a national workforce strategy

- There is an immediate need to expand a workforce already stretched from increased rates of reporting and help seeking as a result of DFV. As one participant stated, “The time for “early” workforce planning has been and gone”.
- A strategy should consider intersections with other elements of commonwealth activity, such as the University Accord, Care Economy, and working with tertiary education providers.
- There is a need for better workforce data and evidence, utilising the commitment to the national workforce data survey, and sharing available data and learnings across jurisdictions.
- Workforce strategies should consider the importance and needs of people with lived and living experience as staff and supporters, not only as clients.
- There should be a focus on building the capacity and capability of the workforce to meet the needs of First Nations communities, LGBTQ+ communities, migrant and refugee communities, and people with disability.
- Governments should recognise the success of place-based responses already delivering results for communities and provide greater flexibility of funding to enable local providers to continue to develop place-based responses.
- Resourcing should be allocated for the effective implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of any workforce strategy.
- A workforce strategy should address the barriers to attracting and retaining staff, including making wages and conditions more competitive, particularly for those in rural and remote areas. The community sector cannot compete with the high salaries in both corporate and government organisations.
- A strategy should consider the enhancing the skills and capabilities of other sectors whose workforces regularly engage with people experiencing domestic, family, and sexual violence (DFS) to achieve greater reach and outcomes.
- Any strategy should build on and learn from work undertaken by Victoria, and underway in New South Wales, Queensland and Western Australia, which provide a firm foundation.

2. Recognition of the importance of Family Violence and Sexual Assault specialisation

- Strong and well-resourced peaks can play a critical role in leadership and workforce development. Table discussions emphasised the need for greater investment in peak bodies – including national DFSV peaks – to enable them to adequately support the specialist sector through strategic leadership, coordination, and advocacy.
- Highly specialised workforces are at the greatest risk of lack of workforce continuity, as their numbers are small and the skillset required is specific. Workers in these services can sometimes be single workers in larger organisations, and do not always have a clear career path.
- An expanded workforce is required not only to meet increasing demand but also to respond to the ways in which people are presenting to the sector. These include different pathways into support for people who are at risk of using violence and support for those seeking healing and recovery.
- The differing support requirements of priority populations needs to be embedded into models of service delivery and the workforce. Addressing the needs of priority populations as an afterthought is not only causing issues for service delivery but also for recruitment and retention.
- The coordination functions that are expected of services (such as creating collaborations, communities of practice and relationship building) need to be recognised and properly funded
- Governments should invest in professional development to enhance workers ability to meet the culturally diverse needs of clients. Currently, workers at all levels struggle to find time for professional development.
- There needs to be more investment in organisations and services who work with adults who use violence. Funding models need to recognise the long-term nature of behavioural change and the need for ongoing support to maintain safe behaviour.

3. Recognition of the unique challenges facing ACCOs and their workforce.

- Attendees noted that ACCOs are best equipped to respond to the unique challenges facing their own sector, workforce, and communities.
- Organisations like First Nations Advocates Against Family Violence are critical to legal access for First Nations survivors of violence, which needs to be recognised in the context of wage disparity when compared to other community legal services and Legal Aid.
- Attendees highlighted that ACCOs need to be supported to grow into the DFSV space and build their specialist workforce with culturally appropriate services which meet the needs of individuals and communities.
- ACCOs are more likely to employ First Nations people, provide valuable cultural learning. They often act as a 'training ground' for government, and their movement into government roles can result in depletion of senior and specialised staff.
- Staff working in ACCOs face additional challenges working and living in communities whom they support. There is also an additional cultural burden to ensure the community is well supported.
- The ACCO workforce often have their own experiences of intergenerational trauma which needs to be recognised and supported to attract, support, and maintain Aboriginal staff.

4. Building the capability of mainstream service providers

- Building the capability of mainstream service providers (such as General Practitioners, health workers and educators) to identify and respond appropriately to people experiencing DFSV is critical to supporting the work of the specialist workforce.
- There should be greater collaboration between the specialist DFSV workforce and mainstream services to equip them to respond appropriately. Specialist services strongly support working with mainstream services to upskill the workforce, however this role needs to be formally recognised by agencies and funded appropriately.
- Competitive funding arrangements can have unintended consequences, such as diminishing cooperation between services and disadvantaging smaller services that lack capacity to engage in competitive tender processes.
- There has been steady progress made in building a broader workforce for prevention in mainstream services and community organisations. This emerging workforce will continue to contribute to systems and attitudinal change.
- Frontline government workers need better training to offer the 'right door' to anyone who needs support.

5. Leadership and professional development

- The DFSV workforce comprises passionate, committed, and hardworking staff, who are strongly motivated by ending all forms of violence. A large component of the workforce has their own lived experience of violence. This intrinsic motivation and experience is a key strength of the sector, but is under threat from other factors such as cost of living pressures, competing demands, and burnout.
- Frontline services need to be appropriately resourced to respond effectively to the risk of vicarious trauma. Flexible work options, such as additional leave and part-time options, may be beyond the capacity of underfunded services. This can be compounded by the increasing burden of significantly rising insurance premiums in response to the psychosocial complexity of work in the specialist sector.
- It is important that efforts to maintain and build the specialist workforce leads to greater representation of diverse communities, including First Nations workers.
- There are significant challenges in the pipeline for social work placements, including that the supervision requirements are sometimes beyond the capacity of small organisations, as well as placement requirements putting unfeasible demands on students' time and income.
- There is a role for governments to ensure that there is an expectation of more comprehensive and effective pre-service and ongoing training for professions that interact with people who experience DFSV.
- There should be a range of pathways for people to enter the specialist sector, including VET and TAFE pathways.
- Dedicated funding built into contracts is critical to support good supervision and transition from education to the workforce.
- Lack of workforce planning, including planning for full career pathways is contributing to challenges of 'juniorisation'; that is, creating a large pool of workers at a relatively junior level with limited opportunities for progress.

6. More flexible approaches to funding and funding models

- Governments need to build in flexibility in funding models to allow organisations to tailor support to meet the needs of their local communities.
- Governments need to consider local conditions when addressing challenges with recruitment and retention, such as addressing local infrastructure (or lack thereof), available and accessible housing, and availability of childcare.
- Organisations should have the flexibility to decide how to use funding to support their workforce needs. For example, agencies should be able to make decisions on workforce recruitment specific to the needs of their community.
- Funding bodies need to recognise the value of relationship building which takes time to build with clients, which is often not built into funding models based on outputs.
- Precarity of funding is causing significant stress on frontline workers, contributing to concerns about job security, and on leadership in organisations.
- The complexity and red tape of short-term project or 'innovation' funding is taking effort away from delivery and into administration.
- Funding for sexual violence has, in some states, been project specific rather than focusing on building the sexual violence workforce.
- All funding models should better support evaluation of effort and effectiveness, to enable improved government investment, greater organisational sustainability, and job satisfaction.

What's next?



The roundtable was part of an ongoing series convened by the Commission to create a space for national conversations on areas of priority and opportunities to accelerate implementation of the National Plan.

The discussions throughout the day demonstrated the ongoing urgency to meet the current and future needs of the domestic, family and sexual violence workforce.

The Commission will continue to work with governments, peak bodies and agencies to facilitate national conversations about what it will take to end gender violence. We encourage participants to learn from each other and to continue to pursue information sharing and collaboration opportunities across the business community.

Further information



- You can read more about the Department of Social Services work on a family, domestic and sexual violence workforce survey here: [National survey to provide insights into family, domestic and sexual violence workforce | Department of Social Services Ministers \(dss.gov.au\)](https://www.dss.gov.au/national-survey-to-provide-insights-into-family-domestic-and-sexual-violence-workforce)
- You can learn more about the Victorian Government's Workforce development activities at the Centre for Workforce Excellence website: [Centre for Workforce Excellence | vic.gov.au \(www.vic.gov.au\)](https://www.vic.gov.au/centre-for-workforce-excellence)
- Some of the research shared at the Roundtable included:
 - Mia Mandara, Sarah Wendt, Helen McLaren, Michelle Jones, Priscilla Dunk-West & Kate Seymour (2023) [First Contact Social Work: Responding to Domestic and Family Violence, Australian Social Work, 76:4, 589-602, DOI: 10.1080/0312407X.2021.1977969](https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2021.1977969)
 - Professor Sarah Wendt, Dr Kate Seymour, and Dr Sharyn Goudie, Strengthening Australia's Domestic and Family Violence Workforce Progress Report, December 2023, Our Watch, [Growing with Change, Developing an expert workforce to prevent violence against women](https://www.ourwatch.org.au/growing-with-change-developing-an-expert-workforce-to-prevent-violence-against-women)
 - First Nations Advocates Against Family Violence is convening a national Community of Practice to support staff in the sector. You can learn more about the Community of Practice, and sign up for free, here: <https://firstnationsadvocatesagainstofamilyviolence.snapforms.com.au/form/fnaafv-community-of-practice-registration>