



Hunter Region Report



Purpose for our visit

The Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission visited the Hunter region to participate in the Healing and Recovery Symposium, hosted by the Hunter New England and Central Coast Primary Health Network. During the visit, we also met with local and national organisations working across a range of areas to support people impacted by domestic, family and sexual violence.

Recovery and healing is the fourth pillar of the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022–2032*. This visit was an important chance to listen to people with lived experience, frontline workers, practitioners and researchers about what is required to better support individuals, families and communities.

Who we engaged with

- **The Hunter New England and Central Coast Primary Health Network (the PHN)**
 - PHN team members
 - Practitioners working within Safe and Healthy Framework programs and services:
 - Local Link Program
 - Primary Care Outreach Program
 - Supporting Recovery Pilot Program
 - Training for Primary Care
 - DFSV GP Clinic
- **Relationships Australia**
- **Connectivity Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) Australia**
- **Port Stephens Family and Neighbourhood Centre**
- **University of Newcastle and Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health**
- **The Hunter Domestic and Family Violence (DFV) Consortium, including:**
 - Warlga Ngurra Aboriginal Women and Children Domestic Violence and Homelessness Service
 - Carrie's Place Domestic Violence and Homelessness Service
 - Family Support Newcastle
 - Got Your Back Sista
 - Jenny's Place Domestic Violence and Homelessness Service
 - Nova for Women and Children Domestic Violence and Homelessness Service
 - Port Stephens Family and Neighbourhood Services
 - Upper Hunter Homeless Support
- **The Healing and Recovery Symposium also allowed us to hear from:**
 - Lived experience advocates
 - Australian Childhood Foundation
 - Eleanor Duncan Aboriginal Services
 - Gudjagang Ngara li-dhi
 - Safe & Together Institute
 - Transforming Justice Australia
 - Anglicare
 - BaptistCare
 - HealthWISE
 - Relationships Australia
 - Uniting
 - Achor Point Therapy
 - RESTORE Centre of Research Excellence, University of Melbourne

What we heard

Across the visit, people shared strong and consistent messages about what helps individuals, families and communities to heal and recover from violence.

Collaborative, person-centred system responses

We heard that people need support systems to work together – rather than services dealing with issues in isolation – to address intersecting needs. In contrast, we heard about the limitations of short-term funding and crisis focused responses that, while important for safety, often don't support long-term healing and stop cycles of violence.

Feedback on the Supporting Recovery Pilot, Local Link and other PHN-commissioned programs demonstrated the recovery outcomes made possible through person-centred, longer-term approaches that allow different organisations to work together. Frontline workers reported that these approaches enabled them to support people without rushing, turning them away, or forcing them to fit narrow referral criteria.

Feedback on these models in practice fostered collective ownership of outcomes for people being supported.

Transforming Justice Australia also emphasised the value of restorative and transformative justice as part of person-centred responses that are helpful for healing, accountability, and repairing harm.

By centring people's individual experiences and building trusting relationships with patients and across services, these approaches show opportunities for moving beyond crisis response toward lasting wellbeing.

Whole-of-family approaches

Participants were clear that to stop violence from continuing across generations, support needs to include the whole family.

- Children and young people should be recognised as victims in their own right, with support that suits their age and development. This can involve observing behaviour as communication, or using alternatives such as play and creative therapies.
- The wellbeing of mothers is critical to children's recovery. Women need ongoing support for their own healing, alongside help with parenting and daily pressures after experiencing violence.
- Men and boys also need to be included in long-term work that addresses harm, accountability and their own past trauma to support healthier ideas about masculinity and belonging.

Empowered First Nations-led healing

First Nations organisations and community members stressed that healing is cultural, long-term, and strongly connected to community and Country.

Short funding cycles and rigid reporting requirements were described as barriers to meaningful healing. Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) called for long-term, flexible funding and the ability to define what success looks like for their communities.

There were also strong calls for governments and partners to genuinely share power with First Nations organisations, involving them in decision-making and design – not just service delivery. Supporting the wellbeing of First Nations workers was also seen as essential.

Ongoing health and wellbeing impacts

Researchers and lived experience advocates highlighted that domestic, family and sexual violence has lasting effects on physical health, mental health, education and employment.

Connectivity Traumatic Brain Injury Australia spoke about the hidden impact of traumatic brain injuries caused by violence, including strangulation and repeated blows to the head. They explained that these injuries are often missed or mistaken for other issues. A strong need was highlighted for better screening, training and referral pathways, including culturally appropriate responses for First Nations communities.

Other research presented at the Symposium, including from the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health and the RESTORE Centre of Research

Excellence, showed strong links between experiences of domestic, family and sexual violence and poorer health and educational outcomes throughout a person's life. We heard that violence – most commonly occurring in the home – can significantly disrupt women's participation in education, employment and community life, leading to long-term impacts on health and wellbeing.

Education was described as both a protective factor and a potential pathway to healing, with higher education and participation in research offering connection, purpose and a sense of being valued, although this area requires further research.

We sincerely thank everyone who generously shared their time and insights with us.

