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31 May 2022

Safe Homes, Families, Communities Team
Department of Communities Tasmania
P.O. Box 538 Hobart TAS 7001

Dear Safe Homes, Families, Communities Team,

Submission to Tasmania's Third Family and Sexual Violence Action Plan

I am pleased to provide this submission to the development of Tasmania's Third Family and Sexual Violence Action Plan on behalf of Uniting Vic.Tas (Uniting). Uniting is the community services organisation of the Uniting Church in Victoria and Tasmania. We have worked alongside local communities in these two states since 1881. We work across the full spectrum of community services, intervening early to help people avoid crisis, as well as supporting those who live life at the margins.

We deliver a range of services across Hobart, Launceston, Southern and North-Western Tasmania including providing early learning to over 350 children, parenting and family programs and services in Hobart and surrounds extending into some parts of the North West coast including around Ulverstone. We also provide crisis support through emergency relief and community meals in Hobart and family violence services through the CRIB program in Launceston and North Western Tasmania as well as administering the national [Escaping Violence Payment](#) initiative.

We welcome the development of the Third Family and Sexual Violence Action Plan and believe it provides an opportunity to invest in actions to prevent family and sexual violence in Tasmania and respond more effectively to those impacted. We call on the Tasmanian government to:

- consider the impact of COVID-19 on the experiences of family and sexual violence, with particular attention to the number of people seeking support for the first time, the increase in severity of violence and the complexity of presenting issues for people seeking support.
- embed tangible actions to respond to the needs of children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right and expand funding for vital support services for Tasmanian children and young people.
- expand funding for vital perpetrator intervention programs to reduce family violence offending.
- recognise the distinct and diverse lived experience of Aboriginal communities and LGBTIQ+ people and their unique support needs.

We also seek an Action Plan that is adequately resourced, clearly defines the roles of government and the community sector, embeds tangible actions and accountability for meaningful outcomes via evaluation of those actions. Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to this important process. If you would like more information, please contact Uniting's Advocacy and Public Policy Manager, Thomas Johnson on 0400 315 446 or via email at Thomas.Johnson@vt.uniting.org.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jeremy Pettet". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Jeremy Pettet
Executive Officer, Uniting Tasmania

Submission to the Third Tasmanian Family and Sexual Violence Action Plan

Introductory comments

Family and sexual violence are major health and social issues in Australia. While family and sexual violence affects people of all ages, genders and backgrounds, it predominately impacts women and children and is perpetrated by men.¹ Nationally, one in six women over the age of 15 has experienced physical violence by a current or former intimate partner and one in five women has experienced sexual violence.² On average, one Australian woman a week is killed by a current or former partner.

Uniting is deeply concerned about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on family and sexual violence and what has been termed “The Shadow Pandemic”. Research undertaken by the Australian Institute of Criminology produced as part of the [ANROWS research program](#) found that in the 12 months to February 2021:

- 1 in 10 women experienced physical violence (9.6%) from their partner
- 1 in 3 (32%) experienced emotionally abusive, harassing and controlling behaviours
- Nearly 1 in 12 (7.6%) experienced sexual violence from their partner.

Tasmanian data from family and sexual violence service providers collated by the Department of Communities shows Tasmania experienced an increase in both the number of family violence incidents and severity of violence during the pandemic.³ Data from service providers across the state also indicates COVID-19 was used as a new method of violence and control, for example, using the threat of COVID-19 as a reason to restrict the movement of a victim/survivor.

COVID-19 also led to increases in complexity of issues for those presenting to specialist services and for some was the impetus to seeking support for family violence for the first time. For example, a significant proportion of those seeking support through the national Escaping Violence Payment (EVP) initiative in Tasmania are doing so for the first time.

We urge the Tasmanian Government to consider the impact of COVID-19 on the experiences of family and sexual violence in the development of the Third Family and Sexual Violence Action Plan, with particular attention to the number of people seeking support for the first time, the increase in severity of violence and complexity of presenting issues for people seeking support.

¹ AIHW 2021. *Examination of hospital stays due to family and domestic violence 2010–11 to 2018–19*
<https://www.aihw.gov.au/news-media/media-releases/2021-1/december/fdsv-2021>

² Australian Bureau of Statistics cited in ANROWS 2015 *Landscapes: Perpetrator Interventions in Australia. Part One: Literature Review*, ANROWS

³ https://www.safefromviolence.tas.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0029/144776/Summary-paper-Tasmanian-FSV-sector-experience-of-COVID-19-December-2020-web.pdf

In developing this submission, we have consulted with a number of Uniting Tasmanian Family Services staff, managers and senior leadership to identify and respond directly to the key consultation questions as follows:

All Tasmanians have a right to be free from family and sexual violence - what do you think would help stop family and sexual violence from happening before it starts?

The drivers of family violence are located right across society in our social and cultural norms. The consensus across national and international research is that family violence arises in the social context of gender inequality.⁴

Considerable research has been undertaken in Australia on this issue and we recommend this work be examined in drafting the Third Tasmanian Family and Sexual Violence Action Plan and that evidence inform investment in broad, community level initiatives to prevent family and sexual violence for occurring in the first place.

At Uniting, we see many families with current or past experiences of family violence and witness the long-term impact this can have on people developing and maintaining healthy relationships when they start their own family. As one of our Family Services practitioners working in Southern Tasmania reports:

"Quite often we'll see young parents who are bringing that same behaviour from their family of origin into their new family and that is an area that has gone unrecognised."

We are fortunate to work with parents, children and young people through a number of our programs to support the development of healthy and resilient families and non-violent relationships. However, there are many families across Tasmania in need of early intervention and prevention programs that do not have access to such supports.

We offer the following insights into how we can improve supports for vulnerable families and those at risk of experiencing family violence:

- Ensure the Third Family and Sexual Violence Action Plan makes explicit the connection between gender inequality, other forms of inequality and family and sexual violence
- Outline the roles and actions of government, non-government and community sectors in preventing family and sexual violence
- Ensure evaluation is built into the Action Plan to clearly map achievements, outcomes and impacts attached to the plan.
- Provide resourcing to support any prevention infrastructure and activity in the plan
- Amplify investment in early intervention programs to support families facing multiple disadvantages and stressors
- Amplify parenting support available to vulnerable families through programs such as *NewPin* and expand the capacity of family services to work with primary school aged children
- Invest in school-based programs which provide young people with education on healthy and equal relationships

⁴ Our Watch *The Issue* <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/the-issue/>

Children and young people are victim-survivors in their own right – in what ways can we better understand the specific experiences of children and young people in relation to family and sexual violence, and how can we better meet their needs?

A child can be exposed to violence either by:

- Directly experiencing the violence (being the target)
- Witnessing violence being inflicted upon somebody else.⁵
- Instances where they are not directly experiencing or witnessing but have an awareness of the violence taking place within the home.

Research has found that exposure to family violence is associated with a range of negative outcomes for children and young people, including but not limited to:

- Diminished educational attainment
- Reduced social participation in early adulthood
- Physical and psychological disorders
- Suicidal ideation
- Behavioural difficulties
- Homelessness
- Future victimisation and/or violence offending.

The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted children and young people, particularly those already facing socio-economic disadvantage. Yet the experiences of children and young people are all too often hidden from view. This is especially true for children who have experienced, or are currently experiencing, family violence

Across Tasmania, Uniting provides parenting support programs and offers support for families experiencing disadvantage and crisis. Our child and family services have been under increasing demand during the pandemic, exacerbated by current funding models that do not reflect the true cost of service delivery.

Data from our *Newpin* services, for example, points to the significant unmet need of families experiencing family violence across Tasmania. *Newpin* is a therapeutic program funded by the Tasmanian government to provide practical and emotional support to families with at least one child under the age of five. The program support families to provide safe, nurturing environments for children, through early intervention.

Data from 2021 reveals a significant number of our families are experiencing family violence. Triangulating this service-level data against data recorded under the national *Escaping Violence Payment* initiative together with our practitioner insights, data from Tasmanian police and data collected by the Tasmanian Commissioner for Children and Young People points to significant unmet need for children and young people who are experiencing or have experienced family violence.

Increased investment in family services is necessary to recognise the voices and experiences of children and young people as victim/survivors of family violence in their own right, and to ensure that children do not miss out on vital support.

⁵ Kulkarni MR, Graham-Bermann S, Rauch SA & Seng J 2011. Witnessing versus experiencing direct violence in childhood as correlates of adulthood PTSD. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 26(6):1264–1281

Tasmanians know what works best in their families and communities -

- **What actions, initiatives, programs and approaches are currently working well? Why are they working well?**
- **What needs to be done differently? In what ways?**
- **What do we need to do more of? Why?**

Our practitioners continue to highlight the importance of holistic, wrap-around supports that are focussed on keeping women and children safe and addressing a family's multiple needs. For instance, Uniting family services practitioners report that family violence is a leading cause of homelessness among women and children. A severe shortage of affordable housing across Tasmania is placing women and children at great risk. For some, the choice is between a violent home or no home at all – a choice nobody should have to make. **More needs to be done to provide safe, supported and long-term housing options for people escaping family violence.**

A case study*

I have been working with a young mother who has been exposed to repeated family violence at her current address, including one particularly violent incident where her life had been in imminent danger. This young mother has a pre-schooler and a young infant. I have been unable to secure safe housing for this family.

The pre-schooler has and continues to experience trauma as a result of the family violence. I have been unable to access any services to help this mother and her children to address the trauma this family has experienced.

After repeated requests and advocacy from myself, this mother has recently been elevated onto the emergency waiting list for alternate accommodation. My client's life was in imminent danger and since that time, which is more than six months ago, she has been waiting for an urgent housing transfer. My client has visited her GP seeking help for her child, who was experiencing trauma symptoms including nightmares and an inability to sleep alone and some aggressive behaviour. The GP advised my client that moving to another house would help.

The perpetrator of the family violence has known my client's address since the life-threatening incident. If my client is to access transitional housing, she would have to relinquish her current lease and be at the bottom of the waiting list again should there be no permanent housing available when her lease on the transitional housing expires.

My client has been left with no options and lives in constant fear.

*Names and other identifiable details have been removed to protect privacy and confidentiality

This case study demonstrates the complexity of need facing some families where limited housing options for those experiencing violence mean they face the choice to exit their current property into homelessness while also supporting young children who have experienced significant trauma. Access to tailored, specialist trauma-focussed support for those children who have witnessed family violence in the home is urgently needed:

"One of the gaps we are seeing is in early intervention support to address the trauma experienced by children in the family, in the homes where there is family violence." – Uniting practitioner

The needs of these younger children may be from witnessing one parent perpetrate violence against another (typically the father against the mother) or from being exposed to other forms of family violence such as older siblings using violence in the home. Our practitioners have reported a significant gap in support for families where an adolescent is using violence in the home:

"Certainly, there is a gap where adolescents in the home are using violence against siblings or parents and damaging property that kind of thing. Child Safety won't help, the police won't really help and children end up on the street and involved with Juvenile Justice from there."

"There is this need and push that a parent has to [prioritise] protecting the younger ones, but for the parents – what do they do with the older ones? Because they are a parent to all the children."

Another practitioner noted:

"I've previously worked with a family where the violence had been going on for a very very long time and the 16-year-old's autism was quite severe but the parent just had nowhere to go. The younger children were witnessing mum being [physically assaulted]"

Uniting's own research in the area has revealed extensive wait-times and substantial costs which act as barriers to getting children the support they need in a timely and equitable manner. In discussing the available funds within the EVP, our staff reported:

"... when a [parent] is thinking about what impact [the family violence] has had on their kids, the wait list to get into a child psychologist or play therapy programs that are [fee-based] means there are effectively no options that are affordable. They [specialist trauma psychologists for children] are so expensive and so costly that they are not even factoring into most peoples' budgets, and where they will spend their [EVP] payment. So those kids are going on with unmet need, which is going to translate to ongoing impacts for their social development and education.

We [Uniting] previously had one of the few free play-based therapy programs in Tasmania but lost the funding so we are no longer able to deliver it. The wait-lists for these kinds of services are 8 months minimum and that's if you've been referred as a crisis client and up to two years if the child hasn't been deemed at crisis point"

Another practitioner spoke of the devastating consequences for a young person experiencing violence perpetrated by their sibling:

"I took a phone call from a young girl whose older sibling was really violent and abusive. This young person ended up homeless and was really desperate for some support...In trying to find services to support her, I realised there is a huge gap for those experiencing violence from a sibling"

Uniting asks the Tasmanian Government to embed tangible actions to respond to the needs of children and young people and expand funding for vital child and young person support services. This should include specialist trauma therapy and play-based therapy programs for younger children and support options for older children to keep them safe in their own home.

Uniting believes there is an urgent need to expand access to perpetrator intervention programs for those using violence in the family context, this includes Men's Behaviour Change programs and specialist support for other populations including adolescents using violence in the home.

Early data collected as part of our Tasmanian Family Violence research project has revealed a lack of specialist perpetrator intervention programs for those seeking to make change to their behaviour and extensive wait lists with limited access outside of major cities, leaving rural and regional Tasmanians with few specialist support services.

The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns have impacted access to men's behaviour change programs in Tasmania. The very real impact of a spike in family violence means the current system cannot meet demand and families are left without any support.

Uniting calls on the Tasmanian Government through the Third Family and Sexual Violence Action Plan to expand funding for vital perpetrator intervention programs. This includes exploring mechanisms to grow, upskill and diversify the workforce, through a suite of activities developed and delivered with child and family services as well as family violence services. This could include measures such as free access to specialist qualifications and must be linked to a broader community services workforce sustainability strategy. Uniting is currently undertaking a research project examining community need and reviewing the evidence on best practice in this area. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss our findings once the project is complete in later 2022, particularly in relation to the growth of new, evidence-based interventions.

How and in what ways can we meet the needs of victim-survivors of family and sexual violence? In answering, you may wish to consider victim-survivors with diverse lived experience, including older people, Tasmanian Aboriginal people, people with disability, CALD Tasmanians, people from rural and regional communities, and LGBTIQ+ Tasmanians.

Our submission has highlighted the many and varied ways in which disadvantage and discrimination can intersect to increase the risk of experiencing family or sexual violence but also create additional barriers to accessing the vital support people need. We are deeply concerned about the interconnections between poverty, homelessness and family violence and the structural discrimination and inequality experienced by different communities across Tasmania which influence the prevalence and experience of family violence.

Uniting sees firsthand the impact of poverty on the communities of Tasmania, particularly in the rural and regional areas where access to services is significantly reduced. Our practice experience highlights significant unmet demand across all components of the family violence service system from crisis support through to inadequate longer-term housing options, limited accessibility to perpetrator interventions for those using violence and inadequate trauma support for victim-survivors including children and young people.

In their national framework to prevent violence against women, *Our Watch* speak to these interconnections and structural inequalities:

"Many other forms of structural and systemic discrimination and inequality influence the prevalence and dynamics of violence against women. These include racism, ableism, ageism, heteronormativity, cissexism, class discrimination, and – for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women – the ongoing impacts of colonialism."

The distinct and diverse lived experience of victim-survivors must be adequately considered in development of an Action Plan with a particular focus on the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the ongoing impacts of colonialism on health and wellbeing.

Our practice experience points to a significant need in this area and **we call on the government to work closely with Aboriginal controlled organisations and communities to adequately and appropriately address community need in a culturally safe way.**

We also call on the Tasmanian Government to work closely with members of the LGBTIQ+ communities of Tasmania to address the ways in which family and sexual violence impact different communities and commit to tailored supports to address need.