



women's
legal
service
tasmania



Media statement

Thursday, 22 April 2021

Urgent Need for Response to Family Violence

Current situation

Two specialist women's services whose work is focussed on supporting survivors of family violence are facing shortfalls in funding or funding cutbacks without increased government investment. These organisations desperately need long-term State Government support to ensure service delivery to meet the needs of survivors.

One in three Australian women directly experience family violence.¹

This already high rate escalated as a result of COVID-19 and is expected to continue to rise because of ongoing financial uncertainty and hardship for many families.² The high profile national conversation about sexual assault is also driving women to seek legal and other support.

This is putting increasing pressure on the financial, emotional, legal and other services needed to support women and their families. For example, Women's Legal Service Tasmania has seen a 50% increase in demand for representation services as a result of COVID-19, due to more women experiencing relationship breakdowns and family violence.

People seeking Engender Equality's counselling service will wait approximately three months from the day they contact the service to their first appointment.

Impacts

Women will be turned away or forced to wait, enduring violence and uncertainty, due to a lack of funding for the specialist organisations that are best-placed to address this need. The consequences have ripple effects throughout our community and economy. For example, Women's Legal Service Tasmania is cutting staff due to their lack of funds meaning hundreds of women will not receive the legal assistance they need, including to secure property settlements for their and their children's financial security and wellbeing. Without financial security and independence more women will be reliant on government income and other supports.

Specialist organisations also play a key role in family violence prevention through the knowledge and advice they give to policy makers. The increasing concern in violence against women adds an additional load to specialist services who rise to meet this interest in workplaces and community groups. This crucial work is also under threat as a direct result of reduced funding. Prevention education and advocacy is the only way we will see a reduction in the demand for these services.

¹ Australian Human Rights Commission 2020, *Respect@Work: Sexual Harassment National Inquiry Report*.

² According to Legal Aid Tasmania, during the COVID-19 lockdown in Tasmania incidents of all crime fell except for family violence, Alan Hensley, personal communication, 4 March 2021.



The solution

The financial, relational and health impacts of the COVID-19 crisis will be felt for years to come. Preventing and responding to family violence is a State Government responsibility.

It is therefore vital that the next State Government acknowledge and support the rights of women to be safe and to have access to the legal and other services they need. We welcome commitments made to date and note that only through the long-term financial support outlined below, will these service be able to meet the current and expected demand with certainty and longevity.

We therefore call on all candidates and parties to commit to increase long-term funding for organisations that provide specialist women's services so they can:

- meet increased and growing demand; and
- continue their work to prevent family violence.

Women's Legal Service Tasmania needs an ongoing commitment of \$700,000 per year (in addition to existing funding).

Engender Equality needs an ongoing commitment of \$620,000 per year (in addition to existing funding).

Our sector supports us:

