



**CAWLS media release, 19 September 2014 - NT Domestic and Family Violence Reduction Strategy 2014 – 2017: Safety is Everyone's Right**

The Central Australian Women's Legal Service (CAWLS) provides free legal advice to all women in Central Australia. A large part of our legal practice relates to domestic and family violence, which continues to occur with appalling frequency across Australia and particularly in the Northern Territory.

The *Northern Territory Domestic and Family Violence Reduction Strategy 2014 – 2017: Safety is Everyone's Right* ("the Strategy"), launched today in Alice Springs, confirms that the NT Government is deeply concerned about the issue. We welcome this initiative, which clearly identifies the elimination of domestic and family violence as a top priority for government. Collective concern from all levels of the community, including leadership from government on this issue, is essential to addressing domestic and family violence. Increased public advocacy against all forms of violence has the potential to fortify victims, building confidence to seek help with the knowledge that domestic and family violence will not be tolerated by society.

Courts have been identified as critical points of contact, where intervention between victims of domestic and family violence and frontline workers occurs. Adequate resources must be directed towards equipping professionals and the justice system itself with an increased capacity to mitigate the risk of re-traumatisation faced by victims during the legal process. A positive step would be ensuring the availability of private, secure spaces for lawyers and support persons to consult with domestic violence clients who are attending court to give evidence.

In many cases, the risk of intimidation and violence from a perpetrator or members of the perpetrator's family will be an overwhelming barrier that can prompt a victim to disengage from the legal process. This must be urgently addressed. Whilst there have been positive developments in this regard through vulnerable witness legislation, it is essential that awareness is raised as to the existence and utility of provisions designed to protect and support victims, so that these laws can be better utilised by professionals working within the court system.

We note with some concern that there is no immediate commitment to the establishment of a Domestic Homicide Review mechanism in the NT. This process could provide insightful, in depth reviews of deaths that may occur in the context of domestic violence; identifying strengths and weaknesses in systemic responses to the issue. Women in the Northern

Territory face the highest risk of experiencing injury or death due to domestic violence, out of every State and Territory in Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are 35 times more likely to be hospitalised due to domestic violence related assault than other Australian females. Given these statistics, it is unclear why the NT remains one of the only jurisdictions in Australia not to have implemented a domestic death review process. There has been researched advocacy conducted in this area by a range of Central Australian agencies, including the Central Australian Family Violence and Sexual Assault Network of which we are a core member. It is hoped that this issue is progressed expediently, to ensure that service responses are informed and enhanced to best assist those in need.

As the strategy is implemented, it is likely that there will be an increase of referrals for people seeking assistance in relation to domestic and family violence. It is essential that local support services are adequately funded and resourced to respond to this increased demand. Cross sector support is needed to ensure the safety of women and children, and in particular access to appropriate accommodation and longer term housing options is vital. Unfortunately limited housing options for women in the Northern Territory, and the high risk of homelessness, can be a barrier for those seeking to leave violent relationships.

**Ends**

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