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“More women will die”: advocates plead for \$25m rescue package for women fleeing violence

Chronic underfunding to family violence legal assistance has stretched the sector to breaking point, Women's Legal Services Australia has warned, applying to the Attorney-General for a \$25 million annual rescue package to help the 40% of women currently being turned away from legal experts due to lack of staff and resources.

WLSA has written to Attorney-General Christian Porter with a National Costing Model by Jim Stanford, Director of the Centre for Future Work at the Australia Institute, calculating an additional \$25 million is needed annually to service those currently at risk of violence and urgently seeking legal advice and representation.

“We are in an unprecedented crisis that has increased the opportunities for partners to exercise controlling, abusive behaviours,” says Joanna Fletcher, CEO of Women's Legal Service Victoria.

“The escalation of family violence can be fatal. We already know that one woman dies at the hands of a violent partner or ex-partner every single week. We see women fleeing similar circumstances asking for legal assistance every day. It's women like these we are now forced to turn away every day. We just don't have enough staff to help them all.

“Successive governments have largely ignored family violence legal services for decades. If the current Government abandons women and children as well, if we don't see funding in the next budget to help these women leave, then the inescapable truth is that more women will die.”

While the Federal Government increased funding for community legal services earlier this year, funds earmarked for family violence legal services have disproportionately been allocated to perpetrators seeking legal defence, while women and children are missing out on the holistic assistance provided by women's legal services which could aid their recovery.

While the National Costing Model assesses funding required to meet the current unmet need, WLSA warns the demand will grow as the delayed impact of trauma prompts more women to reach out.

“Even in ‘normal’ times, there is often a delay between when violence occurs and when women present to us for help,” says Ms Fletcher. “Because of COVID-19, we know the worst is yet to come. COVID-19 has trapped many families inside the home and created intense financial pressures. It's so easy for abusers to monitor and control their partners, track their whereabouts, and cut them off from family and friends.

“We're calling on the Attorney-General to step up and take a stand against family violence. Words and sympathy have not protected women and children. We know from long years of experience that expert legal assistance does. By providing legal assistance across family law, family violence and child protection, as well as social work support and financial counselling, we help hundreds of women and children safely escape dangerous partners.

“It's long past time for the Government to put its money where its mouth is. The safety of Australia's women and children depends on it.”

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