



**ATTORNEY-GENERAL  
HON ROBERT McCLELLAND MP**

**ADDRESS TO THE  
FAMILY VIOLENCE PREVENTION  
LEGAL SERVICES  
2010 NATIONAL CONFERENCE**

*CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY*

**PERTH**

**TUESDAY, 4 MAY 2010**

First, may I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land we meet on, the Noongar people – and pay my respects to their elders, both past and present.

- Jennaburah - Mrs Janet Hayden, Elder of the Wadjuk Region Mr Mick Gooda, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner;
- Ms Libby Lloyd, Chair, Violence Against Women Advisory Group;
- Ladies and Gentlemen.

I am very pleased to be here to launch today's conference.

I am also pleased see such a diverse group of people attending the conference, representing service providers from the length and breadth of Australia.

Today provides an important opportunity to share ideas, improve collaboration and hear from experts on issues that are relevant to your important work.

Family violence affects too many women, men and children in communities across Australia.<sup>1</sup>

Sadly, the statistics highlight that often women and children are more at risk, with the level of violence also particularly prevalent in some Indigenous communities. For instance:

- Indigenous children are six times more likely to be the subject of a substantiated child protection notification than their non-Indigenous counterparts;
- they are also nine times more likely to be in out of home care;
- Indigenous Australians are almost 34 times more likely to be hospitalised for spouse or partner violence than non-Indigenous people;
- Indigenous women are 35 times more likely to be hospitalised than non-Indigenous women; and
- between 70 and 90 per cent of assaults in Indigenous communities are committed while under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Personal Safety Survey Australia 2005* at 17.

Many of you are already well aware of these figures as you are at the frontline providing much-needed assistance and support.

However, as you would know, statistics only tell part of the story. For victims, their families and communities the effects can be devastating, far reaching and long lasting – something a number can never fully describe.

Setting aside the obvious, physical, emotional and psychological damage, family violence affects the inherent well-being of victims, their families and communities. It also makes it harder for people to do the basic things we all take for granted, like going to school, getting or keeping a job and generally leading healthy and productive lives.

### **National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children**

It is clear that there is still a lot of work to do to reduce violence and protect victims.

The Australian Government is committed to a zero tolerance approach to violence.

My colleague, Minister Plibersek and I have been working with the States and Territories to develop a National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children.

The Plan is nearing completion and will include a comprehensive range of outcomes that will deliver tangible improvements to the lives of women and children affected by violence.

In practical terms, the Government is already investing:

- \$26 million for primary prevention activities including \$9.1 million to improve the quality of respectful relationship programs for school age children, and \$17 million for a social marketing campaign focused on changing attitudes and behaviours that contribute to violence;
- \$12.5 million for a new national telephone and online crisis service; and
- \$3 million for research into programs that are successful in ending perpetrators' violence.

The Plan will also develop a multi-disciplinary training package for lawyers, judicial officers, counsellors and other professionals working in the family law system.

### Review of Family Violence - Family Law System

Within my portfolio I have also been working to ensure that the family law system is well placed to detect and deal with issues of family violence.

At the outset, let me say that the Government's primary consideration is ensuring the best interests of children, including most fundamentally, their personal safety.

As you would be aware, earlier this year I released three key reports into the family law system:

- i. An evaluation of the 2006 family law reforms, by the Australian Institute of Family Studies;
- ii. A review of the laws, practices and procedures that apply in the family courts in the context of family violence, by Professor Richard Chisholm; and
- iii. The Family Law Council's report into improving responses to family violence in the family law system.

The reports provide significant evidence about the current state of the family law system. Broadly, the reports demonstrate that there are clearly some things working very well, however, it is also clear that the system as a whole needs to improve its response to family violence.

This is an area that the Government is committed to improving. Accordingly, we are currently considering initiatives that will address many of the concerns identified by the reports and I would welcome your contribution on these important issues.

### **Programs to Prevent Violence**

If we are serious about closing the gap on family violence, prevention must be at the forefront of our strategy. Having strong and effective laws to prevent violence are

essential. It is also critical that we have strong and effective programs to protect the rights of victims.

That is why programs such as this are so important. The unique feature of the program is not only the strong links units build with local Indigenous communities but also the holistic approach to services for victims.

By ensuring victims are able to access legal advice and support as well as other services such as counselling, units play a key role in protecting and enhancing the rights of victims.

By building strong links with local communities and with other service providers you ensure that victims of family violence have access not only to legal advice but to other support that can help them recover.

Units can also play an important role in their respective communities by developing education and early intervention strategies which will address family violence, its associated causes and effects.

The Government is committed to working with service providers and communities to find ways to prevent violence. And where it occurs, to ensure that the rights of victims are protected and that victims, their families and communities have access to help.

I am keen to ensure that the Family Violence Prevention Legal Service continues to develop into a strong and effective service, and your particular focus on providing services for Indigenous victims in rural and remote areas.

I am therefore pleased to announce that the Government will, from next financial year, offer funding agreements for up to three years.

I know this is an issue that has concerned the sector for some time. Longer funding agreements will provide greater certainty for service providers, your staff and the communities you serve. It will also assist in strengthening important links with communities and other services.

## **Additional Funding**

I am also aware of the difficulties you face in attracting and retaining staff, particularly lawyers.

Through funding initiatives such as the Country Lawyers Program run by Legal Aid WA, we have been able to address this to some extent. I understand that you are fortunate to have 11 Country Lawyers in eight of the Units located here in Western Australia.

I am therefore pleased to announce that the Australian Government will invest an additional \$500,000 in the Country Lawyers program to help it continue its important work here in Western Australia.

I am also keen to ensure that victims of family violence, including children, are supported in accessing victim compensation schemes.

These schemes provide a tangible acknowledgment of the pain, suffering and loss endured by victims and also play an important part in helping victims re-establish their lives.

Many victims, however, don't know about the schemes, while others find the costs for medical reports required to lodge an application too prohibitive. These factors can act as a significant disincentive for victims to lodge a claim.

To address this, I am pleased to announce over \$3 million in additional one-off funding to help victims of family violence.

This investment will be distributed to each of the 31 units across Australia, each Women's Legal Service and a number of other community legal services that provide services for Indigenous women.

The additional funding will also allow services to:

- provide legal and other support to lodge such claims;
- cover travel and accommodation expenses for lawyers to undertake pro bono legal work on such claims; and
- increase awareness of their work through improved resources and/or community legal education sessions.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge and thank the effort and devotion that you, your colleagues and others involved with this Program bring to this invaluable service.

By reaching out to victims of family violence you are helping them have their voice heard so they can recover from the trauma that has been inflicted upon them.

I hope you find the conference informative, thought-provoking and enjoyable. I look forward to hearing the outcomes of your discussions.

Thank you.