



Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre

Submission to the development of the Second
National Action Plan for the National Plan to
End Violence Against Women and Children

August 2026

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Introduction

Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of the Second National Action Plan under the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022–2032. As Victoria's statewide specialist 24-hour family violence crisis response service, Safe Steps brings a unique frontline perspective on the changing nature of family and domestic violence, the effectiveness of current service responses, and the reforms required to strengthen safety, recovery and long-term outcomes for victim survivors.

Through telephone, live chat and email, Safe Steps handles approximately 130,000 contacts each year, providing risk assessment, safety planning, crisis intervention and referrals for people experiencing family violence. This statewide role provides unique insight into the acute and crisis stages of family violence, changing patterns of abuse, help-seeking trends, community preferences, and pathways through the statewide family violence service system.

Safe Steps regards the development of the Second National Action Plan as a critical opportunity to build on established reform directions and strengthen coordinated national action to prevent and respond to family and domestic violence. Reflecting the discussion structure of sector forums attended by Safe Steps, this submission is structured into two sections.

The first section focuses on the ongoing opportunities for learning from and scaling Victorian reforms at a national level, and driving further national coordination in the family violence system architecture. This includes opportunities to:

- scale specialist family violence infrastructure nationally across the full continuum of prevention, early intervention, crisis response, case management, healing and recovery;
- establish a clear, legislated basis for information sharing that supports a consistent language of risk, enables timely service responses and meets community expectations; and
- adopt a 'no wrong door' approach, achieved through investment in capability development, aligned investment in specialist services (including services for targeted cohorts) and universal service awareness and capability development.

The second section of this submission focuses on the next significant areas for investment and focus that are required if Australia is to deliver on our national ambition of ending gender-based violence in one generation. Safe Steps believes investment is required to address systems gaps and to ensure that Australia can respond effectively to the rapidly changing nature of abuse. These critical next priorities for Government include:

- establishing dedicated pathways and services for children and young people experiencing family and intimate partner violence;
- strengthening evidence-informed responses to emerging forms of violence, including the rapid escalation of technology-facilitated abuse and systems abuse;
- increasing dedicated investment in early intervention pathways that provide timely, seamless support across family violence, financial, legal and family service systems; and
- expanding evidence-based services and infrastructure that strengthen accountability and support desistance for people who use violence.

This submission is grounded in Safe Steps' frontline practice responding to thousands of victim survivors each year, the insights of the Safe Steps Lived Experience Advisory Group, the expertise of our specialist workforce, and research undertaken in partnership with leading academics examining violence against women, young people and children. These insights point to clear opportunities for the Commonwealth to lead and support a more coordinated, responsive and effective national system that improves safety, recovery and long-term outcomes for victim survivors.

Building on a Decade of Reform

A decade after the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence, Victoria's reform experience provides important evidence and practical lessons for national policy and implementation. The scale and breadth of reform undertaken in Victoria, including sustained investment in specialist infrastructure, prevention, crisis response, intake and assessment, and system coordination, offers valuable insights into the conditions required to strengthen family and domestic violence responses across Australia.

Safe Steps considers it essential that these lessons inform the implementation of the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children and support a stronger, more consistent national response.

1. Dedicated specialist infrastructure across the continuum

Evidence and Insights

Since the Victorian Royal Commission, there has been significant investment in specialist family and domestic violence infrastructure across the service continuum, particularly in prevention, crisis response, intake and assessment.

The Dhelek Dja Agreement established a strengthened framework for partnership between Aboriginal communities, Aboriginal services and the Victorian Government to prevent and respond to family violence against Aboriginal people.

Prevention: Respect Victoria, an independent statutory authority with a mandate to prevent family violence and violence against women, commenced its work in 2018. The creation and strengthening of organisations with an explicit prevention mandate, alongside focused prevention initiatives such as place-based prevention partnerships with local government, have supported a more coordinated, sustained and evidence-informed approach to addressing the underlying drivers of gender-based violence.

Crisis Response: To ensure that the family violence system works cohesively and can effectively support victim survivors, Victoria has implemented the Crisis Response Model.¹

The model details shared responsibility for supporting victim survivors, by aiming to:

- Provide victim survivors in crisis with immediate support and emergency accommodation, if needed, no matter which specialist family violence service they access. This includes brokerage to provide immediate crisis support.

¹ Family Safety Victoria (2022) Family violence crisis response model: Frequently asked questions [Internet] <https://providers.dffh.vic.gov.au/faq-family-violence-crisis-response-model>

- Give face-to-face support to all victim survivors in emergency accommodation via a local family violence support service, wherever they are accommodated and at any time of day or night.
- Support or connect all victim survivors to a local family violence support service when leaving emergency accommodation to support exit and provide ongoing case management.

The model intends to provide a consistent, clearly communicated and jointly managed service to all victim survivors in crisis and prioritises local crisis support in line with victim survivor choice and safety. The model was developed and implemented to provide an optimal and accessible service for anyone who needs to access it. The services providing the crisis response are uniquely placed in the family violence system to be able to recognise and respond to all victim survivors, including those at the highest risk, at any time of the day or night. It works closely with other specialist family violence services to connect victim survivors to emergency and crisis accommodation and refuges.

As part of the reforms, the Orange Door network was established as a dedicated and visible intake point for adults, children and young people who are at risk of, or experiencing, family and domestic violence, as well as for families requiring support with children's development and wellbeing. Victoria also undertook substantial reform of family and domestic violence refuge accommodation, including the transition to safer core and cluster models.

Justice system reforms have also been substantial, including the expansion of Specialist Family Violence Courts and the strengthening of Victoria Police Family Violence Investigation Units. Victoria also established the Victim Survivors' Advisory Council to provide advice to government and ensure lived experience informs system design and reform.

Overall, Victoria's dedicated infrastructure to prevent and respond to family and domestic violence has created more visible and accessible pathways to assessment, crisis response, support and referral. These reforms have strengthened community understanding of how to access help and provide important lessons for national system design.

Lived Experience Advisory Group Insight

Safe Steps' Lived Experience Advisory Group recognises the investment across the prevention continuum as an important foundation for long-term systems change.

Members highlight "growing awareness and capability" across sectors beyond specialist family violence services, including workplaces implementing policies and supports for employees experiencing family violence, and financial institutions strengthening safeguards to identify and prevent financial abuse and the misuse of banking products to facilitate coercive control. These developments demonstrate the value of dedicated prevention leadership in driving broader cultural and institutional change.

Opportunity 1: Scale specialist infrastructure nationally

The Commonwealth should use the opportunity presented by the development of the Second Action Plan to establish the national architecture needed for a coordinated, specialist family and domestic violence system across Australia. This could include:

- Investment to support dedicated infrastructure across the full continuum of prevention, early intervention, crisis response, intake and assessment, recovery and healing. This includes creating nationally consistent service frameworks while allowing flexibility for local implementation and Aboriginal-led responses.
- Strengthening prevention efforts. This includes coordinating evidence-based prevention strategies, supporting consistent public messaging, and leveraging partnerships with corporate Australia to drive workplace prevention, early intervention and workforce responses.
- Ensuring every jurisdiction has access to a centralised, specialist 24/7 intake, assessment and crisis response service that can provide immediate risk assessment, safety planning, crisis support and connection to local services. Family violence occurs 24 hours a day and often presents during periods of acute risk. Making crisis interventions accessible and effective is critical to preventing further harm and improving long-term outcomes.
- Driving consistency across jurisdictions by identifying, evaluating and scaling best practice. Rather than reform occurring in isolation, national mechanisms should be established to consolidate evidence, share lessons and coordinate implementation across Australia.
- Supporting a coordinated national approach to lived experience participation, reducing duplication and consultation fatigue while ensuring victim survivors meaningfully shape policy, service design and system reform.

Ultimately, victim survivors should be able to access specialist support through clear, consistent pathways regardless of where they live. Commonwealth leadership can help ensure that help-seeking is simpler, responses are more consistent, and lessons from successful reforms are translated into better outcomes nationwide.

2. Information sharing: Victorian learnings in practice

Evidence and Insights

A major strength of Victoria's reforms has been the development and adoption of information sharing mechanisms, specifically the Family Violence Information Sharing Scheme (FVISS), Child Information Sharing Scheme (CISS) and the MARAM framework, all of which are supported by a dedicated legislative scheme.

These mechanisms are relied on by services, including Safe Steps, every day to support dynamic risk assessment and coordinated safety planning. Information sharing enables practitioners to maintain an up-to-date understanding of risk, keep the person using violence in view, and coordinate timely responses with Victoria Police, the Orange Door and other specialist services.

The MARAM framework, in particular, provides a shared approach to identifying, assessing and managing risk and need across the family and domestic violence and broader community services sectors. The importance of seamless information sharing is critical between services. For example, where Safe Steps operates 24 hours a day and the Orange Door provides services during business hours, victim survivors frequently move between the two services. Effective information sharing therefore reduces the need for victim survivors to repeatedly recount traumatic experiences and supports more consistent, trauma-informed care.

Lived Experience Advisory Group Insight

Safe Steps Lived Experience Advisory Group recognises the importance of information sharing to support and promote victim survivor safety.

They note that, in Victoria, funding and training to support cross-sectoral adoption of information sharing has been inadequate resulting in gaps in knowledge about the importance of information sharing to support safety and manage risk, especially outside of the family and domestic violence sector.

The MARAM framework and its precursors are more than ten years old in Victoria, yet “there are still pockets of resistance to its primacy as a tool for protecting women and children”.

Victoria’s experience demonstrates that legislative authority to share information must be matched by practical system integration. Information sharing is most effective when frontline practitioners have timely access to relevant information across organisational boundaries, supported by consistent governance, privacy safeguards and interoperable technology. For example, while Safe Steps now has some access to the Orange Door client relationship management system, access is limited by licence numbers and business rules, including only being able to access the system outside of business hours. This means that during business hours, practitioners cannot view information required to provide the safest and most informed responses. These constraints create unnecessary delays and increase the risk of fragmented service delivery.

Opportunity 2: Build a national framework for information sharing

The Commonwealth should build on proven information sharing models by promoting nationally consistent approaches to information sharing across family and domestic violence and related human services. National reform should prioritise:

- consistent legislative and policy settings that support lawful information sharing for risk assessment, safety planning and coordinated service responses;
- interoperable digital systems that enable authorised practitioners to access relevant information in real time across organisational and jurisdictional boundaries;
- investment in shared digital infrastructure to reduce fragmentation and minimise the need for victim survivors to repeatedly recount their experiences; and
- workforce capability and sector-wide education so that organisations understand both their authority and their responsibility to share information appropriately to support victim survivor safety.

Victoria’s experience also highlights that legislation and technology alone are insufficient. Information sharing is only effective when it is supported by a shared understanding across the broader community and social services sector of why information sharing is critical to managing risk and improving outcomes for victim survivors. The Commonwealth has an important leadership role in fostering this culture and ensuring information sharing is consistently understood and applied across the service system.

3. No wrong door + specialist services for targeted cohorts

Evidence and Insights

A central principle of the Victorian Royal Commission reforms was that there should be "no wrong door" for people seeking family and domestic violence support. This has been progressed through significant investment in specialist family violence services, the establishment of integrated intake and referral pathways through the Orange Door ('Support and Safety Hubs'), and targeted capability development across the service system.

Alongside these reforms, dedicated investment in specialist responses for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, people with disability, children and young people, and other priority cohorts has helped improve access to appropriate and culturally responsive support.

While these investments have strengthened the system's capacity to connect people with the services best placed to meet their needs, opportunities remain to further embed the no wrong door approach across universal services. Continued investment in workforce awareness, family violence capability development, clear referral pathways, and secondary consultation arrangements can strengthen the ability of health, education, justice, housing and other mainstream services to identify risk early, respond appropriately, and connect people to specialist support.

For example, the Safe Steps' statewide Disability Family Violence Crisis Response Initiative (DFVCRI) demonstrates the value of embedding specialist disability expertise within the family violence system to support a no wrong door approach. It not only improves outcomes for individual victim survivors but also strengthens the capability of mainstream family violence and disability services to provide more inclusive, accessible and effective responses.

Example: Supporting No Wrong Door - the Disability Family Violence Crisis Response Initiative

Evidence consistently demonstrates that people with disability -particularly women and girls - experience family and domestic violence (family and domestic violence) at higher rates than the broader population and often experience forms of abuse that are unique to disability.ⁱ The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare has also identified a strong correlation between recent experiences of violence, abuse and harassment, for women with psychosocial disability.ⁱⁱ

The DFVCRI was established by the Victorian Government to address the additional barriers faced by victim survivors with disability, including children and young people, in accessing specialist family violence services. The initiative recognises that equitable access requires more than a universal service model; it requires specialist capability to respond to the intersection of disability and family violence.

The DFVCRI delivers three integrated functions across Victoria:

- **Direct crisis response** for victim survivors with disability experiencing family violence, including practical assistance, brokerage and safety planning. In 2025–26, the program supported more than **187 Victorian families** where one or more family members had a disability, autism or another form of neurodiversity.
- **Secondary consultation** to specialist family violence and disability services, providing expert advice on responding to complex cases. In 2025–26, Safe Steps delivered **562 secondary consultations**.
- **Sector capacity building**, strengthening capability across both the family violence and disability sectors through training, presentations and advisory work. In 2025–26, the initiative delivered **58 capacity-building activities**.

- i. Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability. (2023). Final Report - Volume 3, Nature and extent of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation, Commonwealth of Australia, p 116.
- ii. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2024) People with disability in Australia 2024, catalogue number DIS 72, AIHW, Australian Government.

Safe Steps sees significant potential for such initiatives to be **scaled nationally** and inform national service models. The South Australian Royal Commission also recommended the establishment of a comparable specialist response.²

² Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence, *With courage: South Australia's vision beyond violence* August 2025 Recommendation 113 p. 48.

Lived Experience Advisory Group Insight

Safe Steps Lived Experience Advisory Group recognises that there has been significant progress and that services are more inclusive for LGBTQIA+ community members post the Royal Commission, however “some gaps remain in meeting people where they are at.”

As noted by the Safe Steps Lived Experience Advisory Group, continued investment is needed, especially for victim survivors with complex co-occurring needs who continue to face some of the greatest barriers to receiving timely support. Safe Steps' experience is that people experiencing problematic alcohol and other drug use, mental ill-health, or both, often wait the longest for refuge and other crisis accommodation.

The shortage of appropriate accommodation (refuge and housing) following a family violence crisis also remains a significant barrier to safety and recovery. While limited housing supply affects many victim survivors, those with complex co-occurring needs face additional challenges in accessing services that can respond safely and effectively to the intersection of family violence, housing insecurity, mental ill-health and alcohol and other drug use. Sustained investment in this cross-sector coordination, shared accountability and integrated service responses that enable housing, homelessness, alcohol and other drug, mental health and family violence services to work together around the needs of the victim survivor is necessary.

Opportunity 3: Build a Holistic 'No Wrong Door' Approach Through Stronger Specialist and Universal Capability

Invest in specialist, targeted responses to ensure the "no wrong door" approach for victim survivors with the greatest support needs, including people with disability and those experiencing complex co-occurring needs.

The Commonwealth should prioritise:

- Investment in specialist service models for under-served cohorts, including people with disability, recognising the success of initiatives such as Victoria's Disability Family Violence Crisis Response Initiative, which demonstrates how dedicated expertise can improve access, reduce barriers and strengthen the capability of the broader service system.
- Strengthened national leadership to ensure victim survivors with complex co-occurring needs - including alcohol and other drug use, mental ill-health and homelessness - are not excluded from specialist family and domestic violence services because they are considered "too complex" or "too high risk". These victim survivors are often those who wait the longest for support despite facing some of the highest levels of vulnerability.
- Sustained investment in cross-sector coordination, recognising that effective collaboration between family violence, housing, homelessness, mental health, alcohol and other drug, disability and other human services requires dedicated capability and cannot be delivered as business as usual. Specialist coordination functions are critical to creating integrated pathways that improve safety and long-term recovery.

The Second National Action Plan provides an opportunity for the Commonwealth to embed these principles by strengthening specialist responses for under-served cohorts and supporting the cross-sector partnerships necessary to deliver an effective, coordinated national family and domestic violence system.

Looking ahead: where we need to invest next

The preceding sections outline key reflections from Victoria's family and domestic violence reform journey that may inform national policy and implementation. Building on these lessons, Safe Steps' experience as Australia's largest family violence crisis response service, together with lived experience insights and evidence from research and practice, we identify four priorities for future Commonwealth leadership to strengthen Australia's family and domestic violence system:

- building a national pathway to information and support for children and young people;
- responding to the changing nature of abuse, including systems abuse and technology-facilitated abuse;
- increasing dedicated investment in early intervention; and
- strengthening accountability and desistance approaches for people who use violence.

4. Children and Young People: Building a National, Youth-Centred Pathway to Safety

Evidence and Insights

Nationally, there are positive signs that the voices and experiences of children and young people are being put at the centre of policy and service design.³ It would also appear that children and young people are also being included more directly in research and data collection, supporting stronger recognition of them as victim survivors in their own right.⁴

³ For example, DFSV Commission and ANROWS (2025) Children and Young People Roundtable [Internet] <https://www.dfsvc.gov.au/sites/default/files/2026-06/20260602-DFSVC-CYP-RoundtableReport.pdf>; ANROWS (2025) Listen, Learn, Act: Centring children and young people to end violence (ANROWS Conference 2025) [Internet] <https://www.anrows.org.au/conference-2025-young-advocates-statement/>

⁴ See, for example, Fitz-Gibbon K. (2025) Seeking help in their own right Young victim-survivors' experiences of family violence crisis responses in Victoria. Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre. [Internet] <https://safesteps.org.au/wpcontent/uploads/2025/09/Seeking-help-in-their-own-right-web-view.pdf>; Gillfeather-Spetere S and Watson A (2024) In their own right: Actions to improve children and young people's safety from domestic, family and sexual violence [Internet] <https://anrows-2019.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/25125930/CYP-ANROWS-In-their-own-right-Children-and-young-people-Gillfeather-Spetere-Watson-ANROWS.pdf>. Fitz-Gibbon K. Silence and Inaction Report [Internet]. Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence. 2025. Available from: <https://www.royalcommissiondfsv.sa.gov.au/publications/silence-and-inaction-paper>. ANROWS - Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety. 2024. Available from: <https://www.anrows.org.au/publication/children-young-peoples-safety/>; Australian Human Rights Commission. (2024) Do things with the information we tell you [Internet]. Australian Human Rights Commission. 2024. [Internet] https://humanrights.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0024/19428/20240419_supporting_quality_engagement_with_children_2023_fin_al_report_0-3.pdf.

However, many of the barriers experienced by children and young people in accessing family and domestic violence crisis support remain. Safe Steps' research paper *Seeking Help in Their Own Right: Young Victim-Survivors' Experiences of Family Violence Crisis Response in Victoria*⁵ alongside *The ACCESS Project: Children and Young People Seeking Safety from Family Violence*⁶ have informed our understanding of the barriers young people face and how specialist crisis services can better respond to their needs. These reports show that children and young people fall through service gaps and remain largely invisible in a system designed for adults. Safe Steps data reinforces this point with 15–21 year-olds representing less than 10% of the people we support (who have sought help independently i.e. without a protective parent).

Young people interviewed for both reports say they are excluded from decisions that affect them, experiencing missed opportunities for support following disclosure, and lacking the language to recognise or describe their experiences as family and domestic violence. These barriers can delay help-seeking and have lasting impacts on safety, wellbeing and development.

People born from the 1980s onwards are often described as digital natives. Research suggests younger people prefer help-seeking options that provide anonymity, control over disclosure, flexibility and lower barriers to engagement. Many avoid telephone communication or experience anxiety about making calls,⁷ yet the current family and domestic violence system often requires support to be accessed by phone or in person.

Research consistently demonstrates that children and young people want accessible, youth-appropriate information and support delivered through the digital platforms they already use.⁸ Yet the quality and accuracy of online family violence information varies considerably, and Australia currently has no nationally recognised, youth-focused pathway that provides trusted information, practical safety guidance and clear connections to specialist services.

As children progress into their teens they have increased capability for decision-making and positive independent help-seeking. They should be afforded agency to do this. Children, as well as young people, would benefit from access to age-appropriate information and therapeutic services that help them understand patterns of violence and control, heal and recover from violence.

Despite growing recognition of children and young people as victim survivors in their own right, there remains no nationally recognised, youth-appropriate pathway providing consistent information about family violence, practical safety guidance, and clear access to specialist support.

⁵ Fitz-Gibbon, K. (2025) Seeking help in their own right: Young victim-survivors' experiences of family violence crisis responses in Victoria. Final Report. Sequire Consulting and Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre, Victoria, Australia. DOI: 10.6084/ m9.figshare.29242661

⁶ Lee, M., Sutherland, G., Aliscic, E., Block, K., Vaughan, C., and Chaaban, J (2026) The ACCESS project; Children and young people seeking safety from family violence: Final Project Report, Melbourne School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne, Publication pending.

⁷ Narelle Hopkin (Towie). Young people hate making phone calls – could it be hurting their careers? [Internet]. The Conversation. 2024. Available from: <https://theconversation.com/young-people-hate-making-phone-calls-could-it-be-hurting-their-careers232167>

⁸ Fitz-Gibbon. Silence and Inaction Report. P. 67-68.

Lived Experience Advisory Group Insight

Safe Steps Lived Experience Advisory Group members highlight the importance of ensuring children and young people receive clear, accessible and age-appropriate information about family violence through the platforms they already use.

“Young people need to know that it is not acceptable to feel unsafe at home, to be afraid of family members, or to live with fear about the moods and behaviours of those around them”.

- Safe Steps Lived Experience Advisory Group

“Maybe we should have ads about, ‘are you being abused? Do you know who to talk to? Do you have support?’ ... Because even for a lot of people in these situations, they might not even particularly recognise that they are exactly being abused ... So how do we get these resources to people so that they can actually utilise them?”

- “Tom” quoted in Fitz-Gibbon, *Seeking help in their own right*

Opportunity 4: A trusted online information, safety and support pathway for children and young people

Alongside continued investment in specialist services and practice improvement, there is a significant opportunity to transform how children and young people access information and support through a nationally coordinated online pathway for family and domestic violence.

Specifically, the Commonwealth should fund a youth-led co-design process to develop a nationally consistent digital help-seeking pathway for children and young people experiencing or concerned about family and domestic violence and intimate partner violence (IPV).

Safe Steps has advocated for a youth-led co-design process to develop a trusted, online pathway that provides children and young people with accessible information, practical safety guidance and clear pathways to specialist support. Young people must have access to information, safety guidance and help-seeking pathways that reflect how they communicate and seek support.

Importantly, any national digital response should complement - not replace - existing services. It should be designed to integrate with Australia's specialist family violence, counselling, crisis response and community services, strengthening the existing service system rather than creating a parallel one.

Digital innovation should not replace face-to-face services or therapeutic support within communities. Rather, it should become a core component of Australia's family violence response, ensuring children and young people can recognise family violence, seek help safely and access specialist support in ways that reflect how they communicate and engage. If children and young people are to be recognised as victim survivors in their own right, national help-seeking infrastructure must evolve to meet them where they are.

Importantly, expanding digital access must be matched by continued investment in frontline capability. Young people who seek help must be able to access timely specialist responses, including crisis intervention, accommodation, case management and place-based support. Modernising Australia's digital help-seeking infrastructure will only improve outcomes if accompanied by a service system that has the capacity to respond.

Safe Steps has outlined this proposal in recent Federal Pre-Budget Submissions⁹ and encourages the Commonwealth to progress this work as part of the Second National Action Plan.

Proposed Concept: A national digital information safety and support pathway to provide a single, trusted source of youth-appropriate information that supports earlier recognition of family and intimate partner violence, builds the language and confidence to seek help, and connects young people with the right services at the right time.

Unlike a crisis service or counselling helpline, a digital platform has the capacity to:

- normalise early help-seeking;
- increase understanding of healthy relationships, family violence and unhealthy relationship dynamics;
- build the language and confidence needed to describe concerns and seek support;
- provide confidential, low-barrier pathways to information and assistance;
- reach young people through the digital platforms they already use; and
- strengthen prevention, early intervention and crisis responses by connecting young people to existing services.

The development of such a platform must be informed by children and young people through a genuine co-design process and build on, rather than duplicate, Australia's existing service infrastructure. Existing services - including Kids Helpline, The Line, Teach Us Consent, ReachOut, Ask Izzy, 1800RESPECT and Safe Steps - already provide valuable information and support. The opportunity is to create a coordinated pathway point that brings these resources together, addresses current gaps and makes them easier for young people to find, understand and use.

⁹ Safe Steps (2025) Support for young people worried about family, domestic and intimate partner violence [Internet] <https://consult.treasury.gov.au/download/fil3350bdb23a429bd5a2b47>; Safe Steps (2026) How young people seek help: Co-designing Australia's Digital Front Door for family and domestic violence/IPV [Internet] <https://consult.treasury.gov.au/download/fil3aa31fddd1d2aa5b17fe2>

5. Responding to the changing nature of abuse: systems abuse and technology-facilitated abuse

Evidence and Insights

Systems abuse and technology-facilitated abuse have become increasingly common tactics of coercive control.

Systems abuse occurs when a person using violence weaponises legal, government, service or support systems to control a victim survivor's access to support, safety, legal services and income.¹⁰ It can also contribute to misidentification. Its purpose is to disempower, instil fear and isolate the victim survivor.

Safe Steps sees systems abuse across a continuum of family violence presentations, from the manipulation of individual services and administrative processes through to the coordinated misuse of multiple systems. This can include the deliberate and calculated misuse of legal, child protection, housing, health, disability, financial, and service systems to monitor, intimidate, discredit, punish, or restrict a victim survivor's autonomy and access to support.

Victim survivors with disability can be particularly vulnerable to systems abuse, especially where income, supports, mobility aids, assistive technologies, personal care, communication supports, or decision-making arrangements are controlled or influenced by the person using violence. In these circumstances, people using violence may manipulate multiple systems to restrict access to money, services, health care, medication, transport, and social connection, increasing dependence and limiting opportunities for help-seeking.

Lived Experience Advisory Group Insight

The Safe Steps Lived Experience Group identifies the need for greater national consistency across programs that can enable systems abuse through inconsistent responses and siloed practice. For example, members note that different systems use different definitions of family violence, limiting their capacity to work together to hold people using violence accountable. When justice, safety and service systems are misaligned, they can be manipulated.

“The national government and states and territories are still operating in silos, especially different parts of the justice system and government departments ...

We need harmonisation of approaches: justice and safety systems that talk to each other and have agreed approaches about what family violence is. While there are still systems working in opposition to each other, we will continue to see victim-survivors needs not being met, and systems failure responsible for the terrible toll of gender-based violence.”

¹⁰ S Beckwith et al. (2023) Coercive Control Literature Review Final Report [Internet] https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-07/2304_Coercive-control-literature-review_July2023.pdf

Safe Steps also observes growing levels of **technology-facilitated abuse**, which refers to the use of digital technologies, devices, online platforms, and communication tools to monitor, track, harass, threaten, impersonate, control, or surveil victim survivors.¹¹

A tool of coercive control, technology-facilitated abuse often occurs with perpetrators using smartphones, social media, location tracking, smart home technologies, online accounts, and communication platforms to extend abuse beyond physical proximity and maintain control over victim survivors' everyday lives.

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We need harmonisation of approaches: justice and safety systems that talk to each other and have agreed approaches about what family violence is. While there are still systems working in opposition to each other, we will continue to see victim-survivors needs not being met, and systems failure responsible for the terrible toll of gender-based violence.”

Through a research partnership with RMIT, Safe Steps examined this technology-facilitated abuse as a “continuum” of behaviours. At one end, perpetrators may deprive victim survivors of access to technology, preventing communication, work, education and help-seeking. At the other, technology is used to facilitate image-based abuse, online stalking, location tracking, financial abuse and ongoing surveillance. The research also found technology-facilitated abuse is present in approximately 95 per cent of cases involving the highest level of family and domestic violence risk.¹²

Practitioners work with victim survivors to identify and manage risks associated with mobile phones, banking applications, connected vehicles and other digital technologies that may be used by people using violence to monitor, locate or control them. The need for these interventions demonstrates that technology safety is now a core component of contemporary family violence risk assessment, safety planning and crisis response. This increase in prevalence shows no signs of abating.

Safe Steps regularly arranges specialist technology assessments ("tech sweeps") of vehicles and electronic devices before or after a victim survivor enters protective accommodation.

¹¹ Powell, A., and Stockley, C. (2026). A Continuum of Tactics: Technology Facilitated Abuse in Family Violence Crisis Contexts. Australian Social Work, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2026.2640928>

¹² Powell, A., and Stockley, C. (2026). A Continuum of Tactics: Technology Facilitated Abuse in Family Violence Crisis Contexts. Australian Social Work, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2026.2640928>

Further, our research identified particular risks in crisis accommodation settings. While victim survivors may escape ‘in person’ violence by entering refuge, technology can enable people using violence to continue monitoring their movements, creating a sense of ongoing “omnipresence” and, in some cases, compromising the location of secure accommodation.

Lived Experience Advisory Group Insight

Despite the increasing prevalence of technology-facilitated abuse, the Safe Steps Lived Experience Advisory Group observes that many existing technology safety resources are not well known by either practitioners or victim survivors, limiting their impact. They call for greater community awareness and stronger digital capability.

“We need to meet people where they are at. Community members don’t understand what it means to share their information online. They don’t even understand the language being used online. While there is support for people to become more tech savvy, it is not widely known what people can do to keep their tech safe.”

Despite increasing prevalence, community understanding and workforce capability are not keeping pace with technological change.

Practitioners operating within interconnected but siloed systems must carefully avoid contributing to further harm while supporting victim survivors to navigate complex service, legal and administrative processes. This work is time-consuming and requires specialist capability. While Safe Steps provides technology safety training as part of staff induction, maintaining contemporary knowledge of technology-facilitated and systems abuse requires ongoing investment.

Opportunity 5: Strengthen responses to coercive control by addressing systems abuse and technology-facilitated abuse

The Commonwealth has a unique leadership role in preventing systems abuse. As the steward of many legal, administrative and service systems that can be misused to perpetrate systems abuse, the Commonwealth should invest in mechanisms that actively prevent misuse and support a family and domestic violence system capable of responding effectively to current and emerging forms of abuse.

The Commonwealth is also a key stakeholder in national efforts to reduce the harms of technology-facilitated abuse, particularly in online environments for younger Australians. This role should be strengthened across all populations by expanding access to specialist technology safety resources and improving public awareness so victim survivors can better recognise and respond to technology-enabled coercive control.

Technology-facilitated abuse is rapidly evolving and should be recognised as a core capability area for the family and domestic violence workforce. The Commonwealth should invest in nationally consistent, evidence-based training and sustained workforce development, recognising that assessing technology safety is now an essential component of risk assessment, safety planning and crisis response, not an optional add-on.

6. Greater and dedicated investment in early intervention

Evidence and Insights

Safe Steps' experience suggests that the Victorian family violence system has increasingly become oriented towards responding to crisis. Long wait times for local services and sustained demand pressures mean that victim survivors are often unable to access support until risk has escalated to a point where specialist crisis intervention is required.

Practitioners describe how delays in accessing non-crisis services increase the likelihood that victim survivors will experience further incidents of violence before support is available. In Victoria, demand for crisis responses continues to grow, placing increasing pressure on the specialist family violence system. As demand increases, victim survivors assessed as being at lower risk are frequently diverted to non-crisis services, where anecdotal reports suggest wait times have increased significantly. During this period, however, risk is rarely static. Without appropriate support, family violence may escalate into situations that require an emergency or crisis response.

Long waits for a non-crisis response can therefore contribute to worsening risk profiles and greater demand for crisis services - outcomes that may have been prevented if timely specialist support had been available. This issue is particularly evident for children and young people in families experiencing family and domestic violence, including those who come to the attention of child protection and are referred to the Orange Door but do not receive timely ongoing support.¹³

Greater investment in early intervention pathways would complement existing crisis responses by providing accessible support for victim survivors before violence reaches acute levels. Timely access to information, risk assessment, safety planning and practical assistance can help prevent escalation, strengthen safety and wellbeing, and reduce future demand on crisis-focused parts of the service system.

Lived Experience Advisory Group Insight

The Safe Steps Lived Experience Advisory Group identifies information and support is needed to support early intervention, especially in multicultural communities. Limited awareness of rights, available services and pathways to support can delay help-seeking and increase barriers to safety. The Group identifies a need to improve early intervention mechanisms – for example in-language information - for newly arrived migrants, refugees, and people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

Timely and effective early intervention must be available to all people experiencing family and domestic violence, not only those in immediate crisis.

¹³ Commission for Children and Young People (2026) Left behind: Systemic inquiry into responses to children and young people who are the subject of multiple reports to Child Protection [Internet] <https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/assets/Publications-inquiries/Left-behind-FINAL-Web-040626.pdf>.

Opportunity 6: Build early intervention

The Second National Action Plan provides an important opportunity to strengthen early intervention. Specifically, the Commonwealth should invest in evidence-based specialist system infrastructure that identifies and captures earlier intervention opportunities.

A timelier response for people requiring early intervention can interrupt the escalation of family violence before it reaches crisis point. Earlier access to specialist support can improve safety and wellbeing for victim survivors, particular cohorts, for example, children and young people and people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, reduce pressure on crisis services and support a more effective and sustainable family violence response system.

7. More focus on People Using Violence: Accountability and Desistance

Evidence and Insights

A continuing source of frustration for victim survivors and frontline practitioners is that the burden of achieving safety continues to fall overwhelmingly on victim survivors. Crisis responses require victim survivors to leave their homes, communities, schools, workplaces and support networks, while people using violence remain in place.

Safe Steps works directly with victim survivors and observes that system reform will continue to be constrained while perpetrator accountability and desistance responses remain insufficient. Despite an estimated 2.5 million men using family and domestic violence in Australia, fewer than 3 per cent are receiving any form of behaviour change intervention.¹⁴

We strongly support initiatives across the specialist family violence sector that increase accountability for people using violence while prioritising victim survivor safety.

This includes ensuring visibility of PUVs and considering how the system can respond in ways that keep victim survivors, including children and young people, safe in their communities instead of experiencing displacement associated with leaving their homes.

Lived Experience Advisory Group Insight

The Safe Steps Lived Experience Advisory Group identifies the lack of accountability for people using violence as a fundamental weakness of Australia's family and domestic violence response.

“The lack of accountability of people who use violence will continue as long as their behaviours are not seen as a crime. We can't keep women and children safe - and that's why they have to leave their homes. If we see the behaviour as a crime, we will do a better job of accountability and safety.”

¹⁴ No To Violence (2026) Second National Action Plan : Member Briefing & Submission Guide, Unpublished.

This experience was reflected in Safe Steps' research into best-practice crisis responses. As one victim survivor observed: "To think that the only response could possibly be for myself and five children and a bunch of animals to relocate is just crazy."¹⁵

On any given night, Safe Steps supports around 90 women, children and young people in emergency accommodation. In addition to the significant financial cost of purchased emergency accommodation, displacement has profound social and emotional consequences, disrupting education, employment, community connections and recovery.

Opportunity 7: Build evidence-based interventions for people who use violence

The Second National Action Plan provides an important opportunity for the Commonwealth to lead long-term system reform and embed accountability for people using violence as a central principle of Australia's family and domestic violence response. This could include:

- Supporting victim survivors to remain safely at home wherever possible while removing people using violence and holding them accountable for their behaviour. This is an important long-term direction for family violence system reform. It could include working with states and territories to expand evidence-based "Keeping Women Safe in their Homes" initiatives, shifting responsibility for leaving the home from victim survivors to people using violence wherever it is safe and appropriate. Achieving this will require coordinated investment in policing, specialist family violence services, perpetrator interventions and alternative accommodation pathways for people using violence.
- Broadening the range of interventions available for people who use violence, increasing the likelihood of earlier and sustained engagement. This helps keep people who use violence in view of the service system while creating more opportunities for meaningful behaviour change.
- Broadening the range of interventions available for young people who use violence and their families as an early intervention approach that supports breaking cycles of violence. Working with young people presents a unique opportunity to achieve significant and lasting benefits for young people, their families and the broader community.

¹⁵ Safe Steps (2026) Best Practices in Family Violence Crisis Response, Safe Steps, Melbourne, p. 33



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