



Safe Steps submission to the State disability plan and Victorian autism plan 2027 to 2031

Introduction

Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre is Victoria's 24/7 statewide family violence crisis response service. For more than 45 years, we have provided specialist support to victim-survivors experiencing family and domestic violence (FDV), helping people access safety, emergency accommodation, crisis intervention and pathways to recovery.

Our role is to increase help-seeking, respond to immediate risk, and deliver evidence-based, trauma-informed interventions for people experiencing family violence. In addition to operating Victoria's only statewide family violence crisis response service, Safe Steps also delivers national family violence services through 1800RESPECT.

Drawing on specialist family violence expertise and a client-centred, trauma-informed practice framework, we provide telephone, live chat and email support, emergency accommodation, supported crisis accommodation, and management of the Family Violence Accommodation Register (FVAR). We apply a feminist intersectional and trauma-informed approach to ensure responses are tailored to the diverse needs and experiences of victim-survivors.

Our submission to the Statewide disability plan and Victorian autism plan focuses specifically on the experiences of FDV for people with disability, acknowledging both the higher than average occurrences of FDV experienced by people with disability, the systemic barriers that impact help seeking and the unique challenges and barriers to safety, healing and recovery for those that do seek support.

Evidence consistently demonstrates that people with disability - particularly women and girls - experience family violence at higher rates than the broader population and often experience forms of abuse that are specific to disability¹.

Whilst the government's Specialist Homelessness Information Platform (SHIP)² does not allow for detailed capturing of disability and related demographic data, Safe Steps records indicate around 20% of adults requiring a crisis response *self-report* having a disability. This number does not include those who do not disclose this information at the point of intake. It also does not include data on accompanied children victim-survivors.

Physical abuse, such as that too frequently experienced in cases of FDV leads to physical injury, temporary and permanent disability and mental illness.³ Evidence on the impact of FDV suggests not only are people with disability more likely to experience FDV, chronic illness and disability are exacerbated by the experience of FDV.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report a strong correlation between recent reported recent experiences of violence, abuse and harassment amongst women with psychosocial disability.⁴

Victim survivors with disability are also more vulnerable to systems abuse, particularly in relation to income and supports. People using violence can manipulate different systems to control access to money and services, isolating the victim survivor and cutting off means for help-seeking.⁵

In addition to physical and psychological violence, perpetrators may exercise coercive control by withholding medication or healthcare, restricting access to mobility aids and assistive technologies, controlling personal care, limiting communication, or exploiting financial dependence.

¹ 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.

² The Specialist Homelessness Information Platform (SHIP) is the file management and data system used by specialist homelessness services and some Victorian family violence specialist service providers.

³ Brewer, G., & Hendrikse, C. (2023). Experiences of Domestic Violence and Disability. *Disabilities*, 3(4), 550-561. <https://doi.org/10.3390/disabilities3040035>.

⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2024) *People with disability in Australia 2024*, catalogue number DIS 72, AIHW, Australian Government.

⁵ Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence, *With courage: South Australia's vision beyond violence* August 2025

Our specialist role in as the statewide family violence crisis response service

Safe Steps is often the first point of contact for people who are fearful of, experiencing, or escaping family violence. As Victoria's specialist 24/7 family violence crisis service, we support victim-survivors from the moment they seek help through to safety planning, crisis intervention, accommodation support, and connection to longer-term services.

Our work includes facilitating access to family violence case management, specialist support services and housing pathways, enabling victim-survivors - including children and young people - to safely leave a person using violence and begin rebuilding their lives free from abuse.

As part of our services, Safe Steps delivers the Disability Family Violence Crisis Response Initiative (DFVCRI) across Victoria. The breadth of services, together with our specialist DFVCRI service, provides Safe Steps with unique insight into both the lived experiences of victim-survivors and the systemic barriers that prevent access to safety.

During 2024–25, Safe Steps responded to approximately 130,000 family violence-related contacts. We provided around 31,000 nights of emergency accommodation and supported approximately 90 victim-survivors each night to access immediate safety. Through our specialist disability and court-based services, we also support victim-survivors who face additional barriers to accessing protection and support.

Our role in responding to Victorians with disability (the DFVCRI)

The DFVCRI is a Victorian Government-funded program designed to address the additional barriers faced by victim-survivors of family violence who have a disability, including children and young people.

The DFVCRI provides specialist support to victim-survivors with disability experiencing family and domestic violence (FDV), while also strengthening the capacity of the broader family violence and disability sectors to respond effectively to their needs.

It is unique and nation leading. In 2025-26 we provided direct support to more than 187 individuals with disability and their families experiencing FDV to safety (inclusive of protective hiding, safety planning and brief intervention support), 562 secondary consultations and 58 capacity building activities.

The DFVCRI was established to respond to these unique forms of violence and to address the systemic barriers that can prevent victim-survivors with disability from accessing safety.

The program currently receives an annual brokerage allocation of \$111,893. During 2025–26, the DFVCRI supported more than 180 clients, with average brokerage expenditure of approximately \$1,000 per client.

While program guidelines allow up to \$9,000 in brokerage support per victim-survivor, allocating funding at this level would limit the service to supporting approximately 12 clients annually. This demonstrates both the significant demand for the service and the challenge of balancing depth of support with the need to assist as many victim-survivors as possible.

The DFVCRI is delivered by a specialist coordinator(s) (1FTE equivalent) who undertake three core functions across Victoria:

1. **Crisis response and immediate support** in the form of practical and financial support to victim-survivors with disability experiencing family violence crises. During 2025–26, the DFVCRI provided direct support to more than 187 families escaping family violence where one or more family members had a disability, autism or other form of neurodivergence.
2. **Secondary consultation and specialist advice** to professionals and services supporting victim-survivors with disability. In 2025–26, Safe Steps provided 562 secondary consultations to services supporting victim-survivors with disability.
3. **Capacity building and sector development** across both the family violence and disability sectors. During 2025–26, the DFVCRI participated in 58 capacity-building activities, including conference presentations, sector training and advisory engagements.

This submission

As the provider of Victoria's DFVCRI, Safe Steps is uniquely positioned to understand the experiences of victim-survivors with disability who seek safety from family violence.

For the purposes of this submission, the term *victim-survivor with disability* includes people who have experienced family and domestic violence and who identify as having a disability, autism, or another form of neurodivergence.

Consistent with feedback received from victim-survivors with disability, this submission focuses on two consultation themes:

- Health, Housing and Wellbeing
- Fairness and Safety

Our submission highlights the intersectional challenges faced by people with disability who are escaping family violence, particularly the significant barriers to accessing safe, suitable and accessible housing throughout the continuum from crisis response to recovery.

The experiences of victim-survivors consistently demonstrate that people with disability and autistic people face additional risks during family violence crises and often require specialised supports to achieve safety. Significant barriers remain in accessing these supports, resulting in compromised safety outcomes, prolonged periods of instability, and delayed recovery.

Safe Steps acknowledges that many of the issues raised by victim-survivors sit across both state and federal systems, including the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and the social security system. In practice, however, victim-survivors experience these systems as interconnected. The barriers they encounter within disability and income support systems, including systems abuse that weaponises these structures, directly affect their ability to achieve safety and escape violence. As such, it is often impossible to separate family violence risk from the structural barriers embedded within these broader systems.

Theme One: Health, housing and wellbeing

What barriers have you faced trying to get affordable and suitable housing?

Victim-survivors with disability consistently report significant barriers to accessing safe, affordable and appropriate housing. Delays in securing suitable accommodation compromise safety, increase vulnerability, and compound the harms associated with family violence.

While housing shortages affect all Victorians seeking affordable accommodation, victim-survivors with disability face additional and often intersecting barriers. Safe Steps considers victim-survivors with disability to be among the most vulnerable members of the community and believes access to safe, accessible housing should be prioritised accordingly.

Emergency accommodation in motels is limited for victim survivors with disability and is an inappropriate environment for children. Refuge housing stock is old and most does

not meet disability housing standards. Victim survivors with disability need to go through extensive processes and paperwork to test their eligibility for housing support under the NDIS.

Emergency accommodation (motels)

Safe Steps receives approximately 130,000 contacts each year from people seeking assistance in relation to family violence. Following a comprehensive risk assessment, victim-survivors are supported to identify immediate safety options and pathways out of violence.

For those assessed as being at highest risk, Safe Steps provides access to crisis accommodation. Due to the limited availability of supported crisis accommodation across Victoria, this is most often in motel accommodation.

While Safe Steps makes every effort to identify suitable options for people with disability, motel accommodation is rarely designed to meet accessibility requirements under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992. As a result, motel accommodation is frequently unsuitable for people with mobility, sensory or other accessibility needs and may not provide a viable crisis response option.

Where children with disability or autism are part of a family fleeing violence, motel accommodation can create additional challenges, including:

- Confined and restrictive living environments.
- Significant disruption caused by unfamiliar surroundings.
- Loss of access to existing support networks and services.
- Disruption to established routines and daily living supports.
- Interrupted school attendance, including specialist education settings.
- Separation from essential disability-related equipment, technology or mobility aids left behind when escaping violence.

Refuge accommodation

Following an initial crisis response, Safe Steps' Brief Intervention and Family Violence Accommodation Register (FVAR) teams work quickly and intensively with victim-survivors to identify accommodation pathways, including refuge accommodation.

Despite significant investment in Victoria's refuge system, many refuges continue to face physical accessibility challenges and do not fully meet accessibility standards. While most meet basic standards, there are ongoing barriers that impact accessibility, for example, a steep ramp to an accessible unit or a heavy fire doors preventing safe

egress. While we work quickly to refer victims survivors to refuge, this is challenged by suitability of stock, refuge locations and refuge criteria/priority cohort focus. This can result in victim-survivors with disability remaining in unsafe situations for longer periods or spending extended time in temporary motel accommodation while suitable options are identified.

There is currently limited funding available to retrofit refuge properties to improve accessibility. Safe Steps acknowledges that refuges face limited access to maintenance, challenges with maintenance quality and refuge maintenance not receiving priority. Consequently, Safe Steps frequently provides brokerage funding or direct support to enable accessibility modifications and equipment, ensuring victim-survivors can safely access refuge accommodation.

Even after entering refuge accommodation, victim-survivors face the challenge of securing longer-term housing. This process is particularly difficult for people recovering from family violence trauma, managing disability-related needs, and living on fixed incomes.

Extended waiting periods for public and community housing create additional barriers. Victim-survivors requiring modified or accessible housing often experience even longer delays, contributing to ongoing housing insecurity and limiting access to refuge accommodation for others in crisis.

Case example:

Safe Steps DFVCRI provided support to victim survivor with disability who was receiving end of life care when she had to move away from a violent perpetrator.

Core and cluster refuge was not appropriate for her and the refuge was able to offer her a Crisis Accommodation Property (CAP) so she could be in a stand-alone house, instead of a shared block of units. While the property was internally appropriate, it had steps out the front which prevented access.

The Safe Steps DFVCRI funded the ramp required for the person to access the property, to ensure her end-of-life home was stable, safe and accessible.

Safe exit pathways for disability housing

Safe Steps' experience suggests that public and community housing systems are often insufficiently tailored to individual circumstances and accessibility needs.

People with disability are not a homogenous group. Their housing requirements vary considerably depending on the nature of their disability, support needs, family composition and recovery goals. Given the heightened vulnerability of victim-survivors with disability, housing responses must be flexible, individualised and responsive to these diverse needs.

A housing system that recognises and accommodates these differences is critical to supporting long-term safety, recovery and wellbeing.

Case example:

A woman with disability contacted us to support with escaping her family, who were abusive and violent towards her.

Although the victim survivor had public housing, she was a wheelchair user and her public housing unit was on the third level of a building and accessible only by a staircase.

The victim survivor had continued to live with her abusive family, but also pay rent on the unit for three years, while waiting for a transfer to an accessible unit.

Private rental

The barriers within the private rental market are particularly acute.

Anglicare Australia's most recent Rental Affordability Snapshot found no rental listings nationwide that were affordable for a person receiving the Disability Support Pension. This aligns closely with Safe Steps' experience supporting victim-survivors with disability.

Many victim-survivors report that income derived from the Disability Support Pension or other Centrelink payments create an additional barrier to securing housing. Applications are frequently rejected on the basis of *income source* alone, limiting already scarce housing options.

These experiences highlight the need for greater awareness across the private rental sector regarding disability discrimination obligations and the realities of income support arrangements relied upon by many Australians living with disability.

Supported Residential Services

Supported Residential Services (SRS) may provide an option for some individuals requiring higher levels of support. However, these services typically require residents to contribute between 70 and 90 per cent of their income towards accommodation costs, making them inaccessible and unsustainable for many victim-survivors with disability.

As a result, SRS accommodation is rarely a practical housing solution for people escaping FDV.

Theme Two: Fairness and safety

What is working well?

The DFVCRI represents a leading practice approach to supporting victim-survivors with disability experiencing family and domestic violence.

Safe Steps is proud to deliver a specialist, intersectional response that supports the safety, autonomy and self-determination of victim-survivors with disability across Victoria.

The strengths of the singular statewide coordinated approach are:

- A dedicated concentration of specialist expertise at the intersection of disability and family violence.
- Consistent access to support regardless of a person's location, including metropolitan, regional and rural Victoria.
- Strong cross-sector relationships that facilitate service coordination and problem solving.
- The ability to staff with a full-time role that ensures easy-to-access, timely advice and consultation to practitioners working across family violence, disability, health and community services.
- Flexible brokerage funding that can be tailored to individual victim-survivors' needs while being prioritised and managed to support the cohort as a whole.

Importantly, the DFVCRI is available to any Victorian victim-survivor with disability. Access is not limited by disability type, support needs, location or service affiliation.

The service plays a critical role in helping victim-survivors navigate complex service systems, advocate for their needs, and overcome barriers to safety. Through strong partnerships and established referral pathways, the DFVCRI is often able to resolve issues that may otherwise prevent a person from accessing accommodation, supports or services.

Victim-survivors have accessed a broad range of practical supports through the DFVCRI, including:

- Disability support workers
- Medical equipment and health-related supplies
- Specialist health appointments
- Tablets and communication devices
- Sensory supports and sensory regulation equipment
- Shower chairs and mobility aids
- Wheelchairs, walkers and walking frames
- Hearing aids and glasses
- Noise-cancelling headphones
- Weighted blankets
- Disability-accessible transport
- Therapeutic and specialised recreational supports for children and young people.

These supports may appear modest in isolation; however, they are often critical in enabling a victim-survivor to safely leave a violent environment and maintain stability during crisis.

Who or what helps you feel safe?

Feedback from victim-survivors consistently demonstrates the importance of specialist, responsive and practical support during periods of crisis.

For many victim-survivors with disability, safety is not solely about escaping violence. It is also about maintaining access to the supports, equipment, services and routines required to manage everyday life.

The DFVCRI contributes to safety by helping victim-survivors overcome these barriers, maintain access to essential supports, and navigate complex service systems during times of crisis.

The service also promotes safety through advocacy, ensuring that victim-survivors with disability are heard, respected and supported to exercise choice and control over decisions affecting their lives.

Case example:

A victim survivor was required to attend the local police station to provide a statement on the FDV she had experienced. She had 3 children all with complex disabilities and was away from her usual supports due to the FDV.

The victim survivor was worried she would not be able to make her report with her children in tow, given the intense and specific context of police reporting of FDV.

The DFVCRI was able to fund a support worker to attend the police station and engage with the children while the parent made her statement.

What would make it easier to speak up and have your rights respected?

A core function of the DFVCRI is supporting victim-survivors with disability to advocate for themselves, have their rights respected, and access services on an equitable basis.

This includes both direct advocacy and supporting mainstream services to recognise and respond appropriately to disability-related needs.

Examples of this work include:

- Advocating with family violence and community service providers to remove barriers to service access.
- Challenging assumptions about the capacity of people with disability, including assumptions relating to parenting capability and decision-making capacity.
- Providing brokerage funding to support accessibility requirements, including equipment and environmental modifications.
- Supporting practitioners to understand the relationship between disability and family violence risk within Victoria's Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework (MARAM). Disability *in itself* is a risk factor. In the Victorian FDV system, the higher risk allocation, the speedier the

access to services. We work to ensure other services understand heightened risk associated with intersectional factors.

- Assisting victim-survivors to build confidence and capacity to advocate for their own needs when engaging with services and systems.

While these activities can improve outcomes for individuals, broader systemic reform is required to ensure victim-survivors with disability are consistently treated with dignity, respect and equity across all service systems.

What needs to change?

The experiences shared with Safe Steps demonstrate that safety and housing cannot be considered separately for victim-survivors with disability escaping family violence.

For most victim-survivors, the pathway to safety begins with securing safe and appropriate accommodation. Where housing is inaccessible, unavailable or unable to meet disability-related needs, the ability to escape violence is significantly compromised.

Ongoing high incidence of FDV mean that even more people are experiencing significant temporary and permanent disability as a result of abuse. Investing in FDV prevention and early intervention is critical to reduce rates of preventable disability.

Through our work supporting victim-survivors across Victoria, Safe Steps has identified four key systemic challenges:

1. Insufficient accessible emergency, crisis and refuge accommodation.
2. Limited access to accessible long-term housing options.
3. Low levels of disability and family violence capability across key workforces.
4. Inflexibility and poor responsiveness within the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) during family violence crises, and use of the NDIS to facilitate systems abuse.

To address these challenges, Safe Steps recommends the following actions.

Recommendation 1: Develop alternatives to motel accommodation for victim-survivors with disability

Motel accommodation is frequently used as an emergency response when victim-survivors are escaping family violence. However, motels are rarely designed to meet accessibility requirements and are often isolating and unsuitable for people with disability.

Motels are particularly challenging environments for children and young people with disability, whose wellbeing may be significantly affected by disruption to routine, lack of therapeutic supports, no access to education and an environment that fails to meet sensory needs.

Victim-survivors with disability require timely access to supported crisis accommodation that can respond to their physical, sensory, communication and support needs. Expanding accessible crisis accommodation options would significantly improve both safety and recovery outcomes.

Recommendation 2: Invest in accessibility upgrades across refuge and housing systems

Suitable accommodation for victim-survivors with disability remains extremely limited across the housing continuum.

From emergency accommodation through to refuge, public housing and long-term rental options, victim-survivors consistently report barriers associated with accessibility, suitability and discrimination.

Additional investment is required to:

- Retrofit existing refuge accommodation to improve accessibility.
- Increase the supply of accessible family violence accommodation.
- Improve access to accessible public and community housing.
- Ensure accessibility is embedded as a standard feature rather than an exception.

Without targeted investment, victim-survivors with disability will continue to face prolonged periods of housing insecurity and elevated risk.

Recommendation 3: Strengthen family violence capability across the disability workforce and disability capability across the FDV workforce

Disability support workers are often trusted professionals who have regular contact with people experiencing family violence.

Despite this, many disability practitioners have limited opportunities to undertake specialist family violence training. Workforce pressures and funding constraints can make it difficult for providers to release staff for professional development.

Victim-survivors with disability are among the most vulnerable members of the community. It is therefore essential that disability workers understand the dynamics of family violence, can identify indicators of risk, and know how to respond appropriately and refer people to specialist support.

While family violence practitioners generally understand the importance of intersectional practice, knowledge of disability-specific issues is not always consistent across the sector.

Victim-survivors with disability have reported experiences of deficit-based practice, including assumptions about their capacity, autonomy and parenting ability that were based solely on the existence of disability rather than individual capability.

Further workforce development is required to strengthen understanding of disability, neurodiversity and accessibility within the specialist family violence sector. This includes improving responses to both adults and children with disability and ensuring practice remains strengths-based, empowering and person-centred.

Recommendation 4: Establish interim supports to address NDIS service gaps and address the risks of systems abuse during family violence crises

While the National Disability Insurance Scheme falls outside the direct scope of this consultation, its operation has a significant impact on the safety of victim-survivors with disability.

Safe Steps regularly encounters situations where NDIS processes are unable to respond quickly enough to support people escaping family violence. Common issues include:

- Delays in transferring supports when a person is forced to flee their home.
- Delays in removing a perpetrator as a plan nominee, enabling ongoing systems abuse and coercive control.
- Interruptions to essential supports when a victim-survivor relocates to a new area.
- Delays in implementing plan changes required to address new safety needs.

While the DFVCRI can provide short-term assistance through brokerage funding, this is not a sustainable solution.

Dedicated interim funding mechanisms are required to bridge the gap between immediate safety needs and the time required for NDIS systems to respond, ensuring victim-survivors are not forced to choose between personal safety and access to essential disability supports.

Conclusion

Since the implementation of reforms arising from the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence, the DFVCRI has enabled Safe Steps to provide specialist support to victim-survivors with disability and to reduce many of the barriers that prevent access to safety.

However, significant challenges remain.

Victim-survivors with disability continue to face systemic barriers across housing, disability and family violence systems that delay access to safety, limit recovery opportunities and increase vulnerability to ongoing harm.

While the DFVCRI has demonstrated the value of specialist, intersectional responses, its capacity is constrained by available funding. There remain significant gaps in accessible crisis accommodation, workforce capability and system responsiveness that cannot be addressed through brokerage funding alone.

This submission draws on both the lived experiences of victim-survivors with disability and autism and the professional expertise of practitioners who support them every day. We hope these insights contribute to the development of a State disability plan and Victorian autism plan that better recognise the unique challenges faced by victim-survivors with disability and deliver meaningful reforms to improve safety, inclusion and wellbeing.

Additional information

Prepared by Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre.

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For further information contact comms@safesteps.org.au.

If you, or someone you know does not feel safe, call Safe Steps 24/7 on 1800 015 188.

In an emergency contact 000.