

# Domestic and family violence and disaster management in NSW

Submission to the *NSW Independent Flood Inquiry*

Domestic Violence NSW

**D** O M E S T I C  
V I O L E N C E  
**N S W**

## Contents

Domestic and family violence and disaster management in NSW.....	1
Acknowledgements .....	3
About Domestic Violence NSW .....	4
<b>Recommendations</b> .....	<b>5</b>
Executive summary .....	7
Methodology .....	9
Disaster response .....	10
The impact of the floods on domestic and family violence services.....	10
Poor Government response .....	11
Domestic and family violence in evacuation centres .....	12
No media policy.....	12
Lack of support from funding agencies .....	12
The risks of temporary accommodation .....	13
Disaster recovery.....	15
Prioritising access to safe and affordable housing.....	15
Ensuring access to trauma support.....	15
Involving local services in the decision-making for the disaster response .....	15
Ensuring access to emergency services.....	16
Funding agencies supporting the wellbeing of non-government agency staff.....	17
Ensuring access to justice .....	18
Ensuring access to communication networks .....	19
Quantifying the impact.....	19
Ensuring a coordinated response .....	20
Funding domestic and family violence services to respond adequately.....	20
Ensuring funding agencies provide support .....	21
Training volunteers on domestic and family violence.....	21
Ensuring the safety and wellbeing of children and young people .....	21
Planning for safe accommodation.....	22
Recognising the impact of coercive and controlling behaviours.....	23
Relocating safe spaces and domestic and family violence services .....	23
Incorporating the National Gender and Emergency Management Guidelines into NSW disaster planning .....	23
Case Study: Women’s Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service .....	25
References.....	26

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This submission was written on the unceded lands of the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation and the Dharawal people of the Wodi Wodi nation. We pay respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

Domestic Violence NSW would like to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the breadth and depth of Australia. We recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have lived and cared for Country for over 65,000 years and continue to do so, honouring ancestors and knowledge holders within community, and observing ancient cultural practices.

This submission on domestic and family violence and disaster management in NSW is the result of a process involving many organisations and individuals in the specialist domestic and family violence sector in NSW. Without their commitment and expertise during a personally and professionally challenging time, this submission would not have been possible.

We would like to thank our members for providing analysis, and to all those who contributed to the focus group held in May 2022. In particular, we would like to thank the following individuals:

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- Jillian Knight-Smith, Executive Officer, Women Up North, Lismore/Byron/Ballina/Kyogle/Clarence Valley
- Lainie Rees, Acting Co-Manager, Men and Family Centre, Lismore/Tweed Heads/Ballina LGA/Byron Bay LGA/Richmond LGA
- Nav Navratil, Manager, Clarence River Domestic and Family Violence Specialist Service, Clarence River LGA
- Alison Waters, Northern Rivers Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service.

## About Domestic Violence NSW

Domestic Violence NSW (DVNSW) is the peak body for specialist domestic and family violence services in NSW. We have over 125 member organisations across NSW.

Our members represent the diversity of specialist services working in NSW to support women, families and communities impacted by domestic and family violence.

Our member organisations include:

- crisis and refuge services,
- transitional accommodation and community housing providers,
- family support services,
- Aboriginal controlled organisations and specialist CALD organisations,
- specialist homelessness service providers,
- men's behaviour change programs and networks,
- community organisations working with high-risk communities,
- specialist women's legal support services,
- women's health centres,
- women and children's support services, and
- safe at home programs.

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## Recommendations

### **Domestic Violence NSW – and its flood affected member services – call on the NSW Government to implement the following recommendations:**

1. That the NSW Government ensures that NSW disaster management planning includes responses to domestic and family violence.
  - a. That the Department of Communities and Justice develops a transportation and accommodation policy to ensure people experiencing domestic and family violence are protected if they are evacuated with perpetrators of violence.
  - b. That NSW Government departments maintain relationships and contact with local domestic and family violence service providers during disaster response and recovery to ensure safety of people assessed at high risk of significant harm.
  - c. That the NSW Government ensures consistency across the recovery centres, including the provision of private child-friendly spaces and safe and secure spaces for women and children experiencing domestic and family violence within the centre.
  - d. That the NSW Government ensures that all volunteers working across the recovery centres and evacuating people (including the SES) are trained on how to identify and respond to domestic and family violence.
  - e. That the Department of Communities and Justice develops a media policy to limit filming inside recovery centres.
  - f. That the NSW Government introduce data collection methods such as tick box on Evacuation Centre forms, regarding domestic and family violence.
2. That the NSW Government ensures that recommendations from the specialist domestic and family violence sector are included in future disaster management plans.
3. That the NSW Government develop streamlined evacuation policies and procedures that ensure that – in the very first instance – the elderly, disabled, and people experiencing domestic and family violence are transported to a safe place that will remain a safe place.
  - a. That NSW Government agencies act quickly to ensure immediate access to crisis and temporary accommodation for people experiencing domestic and family violence.
  - b. That the Department of Communities and Justice ensures safe spaces for people experiencing domestic and family violence who are identified at significant risk of harm by women and youth refuges (and other specialist domestic and family violence service providers).
  - c. That a NSW Government accommodation policy is developed to ensure separate family groups of vulnerable women and children evacuated from a women's refuge are not expected to be housed together in one family room.
  - d. That the NSW Government arrange alternative accommodation to the recovery centres where people are at significant risk of violence.
4. That the NSW Government maintains a priority focus on providing safe and affordable housing during disaster recovery.
5. That NSW Government departments ensure the representation of local domestic and family violence service providers in the committees and sub-committees making decisions about recovery centres and other evacuation and accommodation planning.
  - a. That NSW Government departments (especially the Department of Communities and Justice) ensure the representation of local domestic and family violence service providers in decisions about setting up temporary accommodation.
6. That the NSW Government ensures emergency responses are available for people at risk of significant harm due to domestic and family violence during disasters.
  - a. That the NSW Government ensures the SES phone line is active and available 24/7 during a period of acute disaster response.

- b. That the NSW Government ensures the Triple 0 phone line is active and available 24/7 during any period of acute disaster response.
  - c. That the NSW Government ensures alternatives to the Triple 0 and SES emergency phone lines are available for service providers with high-risk client groups.
- 7. That the NSW Government ensures sufficient staffing and supports are available to specialist domestic and family violence services during disaster management and recovery.
  - a. That the NSW Government explore options for surge staffing from associated services in other regions to respond to demand.
  - b. That the Department of Communities and Justice provides immediate additional funding for professional supervision (counselling by registered psychologists) for staff of disaster affected specialist domestic and family violence services.
- 8. That the NSW Government ensures that domestic and family violence services are accessible to people during periods of disaster recovery.
  - a. That the Department of Communities and Justice provide immediate additional brokerage funding to specialist domestic and family violence services to enable them to support women to travel to and access services not available in flood impacted towns.
  - b. That the NSW Government mandate that video conferencing in courts be available for vulnerable clients (e.g. women and children experiencing domestic and family violence) who are impacted by natural disasters.
- 9. That the NSW Government works to ensure that the NBN be reconnected as a priority.
- 10. That the NSW Government (especially the Department of Communities and Justice) relocate safe spaces for people experiencing domestic and family violence to places that are not on a known flood plain.
  - a. That the NSW Government ensures that any new premises for specialist domestic and family violence services are disability accessible and built outside of 'first flood' affected areas.
- 11. That the NSW Government fund research into the prevalence of domestic and family violence following the 2022 floods, including qualitative data of the experience of people experiencing violence.
- 12. That the NSW Government work with Gender and Disaster Australia to incorporate the *National Gender and Emergency Management Guidelines* into NSW disaster planning.

## Executive summary

Natural disasters significantly exacerbate the risk of harm for vulnerable people experiencing domestic and family violence including child abuse (Parkinson, 2019). This has been demonstrated during the 2009 bushfires, 2017 floods, the 2019-20 bushfires, the COVID-19 pandemic, and again during the major flooding of 2022. Disasters can increase vulnerability to violence due to various factors including homelessness, unemployment, the loss of control, as well as the trauma experienced from the disaster itself (Hazeleger, 2013).

In 2022, Domestic Violence NSW member services were directly impacted by the major floods across NSW. These services have reported:

- loss of premises - including refuges that were providing safe accommodation for vulnerable women and children,
- being unable to contact or reach at-risk clients who were living with perpetrators of violence,
- being unable to safely house vulnerable women and children,
- staff personally impacted by the floods having to respond to clients traumatised by the floods who were already traumatised by violence, and
- specialist domestic and family violence services not being included in the government-led committees and conversations that were making decisions about their clients and communities.

Safe housing is of utmost importance during crisis and recovery phases, and people at risk of significant harm need to be prioritised. Specialist domestic and family violence services expressed concern that the needs of people experiencing domestic and family violence were not incorporated into the disaster response, that there was insufficient training, planning and focus on the safety of this high-risk cohort.

**Domestic Violence NSW calls on the NSW Government to ensure that responses to domestic and family violence are included in disaster management planning now and into the future.**

The following submission speaks to the below terms of reference of the Inquiry:

- b. the preparation and planning by agencies, government, other entities and the community for floods in NSW, including the accuracy and timing of weather forecasts, current laws, emergency management plans, practices and mitigation strategies, their application and effect;
  - c. responses to floods, particularly measures to protect life, property and the environment, including:
    - i. immediate management, including the issuing and response to public warnings;
    - ii. resourcing, coordination and deployment, including with respect to the Australian Defence Force; and
    - iii. equipment and communication systems;
  - d. the transition from incident response to recovery, including the roles, structure and procedures of agencies, government, other entities and the community;
  - e. recovery from floods, including:
    - i. immediate housing, clean-up, financial support and community engagement measures; and
    - ii. longer-term community rebuilding support; and
  - f. any other matters that the inquiry deems appropriate in relation to floods.
2. And to make recommendations arising from the Inquiry as considered appropriate, including on:
    - a. safety of all emergency service personnel and community first responders;
    - b. preparation and planning for future flood threats and risks;
    - d. impact on essential services, including electricity supply, water supply and telecommunications;
    - e. land use planning and management and building standards, including:

- i. the instruments, policies and programs applying to existing development in flood prone locations across NSW; and
- ii. the instruments, policies and programs applying to proposed future developments in flood prone locations across NSW;
- f. appropriate action to adapt to future flood risks to communities and ecosystems;
- g. coordination and collaboration between the NSW Government and the Australian Government;
- h. coordination and collaboration by the NSW Government with other state and territory governments and local governments; and
- i. public communication and advice systems and strategies.



## Methodology

On 27 April 2022, Domestic Violence NSW consulted with seven specialist domestic and family violence services directly impacted by the major floods. We asked these services:

- How have the floods impacted your clients and service?
- What needs to be done now to support recovery and ensure your service can operate effectively?
- What planning needs to be done to ensure that responding to domestic and family violence is a part of disaster management across NSW now and into the future?

The submission draws on available research, but is primarily centred around the insights from Domestic Violence NSW members on how the NSW Government – and its relevant departments and agencies – need to respond to support vulnerable people impacted by sexual, domestic and family violence during disasters such as the major flooding across NSW in 2022. Whilst the submission is directly related to the flooding of 2022, we hope that the recommendations will be utilised in the prevention and response to future natural disasters.

Information from member services has been deidentified. The case study and quotes provide the immediate context for our recommendations to the NSW Government.

## Disaster response

### The impact of the floods on domestic and family violence services

Research indicates increased incidents of sexual, domestic and family violence during disasters (Parkinson, 2019; Thurston Stöckl, & Ranganathan, 2021). This has been shown in studies following the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria, the Charleville floods in Queensland, the Christchurch earthquake in New Zealand, and Hurricane Katrina in the United States (Parkinson & Zara, 2013). Over half of the women in one study referred to the increase of domestic violence post the Black Saturday fires as a ‘catalyst’ (Parkinson, 2019). A recent literature review looking at violence against children post natural disaster, indicates pathways between disasters and violence which could occur due to child separation, changes in social norms, insecure housing, as well as economic stress (Cerna-Turoff, Fischer, Mansourian, & Mayhew, 2021).

In NSW too, Domestic Violence NSW member services have experienced an increase in referrals for domestic and family violence during and following the 2022 flooding. This has been made more complex by the experiences of staff also undergoing trauma and homelessness.

The following quotes describe the experiences of Domestic Violence NSW member services following the 2022 flooding in the Northern Rivers:

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*“It takes days for people to get out from flood waters. This has a cumulative affect for women as they are stuck with their perpetrators. How do we support these women? We need to prioritise their lives and the psychological risk. This has an impact on other family members.”*

*“There were women’s refuges with vacancies in other towns offering support, but the women couldn’t get to them as the roads were cut off.”*

*“We had an issue with women’s inability to get to the recovery centres.”*

*“Initially after the flood, we had an increase in referrals.”*

*“The recovery centres had inadequate support for survivors of domestic and family violence (women and children). There needs to be a safe space for them.”*

*“Only one staff member could get to the site of our premises for two and a half weeks to do the clean-up. All the other staff members were flooded out. We’ve had no electricity and no internet.”*

*“We have managed to support our clients via one staff member with a generator sitting on top of her car with a makeshift antenna. This is war zone stuff.”*

*“As an underfunded sector, we often have to seek accommodation [premises] that is disability accessible and within our budget, which means, just like the housing sector, we are the lower socio-economic people in the service sector so the premises we are able to work from and provide service to the people who need it, we are in the first flood affected area. Our service was wiped out.”*

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*“Our service is temporarily housed at the Southern Cross University. We have a somewhat flooded building, so we expect to be up and running in three months – but still lost our gear that was flooded.”*

*“Thinking outside the box is the only way to move forward with this. Inside the rigid confines of what our government has decided works best for our community is clearly not what does. I think that this event, and we talk about being resilient – seems to be the buzz word at the moment – our region has defined what resilience is.”*

*“There was a lady who came into the child-friendly space, and she just burst into tears that she could leave her children there. She asked if she could just leave them for ten minutes. [We told her] you can leave them for as long as it actually takes you to go around and see all the services you need to see, as long as you are signed in, and we have a contact number for you. She just cried in relief because obviously she had not had any time away from [the children]. The children were obviously quite traumatised because of domestic and family violence as well as being through the floods. It was nice to have a space for her to even have five minutes for herself to have a coffee, calm down and come back. It was very confronting.”*

*“Some people are trying to defraud the funding so they can move location. We’ve had requests to move from people from Clarence to Tweed and Lismore. They are using services in an attempt to give an address so they can apply for flood funding. I’m surprised at the number of people taking advantage of the funds. Then you have at the other extreme, others that wouldn’t apply that are eligible.”*

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## Poor Government response

Domestic Violence NSW members consistently discussed concerns regarding poor, ill-planned, ad-hoc and inadequate government responses both generally and regarding supports specifically for people experiencing domestic and family violence.

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*“There has been no systematic or systems approach by the Government.”*

*“The whole attitude from Government has been piecemeal and practically disrespectful.”*

*“We actually need the army straight away. We can’t wait. When there is a disaster, you just respond. You just respond straight away. And if by accident you provide too much assistance, so be it.”*

*“We needed the army the day before the disaster hit. We needed boats. The SES is like nine volunteers. Don’t even think about the SES responding to a disaster of this scale – that is ridiculous.”*

*“That adequate funding or vouchers or whatever is given in the first instance. You just deal with that straight away. The aged, the elderly the disabled, you get all the vulnerable*

*out straight away. It is ridiculous that we are talking about it! This stuff is straight forward."*

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## Domestic and family violence in evacuation centres

Services held concerns for people experiencing domestic and family violence in evacuation centres; that there was no risk assessment made for this, that perpetrators and people experiencing violence were housed together, that there were no separate, safe places for women and children and that staff/volunteers were not trained to identify and respond to domestic violence.

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*"All the recovery centres were set up differently."*

*"There were evacuation centres established, but citizen evacuation centres established as well on the other side of the Wilson River. [The citizen evacuation centres are] ripe for disaster. Though nothing bad happened, a lot could have gone wrong. They still haven't got it right in how to evacuate people and set up centres in the aftermath, particularly around the Wilson River. You've got people on both sides of the river, they won't be crossing for days, and you'll have people on the "wrong side" of the river for days. "*

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## No media policy

In 2010, the Clarence area experienced major flooding. Media was going into the recovery centres and filming. The Department of Communities and Justice did not have a media policy. There was an added safety issue for women and children who were being filmed inside a recovery centre. This was raised again in the 2022 floods. It is concerning that the issue continues to be a problem.

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*"In 2010, we made a formal complaint to the broadcasting commission, the recovery centre and the Department of Communities and Justice regarding filming in recovery centres. There was no response."*

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## Lack of support from funding agencies

Although some services received support from their service providers and funders, others felt they were not at all supported.

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*"I felt as a community service I could have been offered some help by the Department of Communities and Justice. Nobody ever asked. Nobody ever offered anything. Nobody asked what are you doing about your confidential documents?"*

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Another service spoke of support from their funding body with surge staffing and brokerage support. It is important that funders are flexible with contracting requirements during periods of natural disaster, and that individual conversations are held with services to provide supports they may require including surge staffing, document storage, moving costs, brokerage and staff wellbeing costs.

## The risks of temporary accommodation

Service providers had concerns about the immediate safety of people experiencing/at risk of domestic and family violence being put into temporary accommodation.

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*“The Department of Communities and Justice is putting people into accommodation together – one big family room for all the women and children from the refuge together. The refuge had to pay for private accommodation to allow the women some privacy.”*

*“How are women and children protected if they are being evacuated with perpetrators?”*

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Services providers felt that people at risk of significant harm were not prioritised for crisis and temporary accommodation. Domestic Violence NSW has long raised concerns about the safety of temporary accommodation. In many cases, perpetrators and victims are housed in the same facilities. The facilities do not have safety measures and therefore do not feel safe to the people using them.

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*“There are people not accessing temporary accommodation. They don’t want to go there. Some people are choosing to live in the shells of their former accommodation, and citizens are driving around giving them stuff. In that space a lot can happen – women and children in shells of houses with no resources. Maybe with one power point? It is getting cold. People choosing that setting rather than the evacuation centres. I don’t think we have the numbers on that and I’m sure the numbers are high.”*

*“Many families I consider at risk are living in shells of houses, including children at risk [rather than accessing temporary accommodation].”*

*“We have concerns with temporary housing being set up. We don’t know what is being thought about in terms of how people are being placed there. How is it being set up? Are perpetrators being placed in the same places as victims? We don’t know these things.”*

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### Recommendations:

- That the NSW Government develop streamlined evacuation policies and procedures that ensure that – in the very first instance – the elderly, disabled, and people experiencing domestic and family violence are transported to a safe place that will remain a safe place:
  - a. That NSW Government agencies act quickly to ensure immediate access to crisis and temporary accommodation for people experiencing domestic and family violence.
  - b. That the Department of Communities and Justice ensures safe spaces for people experiencing domestic and family violence who are identified at significant risk of harm by women and youth refuges (and other specialist domestic and family violence service providers).

- c. *An accommodation policy is developed to ensure separate family groups of vulnerable women and children evacuated from a women's refuge are not expected to be housed together in one family room.*
- d. *Arrange alternative accommodation to the recovery centres where people are at significant risk of violence.*

## Disaster recovery

### Prioritising access to safe and affordable housing

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*“Housing is by far the biggest problem. It was the biggest problem before the floods wiped out the actual structures themselves, but it’s beyond desperation now.”*

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Housing availability was already at capacity in the Northern Rivers before the flooding events of 2022, exacerbated by large numbers of people moving out of metro areas because of the COVID 19 pandemic. The flooding event of 2022 pushed housing availability to extreme crisis levels. DVNSW, alongside other peaks and homelessness organisations advocates for the NSW government to build 5000 homes per year for 10 years to address the shortfall of social housing. Investing in social and affordable housing outside the crisis of flooding and other natural disasters will reduce the pressure on communities and improve responses when disasters do occur.

*Recommendation:*

- *That the NSW Government maintains a priority focus on providing safe and affordable housing during disaster recovery.*

### Ensuring access to trauma support

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*“We need a trauma response and trauma support for the community.”*

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The two flooding events have caused immense trauma in the Northern Rivers. DVNSW members spoke to the community resilience, but also to the importance of acknowledging that trauma in the recovery phase.

More practically, weeks after the flooding, services are still attempting to operate and support those in crisis without offices, equipment and technology.

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*“There has been an assumption that the internet, computers and phones are working. We need IT support provided after the flooding event.”*

*“A lot of regional services are based in Lismore and on the ground floor as there is limited disability access in town. That forces you to be on the ground floor so clients can access services. This needs to be addressed in any reconstruction.”*

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### Involving local services in the decision-making for the disaster response

Services reiterated the need for local communities to be part of the planning regarding disaster planning and implementation. Although this is currently done on a regional level in NSW, service providers in the domestic and family violence sector did not feel that they were consulted with or that their concerns regarding

domestic and family violence were considered. Co-design with community is considered the best option when creating plans specific to different communities.

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*“The only way to move forward is for government to actually start listening. To start listening to people who live it – who lived it – who work and are part of this community. Who know what the resources are, and where they are. The resources at the moment are on a flood plain. Our community knows that, absolutely. But someone sitting somewhere else does not. Relying on information from our community to provide risk mitigation moving forward is the only way we are going to come anywhere close to getting this to a safer space.”*

*“There is adequate scope for the inclusion of the expertise and service delivery experience of specialist domestic and family violence services to be incorporated into emergency management and disaster planning. Community is already included in emergency management planning documents as recipients of government-led activity, we believe that it is critical that the community sector be included as architects in the planning process, not just as the receivers of goods and services.”*

*“The community comes up with the best options. We’ve got to convince the Government to hand over the money. There is all this red tape. We were offered money, but we couldn’t meet the criteria. We were hassled to apply; we met the criteria, but I couldn’t provide exact information because the clients themselves didn’t know it. Need to hand over the money for it to be practical. I know we need to account for the public purse, but there needs to be some thinking outside the box. If we are going to use other resources, let’s not make it that much harder.”*

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#### *Recommendations:*

- *That NSW Government departments ensure the representation of local domestic and family violence service providers in the committees and sub-committees making decisions about recovery centres and other evacuation and accommodation planning.*
  - a. *That NSW Government departments (especially the Department of Communities and Justice) ensure the representation of local domestic and family violence service providers in decisions about setting up temporary accommodation.*

#### Ensuring access to emergency services

During a natural disaster, it is important that people at significant risk of death, disability and injury due to domestic violence still have ways to access support. Unfortunately, it was the experience of Northern Rivers services that this was not the case.

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*“You could not ring Triple 0 during the event, it rang out. This means that women experiencing violence are not able to reach help. What other things are happening while we can’t ring Triple 0?”*

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*“Clearly the Triple 0 service can’t cope with that level of distress. Continue to have patchwork service.”*

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Similarly, there were issues accessing the SES phone line due to high demand. DVNSW suggests exploring alternative phone lines for service providers to access emergency services where there are high risk clients who need urgent support.

*Recommendations:*

- *That the NSW Government ensures emergency responses are available for people at risk of significant harm due to domestic and family violence during disasters.*
  - a. *That the NSW Government ensure the SES phone line is active and available 24/7 during a period of acute disaster response.*
  - b. *That the NSW Government ensures that the Triple 0 phone line is active and available 24/7 during any period of acute disaster response.*
  - c. *That the NSW Government ensures alternatives to the Triple 0 and SES emergency phone lines are available for service providers with high-risk client groups.*

Funding agencies supporting the wellbeing of non-government agency staff

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*“There has been a huge impact on staff mental health and wellbeing. The extra worry staff have as they don’t have communication with clients. Also flooded in and need their own personal support.”*

*“Our staff have compassion fatigue and worry about clients.”*

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Staff wellbeing, or lack thereof, was a strong theme in the Domestic Violence NSW member consultation. Frontline specialist domestic and family violence workers were themselves personally traumatised and impacted by the floods. However, the domestic and family violence services and their workers continued to support their clients during response and recovery.

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*“We’ve had clients coming off prescription medications they didn’t have access to. There has been a huge impact on the mental health of workers and clients. We will be dealing with vicarious trauma for many months (and years) to come.”*

*“Our workers are working with traumatised clients that have experienced severe trauma when they themselves are homeless. We need extra funding for professional supervision (counselling) for at least the next 12 months. Professional supervision for the staff of domestic and family violence services through registered psychologists.”*

*“As a telephone and referral service we had no telephone for some time. Legal Aid in Sydney took over the calls. We resumed work with skeleton staff with people in areas with power. It has been difficult.”*

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*“We are supporting team members who were personally affected, concerned about families they’ve worked with, team members who have been uncontactable for ten days.”*

*“We need increased funding and resources for counselling for staff after a natural disaster event – fires, floods and Covid.”*

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#### Recommendations:

- That the NSW Government ensures sufficient staffing and supports to specialist domestic and family violence services during disaster management and recovery.
  - a. That the NSW Government explore options for surge staffing from associated services in other regions to respond to demand.
  - b. That the Department of Communities and Justice provides immediate additional funding for professional supervision (counselling by registered psychologists) for staff of disaster affected specialist domestic and family violence services.

#### Ensuring access to justice

Processes addressing justice and safety for people experiencing domestic and family violence continue amidst natural disasters. It is integral that victim-survivors are adequately supported to access justice and the increased safety afforded by that process. This includes funding services to provide additional brokerage to resource victim-survivors to attend court and police stations as necessary.

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*“Women who are misidentified perpetrators are having trouble putting their evidence together from text and emails. They no longer have those things available to them post flood. These defendants will now struggle to find evidence.”*

*“The courts and police station affected by the flooding. Lismore Police Station is now operating out of Southern Cross University. Lismore Court is not currently operational. Casino Court has structural damage and is likely to be under repair for up to nine months. The police station is expected to be at the university for nine months. People have to track down the police station to make a statement.”*

*“Our clients have issues with access to court, travelling to court. Women who would have had to travel to Casino Court now need to travel Kyogle. Women at Lismore now have to travel to Byron or Byron Bay Court. There are issues with their capacity to travel. Do they still have a car? Can they afford the petrol to get there?”*

*“As first responders, the moment of crisis lasted two weeks in Lismore. It was a lengthy crisis response because it had to be. How are we going to support women to feel safe to contact police? How do we support a sense of safety and trust? This crisis has damaged further. Our clients are further traumatised on top on the lack of [police] response for domestic and family violence, now there is trauma from the lack of response to the flood crisis. Overall, the police response needs a lot of attention in terms of understanding domestic and family violence and how they respond. How are we going to move forward in supporting the community to believe that they can pick up the phone and be heard on the other end?”*

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*“As far as court support goes, there was none. Why should we have to wait for a disaster to have an adequate response for disabled, people in domestic and family violence, vulnerable people, to get to court?”*

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*Recommendations:*

- *That the NSW Government ensure that the police and domestic and family violence services are accessible to people during periods of disaster recovery.*
  - a. That the Department of Communities and Justice provide immediate additional brokerage funding to specialist domestic and family violence services to enable them to support women to travel to and access services not available in flood impacted towns.*
  - b. That the NSW Government mandate that video conferencing in courts be available for vulnerable clients (women and children experiencing violence) who are impacted by natural disasters.*

## Ensuring access to communication networks

Services working to prevent and respond to serious risk of death, disability and injury need access to the internet. These services should be prioritised alongside other primary health care services.

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*“There is no NBN. I’ve booked the NBN seven times. Four times at one refuge, three times at the centre. And they don’t turn up.”*

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*Recommendation:*

- *That the NSW Government ensures that the NBN be reconnected as a priority.*

## Quantifying the impact

In the aftermath of the 2019 bushfires, there were murmurs of increased domestic violence. The issue has been discussed and reported by specialist women’s services sectors workers and raised across a range of media outlets. However, there is a dearth of collected data and empirical evidence about the extent and varied nature of violence experienced during disasters. In addition, for many who experience sexual violence seeking assistance can be months after the event and for children, years. This makes the magnitude of the problem difficult to know. But by the end of the bushfire season in 2020, member reports of increased need were frequent and consistent.

*Recommendation:*

- *Fund research into the prevalence of domestic and family violence following the 2022 floods, including qualitative data of the experience of people experiencing violence.*

# Disaster planning

## Ensuring a coordinated response

Services consistently called for a coordinated response to disaster management which included domestic and family violence management.

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*“It’s been flood, fire, Covid, flood, flood, flood, it’s been going on and on, and it would be really good if there was a coordinated, financially invested commitment from Government to respond to disasters so that we don’t sit and watch people on television – with their piles of rubbish and mattresses – that there is just a streamlined system with policy and procedure.”*

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## Funding domestic and family violence services to respond adequately

The general lack of funding in the domestic and family violence sector was identified as a concern, that led to elevated risk during times of natural disaster. Services should be funded to adequately respond to demand. This will allow capacity to plan for disaster management, and ensure that when disasters occur, services are not stretched to breaking point.

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*“There are preparations that can actually support service provision within the domestic and family violence space. In terms of being government funded, non-government organisations are screaming for additional and adequate funding.”*

*“Moving forward, there are risk mitigation strategies the NSW Government can support us to take, such as our premises being out of first flood affected properties. Women’s refuges are placed in first flood affected areas. These are the only properties available within our funding constraints.”*

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The six national principles for disaster recovery include a requirement that planning take into consideration an understanding of the context of recovery (and therefore presumably the impact of the disasters and the response effort) on community including an appreciation of risk, capacity, capability, and upholding human rights and human dignity. Recognising complexity is also required in planning, including the way in which critical information is conveyed and how this changes over time, and the diverse needs of individual members of the community, which may also change over time.

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*“All the policies and procedures should already be in place. We need a streamlined approach to the evacuation with the elderly, disabled, people experiencing domestic and family violence, just a streamlined approach that they in the very first instance, get transported to a safe place that will remain a safe place.”*

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*“There needed to be better arrangements by Resilience NSW and local councils. Some days we were very unsure about what was going on, what was happening at the service. It is crucial that the recovery centre is set up more.”*

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## Ensuring funding agencies provide support

Services felt that their funding department could have offered additional support. There were limited options for the additional supports needed, for example safe disposal of confidential documents and the additional brokerage clients needed to travel further for services and replace items lost during the floods.

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*“The Department of Communities and Justice didn’t ask what are you doing with confidential documents? How can we help you? How are you getting documents through? How are your clients getting to court? How can we help you? These are really key basic things; they are daily things.”*

*“I was lucky to be able to book a confidential documents wet skip bin. It took a lot of hard work to get it all emptied out of this building and out of the filing cabinets. You need practically a crowbar just to get the brick of those documents out and into the bin. Nobody is even talking about that. Where did all those confidential documents go?”*

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## Training volunteers on domestic and family violence

Volunteer training on recognising and responding to domestic and family violence was identified as a need.

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*“After the 2017 floods there was a long debrief process where it was identified that we needed to identify our spontaneous volunteers and provide domestic and family violence training to those spontaneous volunteers. Unfortunately, because the SES is based in Wollongong and has very few resources in the region, there are only two people employed for the whole region to do that coordination work. Although a lot of people voluntarily put a lot of energy into the idea, it went absolutely nowhere because everything gets decided down in Wollongong. This has been talked about after the 2017 floods. We all agreed it was a good idea, and it went absolutely nowhere. I agree it is still a good idea, and we should enhance that idea, but we have to recognise that the SES (or the people tasked with that, and it is not the local SES fault), it is a question of structure and lack of staffing.”*

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## Ensuring the safety and wellbeing of children and young people

The safety and wellbeing of children and young people needs to be central to natural disaster management, including children experiencing or at risk of domestic and family violence. Research demonstrates increased child abuse in the aftermath of natural disasters (Cerna-Turoff, Fischer, Mansourian, & Mayhew, 2021).

Evacuation centres need to have child-friendly, safe spaces. Services working with children and young people at significant risk of harm need to be resourced to provide priority support for those individuals.

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*“What about the children? Experiencing trauma, possibly in houses where they’ve experienced violence. It is fragile in how people relate to each other. This is a difficult situation for the kids.”*

*“At one service in the recovery centre we were in a back room next to the Salvation Army. A man attending the Salvation Army saw his son and immediately walked into our space. We wouldn’t let him in, but he got quite aggressive. Child-friendly spaces needs to be more private to keep children safe and protected. We are there to keep the children safe.”*

*“Our organisation offered child-friendly spaces in the recovery centres. [We] saw domestic and family violence whilst in the recovery centre. It was happening in front of us, and security was called. Scary for the staff and children. There was no safe space to separate them. There was no secure room for the victim to go into, and she had some young children with her.”*

*“Our child-friendly space, it needs to be somewhere private to keep the children safe and protected. And to keep families safe and protected too.”*

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## Planning for safe accommodation

Due to the poor response, Domestic Violence NSW members have discussed exploring alternative options to the crisis response that was provided. If this were implemented into the future, this would require stringent plans, police and child welfare checks to ensure the safety of people using them.

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*“Thinking out of the box – community responses, community evacuation centres set up by the good will of people. Looking at the possibility, are there any venues, particularly in Lismore where there may be identified individuals in the community where police checks have been done, working with children checks, where they may have capacity to put a couple of families up?”*

*“Maybe there are other ways we can look at for planning should this event happen? What venues – public or private – could we enlist now? And an ongoing thing that the police checks, and all those checks are done at the right time when they need to be. So should there be a disaster, and should we need to get families out, that designated spot is there. And it doesn’t need to be for weeks on end. Might be just until you can bring them back to the hubs where all the services are. Communities do rally together in these difficult times, but we do need to make sure all the safety checks are done for the welfare and wellbeing of the clients. And also, the staff. Maybe a staff member is available?”*

*“Even talking about community halls, there may be some community halls that are on higher ground that may be able to house women and children – just for domestic violence, it doesn’t have to be advertised – the powers that be – the non-government organisations, the Government, the SES, the police – the hall at so and so is going to be*

*designated for future floods. It may only capture a small group of clients, but that is going to be the safe place. In advance, all the players in the area are going to go – that is the community hall we are going to use that has the safety.”*

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## Recognising the impact of coercive and controlling behaviours

It's important to note that people experiencing domestic and family violence may not have access to official communications. As an additional component of coercive and controlling behaviour, perpetrators will often monitor their victim's communications devices or not allow them access to one. Communications about safety and evacuation protocols might not be passed on. These factors place people experiencing violence, predominantly women and children, at heightened risk during disasters.

## Relocating safe spaces and domestic and family violence services

Due to limited funding, domestic and family violence services are most often located in “first flood” affected areas. The NSW Government could ensure the ongoing safety of people experiencing domestic and family violence through funding to relocating safe spaces and disability-accessible domestic and family violence services outside “first flood” affected areas.

## Incorporating the National Gender and Emergency Management Guidelines into NSW disaster planning

In 2016, Gender and Disaster Australia consulted with more than 350 emergency management personnel across Australia to produce the *National Gender and Emergency Management Guidelines* and the *Gender and Emergency Management Checklist*: <https://www.genderanddisaster.com.au/info-hub/national-gem-guidelines/>

The Guidelines and Checklist align with the experiences and recommendations of our members.

The NSW Government must work with Gender and Disaster Australia to incorporate the Guidelines and Checklist into NSW disaster planning.

### *Recommendations:*

- *That the NSW Government ensures that NSW disaster management planning includes responses to domestic and family violence.*
  - a. *That the Department of Communities and Justice develops a transportation and accommodation policy to ensure people experiencing domestic and family violence are protected if they are evacuated with perpetrators of violence.*
  - b. *That NSW Government departments maintain relationships and contact with local domestic and family violence service providers during disaster response and recovery to ensure safety of people assessed at high risk of significant harm.*
  - c. *That the NSW Government ensures consistency across the recovery centres, including the provision of private child-friendly spaces and safe and secure spaces for women and children experiencing domestic and family violence within the centre.*

- d. That the NSW Government ensures that all volunteers working across the recovery centres and evacuating people (including the SES) are trained on how to identify and respond to domestic and family violence.*
  - e. That the NSW Government develops a media policy to limit filming inside recovery centres.*
  - f. That the NSW Government introduce data collection methods such as tick box on Evacuation Centre forms, regarding domestic and family violence.*
- *That the NSW Government ensures that recommendations from the specialist domestic and family violence sector are included in future disaster management plans.*
- *That the NSW Government (especially the Department of Communities and Justice) relocate safe spaces for people experiencing domestic and family violence to places that are not on a known flood plain:*
  - a. That the NSW Government ensures that any new premises for specialist domestic and family violence services are disability accessible and built outside of 'first flood' affected areas.*
- *That the NSW Government work with Gender and Disaster Australia to incorporate the National Gender and Emergency Management Guidelines into NSW disaster planning.*



## Case Study: Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service

In the flood, our service lost both our old office and our new. We lost the legal centre, lost all the furniture, and some of staff are now homeless.

The Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Program Unit [which operates out of Legal Aid NSW in Sydney] has helped on three occasions with surge staffing and workload, so our staff feel supported on that front.

Our staff are currently working from home but will have a temporary office at Southern Cross University. They're really looking forward to this as they all just want to get together in an office and some staff don't even have power let alone internet.

The service has insurance after the last floods, but the claims are all still being processed.

The service was on a five-year lease; however, the office was right in a flood zone. The lease just finished, so we were a week and a half from moving into the new office. The new office is on the first floor of the building, so we thought we were safe, but the flood was two metres higher than anyone ever thought it could get. We had moved some of our equipment into the new office without desks, so everything was just on the floor and was damaged. The new office should be back up and running soon, with the carpet being ripped up and replaced now.

There is no power in the CBD.

The community legal centre is in the disaster recovery centres helping with legal/tenancy advice. Some landlords are just chucking people's belongings out onto the sidewalk, unfortunately some really disgusting behaviour is going on and people don't know their rights.

We are thinking about the Court Advocacy Scheme going into the disaster recovery centres to offer support and see if they recognise some clients from court they can check in on. This has never been done before, but we believe there is scope, and this is what the community needs right now. There's a centre at the university we are going to have a temporary office in, so people will be able to come by.

We don't think we will be able to rebuild in the flood zone and the CBD is likely to be moved. Surely it can't be justified to rebuild in a flood zone that First Nations people said shouldn't be built on in the first place. With climate change we are now seeing a regular flood zone of these proportions.

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