Family and Domestic Violence Strategy 2020–23
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**Acknowledgement of Country and Traditional Owners**

Services Australia acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands we live on. We pay our respects to all Elders, past and present, of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations.
A message from the Chief Executive Officer

Services Australia presents our *Family and Domestic Violence Strategy 2020–23.*

Our mission as Services Australia is to be ready to support our customers with the kind of assistance that any of us would want to receive: assistance that is simple, helpful, respectful and transparent.

Having access to the right assistance is never more important than when supporting those affected by family and domestic violence, whether they come to us as customers or they are our staff.

The way we respond when someone walks up to the counter or picks up the phone is important—but so too are the systems we design, the work practices we put in place, and the relationships we forge with our partner organisations in the community.

As a united agency, it is our responsibility to help those affected by family and domestic violence access the services we provide, and make connections to other sources of guidance and support. It is vital, and calls for understanding and commitment from us all.

This strategy is the blueprint that will guide us in that ongoing effort. It builds on the structures we have already put in place, and the culture of awareness we have developed, while recognising that we cannot let our efforts lapse. As a society, we need to be alert to the ways that abusers can use technology to facilitate methods of abuse, and understand the person responsible for violence is the person using the violence. As an agency, we need to be both evidence-based and creative in the ways we respond. Above all, we will never lose sight of ways we can raise awareness of and support those affected by family and domestic violence.

Together, we can make a difference.

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This strategy is the blueprint that will guide us in our ongoing effort to support customers and staff affected by family and domestic violence.

Rebecca Skinner
Chief Executive Officer
Services Australia
What is family and domestic violence?

Family and domestic violence is behaviour that is violent, threatening, coercive or controlling, or causes a person to be fearful.

Family and domestic violence happens in many types of relationships, including past or current intimate relationships. It can also happen in relationships involving carers, relatives or guardians, kinship groups and other family groups recognised by various cultures and communities.

Family and domestic violence isn’t only physical violence or sexual assault. It can include doing 1 or more of the following to a person:
- financially abusing them—for example, restricting or removing their access to money
- verbally abusing them—for example, calling them names, criticising and belittling them or being cruel to them in front of others
- emotionally or psychologically abusing them—for example, controlling them, threatening them, or forcing them to do something
- abusing them through technology—for example, harassing or threatening them through social media, pretending to be another person online or sharing nude or sexually graphic images of them without their permission
- stalking, following or harassing them—for example, watching them from a parked car, or turning up at their home or where they work
- kidnapping or holding them against their will
- neglecting them when they depend on the perpetrator for care or support
- causing or threatening injury to others
- causing or threatening injury or death to an animal—for example, hurting the family pet
- causing or threatening damage to property
- abusing spiritual or cultural beliefs—for example, stopping them from practising their religion or putting them through harmful traditional practices, such as female genital mutilation, early or child marriage, or dowry abuse.

Exposing a child to any of these behaviours is also family and domestic violence.

Family and domestic violence is always the responsibility of the person perpetrating the violence. It’s never the fault of the person it affects. That’s why our focus isn’t only on supporting those affected by violence, but on encouraging perpetrators to change their behaviour.

We support all people affected by violence. However, we know there are certain factors, such as gender inequality and gender-based stereotypes, that lead and contribute to violence against women.
Around 1 in 4 women and

1 in 13 men have experienced at least 1 incident of violence by a current or former partner since the age of 15.

That's more than 2 million women and more than 700,000 men who have been affected.

1 in 4 women and

1 in 6 men have experienced emotional abuse by a current or former partner since the age of 15¹.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics. Personal safety, Australia, 2016. ABS cat. no. 4906.0. Canberra: ABS.
Some people are particularly vulnerable to family and domestic violence, including:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- Children and young people
- Older people
- People with disability
- People experiencing financial hardship
- People who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and others (LGBTI+)
- People living in rural, remote and regional areas
- Women at particular stages of life, such as young women, pregnant women, new mothers and women separating from their partners
- Refugees and newly arrived migrants.

A person who identifies with more than 1 of these groups may face even greater barriers and be at even higher risk of family and domestic violence.
Family and domestic violence is a complex issue and affects people in different ways. Everybody has a role to play in addressing it.

Our role as a service provider is to identify customers affected by family and domestic violence and to connect them to support as quickly as possible. Our role as an employer is to make sure we provide a safe and supportive workplace for our staff, including those affected by family and domestic violence.

We also recognise the high levels of expertise in the community in this area. We work with specialist providers and other areas of government to find better ways to support our customers and staff who are affected by family and domestic violence. These partnerships help us provide a complete service for customers and staff.

If you or someone you know is affected by family and domestic violence, it’s time to say enough.

An example of the agency’s ‘enough’ brand used on communication materials.
We will create an environment where customers and staff feel comfortable reaching out for support.

Telling someone family and domestic violence has affected you isn’t easy. Our customers and staff should feel comfortable telling us their concerns. They should feel encouraged to reach out. We train our staff to recognise when customers might be experiencing family and domestic violence. We also train them to ask customers a risk identification question if they’re concerned someone might be experiencing family and domestic violence. We tell people how we can help or how other organisations can help. We offer this support to all people violence affects, regardless of their gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, cultural background or ability.

We will:

• target our communication materials, including the ‘enough’ brand, to make sure customers and staff know what support is available to people affected by family and domestic violence.
• make sure our risk identification and referral model includes all customers who might be affected by family and domestic violence, and how it might affect them—for example, we’ll look at how we can identify and support older people experiencing abuse (see the box on page 11). This will make sure customers get the support they need.
• identify customers who might be affected by family and domestic violence so we can offer them support. This includes people experiencing less visible types of abuse like coercive control (see the box on page 11).
• ask our customers the risk identification question when there might be more risk of family and domestic violence—for example, when families separate.
• make sure our risk identification and referral model follows the latest, most rigorous research about family and domestic violence.
• make sure all staff can access family and domestic violence and child safety training, along with other support materials.
• use communication materials that promote primary prevention—for example, materials that explain why gender equality and healthy relationships are important, and that challenge gender stereotypes. This will help us drive change.
• use communication materials that promote secondary prevention—for example, materials that encourage someone experiencing the early stages of family and domestic violence to seek help.
• make sure the language in our communication materials doesn’t promote myths about family and domestic violence.
• make sure the referrals we offer to customers affected by family and domestic violence suit their needs.
• offer to refer customers who identify as perpetrators of violence or who tell us they are thinking of perpetrating violence to support services that can help them change their behaviour.
Coercive control

Coercive control is a pattern of dominating behaviour used to make another person afraid and obedient. It’s not always obvious that coercive control is happening, particularly at the start of a relationship. At first, coercive control can include constant communication, protectiveness and displays of jealousy from the perpetrator. But it can get worse over time. The perpetrator may:

- isolate the person from their family, friends and other sources of support
- restrict their finances and other resources
- track and control their movements
- criticise and belittle them often
- set rules about their behaviour, such as what to eat and wear
- make them believe they’re imagining the abuse—this is known as gaslighting.

They may also threaten violence to the person, their loved ones or pets. Or, they may threaten to hurt themselves if the other person leaves them. This can be devastating. The person affected can feel scared and like they can’t speak up. They may also question their self-worth.

Abuse of older people

Abuse of older people, also called elder abuse, is any form of violence or mistreatment that causes harm or distress to an older person and is generally perpetrated by someone they trust and depend on. This can include:

- physical abuse
- sexual abuse
- psychological abuse
- financial abuse
- social abuse
- neglect.

Abuse of older people can be unintentional or deliberate. The older person usually knows the perpetrator, who may be a carer, neighbour, friend or family member. Abuse of older people can happen in the person’s home and in institutions, such as nursing homes and hospitals.

A person is generally considered to be an older person if they are aged 65 and older. Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples may be considered older from the age of 45–50.2

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We will make sure our systems and processes are simple and safe for customers to use.

Family and domestic violence can be traumatic and disempowering. When a customer is experiencing family and domestic violence, we don’t want them to be traumatised more. We want to help them make an informed decision about what to do next. Our systems and processes need to support this by being easy and safe for them to use.

We will:
• give customers affected by family and domestic violence trauma-informed services (see the box to the right).
• give customers affected by family and domestic violence culturally appropriate services.
• provide access to interpreting services for people who speak languages other than English and who may be affected by family and domestic violence.
• continue to increase the skills of our staff in supporting people affected by family and domestic violence, through training and updated reference material. We want staff to be well informed and confident in explaining the payments and services available to those experiencing family and domestic violence.
• improve our service so we can help customers experiencing family and domestic violence to get the support they need without having to tell their story multiple times.
• explore ways to fast-track customers affected by family and domestic violence to help them get the support and services they need.
• explore ways to improve our online services so customers affected by family and domestic violence can complete their transactions safely and securely, at a time that suits them.
• give all customers consistent, accurate and up-to-date information and support when they engage with us face-to-face, over the phone or online.
• review our systems and processes to find issues that may place customers affected by family and domestic violence in further danger.
• understand the impact of technology-facilitated abuse and make sure customers affected by family and domestic violence can safely use our online services (see the box to the right).

Trauma-informed service

Trauma-informed services recognise customers may have experienced or be experiencing trauma, such as family and domestic violence, and respond to each person with sensitivity and respect. Those providing trauma-informed services understand customers might be fearful or mistrustful of services. It’s therefore important to help customers feel safe when they deal with services. Some ways a service provider can help customers feel safe include:
• reducing the number of times they have to tell their story
• making sure they have a safe space where they can talk about their concerns
• giving them clear information about the services available
• empowering them to make their own decisions, rather than telling them what to do.

Technology-facilitated abuse

Technology-facilitated abuse is using technology to control, threaten or harass another person. This can include sending someone abusive text messages, stalking them through social media or surveillance devices, and sharing private photos of them without their consent. The impacts of this abuse on the person affected are huge. For example, a person whose violent ex-partner is stalking them online can be in constant fear for their safety.
We will work with the community and government to better support customers.

The support we provide is important for people affected by family and domestic violence. We recognise this must complement the support other organisations provide. Our referral partners and local, state and national community service providers work alongside us to make the changes that need to happen to transform attitudes and end family and domestic violence. Other levels of government also help us address family and domestic violence. Sharing our approach to family and domestic violence with these groups, learning from their expertise, and uniting with them against family and domestic violence, will lead to better support for our customers.

We will:
• work together with the community, across government and with our customers to drive cultural change.
• share our communication materials, including the 'enough' branding, across government. We want the government, in one voice, to declare: ‘Family and domestic violence: It’s time to say enough’.
• work together with external services to place customers at the centre of our approach and to make sure services and support are accessible, timely and useful.
• champion the government’s national family and domestic violence agenda.
• work with our referral partners to connect customers affected by family and domestic violence to the support they need, when they need it.
• find new referral partners to provide a range of support options for all customers.
• share our data and insights about family and domestic violence with other areas of government when it’s appropriate.

Family and domestic violence myths

• **The person experiencing violence should just leave.** False. There are many reasons why a person may be unable to ‘just leave’. A person is often at greater risk of harm if they do leave: the violence may not stop simply because they’re no longer living with the perpetrator. The person experiencing violence might not be able to support themselves financially. Or, perhaps they want to stay to keep the family together or because they hope the abuse might stop. Most importantly, the responsibility to stop the violence always lies with the perpetrator. All people have a right to live without violence.

• **If the person doesn’t leave, the violence can’t be that bad.** False. No form of violence is acceptable. Also, the violence might be so bad that it’s too dangerous to leave. People who stay in family or domestic violence situations often correctly predict the violence will increase if they leave.

• **The person experiencing the violence must be doing something to cause it.** False. The perpetrator chooses to be violent. Often, the person experiencing the violence is trying desperately to avoid doing anything to ‘trigger’ the violence. The perpetrator is always responsible for the violence. We should never blame the person experiencing it.

• **A certain type of person is more likely to be abused.** False. Family and domestic violence doesn’t discriminate. Anybody can be affected. Family and domestic violence affects all sections of the community.

• **If there’s no physical evidence, it’s not abuse.** False. Psychological and emotional abuse, such as coercive, controlling behaviour and verbal abuse, are just as destructive as physical abuse and can impact people for the rest of their lives.

• **Children aren’t really impacted if they witness family and domestic violence.** False. Witnessing family and domestic violence can be extremely traumatic for children. Exposing children to abusive behaviour is in itself considered family and domestic violence.
We will take care of ourselves and each other.

Safety underpins everything we do at Services Australia. We connect Australians to the services they need, and we take this role seriously. We make sure our workplaces are safe and supportive for all. We want to encourage our staff to talk about their concerns if they’re affected by family and domestic violence and to ask for help if they need it.

We will:
- encourage our staff to talk about their concerns. We’ll make sure we openly acknowledge the work we do can be difficult in our induction and management processes.
- support our staff with effective training and updated reference materials so they can look after their own wellbeing when helping customers affected by or perpetrating family and domestic violence.
- support our staff who are affected by family and domestic violence. We’ll behave consistently and sensitively and give all staff access to training and information.
- make sure staff affected by family and domestic violence know about existing staff entitlements, such as flexible working arrangements and the leave they can use.
- make sure safety measures are in place so staff affected by family and domestic violence are safe at work.
- maintain our dedicated contact line for staff affected by family and domestic violence.
- make sure staff and managers know about the support available through the Employee Assistance Program.
- improve staff awareness of the supports available to them by continuing our targeted family and domestic violence awareness activities.
- support our family and domestic violence senior leaders to promote the family and domestic violence assistance available for staff and customers.
- help our managers increase their skills, through effective training and updated reference materials. We want them to provide consistent, high-quality support to their staff—for example, telling staff about how they can ask for advice on safety matters.