



16 September 2021

Re: Submission on the National Action Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children

To the Minister for Women, Senator the Hon Marise Payne,

As the national advocacy body for families of current serving members of the Australian Defence Force (ADF), **Defence Families of Australia (DFA)** present the below feedback for your inclusion in the development of the next National Action Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children (the National Plan).

Established in 1986, DFA is the Ministerially appointed group representing the equities of the families of current serving ADF members. As advisors to Government and Defence, DFA advocates for ongoing improvement in policy and practice. Our aim is to reduce the negative impacts of military service on ADF families, and to support the positive aspects of this unique Defence lifestyle. At this critical time of change, this work is more important than ever for shaping the future of our community.

Defence families face a unique set of circumstances and challenges, which can make it even more difficult to escape a situation of violence. The main elements of these circumstances may be summarised in the below points:

- **Isolation:** regular relocations to new Defence postings can restrict the establishment and accessibility of family and friendship networks, reducing support options and increasing pressure on the family. Families may be further isolated when the ADF member is away from home for military purposes¹.
- **Financial dependence:** regular relocations and deployments of the ADF member away from home can limit economic engagement through employment for the spouse. This can lead families to be less likely to have the financial independence to escape situations of violence².
- **Uncertainty of impacts:** there can sometimes be a fear of what impact any report of violence will have on the ADF member's career. It may be that reporting levels are lower among this cohort than for the general public, even though violence is acknowledged as an issue³.
- **Mental health:** impacts of isolation and a lack of local support networks can increase poor mental health outcomes for family members^{4,5}.

¹ For more information, refer to the Defence Pay and Conditions Manual (PACMAN).

² The rate of unemployment among the spouses of Defence personnel (14%) is significantly more than the rate for the general population (4.5%) (Defence Families Survey 2019; ABS Labour Force Data, August 2021).

³ For more information, refer to the Defence Family and Domestic Violence Strategy 2017-2022

⁴ Daraganova, G., Smart, D., & Romaniuk, H. (2018) *Family Wellbeing Study: Part 1: Families of Current and Ex-Serving ADF Members: Health and Wellbeing*. Canberra: Department of Defence and Department of Veterans' Affairs.

⁵ Muir, S. (2018) *Family Wellbeing Study: Part 2: Military Family Approaches to Managing Transition to Civilian Life*. Canberra: Department of Defence and Department of Veterans' Affairs.



- **Limited pathways to support:** in instances of violence, families may face additional hurdles to escape due to current limitations in support within housing and removal entitlements policy and a lack of local connections to support^{6,7,8}.

The third national priority of the current National Plan states: *Respect, listen and respond to the diverse lived experience and knowledge of women and their children affected by violence.*

DFA beseech the National Plan's development team to now respect, listen and respond to the lived experiences of Defence and veterans' families. The above perspectives and evidence demonstrate the need for the addition of Defence and veterans' families as a distinct cohort of interest in the National Plan. This request is also being made by the Veteran Family Advocate, Commissioner Gwen Cherne, by the Australian War Windows Inc, and other prominent voices in the Defence and veteran community.

In the strongest possible terms, DFA advocate for the inclusion of "Defence and veterans' families" as a cohort in their own right for consideration under the new National Plan.

This cohort experience a unique set of pressures, and care should be taken to consider them in future research and engagement. The National Plan must include mechanisms to understand and support best practice interventions against instances of negative impacts of military service on ADF families which result in violence against family members of any age or gender.

You are welcome to contact me if you require any clarification or further information on our submission.

Thank you for your support of this community.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sandi Laaksonen-Sherrin', written in a cursive style.

Sandi Laaksonen-Sherrin
National Convenor
Defence Families of Australia
0410 626 103
convenor@dfa.org.au

⁶ For more information, refer to the Defence Pay and Conditions Manual (PACMAN).

⁷ These points are also informed by a wide range of qualitative sources, including direct feedback from Defence families provided to DFA.

⁸ Department of Defence offer some programs to support instances of domestic violence, such as SAFE housing.