

Inquiry into the provision and regulation of supported accommodation in Queensland

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DVConnect receives funding from the Queensland Government.

DVConnect respectfully acknowledges and celebrates the Traditional Owners/Custodians throughout Australia and pays its respects to Elders, children and young people of past, current and future generations. We are committed to helping anyone experiencing domestic, family and/or sexual violence. This includes the LGBTIQ+ community, people of all ethnicities, religions, ages, abilities and pets.

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About DVConnect

DVConnect provides several national and state responses to people who have experienced violence and offer support and pathways to safety and healing.

Queensland wide:

Domestic, family and sexual violence response services:

- DVConnect Womensline
- DVConnect Mensline
- Sexual Assault Helpline
- Pets in Crisis
- Bella's Sanctuary

Victims of crime service:

- VictimConnect

Nationally:

- National Sexual Assault, Domestic & Family Violence Counselling Service, 1800RESPECT.

DVConnect's driving ethos is respect and safety, the right of people to live without violence, in the home or in the community. We are a not-for-profit organisation, with primary funding streams from Department of Justice and Attorney General, Office for Women and Violence Prevention (Queensland); Department of Justice and Attorney General, Victim Assist Queensland (Queensland) and Department of Social Services (Australia).

DVConnect was established in 1980 and is Queensland's state-wide crisis response service for domestic, family and sexual violence. DVConnect helps Queenslanders find pathways to safety 24 hours a day, 7 days per week. Annually, DVConnect takes in excess of 100,000 calls across all lines and provides crisis intervention across a number of key services. Womensline receives one call for help every five minutes (across a 24 hour period). Crisis support is provided in the form of emergency telephone support, emergency crisis accommodation placement and transport for families affected by abusive relationship, counselling for men, women and victims of sexual assault, education and support for men, community education, and care for pets of families experiencing domestic and family violence. DVConnect also operates Bella's Sanctuary a 5-unit medium-term accommodation residence that exists to provide women and children with a safe housing option after leaving a shelter/refuge.

DVConnect provides Australia's national sexual assault, domestic and family violence support service, 1800RESPECT. This service provides information, referral and counselling 24 hours a day, 7 days per week. DVConnect are subcontracted by Telstra Health to provide specialist counselling across the country.

VictimConnect is the state-wide response for victims of crime that fall under the *Victim Of Crime Assistance Act 2019* (Queensland). VictimConnect provides a



state-wide 24/7 helpline and multi-session counselling and case management support service. Delivering this service expands DVConnect's experience with those who experience domestic, family and sexual violence (DFSV) to now include those who experience violent and personal crime across Queensland.

DVConnect operates from an intersectional feminist framework, acknowledging that DFSV is gender-based violence. This gendered analysis is supported by research, evidence and data, and indicates that DFSV is most often perpetrated by men against women, and that perpetrators of this violence are fully responsible for their actions. This framework acknowledges and responds to the intersectional experience of DFSV.

While the experience of those impacted by violent and personal crime is more broad reaching than DFSV, we build upon our intersectional, trauma-informed expertise to offer recovery-based counselling and case management.

The clinical services provided by DVConnect are inclusive and trauma-informed. We are guided by the diverse voices of survivors and recognise our clients as the expert in their own lives. The abilities, strengths, goals and needs of people living with disability are respected, as are individuals from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. DVConnect acknowledges that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people know best what their communities need and want. Importantly, the intersectional approach of DVConnect considers and responds to how overlapping forms of discrimination may impact a client's experience of DFSV and other violent and personal crime.

Through operating multiple state-wide services DVConnect has unique insight into the experience of both violence and relevant services systems across Queensland. This combines with our national program which furthers our appreciation and practice-based evidence about geographic diversity and its impact on how DFSV and ability to access safer and supports.



Recommendations:

Raising standard of supported accommodation to ensure their **accessibility and appropriateness for all individuals** in both the physical design and the operating protocols

- Personal and community safety as a priority.
- Diverse accommodation options that can meet specific needs and cohorts
- Universal accessibility for those with physical disability
- Embedded support programs that are trauma-informed
- Access to dedicated medical supports on site.
- Dedicated and safe spaces to access emergency or onsite supports such as secure offices

Supported accommodation **staff should reflect the varied demographic of individuals** using the service and trained to ensure that they are providing a trauma informed response that meets the clients' individual physical, emotional, and cultural needs.

People staying in supported accommodation have **access to a dedicated advocate** to help them navigate their experience and outcomes from supported accommodation.

Reducing the impact that of the cost of supported accommodation to ensure that it facilitates an individual's ability to save towards next steps (ie rental). This may include increasing subsidies to supported accommodation, offering grants or rebates to individuals accessing these services, or imposing caps on supported accommodation charges. Alternatively identifying a new funding stream which individuals can use to supplement their income and enable them to afford to fund a rental property.

Creating supported accommodation options that are **suitable for people that use violence so that woman and any children can remain in their homes** and remain linked into social supports, school, and community, rather than experiencing the current high levels of disruption this service model puts them through. To enable this, supported accommodations would have to be part of safety plans and accountable to their role in keeping women safe. This would also allow for on-site support to be offered to men who use violence to stop their use of violence including men with disabilities who use violence in interpersonal relationships. While this presents as challenging, mostly as this is not how the system is currently structured, DVConnect believes that more effort to develop a response in this space will decrease the cost of violence on victim/survivors and on the community and can be safe and effective.



Background

Current Rates of DFV and Homelessness

The recent enquiry into family, domestic and sexual violence identified that victim survivors are more likely than the person using violence to bear the costs of leaving the relationship, the family home and their support networks or community (Department of Social Services, 2023). In addition, the experience of family and domestic violence can significantly impact financial stability, housing security and lifetime earnings (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023). The impacts of this are visible through the struggle many have when trying to secure safe accommodation. In 2022-23 66% of daily, unassisted requests for short-term or emergency accommodation across Australia were made by Women Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023). 87% of unassisted requests made by single adults with children were from females. The main reason agencies were unable to respond to these requests was because there was no accommodation available at the time.

Findings from the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability demonstrated the high rates at which people with a disability experience violence and the challenges they face when reaching out to services. More than half of all people with disability aged 18 to 64 years (55 per cent), have experienced physical or sexual violence since the age of 15 and for 81% of these people, the perpetrator is someone known to them (Royal Commission into Violence, 2023, pp. 86-90). For those reaching out for support to leave an abusive partner, research has shown that their options can be limited and that they are often forced to live in accommodation that is segregated from mainstream services (Royal Commission into Violence, 2023).

The key points raised within this submission are:

The competitive rental market and lack of housing options is impacting supported accommodation entry and exit for women including women with disabilities, trying to leave abusive relationships.

Varying level of support for vulnerable clients residing in supported accommodation is impacting client outcomes and increasing their risk of further harm.

Limited specialised supported accommodation and housing options available is disempowering and isolating for victim survivors and their children.



The competitive rental market and lack of housing options is impacting supported accommodation entry and exit for women:

- An increased number of women and children at risk from family violence are being forced to stay home in unsafe relationships due to lack of housing options for those with no income.
- Women with a disability have extremely limited supported accommodation options and specialised services charge higher rates than mainstream services.
- Increased amounts of Women in supported accommodation are returning home due to lack of longer-term housing options for them.
- Women with no rental history are unable to secure a longer-term rental property whilst living in support accommodation due to the competitive housing market.
- The lack of resources for Women in remote communities means they either must travel thousands of kilometres to access accommodation or return home to a violent partner.

There are limited options available to women exiting supported accommodation. Rental property as an exit is becoming increasingly unrealistic for clients due to increasing rent rates and high demand and government housing have extensively long waitlists (Batterham et al., 2023). This lack of exit options from supported accommodation means that clients can remain in the supported accommodation for a long period of time, with no hope of moving on to more stable and suitable long-term accommodations. Many clients return home to a violent partner before finding themselves having to re-enter the system again at a later point due to ongoing violence and abuse. Both outcomes prolong the clients experience of homelessness and increases their risk of poor physical and mental health outcomes (Batterham et al., 2023). 62% of SHS clients were shown to have previously been supported by an SHS agency at least once since July 2011 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023).

For Women with a disability hoping to exit supported accommodation, it can be difficult to find a rental that meets their accessibility needs. Women report being unable to afford suitable accommodation, or they are often forced to pay higher rent to cover the costs of any modifications by their landlord (Royal Commission into Violence, 2023). This can mean that many return to an unsafe home or may end up in another unsafe situation due to their vulnerable situation.

The varying level of support for clients residing in supported accommodation is impacting client outcomes:

- Supported accommodation not always being suitable for survivors of DFV due to the level of the support available not meeting their needs in relation to risk management, mental health needs, parenting support and housing applications.
- Supported accommodation is not also designed to meet the needs of Women with disabilities and as such, there are less suitable options available for them.



- Women with multiple and complex needs are often unable to maintain supported accommodation or gain access due to the inadequate level of support available for them.
- Lack of financial literacy, limited income, and support within supported accommodation to improve this mean that Women struggle to manage the cost of supported accommodation or have a high enough income to secure rental accommodation.

Women with disabilities often struggle to locate a spot in a supported accommodation which can meet their support needs. For example, women with physical support needs struggle to obtain a spot in an appropriate safe house, with limited purpose-built accommodation available. Similarly, there are limited options for Women with sensory impairments and it can be challenging to locate a suitable vacancy for these clients within mainstream supported accommodation. Often referrals to emergency refuge or supported accommodation for clients with disabilities are rejected due to the services feeling unable to meet the support needs of that woman.

Women who require the assistance of a personal support worker can also find it challenging to gain access to family violence supported accommodation. Specialist family violence services keep addresses confidential and tend not to allow visitors to the site, instead encouraging clients to meet workers offsite and not disclose the address. Whilst it is important to acknowledge that refuge security is crucial, such rules can make it challenging for Women with a disability requiring access for a personal support worker. For some Women, this means she will not be granted access to this accommodation and may have to seek accommodation in non-mainstream services with this lack of decision and autonomy being isolating and disempowering to many clients (Royal Commission into Violence, 2023).

Alternatively, Women with a disability are successfully placed in supported accommodation but then report not being provided with the appropriate level of support required to achieve positive outcomes (Royal Commission into Violence, 2023). For example, Women with no experience of managing their own finances, due to this being controlled by a partner, aren't provided with support or education around managing their money and saving to cover rent. Or Women are being told that they will exit into a rental but are not being provided with support around completing rental applications, getting to property viewings or liaising with housing services. This lack of support towards exiting into a rental or alternative housing option means Women are being moved to supported accommodation or refuge and then given a task of locating a rental property – a task that is becoming impossible to achieve (Batterham et al., 2023).



The limited supported accommodation and housing options available is disempowering and isolating for victim survivors and their children and many remain in unsafe situations or return home due to a lack of housing options:

- Women are being forced to relocate thousands of kilometres from their home, leading to them losing their support networks, leave employment, having to move children away from school and increase feelings of isolation whilst the person using violence can remain in the home.
- The lack of options is disempowering for Women, particularly when the person using violence is often still residing in the house.
- Lack of options or unsatisfactory outcomes means many returns home, only to reenter the service.
- Lack of trauma informed response from some supported accommodation providers means that Women are punished for their behaviour which is a trauma response following the physical, emotional, or sexual abuse they have experienced.
- High quality supported accommodation provides appropriate levels of support and accessibility; however, the costs are extremely high and not maintainable for many clients.
- People who use violence are often not asked to leave as there are limited options available that will accommodate him and be part of the chain of safety, placing the onus on victim/survivors.

Many Women reported feeling unsafe due to the worker being off site, or the house not having any CCTV or security systems onsite. Women had to share communal areas with other residents which some also reported as making them feel unsafe due to unpleasant interactions with other residents when the worker was offsite. It is known that placing many traumatised people together with limited support from workers places additional risk of harm upon these clients (Department of Social Services, 2023).

Communal accommodations are more frequently seen in non FDV specialist level 3 supported accommodation. The level 3 supported accommodation DVConnect refers people to are all shared accommodation options, and some are known to have significant levels of violence and drug use on-site. These supported accommodations are generalist services and as such as specialised family violence response is not available. Residents often must adhere to strict rules and remain compliant without raising any complaints or they risk being asked to leave.

We have received feedback from clients who have been abused by staff, kicked out of the accommodation when they have complained about it, or kicked out for raising any complaints regarding the accommodation. As such, we are reluctant to refer vulnerable clients to them.

We consistently hear that men using violence are not ousted from property due to risk of his homelessness (lack of shelter/accommodation network, especially for men



with a disability) to support him. Further there are worries that available responses are not set up to be part of the family's safety plan making the family vulnerable to violence. We see space for a response that not only houses men that use DFV but also can take basic steps to improve her safety and help him address his use of violence. This includes men who have disabilities. This allows the victim/survivors to remain in her home and with consistent access to the range of supports that she needs.

Conclusion

DVConnect sees supported accommodation as an important option that needs to be readily available to people impacted by violence. Current options are limited, and inappropriate in many situations leaving victim/survivors vulnerable to further harm. We support this inquiry into these options and look to our fellow services with expertise in housing and disability services to add to our focused view on working with people impacted by DFV.



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