

BRIEFING FOR THE EDUCATION, ARTS AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into elder abuse in Queensland

Department of Women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships and Multiculturalism

1. BACKGROUND

The Inquiry into elder abuse in Queensland was introduced into Parliament and referred to the Education, Arts and Communities Parliamentary Committee on 10 December 2024. The committee has requested a briefing on aspects of the Inquiry terms of reference that are relevant to the Department of Women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships and Multiculturalism (the department), including:

- details of any strategies, policies, programs and funding the department is responsible for in relation to the Queensland Government response to, prevention and raising awareness of elder abuse
- how the department addresses challenges affecting more vulnerable groups such as women, First Nations peoples, and seniors in culturally and linguistically diverse communities and any future plans in these areas.

2. ROLE OF THE DEPARTMENT

The department is responsible for:

- Fostering an environment that allows Queensland women to be economically secure;
- Working closely with other agencies, peak bodies, local leaders, and the community to lift the living standards and life outcomes of Aboriginal communities and Torres Strait Islander communities; and
- Facilitating an environment where multicultural communities want to call Queensland home by harnessing their skill and expertise and celebrating the cultural diversity of our State.

While the department is not responsible for strategies, policies, programs and funding that directly address elder abuse, the portfolio areas for Women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds may address elder abuse as an issue of concern, as highlighted below.

The department notes the findings of the recent Elder Abuse Statistics in Queensland: Year in Review 2023–24 report, which found women are more than twice as likely to be victims of elder abuse (67.1 per cent).

The report further highlights that 3.7 per cent of elder abuse victims identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, highlighting an over-representation in the incidence of elder abuse given only 2.4 per cent of people aged 50 years and over living in Queensland identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. Just over 4 per cent of elder abuse victims identified as having a CALD background, noting 13.9 per cent of Queenslanders aged over 50 years have a CALD background.

3. QUEENSLAND WOMEN'S STRATEGY

The department through the Office for Women (OfW) actively works with government agencies and community partners on gender equality reforms to improve the lives and rights of women and girls in Queensland. The work of OfW is guided by the *Queensland Women's Strategy 2022–27* (the Women's Strategy).

The Women's Strategy is a strategy for whole-of-government to implement. The Women's Strategy includes a vision for women and girls to have equal rights, and equal access to opportunities. Women and girls are safe, valued, and able to freely participate and succeed in the economic, social and cultural opportunities available. Women and girls are recognised and celebrated for their achievements and contributions to the community.

The vision is underpinned by 47 commitments across five impact areas:

1. Economic security
2. Safety, health and wellbeing
3. Elevating First Nations women
4. Diverse backgrounds and experiences
5. Empowerment and recognition.

The Women's Strategy acknowledges older women experience not only the impacts of gender inequalities, but also the cumulative impacts of gender inequality experienced through their lives. As such, there are three commitments that specifically focus attention on older women:

- Commitment 7: Delivering enhanced responses that enable Queensland women to access safe, secure and sustainable housing, paying particular attention to women impacted by violence and older women.
- Commitment 17: Raising awareness of, prevent and respond to elder abuse and its impacts on older Queensland women
- Commitment 44: Supporting older women to stay connected and contribute to their local communities.

The lead agencies responsible for addressing these commitments are:

- Department of Housing and Public Works (Commitment 7)
- Department of Families, Seniors, Disability Services and Child Safety (Commitments 17 and 44).

The department is not directly responsible for the implementation of specific commitments in the Women's Strategy. However, it administers the Investing in Queensland Women grant program. This program supports community groups and organisations across Queensland to develop and deliver initiatives and/or events that align with the Queensland Government's strategic priorities for women and address the unique issues faced by women and girls.

To date, nine (9) successful applicants have been funded under the Investing in Queensland Women grant program to deliver a range of initiatives specifically targeting older women, including through discussion groups and structured workshops to assess the level of awareness of elder abuse, identify barriers to reporting it, and to develop resources to improve awareness of elder abuse.

Ongoing (recurrent base) funding of \$540,000 per annum is available for the Investing in Queensland Women grant program.

The 2023 Queensland Government Gender Equality Report Cards include statistics that highlight older women in Queensland face several intersecting barriers impacting their economic security and safety:

- In 2021–22, females accounted for 69.1 per cent of all alleged victims of elder abuse reported to the Elder Abuse Helpline.
- In every age group, on average, females had lower superannuation balances. Those aged 60–64 years showed the largest gap (almost \$74,000).

- Only 13.9 per cent of women were able to rely on superannuation as their main source of income at retirement, compared to 36 per cent of men.
- 18.3 per cent of females (aged 45yrs and over) retired with no personal income.
- 59 per cent of people accessing government-funded specialist homelessness services were female.
- Females comprised the majority of fall-related hospitalisations in Queensland for patients aged 65 years and older (60.8 per cent in 2022–23).

The department will continue to work with government agencies and community partners to improve gender equality across Queensland.

4. NATIONAL AGREEMENT ON CLOSING THE GAP

The department is responsible for co-ordinating the whole-of-government response to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (National Agreement).

The National Agreement has four priority reforms (Formal partnerships and shared decision making; Building the community-controlled sector; Transforming government organisations; and Shared access to data and information at a regional level) and 19 national socio-economic targets across 17 socio-economic outcome areas.

These priority reforms, targets and outcome areas present an opportunity to improve responses to elder abuse of First Nations Australians in Queensland through implementation of the National Agreement, including:

- **Priority reform 1 – shared decision making** – creating partnership structures that enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to share decision making authority with governments regarding policy and place-based programs relating to older First Nations Australians.
- **Priority reform 2 – building the community-controlled sector** – enables investment in culturally safe and responsive services for older First Nations people and directs investment towards First Nations led organisations.
- **Priority reform 3 – transforming mainstream government organisations and institutions** that deliver services and programs to First Nations people, so they are culturally safe and responsive to the needs of older First Nations Australians.
- **Priority reform 4 – shared access to data** to provide enable redirection of funding towards community control and provide evidence access to data and information to set and monitor progress towards the priority reforms and targets.
- Socio-Economic Targets have an impact on life outcomes for First Nations people including life outcomes and the wellbeing of older First Nations Australians:
 - Outcome 1 – Everyone enjoys long and healthy lives.
 - Outcome 9 – People can secure appropriate, affordable housing that is aligned with their priorities and need.
 - Outcome 13 – Families and households are safe.
 - Outcome 17 – People have access to information and services enabling participation in informed decision-making regarding their own lives.

5. FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES COMMISSION

The Family Responsibilities Commission (FRC) is an independent statutory body established under the *Family Responsibilities Commission Act 2008* (FRC Act).

Under the FRC Act, the FRC receives notices for a range of matters (school attendance and enrolment, child safety matters, court convictions, domestic and family violence orders and breaches and housing tenancy breaches). The FRC conferences with the person the subject of the notices to support them to address the issues to which the notice related.

Though it endeavours to deal with matters on a voluntary or consensual basis, the FRC has statutory powers including to order a person to attend a community support service and, as a last resort, order the person's welfare payments to be subject to income management (Conditional Income Management). Eligible community members are also able to seek Voluntary Income Management (VIM) arrangements.

The FRC reports that VIM helps elderly community members to safeguard funds for their own needs and protect against 'humbugging' or other elder abuse or violence (FRC Annual Report 2022-23).

6. COMMUNITY ACTION FOR A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY (CAMS) PROGRAM

The department's CAMS program provides funding to organisations across Queensland to deliver local economic and social inclusion outcomes for people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, including for seniors. For example, following are activities that were delivered in 2024 to support seniors:

- The Islamic Women's Association of Australia (IWAA) Inc delivered information sessions about elder abuse in Brisbane and Southeast Queensland. The sessions covered information on what elder abuse is, where help can be obtained and what to do if someone you know is being abused. The workshops were targeted to older people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and to the community leaders network. These sessions will continue in 2025.
- The Migrant Centre Organisation Inc (MCOI) delivered information sessions on the Gold Coast to identify aspirations, training and upskilling opportunities for seniors from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The MCOI worked with participants to undertake reskilling or up-skilling, provide volunteer training and facilitate placements. The organisation also hosted workshops to assist with digital literacy, refresher on Australian workplace requirements, eCommerce and gig economy opportunities.

7. POSITIVE RELATIONSHIP CULTURAL CONNECTORS (PRCC)

The department employs ten PRCCs in Logan/Beenleigh, Brisbane, Redlands, Ipswich, Caboolture, Cherbourg, Mackay, Mount Isa, Cairns and Townsville/Palm Island. The PRCCs are officers who work on strengthening the service system in each of these locations that is responsive to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experiencing domestic and family violence, including elder abuse. For example, the PRCC in Mount Isa has worked with the Elder Abuse Prevention Unit (EAPU) of Uniting Care Queensland since 2018 and promotes EAPU programs. The PRCC and other local departmental staff support EAPU with introductions into communities, advising of the cultural protocols of each community and connections/engagement.

In 2024, the department awarded a total of \$165,740 in grants to nine organisations, specifically aimed at supporting and implementing projects aligned with domestic and family violence prevention. The funded projects are designed to prioritise both prevention and intervention and target young people, women, and men, with the goal of fostering healthy relationships. The projects funded in 2024 were:

- Borrumpah Goupong Aboriginal Corporation was provided \$20,000 to deliver Cultural Mentorship in Ipswich. The project aims at addressing the critical issues of Family and Domestic Violence by providing prevention and early intervention activities through a series of 20 men's camps. Desired outcomes of the program are to reduce the risk of DV, also increase education in relation to relationships, parenting, mental health and how culture plays a part in healing.
- Murrigunyah Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation for Women was provided \$20,000 to deliver Healing Spirits: Health Through Culture in Mackay. The project aims at building stronger families by addressing DV in the community and to increase awareness of cultural healing and empowerment.

- Strong Women Talking – Marigurim Mubi Yangu Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation was provided \$20,000 to deliver Open Thinking – On Country Gathering in Brisbane. The purpose of this project is to gather specialist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who work in community led grassroots organisations servicing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who have experienced domestic and family violence to facilitate learning, knowledge sharing and support.
- Marabisda Inc was provided a total of \$25,870 for two programs, Safe Youth Yarns and Women’s Journey of Healing in Mackay. The purpose of Safe Youth Yarns is directed at young people between the ages of 12–17 years of age to increase awareness and knowledge of positive relationships. The second program is the Marabisda Journey of Healing where women who have experienced domestic and family violence come together in a safe and empowering space and focus on healing and self-care.
- Wuchopperen Health Service Limited was provided \$20,000 to deliver Women’s Yarning Circle in Cairns. The purpose for this program is to support vulnerable women experiencing domestic violence, homelessness substance abuse, child protection matters, and women with disabilities.
- Campfire Healing Indigenous Corporation was provided \$20,000 to deliver Outback Indigenous Women’s Group in Mount Isa. The purpose of this Women’s Group is to unite support for local Indigenous women to participate in yarns, hobby activities and social events in order to promote and inspire community safety.
- Kambu Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation for Health was provided \$20,000 to deliver First Nations Women’s Retreat in Ipswich. This three-day retreat for up to 30 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women to focus on developing community responses to domestic and family violence.
- Kirrawe Indigenous Corporation was provided \$19,870 to deliver Connect to Country Camp in Ipswich. A five-day cultural camp for up to 45 First Nations girls from 14–17 years and their mothers/grandmothers/caregivers will provide education and support to work against family violence.
- Rainbow Serpent Dreaming Indigenous Corporation was provided \$20,000 to deliver SerpentSSS Elite Sport Program in Redbank Plains. This program is targeted at First Nations youth to build a skillset in sport and at the same time build awareness of DFV and be supported and mentored to have model respectful relationships in a culturally appropriate way.