

NAAFLS calls on Government to increase availability of crisis accommodation and improve Police DV training

Last week, when sentencing Samuel Edwards for the murder of his partner in Palmerston in 2019, Justice Judith Kelly called on the general public to take responsibility for intervening in domestic violence situations. She stated “if any one of the people who saw and heard what was happening had called police when they first saw or heard...she would probably still be alive...it doesn’t take much effort to call triple-0. It can save lives – and stop other lives being ruined”. This stinging criticism of bystanders fails to acknowledge the lack of supports available for victim-survivors of domestic violence. Her reliance and trust in the Police, while undoubtedly coming from a genuine place, ignores the history of Police interactions with Aboriginal communities and victim-survivors of domestic violence.

Two weeks ago the NT Coroners Court held a two day inquest into the alleged murder of a woman, HD, by her husband. Both parties were serving NT Police Officers and the alleged perpetrator continues to serve today. In the years before her death, 17 reports of “domestic disturbance” were made to Police. Most went uninvestigated.

All this is to highlight that even when domestic violence is reported, NT Police do not necessarily provide a safe or effective response. In our experience, there is a tendency for Police in remote communities to expect and accept a higher level of violence than an average person might do. We have had clients report threats to kill only to be brushed off with “he’s only letting off steam”.

Just as HD appears to have been blamed for being “difficult to live with” and dealing with alcohol dependence, and therefore somehow presumably asking for trouble, Aboriginal victims are often portrayed as being active participants in domestic violence. The courts are often told that the victim of the violence was “engaging in violence” rather than being subjected to violence.

Leaving an abusive relationship is an incredibly difficult thing to do and is when victims face the highest risk of serious violence. Many women in this situation seek safety at a safehouse. Across all the remote communities in the NT, the Department of Families, Housing and Communities funds only 14 safehouses, leaving countless people without access. The safehouses in Darwin are often at capacity. NAAFLS regularly assists clients to find crisis accommodation. We are often told the safehouses do not have rooms and our clients have to turn to hotels or hostels for accommodation. These are expensive and do not provide safety from their abuser. The NT Government should recognise the opportunity to afford more victim-survivors with safety and increase funding and availability for crisis accommodation.

Police responses to reports of domestic violence need to be improved. NAAFLS has previously provided training in relation to the legal avenues for victims of family and domestic Violence to new recruits at the Peter McCauley Centre. We support a call for further training to be provided to Police by specialist Domestic and Family Violence services, regarding the complexities of Family and Domestic Violence. We also encourage a review of Police response to Family and Domestic Violence more broadly as the current response is often either inadequate or inappropriate