



Mandatory reporting of family violence in the NT won't always help victims

Proposals by the Northern Territory (NT) Government on family and domestic violence may put lives at risk and make it harder for social workers to assist women and children who have been affected by family violence.

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) lodged a submission to the NT Government earlier this year which argued that the introduction of mandatory reporting for health professionals such as nurses and physiotherapists could force victims of family violence underground, as women could choose not to present to health authorities if they believed the police would be notified.

The actual proposals from the NT Government, released two weeks ago, go much further, creating an offence for any adult in the NT to not inform the police of a reasonable belief in family and domestic violence. The AASW responded to the proposals last week with a letter to the NT Department of Justice. The AASW argued that the proposals are counter-productive, are not based on evidence, and may put lives at risk.

Social workers work in hospitals, and health centres, in women's refuges and counselling services, and work in other settings such as housing and the Courts where they support victims of family and domestic violence.

"Family and domestic violence is a crime and has no place whatsoever in a decent society, but these proposals run counter to the knowledge and experience of social workers and services that they work in, are not based on evidence about what works, and ultimately could put women's lives at risk," said AASW President Professor Bob Lonne.

"Our members who work in this area know that a victim of family violence doesn't always want the police to come round, as it doesn't always lead to a resolution and can sometimes make the problem worse. Removing the power of the victim to decide when the police are notified makes the victim even more powerless in what is already a powerless family situation," said Professor Lonne.

The AASW would support measures based on evidence that increase the safety and security of vulnerable family members. Such programs would include:

- Increased funding of maternal and child health services especially home visiting programs for new parents;
- Increased investment in child and family services;
- Culturally relevant specific measures to target domestic and family violence in Indigenous communities;
- Increased investment in social infrastructure including primary health, education, and housing.

The current proposals from the NT Government will create an atmosphere of distrust between women and the very services that are there to support them. The AASW calls on the NT Government to reconsider their proposals and take on board the evidence from professionals involved in family violence services.