

## Local government domestic violence prevention officers needed to drive change in communities

### DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PREVENTION OFFICER IN EACH LOCAL GOVERNMENT STATE AND TERRITORY ASSOCIATION

**Key request:** In order for local government to be able to maximise its capacity to contribute to the prevention of domestic violence, it is essential that councils receive support. Local government strongly advocates for Commonwealth/State funding to establish a dedicated Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Officer in every State and Territory Association. As demonstrated by our State Associations in Victoria and Queensland, a dedicated officer has made an enormous difference in increasing the capacity of councils in those States to counter domestic and family violence at the local level through targeted, ongoing support.

**Impact:** For a relatively small investment, of around \$1M per annum, a domestic and family violence prevention officer could be located in every State and Territory Association (except for the ACT which does not have councils, and which is not a member of ALGA). Every council in Australia would benefit from this investment through: a suite of resources developed by each State Association to assist in increasing the capacity of their councils; resource sharing between Associations for the benefit of all councils; enable a more agile response to emerging issues at a community level; promoting the LG Toolkit to councils and assisting them to apply it; ability of the Domestic and Violence Prevention Officers to work with all levels of government in prevention initiatives; and enabling long-term, sustainable activities through an ongoing resourcing commitment.

#### Councils' unique position in the community

- As the closest level of government to the community, councils are uniquely placed to influence and drive social change to prevent domestic, family, and sexual violence through existing partnerships, networks, and structures.
- Councils have significant reach within the community and can provide a platform for integrated activity in preventing violence, by applying a prevention focus through their networks and partnerships, by using a gender equity and inclusion lens when planning, implementing and evaluating programs and services for libraries; youth services; early years; maternal and child health; aged and disability programs; planning and infrastructure; rates, revenue and local laws; community engagement prevention campaigns such as 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-based Violence (including White Ribbon Day); Elder Abuse Awareness Day and others.
- Local Government comprises a significant workforce, with almost 200,000 people employed in 537 councils across Australia, the majority of which (55%) are rural, regional, or remote. Most people employed in councils also live locally and have capacity to influence change beyond their workplaces in their communities such as sports clubs, schools, faith-based settings, and neighbourhoods.

- Prevention of violence against women is a responsibility of everyone in local government - from the role modelling and leadership of elected members to the activities, workplace policies of councils and culture and practices of employees. Councils can provide guidance and support for awareness raising and prevention activities at local level – across the nation.
- Councils are committed to playing their role in partnership with other levels of government to prevent domestic and family violence. There are numerous examples of councils contributing to the prevention of domestic and family violence in their communities, despite the limited funding and resources available to them. This work could be maximised with additional funding and support.

### Role of ALGA and State and Territory Associations

- State and Territory Local Government Associations – which represent councils in their jurisdiction – work co-operatively with state and territory governments to support state-wide initiatives (an example of this is the Local Government Association of Queensland joining the Queensland Government’s push for new legislation on domestic violence following the report of the Queensland Special Taskforce on Domestic and Family Violence in February 2015. During September and October 2015, Queensland councils were involved in rallies and marches as part of a local government campaign “Safer Families, Better Communities”).
- A key area of focus for the LGAQ Domestic and Family Abuse Project Officer has been the development and ongoing support of two ‘community of interest’ networks which bring together local government officers that will be ‘champions’ for the issue of domestic and family violence. Forty-four (44) councils are represented across both networks, including representation from some of the seventeen (17) First Nations Councils. A database has been created for all seventy-seven (77) Queensland councils to facilitate swift distribution of information and campaigns.
- The Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) was involved in the development of the National Framework to Prevent Violence Against Women and their Children – ***Change the Story*** - coordinated by Our Watch in partnership with VicHealth and Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety (ANROWS) in 2015, to provide a local perspective to potential initiatives and role of local government. The Framework was launched in late 2015. ALGA and State and Territory Associations have been involved in consultations to develop the next version of *Change the Story*.
- As part of the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children 2010-2022, the Third Action Plan included a priority to “co-design tools and resources with local government to engage with sporting organisations and community groups to promote action against violence against women and their children”. The Prevention Toolkit for Local Government (<https://handbook.ourwatch.org.au/localgovtoolkit/>) was designed in conjunction with all Local Government State and Territory Associations, ALGA, Department of Social Services, consultants, Our Watch and ANROWS, and launched in 2020 to provide councils with a resource to assist them in their role in preventing domestic and family violence in their communities and raising awareness of the issue. The Toolkit was officially launched in November 2020 at the ALGA’s National Local Government Roads and Transport Congress.
- Local disaster/emergency events are known to increase the risk of domestic violence. Research has shown (including after the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria in 2009 and lockdowns in relation to COVID 19) that

the incidence of domestic violence increases during and post disaster and that there are significant differences in how men and women experience and recover from disaster. Research also shows a higher death rate for women after disasters. An example of Local Government work to address this issue is by the Municipal Association of Victoria, which has developed a Gender and Emergency Management Strategy which is designed to help councils and their partners improve their understanding of gender differences and incorporate gender considerations into their emergency management policy, planning, decision making and service delivery.

- The Municipal Association of Victoria and the Local Government Association of Queensland are currently the only Associations which have a Policy Officer who is dedicated to Domestic and Family Violence Prevention. The work being done by these two Associations for their councils has made a huge difference in the resources and support available to these councils to tackle violence against women. In order to harness the full potential of local government as a platform for integrated primary prevention, it will require resourcing of each municipality to drive and embed change across services and programs on a day-to-day basis. Rural councils, require funding assistance to undertake this role. The Australian Local Government Association (ALGA), on behalf of councils across Australia, has called on the Commonwealth and State Governments to fund a dedicated Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Policy Officer in every Local Government State and Territory Association.
- Each Local Government State and Territory Association is supporting councils in its state or territory to the extent of its capability. State Associations recognise this issue as a priority.

#### Financial support needed for Local Government to be able to maximise its capacity to prevent domestic and family violence at local level

- ALGA's key recommendation to the House of Representatives inquiry into family, domestic and sexual violence (2020) was for a dedicated domestic violence prevention officer in every State and Territory Association. The Committee supported this recommendation, as well as supporting the other recommendations made by ALGA in its submission to the inquiry, namely:
  - ❖ **that ALGA is a member of the National Federation reform Taskforce on Women's Safety;**
  - ❖ **that a domestic violence policy officer in each state and territory local government association be funded by the Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments on a 50/50 basis for an initial period of 5 years.**
  - ❖ **that the Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments work with ALGA to consider whether additional resources are required to assist individual councils to be more active in preventing violence.**
  - ❖ **it also further recommended that local government be directly involved in the development and implementation of the next National Plan.**

Local government awaits the Commonwealth Government's response to the Committee's recommendations and continues to advocate for adequate financial support for local government.

- Although a Toolkit has been developed to assist local government to play its role in preventing violence against women, councils require funding support to implement the Toolkit and allow continuing and sustained activity at local government level. Councils chosen as trial sites during the development of the Toolkit all expressed concerns at the end of the 12-month trial, saying that once trial site funding ceased,

they would not be able to sustain their domestic violence prevention activities. The parliamentary inquiry into family, domestic and sexual violence highlighted the need for additional financial resources to assist local government.

- Local Government's experience is that short term, project-by-project approaches to primary prevention will not have a lasting effect. This is reinforced by the National Framework to Prevent Violence Against Women and their Children which promotes a consistent, coordinated approach across all sectors and governments. Changing attitudes, practices, structures, and norms needs sustained, coordinated effort and response across all levels of government. Local government is the closest level of government to communities and is often the best positioned to lead by example and raise community awareness.
- Where councils and/or State Associations have benefited from resourcing, there have been significant impacts in the capacity of councils to promote equality and respect and preventing violence against women within their community and workplace. However, few councils or local government state and territory associations nationally have been resourced to drive essential prevention work. With appropriate resourcing and coordination, Local Governments could contribute far more significantly to play their role in driving coordinated and sustainable prevention activities within their community
- In late 2020, following the launch of the Prevention Toolkit for Local Government, the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) Board and the Our Watch Board agreed to a closer working relationship between the two organisations to maximise strategies and opportunities for prevention at the local level. A network of Our Watch, ALGA and State and Territory Associations meets regularly to progress prevention workforce development strategies, training opportunities and other initiatives to prevent violence against women. ALGA is also working with Our Watch on the Second version of the national prevention framework and is keen to be involved in the development of the 2nd National Action Plan.

### Conclusion

- Councils want to play a bigger role in the prevention of violence against women but need financial assistance to allow them to drive social change locally and to fully play their part. **Embedding a domestic and family violence prevention officer in every State and Territory Association would not only enable each Association to assist the councils in their state, but also to be more agile in responding to emerging issues, share knowledge and experiences, and increase the capacity of Local Government as a sector to prevent violence against women.**
- For a relatively small amount of funding, locating a dedicated Policy Officer in each Association will have a major impact in maximising the capacity of the sector to prevent domestic violence. Benefits of a domestic family violence prevention officer have been clearly demonstrated in the MAV and LGAQ, where these two officers have significantly increased the capacity of councils in those states to prevent violence against women at the local level.
- This position is supported by ALGA and all State and Territory Local Government Associations.