



## PRIMARY PREVENTION PRIORITIES FOR ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER NATIONAL FAMILY SAFETY PLAN

Position Paper | December 2024

### Acknowledgment of Country

Respect Victoria acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (hereafter 'Aboriginal')<sup>1</sup> peoples throughout Victoria as the First Peoples and Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands and waterways on which we rely. We pay our respects to their Elders, past and present. We proudly acknowledge the Aboriginal communities throughout Victoria and their ongoing strength in practising the world's oldest living cultures. We acknowledge the significant and ongoing impacts of colonisation and commit to working alongside First Nations communities to effect change. We recognise the ongoing leadership role of these communities in addressing and preventing family violence and violence against women, and will continue to work in collaboration with First Peoples to eliminate these forms of violence from all communities.

### Background

Respect Victoria welcomes the creation of *Our Ways – Strong Ways – Our Voices: National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Family Safety Plan* (the **National Plan**), as Australia's first stand-alone national plan dedicated to addressing the impacts of violence against Aboriginal women, children, men, families and communities. As the dedicated organisation for the prevention of family violence and violence against women in Victoria, Respect Victoria supports a strong focus on primary prevention within this National Plan.

The National Plan presents a unique opportunity to support a shared, evidence-informed understanding of what drives violence against and within Aboriginal families and what works to prevent it. This document sets out a series of high-level principles for consideration in enlivening the prevention potential of the National Plan.

Preventing violence against Aboriginal women, children, families and communities requires targeted action to address the underlying drivers of this violence. This means acknowledging and working to address the impacts of colonisation, marginalisation, displacement and intergenerational trauma, alongside the intersecting gendered drivers of violence. Mainstream prevention programs targeting family violence often do not take into consideration the full spectrum of these intersecting drivers, nor the unique

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<sup>1</sup> We recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Victoria have different preferences for the way their communities are collectively or individually referred to. Where this document states 'Aboriginal' it uses it in the context of its use within *Dhelk Dja: Safe Our Way – Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families* to refer to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

experiences of Aboriginal women, men, children and families. This impacts both their experiences of violence, their experiences with the domestic, sexual and family violence sector and the efficacy of prevention efforts.

Our Watch's *Changing The Picture* created with dedicated consultation and leadership from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people identifies three underlying and intersecting drivers of violence against Aboriginal women. These are:

1. ongoing impacts of colonisation for Aboriginal people, families and communities
2. ongoing impacts of colonisation for non-Aboriginal people and society, including racialised structural inequalities of power and entrenched racism in social norms, attitudes and practices
3. gendered factors, including gender and inequality in a general sense.(1)

Ongoing work to build and promote a shared understanding of the drivers of family violence impacting on Aboriginal communities will be key to the success of the National Plan.

It is crucial that prevention efforts are informed by principles of Aboriginal self-determination and that Aboriginal women, men, children and communities are recognised and supported as the experts on their own lives. For prevention to be effective, it is also crucial that we take a whole-of-population approach to addressing the intersecting drivers of systemic racism, colonialism and gender inequality. As such, it is the duty of mainstream organisations and institutions to play a role and to work in genuine partnership with Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal-led prevention initiatives so that together we can create a world where Aboriginal peoples can live free from violence.

## Victorian context

Victoria is one of the only two Australian jurisdictions which have Aboriginal specific strategies on ending family violence, identifying the unique and nuanced needs of First Nations communities and the need for culturally tailored prevention and response efforts.(2)

Victoria is privileged to have a long history of committed and passionate Aboriginal communities and services championing Aboriginal-led approaches to ending family violence. This history includes the Victorian Indigenous Family Violence Task Force, which was ministerially appointed in October 2001 to raise community awareness and engage Aboriginal Victorians in the development of statewide and local responses to family violence.

*Dhelk Dja: Safe Our Way – Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families 2018-2028* is the key Aboriginal-led Victorian 10 Year Agreement that commits Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, Aboriginal services and government to work together and be accountable for ensuring that Aboriginal people, families and communities are living free from family violence.(3)

It is crucial that development of the National Plan is informed by meaningful consultation with both specialist family violence ACCOs in Victoria and the Dhelk Dja Regional Action Groups as representatives of their communities across Victoria. This is to take into consideration both the frontline expertise and service perspectives of ACCOs and the distinct and important role the Dhelk Dja Action Groups play in representing community voices.

Over successive decades, Victoria has played a nation-leading role in both preventing family violence and embedding Aboriginal self-determination. This includes:

- Significant investment in family violence and sexual assault service delivery funding to ACCOs since the 2016 Royal Commission into Family Violence from approximately \$5.2 million in 2017-18 to approximately \$52.5 million in 2022-23. Of this, grant-based funding for Aboriginal-led prevention and early intervention projects has grown from \$0.65 million in 2017-18 to approximately \$4 million in 2022-23.(4)

- Establishing the Victorian Indigenous Family Violence Task Force in 2001 to raise community awareness and engage Aboriginal Victorians in the development of statewide and local responses to family violence, including prevention approaches.
- Establishing the Dhelk Dja Partnership Forum (previously called the Indigenous Family Violence Partnership Forum) in 2005 to oversee implementation of the *Dhelk Dja: Safe Our Way – Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families 2018-2028* agreement.<sup>(3)</sup> The establishment of 11 Aboriginal family violence regional action groups across the state in 2002, now known as the Dhelk Dja Action Groups, which play a pivotal role in implementing community-led responses that educate, prevent, respond to and reduce family violence in Aboriginal communities.<sup>(3)</sup>
- Establishing the annual \$1.1 million Victorian Aboriginal Community Initiatives Fund in 2003, aimed at supporting prevention and early intervention projects that are Aboriginal-led and delivered by local organisations and communities that reduce family violence in Aboriginal communities.
- Commitment to embed self-determination through the *Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework* in 2018 and the *Self Determination Reform Framework*.<sup>(5)</sup>
- Establishment of Family Safety Victoria with a dedicated Aboriginal Initiatives Unit to advance Aboriginal self-determination within the family violence service system
- Establishment of Respect Victoria in 2018, as Australia’s first state-based statutory agency for the prevention of family violence and violence against women.
- Commitment to advancing truth and treaty through establishment of Yoorrook the nation’s first truth-telling commission, the First Peoples Assembly of Victoria and the Treaty Authority.
- The refresh of the Indigenous Family Violence Primary Prevention Framework originally published in 2012 (to be released in 2025).

## Key principles for consideration

### Prevention, including primary prevention

It is critical that primary prevention is central to the strategic approach to the National Plan.

Primary prevention refers to work that addresses the drivers of violence and is a long-term strategic approach that seeks to engage people of all ages, cultures, abilities and backgrounds in the places where they live, work, learn and play. It aims to drive social and cultural change towards a society where all Victorians can live free from violence.

The Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor’s (FVRIM) report *Monitoring Victoria’s family violence reforms: Aboriginal-led prevention and early intervention*, released in 2022, outlines that Aboriginal-led family violence prevention efforts differ from mainstream approaches in three main respects:

- Impacts of colonisation as a key driver of family violence
- Family violence prevention as part of a holistic approach to wellbeing; and
- Integrated approach to family violence primary prevention, early intervention, response, and recovery in Aboriginal communities. <sup>(4)</sup>

Ending violence against Aboriginal people requires a holistic approach spanning action across the continuum of primary prevention, early intervention, response, and recovery. In an Aboriginal context, community-led efforts to prevent family violence often combine activities across the continuum and the distinction between primary prevention and early intervention is not always clear cut.

ACCOs and community groups adopt a whole-of-community engagement model to raise awareness, address the drivers of family violence against Aboriginal people, strengthen protective factors, and support victim-survivors while also engaging with those who use violence. Prevention activities are

embedded at each stage of the family violence continuum, and work together with response, early intervention and recovery activities to make Aboriginal communities safer.

Prevention efforts must focus on addressing the unique underlying drivers of violence against Aboriginal people, such as the ongoing effects of colonialism and all forms of racism. A recent evidence review of Victorian, national and international literature identified that prevention approaches targeting Aboriginal communities are more likely to be successful if they are:

- community led in design and delivery
- holistic and involve the whole family
- prioritise cultural strengthening and reconnecting to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture
- are strengths-based.(2, 6)

As outlined in *Changing the Picture*, efforts to prevent family violence against Aboriginal people should be holistic in recognition of the interconnectedness of families, kinship networks, and communities.(1)

### **Self-determination**

Self-determination is one of the most fundamental of all rights for Aboriginal peoples. It means exercising true freedom, full and total control of one's safety, healing, connections to land and culture, communities, futures and lives.(5)

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**Aboriginal self-determination in a family violence context is a systemic shift from government and the non-Aboriginal service sector, that requires the transfer of power, control, decision making and resources to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their organisations.(3)**

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This includes transferring decision making for policy development and program design to ACCOs. It necessitates recognising existing expertise and growing capability across the Aboriginal workforce and sector.

Self-determination ensures active community involvement and ownership over prevention efforts and outcomes and means that Aboriginal people and communities are at the centre of the collective effort to prevent family violence against Aboriginal people. This recognises that Aboriginal people have deep understanding and knowledge of local community needs, priorities, and aspirations to deliver culturally appropriate approaches.

### **Collaboration**

Preventing family violence against Aboriginal people is not the sole responsibility of any one agency, community, or person. Collaborative processes that enable services to work together, instead of in silos, are needed to drive a more holistic and strategic approach to prevention. Building the best possible outcomes requires true collaboration, commitment and respectful partnerships across communities, government, the sector, at regional, statewide and national levels. Partnerships are most effective when they are Aboriginal community-led and built on transparency, mutual learning, respect, and accountability.

It is also critical that efforts to prevent violence against Aboriginal people recognise that violence against Aboriginal women and children is not part of Aboriginal culture, and that perpetrators of violence include

both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people (predominantly men) – therefore we are all accountable for preventing this violence.

If we are to effectively end violence, it is critical that mainstream organisations share power, decision-making authority, and resources relating to family violence prevention policy, programs, and services with Aboriginal organisations and peoples.(3)

## **Data & Evaluation**

The collection of comprehensive and relevant data is a persistent challenge in primary prevention, this is particularly pertinent for specific at-risk population groups, including Aboriginal peoples.

Data sovereignty and data governance is particularly important for Aboriginal peoples. Evaluation of Aboriginal -specific prevention initiatives should be designed and led by ACCOs and community groups in line with principles of Aboriginal data sovereignty.(4, 7)

There are also funding and resourcing costs associated with monitoring and evaluation that are often unaccounted for in funding models.

## **Intersectionality**

Prevention work exists in the context of interdependent and overlapping systems of discrimination and disadvantage. The elimination of discrimination is a precondition for a more equal society, and therefore critical to the prevention of violence. Individuals may experience various forms of discrimination and prejudice based on sexual orientation and identity, gender and gender identity, race, economic status, migrant status, class, national origin, and ability, among other aspects of one's identity. These characteristics then impact the risk of experiencing family violence and its severity.(8)

Working in intersectional ways and acknowledging the diverse experiences and identities of all Aboriginal people including women, girls, men, boys, Elders, Stolen Generations, people living remotely, people with disability, and LGBTIQ+ Sistergirl and Brotherboy communities, is critical in prevention efforts.

Intersectional prevention approaches should recognise the compounding drivers of violence for Aboriginal people, including how the cumulative effect of systemic racism and individual, institutional and societal violence have contributed to the severity and disproportionate impact of family violence on Aboriginal people, families and communities. This necessitates taking into account the ongoing legacies of colonisation including racism, systemic barriers, social and economic disadvantage resulting from intergenerational and ongoing experiences of trauma, and culturally unsafe service provision.

To be effective, the National Plan will need to take a broad view of family safety and encompass actions that prioritise the prevention of all forms of family and gendered violence impacting upon Aboriginal families. This includes all forms of violence against women, intimate partner violence, Elder abuse, child maltreatment and violence towards LGBTIQ+ Aboriginal peoples.(2)

**For further information about Aboriginal led prevention efforts in Victoria see [Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention Mapping Project](#) and [Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention Evidence Review](#).**

## WHO WE ARE

Respect Victoria is the dedicated organisation for the prevention of family violence and violence against women in Victoria. Our vision is a Victoria where all people are safe, equal and respected. A Victoria where everyone lives free from family violence and violence against women.

### References

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