



# **Background Briefing No. 1**

## **Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service NSW Inc.**

8 October 2015

### **BACKGROUND**

The Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Services (**WDVCASs**) were established and funded under the Legal Aid NSW Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Program in 1995.

There are currently 28 WDVCASs operating from 114 Local Courts in metropolitan, regional and rural areas of New South Wales.

**WDVCAS NSW Inc.** is the independent peak body representing WDVCAS members. While funded by Legal Aid NSW, WDVCAS Inc. is independently governed by a Board of Directors. The Board appoints an Executive Officer to implement the organisation's key roles which are to:

- advocate in social, legal and political settings on behalf of our members who work with women and their children who have experienced domestic violence;
- collaborate and consult with key stakeholders;
- formulate recommendations for systemic policy and law reform; and
- assist in coordination of state wide membership.

We aim to be a leader in initiating policy and law reform on issues affecting women and children experiencing domestic and family violence. This we achieve through working with our members to identify systemic issues and advocating for change via constructive recommendations to the on-going policy and law reform agenda.

### **ROLE OF WDVCASs**

The 28 WDVCASs operate from metropolitan, regional and rural Local Courts. WDVCASs work co-operatively with the NSW Police, Magistrates, Local Court staff, legal practitioners and local support services to improve court outcomes for women and their children who have experienced Domestic and Family Violence.

More specifically, WDVCAS workers provide the following support:

- assist women and their children obtain ADVOs at court
- refer women to solicitors and in certain circumstances, organise legal representation through the *Domestic Violence Practitioner Scheme*
- advocate and make referrals to support sources such as related legal services (victims compensation for example) housing, health, counselling, and financial services such as Centrelink or financial counselling
- facilitate the empowerment of women who have experienced Domestic and Family Violence.

The WDVCASs play a pivotal role in the *It Stops Here* reform and the *NSW Domestic Violence Justice Strategy*. For example, under the Strategy, it is mandatory for Police to refer all women who are domestic and family violence victims to a WDVCAS by the end of their shift. The WDVCAS then makes contact with that woman and speak to her about her needs. The WDVCAS then assess each woman's situation and make appropriate referrals to professional service providers that can provide ongoing support. If the referral involves a Court matter (ie.

an ADVO and/or related criminal charge) the WDVCS will continue to support that woman through that process.

In 2014, the NSW Government chose the state wide WDVCS network of services to host the Local Coordination Points which are fundamental to the success of its Domestic and Family Violence Reform Framework - *It Stops Here – Safer Pathway*. For more information about *Safer Pathways* click here: [www.wdvcasnw.org.au/pdf/Background-Briefing-No.-2--NSW-Domestic-and-Family-Violence-Reform-Framework.pdf](http://www.wdvcasnw.org.au/pdf/Background-Briefing-No.-2--NSW-Domestic-and-Family-Violence-Reform-Framework.pdf)).

Between 2009 and 2014 the WDVCS' experienced a 25% increase in the total number of clients.

### **Statistics on WDVCSs referrals and support work – 2013/14 to 2014/15**

#### **Referrals to Support Services**

2014/15 - 84,369 (+14.8% from previous year)  
2013/14 - 73,433

#### **Final ADVO's for Women**

2014/15 - 11,477 (+3.16% from previous year)  
2013/14 - 11,125

#### **Service Events for Women** (ie: any action taken for client incl. court support and referrals.)

2014/15 - 102,127 (+12% from previous year)  
2013/14 - 91,078

#### **Total Clients**

2014/15 - 22,557 (+2% from previous year)  
2013/14 - 22,065

#### **Client Comparison (total clients)**

2014/15 - 22,557 (+25% since 09/10 period)  
2009/10 - 18,060

In addition to the already increasing workload over this period, from 1 July 2015 the WDVCS began to receive all NSW Police Referrals for women identified as victims of a domestic and family violence incident. In the few months since the new system was launched, the number of new clients referred to WDVCS has rapidly increased.

For the month of **July 2015, 5,794 women were referred by the NSW Police to the WDVCS'.** In **August 2015 that figure rose to 8,428.** This an increase of 45% in referrals in just one month of referrals. Refer to Briefing Note No 2 for more information on the Domestic Violence Justice Strategy and the impact on the WDVCS'.

#### **WDVCS as host of the Local Coordination Point under Safer Pathways**

WDVCS' reputation and decades of experience in providing a state wide crisis response for domestic and family violence victims accessing the court system made them the ideal choice as Local Coordination Points. Over the years, the WDVCS network has established strong working relationships with police, court staff, human services agencies and specialist community based service providers. Throughout NSW WDVCS's have done the groundwork for enhanced safety and protection outcomes for women and children receiving support through the Local Coordination Points.

While a core focus of the WDVCSs is to provide court advocacy, it should be noted that they also provide non-court related DV specialist assistance. They provide information and referrals on a range of matters, including relevant supports through other services, letters of support to services such as Housing NSW and advocacy on behalf of women and advice on domestic violence related issues. Two WDVCSs (Macarthur and Wagga Wagga) also provide case management to women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence.

Of the 28 services 23 (or 82%) are funded to employ specialist Aboriginal workers and 13 (or 46%) receive funding to employ specialist CALD workers. Both specialist worker groups participate in network meetings and activities and share their expertise and knowledge with other workers at their respective WDVCS. They participate in well established networks in their regions to ensure appropriate referrals can be made for counselling and support groups, or for legal, health, financial, housing, education or employment issues.

While WDVCSs currently receive most referrals from NSW Police Force or NSW Local Courts, they also accept referrals from other service providers and self referrals from women experiencing violence. Being host of the Local Coordination Point means that the non-court related support already delivered by WDVCS will not only continue, but will be further enhanced and expanded.

The challenge and opportunity to make such a meaningful, collaborative contribution to the protection of women and children is one which has been embraced by WDVCS's. Their commitment, **if combined with adequate resourcing**, will pave new ground in supporting victims of domestic and family violence to lead safe and empowered lives. Currently six of the WDVCS' are now working as a Local Coordination Point – where the Safety Action Meetings (SAM's) are also held with key stakeholders in those areas.

**The Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Services have not had a funding increase since 2009.** The workload has increased significantly in this period of time and has rapidly increase since 1 July 2015 with the introduction of the new referral pathway implemented under the Domestic Violence Justice Strategy. The WDVCS workers remain committed to supporting women and children with issues around domestic and family violence.

The WDVCS are the only DFV Specialist service provider state wide that work on a local level. They are committed to working collaboratively with all service providers in their areas to continue the essential work in supporting women in domestic violence.

For more information please contact:

**Helen Brereton**

Executive Officer

WDVCAS NSW Inc

[eo@wdvcasnsw.org.au](mailto:eo@wdvcasnsw.org.au)

Ph: 0474 779 847

**Tanya Whitehouse**

Chair

WDVCAS NSW Inc

[tanya\\_whitehouse@clc.net.au](mailto:tanya_whitehouse@clc.net.au)

Ph: (02) 4640 7333

**Or visit: [www.wdvcasnsw.org.au](http://www.wdvcasnsw.org.au)**