



Building resilient family violence services

Learning from CALD communities'
experiences during COVID-19

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Executive summary

Family violence support systems in New South Wales (NSW) face a critical policy challenge: they lack the structural resilience required to sustain effective service delivery during periods of acute social disruption. The COVID-19 pandemic provides a clear and recent illustration of this vulnerability, revealing how sudden surges in demand expose and intensify existing systemic weaknesses. While the pandemic serves as a focal case, these weaknesses are not crisis-specific but reflect enduring issues that affect system performance under any major disruption.

During COVID-19 lockdowns, demand for family violence support surged by 73 per cent and case complexity increased across the board. Frontline family violence services struggled to meet community needs. The limited capacity of support services to meet demand should be understood not only within the context of the pandemic, but within the broader context of resource constraints and inadequate support for service providers that existed pre- and post-pandemic.

For culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, these systemic vulnerabilities create compounding barriers to accessing support services for family violence.

Through a case study of Linking Hearts, a multicultural family violence and homelessness service (auspiced by Muslim Women Australia), this study illustrates how crises expose and amplify existing systemic vulnerabilities. Although COVID-19 is the case study, the findings are applicable to a wide range of future social systems disruptions (such as infectious diseases and climate change-related natural disasters).

The report identifies how innovative and culturally responsive services that adapted in real time to meet community needs during the COVID-19 crisis can offer a proven model for improving system-wide resilience.

The NSW Government, alongside relevant stakeholders, can build a family violence service system that is structurally equipped for future crises, while maintaining a focus on victim-survivor safety and empowerment. This can be done through flexible sector funding, greater investment in workforce support, enhanced digital service delivery, improved acute and long-term housing stability and meaningful CALD community engagement.



Policy opportunities – at a glance

- 1 Establish sector-wide, sustainable baseline funding and crisis funding mechanisms** | Explore alternatives to ad hoc emergency funding with pre-designed, rapidly deployable support systems that automatically scale during crises without lengthy application processes.
- 2 Strengthen workforce resilience infrastructure** | Create permanent support systems for family violence sector workers that recognise the unique stresses of family violence work, as well as providing additional supports during crisis periods.
- 3 Develop remote service delivery standards for family violence services** | Create comprehensive guidelines to enable services to maintain effective service delivery through digital platforms while ensuring victim-survivor confidentiality and privacy as well as maintaining human elements of family violence casework.
- 4 Address widespread housing insecurity beyond crisis periods** | Continue to support and grow mechanisms that protect victim-survivors of family violence from housing instability during social system disruptions while addressing the ongoing housing and cost-of-living pressures that compound the impacts of family violence.
- 5 Embed CALD community consultation in crisis response planning** | Design and embed engagement with CALD service providers within government institutions to co-develop policy and crisis responses. This will ensure that diverse community needs are reflected in system design rather than addressed as an afterthought.



Background

Periods of acute social disruption place exceptional pressure on family violence support systems, revealing the extent to which underlying structures are equipped to respond to sudden surges in demand. The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns starkly illustrated systemic vulnerabilities in the NSW family violence service system. While the immediate public health emergency has now ended, the structural vulnerabilities that it exposed persist and – without a coordinated effort by government and relevant stakeholders to improve baseline resilience – will likely resurface when faced with future crises.

Research by Domestic Violence NSW found that during COVID-19, services experienced a 73 per cent increase in demand, a 48.5 per cent expansion in waitlists and a significant increase in case complexity.² While additional government support was available during COVID-19, research into the lived experiences of community organisations suggests that it did not meet the heightened demand on services and increased complexity of client needs, which stretched far beyond traditional service delivery and related funding sources.³

These system vulnerabilities disproportionately impacted CALD communities who (even during non-crisis times) face additional barriers to help-seeking. Barriers include language, a lack of cultural competency in mainstream service provision and a heightened fear of authorities – all of which were greatly exacerbated during the lockdowns.⁴ Given that CALD communities face compounding barriers to accessing family violence supports, specialised multicultural services play a critical role in the provision of family violence services to NSW's diverse communities.

Family violence service policy commitments during COVID-19

The Domestic and Family Violence Blueprint for Reform 2016–2021 committed to improving the system to be “transparent and accountable with shared accountability for common policy goals”; with enhanced coordination across “policy that shapes services and interventions, as well as the processes by which government engages the non-government sector to deliver services”.⁵ These sentiments continued in the NSW Domestic and Family Violence Plan 2022–2027, which is the current strategic policy in force, with recognition that there needs to be “whole-of-society collaboration and action” amongst community, civil society, government and the private sector.⁶

Similarly, the Pathways to Prevention NSW Strategy for the Prevention of Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence 2024–2028 emphasises embedding intersectionality and supporting higher-risk individuals and communities (including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and CALD communities, amongst others). Key principles underpinning the strategy include applying an intersectional lens and working in partnership across government, organisations and leaders/practitioners in community. Such partnerships aim to ensure that processes are being “implemented in a nuanced and relevant way and by the people known and trusted in those settings and communities”.⁷

An example of this in practice is Linking Hearts, an organisation that delivered culturally-appropriate family violence services during the COVID-19 crisis to communities in Southwest Sydney through daily check-ins, translating key messaging into community languages and providing religiously appropriate food packages that maintained cultural connection during lockdowns.



Further, funding commitments announced by the Commonwealth Government recognise the need for culturally-appropriate supports. In 2024, the Minister for Social Services announced specific funding to support training for faith leaders and CALD communities.⁸ This funding emphasises the Government's understanding of the critical role of culturally competent service providers during crises. However, this report also concludes that training alone is insufficient without accompanying infrastructural support and sustainable funding models.

In NSW, the COVID-19 investment to boost frontline services totalled \$21.6 million (\$12.8 million from the NSW Government, \$8.8 million from the Commonwealth Government). This funding was critical in supporting services during the pandemic, but this research also highlights the limitations of reactive, ad hoc funding.⁹ While Domestic Violence NSW (DVNSW) – the peak body for specialist domestic and family violence services in the state – recognised that these funds were “helpful and most welcome” for service providers, their temporary nature left services struggling to maintain enhanced capacity once funding ceased, despite the continued increase in demand for support.¹⁰

It is well-established that the sector is in a state of crisis, with victim-survivors waiting months to access services or being turned away from services that do not have the capacity to meet demand. The reality is that “existing services are stretched to breaking point – operating on outdated funding models that don’t come close to covering today’s costs”.¹¹ For example, DVNSW documents how new client referrals for case management and case coordination continue to increase – outstripping existing funding, with NSW-based services collectively experiencing a 22 per cent increase in new referrals between January and July 2025.¹²

While additional funding during COVID-19 partially helped alleviate increased pandemic-related caseloads, it did not meet all pandemic-related expenses for service providers or account for heightened unmet need related to increased case complexity post-lockdowns; nor did it remedy the preceding or post-pandemic gap between need and baseline funding.¹³

Even outside of crisis times, there is a growing demand for family violence services. There have been “year-on-year increase[s]” in reports of family violence-related assaults since the pandemic, with “the rate of reported assaults per 100,000 population increasing by almost 16 per cent since 2020–21.”¹⁴ Based on data, research and sector consultation, DVNSW has consistently called for a “50 per cent core funding increase for all specialist domestic and family violence services, so that frontline services have sufficient resourcing to meet ongoing demand”.¹⁵ The NSW Government’s 2026–27 budget announcement to increase funding by 50 per cent for six frontline specialist programs over next four years marks the first core funding increase in more than a decade.¹⁶ While NSW’s funding increase provides welcome relief, the next challenge is ensuring that it marks the beginning of a longer-term commitment to building a sustainable specialist sector.¹⁷

Additionally, during the pandemic, there were cross-governmental coordination efforts, with agencies such as Multicultural NSW providing targeted support. This included support for service providers to utilise existing organisational capacity to expand their services and meet COVID-19-related needs in a timely manner.¹⁸ However, in other respects, federal-state jurisdictional issues that arose during the crisis posed tangible challenges for disaster response, with service providers receiving mixed messages from the federal and state governments.¹⁹ While Linking Hearts noted that they did receive additional grants during the pandemic, including support for temporary visa holders, from the NSW Government, this was a result of the state “absolutely stepping into gaps that the Commonwealth had at the time”.²⁰ Post-COVID-19, the reversion to rigid federal-state jurisdictional boundaries has reintroduced barriers for some cohorts, including barriers for temporary visa holders accessing family violence support.²¹ This shift highlights the need for greater, ongoing cross-jurisdictional cooperation, rather than forming collaborative partnerships only during crises.²²



Resilient family violence services: benefits for the whole community

Strengthening the resilience of family violence services will have profound benefits that extend far beyond crisis preparedness, creating safer, more connected communities in the long term. Resilient services are ones that can respond quickly and effectively to meet clients' current and emerging needs, resulting in improved wraparound support for victim-survivors of family violence. For example, measures that enhance early intervention, such as protocols devised and implemented during COVID-19, enable earlier identification of clients' changing needs. One client described how Linking Heart's (a multicultural family violence and homelessness service) proactive approach made them feel that "...if something happened, someone cared, and my kids would be looked after"²³ – offering a level of security that can transform individual and community wellbeing.

Resilient services that can quickly adapt to provide wraparound support – from housing assistance to navigating government services – prevent families experiencing family violence from the exacerbation of financial distress and housing insecurity during crises. Specifically, within NSW in the context of COVID-19, DVNSW highlighted the need for increased social housing as a priority due to the link between family violence and homelessness.²⁴

The research presented in this paper documents how services like Linking Hearts stepped up to provide rent assistance to prevent homelessness when clients faced barriers to accessing mainstream systems. Further, evidence from this study suggests that when family violence services are supported to be more resilient, services can reduce the strain on other crisis services. For example, the proactive health support provided by Linking Hearts, which included facilitating clients' access to vaccination clinics and distributing medical supplies through COVID-19 care packages, improved community health outcomes and (in cases that were not acute) diverted clients away from already overwhelmed emergency health services.²⁵

Additionally, the lived experience of CALD communities in Western Sydney documented in this study suggests that diverse communities benefit when services maintain cultural responsiveness during times of crisis – a clear strength of Linking Hearts' approach pre-, during- and post-COVID-19. This research shows how culturally-appropriate food packages, the translation of government messaging and an understanding of faith-based needs created not just individual support but also community resilience. For example, one participant explained that the group therapy sessions run by Linking Hearts became an important source of community connection during a time of profound isolation.²⁶



Findings from community

This project sought to identify what policymakers could learn from the experiences of victim-survivors and providers during COVID-19 and what government action is required to improve service system resilience.

Undertaken in partnership with Muslim Women Australia, the study draws on the lived experiences of Linking Hearts clients and staff during lockdowns in the Western Sydney region. It examines how family violence services adapted to crisis conditions and where gaps in the system emerged.

Linking Hearts

Muslim Women Australia, established in 1983, operates Linking Hearts, a specialist family violence service for women from diverse cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds. Linking Hearts provides integrated and holistic family violence services ranging from prevention and early intervention, crisis and transitional accommodation, rapid rehousing and intensive support for clients with complex needs.²⁷



The service's pre-COVID model was based on wraparound case management processes delivered in partnership with other providers, including legal assistance, housing support, migration advice, emergency assistance, access to parenting programs, financial literacy programs and youth services. This holistic approach proved crucial during the pandemic when clients needed support across multiple life domains simultaneously.

During COVID-19, Linking Hearts was categorised as an essential service, qualifying for exemptions to lockdown restrictions. The service adapted its model to include online and outdoor delivery while maintaining the essence of being a "client-centred and trauma-informed and culturally-appropriate" service.²⁸

Linking Hearts, saw a 12.5 per cent increase in 'high effort' cases during the first lockdown, with almost 40 per cent of clients requesting additional support across a range of areas like accommodation, income support, legal assistance and access to food and medicine.²⁹

As explained by CEO Hajjeh Maha Abdo OAM, during the pandemic *"a therapeutic and healing model was central ... in response to the increased levels of anxiety experienced by communities and the increased support women experiencing domestic and family violence required"*.³⁰ The intersectional approach adopted by Muslim Women Australia demonstrates cultural and religious competence that creates safe spaces for families to seek help when facing violence.

The research team conducted 20 interviews with victim-survivors and staff from Linking Hearts. Participants represented significant cultural diversity, including those from Samoan, Thai, Bangladeshi, Jordanian, Lebanese, Syrian, Palestinian, Tunisian, Egyptian and Australian backgrounds, with ages ranging from the early 20s to the 50s. Many participants self-identified as single parents and/or carers for children with disabilities, highlighting intersectional vulnerabilities that were compounded during the pandemic.

A particular focus that emerged from the research included people from migrant backgrounds on temporary visas, who relied heavily on support services for necessities during COVID-19 due to sharp rises in unemployment and exclusion from most government support programs. This community faces unique challenges that illuminate broader issues about service system resilience and inclusivity.³¹



Crisis conditions amplified support needs across multiple domains

During COVID-19, family violence services rapidly adapted to provide expanded services that were typically outside their remit or were usually delivered in partnership with other services. This included support in accessing food and medicine/healthcare, housing, legal and immigration support and assistance navigating other government service systems, especially when other service systems were inaccessible to clients.

COVID-19 lockdowns fundamentally altered the scope of support required by family violence victims. Beyond traditional supports, Linking Hearts data showed a greater client demand for access to food and medicine, housing support, immigration advice, disability support and access to education (particularly for school-aged children). The increased vulnerability and isolation of clients required family violence services to cross traditional service delivery siloes and provide more comprehensive wraparound support than what is typically resourced within family violence funding frameworks.

As one Linking Hearts manager explained, “our service delivery continued during that time, but it had to continue differently”.³² The ‘differently’ involved staff members becoming “people of all trades”,³³ providing support across multiple areas that would typically be addressed by separate service systems. Not only were staff working outside their typical remits, but funding for these expanded services was limited.

This expansion was necessitated by increased inaccessibility or barriers to accessing other support systems during the pandemic. Case workers had to respond to a heightened level of client need as social systems – from work, school, health and housing – were all impacted by a state of flux and uncertainty. This disruption of surrounding social systems, which generally operate in tandem with traditional family violence services, made it difficult for victim-survivors to independently navigate other services, leading to increased reliance on family violence service providers like Linking Hearts.

The scope of additional support was extensive. Service provision was impacted across the board in terms of case management – the in-house counselling capability needed to be expanded, as did the provision of COVID-19-related health supplies and information, including on vaccination and mobility restrictions. Further, clients who contracted COVID-19 relied heavily on the service to obtain groceries for themselves and their children.

Linking Hearts organised comprehensive food packages including fresh meat, fresh fruit, vegetables and other (culturally-appropriate) items.³⁴ One client described the impact of receiving the food packages:

“

*They honestly were lifesavers. I remember when I was sick, [the case worker] asked me what do you need? I sent her a message with a few things, she said is that all you need? I needed more but I was embarrassed... They sent me everything I needed and more – meat, chicken, fruit, butter, flour, pasta, veggies. They secured halal meat for us.*³⁵

“

*I can't explain, because they helped me so much. My kids... Alhamdulillah... lucky I was renting from them [MWA]. Everything, from food, toilet paper, shampoo, everything... They call or they message if I need help or support... they send someone to drop off... especially with the food.*³⁶

Another significant domain of support that emerged during COVID-19 and continued to place pressure on services in the post-COVID period was crisis accommodation and housing. Linking Hearts staff reflected on the fact that housing security for clients has worsened considerably since the pandemic. As one staff member explained *"looking for private rental these days is really hard. Before COVID, it wasn't that hard... Now it's like it's a mission to find a property for a client."*³⁷ Further, *"during COVID we were advocating for all our clients to stay in their already rented houses and not be evicted... [post-COVID] there [was] a floodgate of people/women who need[ed] to find alternative accommodation".*³⁸

While family violence services have long played a role in supporting clients with housing, the compounding pressures of increased demand during and after COVID, alongside broader systemic issues of housing supply and affordability, have pushed this issue to critical levels. These conditions have significantly constrained services' capacity to respond effectively.

Housing and crisis accommodation are central to the long-term wellbeing and safety of victim-survivors. As articulated by a senior staff member: *"Women need that stability, children need that stability of housing to be able to, to feel like a sense of belonging in a community, in an area where they live and they work, and they go to school and all of that. And if that's not provided then everything that we've done is just a Band-Aid solution... When we're pouring so much money into mental health and wellbeing, we've got to do the same in providing these women with affordable, stable long-term accommodation."*³⁹

Significant increases in case complexity and duration

High-effort cases increased by 12.5 per cent during the first lockdown and 5.8 per cent during the second lockdown, with cases taking longer to move through usual services due to clients requiring higher levels of support for extended periods.

The pandemic did not just increase the number of people seeking help – it changed the nature of the support required. As a result, cases took longer to transition through the usual services, because clients required higher levels of support for longer periods.

Linking Hearts categorises cases across a scale of low, medium and high effort, with 'high effort' cases being those with more complex needs and requiring deeper engagement. During both COVID-19 lockdown periods, there was an increase in 'high effort' cases when compared to the periods immediately preceding the COVID-19 lockdowns. During the first lockdown (March–June 2020), there was a 12.5 per cent increase, while the second lockdown (June–October 2021) saw a 5.8 per cent increase in high effort cases.

Increased complexity was not simply a reflection of individual circumstances but was shaped by clients' need to constantly navigate changing external conditions. Case management involved frequent reassessment and adjustment in response to changes in government policies and their impact on victim-survivors' circumstances. In one case, a client was moving towards exiting the transitional accommodation system and seeking a private rental when the pandemic impacted her work security and her mental health support needs escalated. A Linking Hearts staff member explained that, although *"on paper, this client not moving into a private rental may be categorised as a 'negative' outcome. In reality, the fact that the client was able to stay connected to the services that she required is a positive outcome".*⁴⁰



The duration of support for clients also increased significantly. During the lockdowns, almost 40 per cent of clients requested further support, whether for securing accommodation, income support, accessing legal assistance or receiving food packages. Many clients who had formally 'exited' case management processes returned or reconnected during the COVID-19 pandemic, requiring crisis-level support due to changes in their circumstances triggered by the pandemic.

The increased complexity placed an enormous strain on caseworkers. As one staff member explained: *"When we talk about complexity of case management it is not talking literally about intake, and assessment, and entry, and all the domains in such a dry way. We are talking about individuals and families and communities and entities that are living and breathing and dynamic and have their own individual experiences and stories."*⁴¹

The study of service provision during COVID-19 also highlighted how service disruptions affect entire families across generations. Proactive service provision for children as individuals – not just as extensions of their parents – has the potential to break cycles of violence and trauma. Resilient services ensure that even during crises, children receive the specialised attention they need for their wellbeing and development.

Supporting children added significant complexity to cases, as the move to online case management during the pandemic limited direct engagement and hindered individualised case planning. While Linking Hearts continued to provide specialised programs for children, such as online youth groups, staff were concerned that opportunities to provide services for children 'shrunk' during the pandemic, as services focused on meeting their immediate and crucial needs.⁴²

These patterns in service usage highlight the need for crisis funding models to account for both the increased intensity and extended duration of support required during and after emergencies. In the context of COVID-19, this meant recognising support needs beyond mandated lockdown periods and into longer-term recovery phases. Future crisis funding could adopt more flexible timeframes that acknowledge extended recovery periods and the iterative, non-linear nature of crisis response.

Digital service delivery brought both opportunities and challenges

Family violence services found that digital service delivery provided unexpected opportunities for client engagement, but not without significant challenges, including compromised privacy, confidentiality and assessment capabilities.

The rapid shift to digital service delivery was essential for maintaining contact during lockdowns but revealed significant limitations in how family violence support can be provided remotely. A significant change to service provision that emerged from the COVID-19 lockdowns has been the use of technology.

During this period, Linking Hearts adapted and embraced different technologies and social media platforms. This involved shifting most assessments to video calls, while ensuring that in-person options remained available, with a clean, outdoor space available if required.

The move online fundamentally changed the quality of client-worker relationships. As noted in the staff focus group, *"casework is not like any other work... when you see a client face to face, you can tell... you can see the pain in the person. You can see their struggle. You can see everything"*.⁴³ Linking Hearts staff noted that face-to-face interaction is also an important element of case coordination within the service (i.e. staff briefings).⁴⁴ Although online modes can increase access to services for some cohorts (and were necessary during the lockdowns), conducting casework online is significantly more difficult for CALD cohorts. For multicultural communities, communication involves more than speaking the right language, for example non-verbal social and cultural cues.



For family violence services, a key consideration in moving to digital service delivery was ensuring client privacy and confidentiality.⁴⁵ While staff guidelines were created to ensure privacy-protected remote service delivery, some clients could not access services due to the practicalities of being ‘locked down’ with family members using violence.

Despite the challenges, digital technologies and platforms also created new possibilities. During the lockdown periods, there was an increase in engagement with all Linking Hearts online platforms, and a significant increase in self-referrals made through the website compared to traditional engagement.⁴⁶ Online group activities, such as group therapy, became particularly valuable. The adoption of technological innovations in services was not just a temporary measure. Engagement via online platforms has become an integral part of Linking Heart’s holistic approach to service delivery, leveraging the accessibility benefits of technology while maintaining the essential human elements of family violence casework.⁴⁷

Workforce adaptation required intensive support

Staff experienced unprecedented strain adapting to crisis conditions, requiring new operational models and support systems that proved essential for maintaining service continuity.

During the pandemic, working conditions rapidly changed for family violence service providers, with staff adapting their processes while maintaining a high level of support for clients in crisis. Like other workplaces during COVID-19, Linking Hearts’ staff working arrangements changed, significantly impacting staff.

The organisation had to innovate to ensure service continuity. For example, the service’s staff were operationalised into Team A and Team B, with Team A comprising frontline staff working on-site and Team B working exclusively online.⁴⁸ The primary reason for this team split was to ensure that, if a COVID-19 outbreak occurred within the service, the service would not come to a standstill, as the other team could step in while accounting for the virus’s incubation period.⁴⁹

With the increased demand across services, staff found themselves providing support far beyond the scope of their usual roles. During the pandemic, case workers commenced ‘daily check-ins’ to combat isolation, assess client needs and provide support.

The shift to working from home while managing crisis-level client needs created unprecedented stress for staff. They had to adapt to the lack of separation between work and home life when working from home, which presented challenges not only for client confidentiality but also in being able to ‘switch off’ from work.⁵⁰ Considering the gendered nature of the family violence workforce, many staff were also navigating changes to conditions in their own caring responsibilities. The health and wellbeing of staff were centred within Linking Hearts with daily check-ins for staff to ensure that support was available. As Linking Hearts staff explained in the focus group: “without us [the staff], we can’t provide the support to our refuge and our clients”.⁵¹

Notably, the NSW Department of Communities and Justice made the Employment Assistance Program, which was ordinarily available only to its own staff, available to all staff within family violence services in 2021. This was viewed by service providers as a “really good initiative” and one that could be extended longer term. Workforce shortages following COVID-19 – including at Linking Hearts – have been attributed to preventable burnout and staff feeling overwhelmed, further highlighting this need.⁵²



Community-specific communication and needs

CALD communities required targeted, culturally-appropriate crisis communication and service delivery. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this went far beyond translation of public communications, involving culturally-informed approaches to building trust and, importantly, addressing fear of authorities.

The pandemic highlighted how crisis communication and service delivery can either reinforce or break down barriers for CALD communities.

This research found that standard government messaging often failed to reach CALD communities effectively. As Linking Hearts staff explained: *"everything was put up in English first, and then it was done in language second. And so, by the time we broke that [communications] down in a way that was nuanced, it was even further down the line".*⁵³ This delay in communication caused uncertainty and stress within the community.

This experience was not unique to Linking Hearts but reflects broader findings from the NSW Government's inquiry on improving crisis communications to CALD communities and the Commonwealth Government's COVID-19 Response Inquiry.⁵⁴

Relaying government communications to CALD communities often fell to organisations such as Linking Hearts and Muslim Women Australia. Their responses demonstrated the critical importance of culturally-informed approaches that address both practical and cultural needs in emergency situations. Following the release of public announcements, the communications manager at Muslim Women Australia translated official guidance into simple words so staff could convey key messages to clients. During COVID-19, this was a daily task with government policies and directions changing on an iterative basis, contributing to confusion within the community because "one minute it's this and the next minute it was that."⁵⁵

CALD communities also faced challenges with increased police presence and enforcement during lockdowns. Divisions in social restrictions between the Western Sydney area and other areas, which included bringing in the army and police, heavily impacted Linking Hearts clients, as many people from diverse cultural backgrounds held heightened fear of the military and police.⁵⁶

This created barriers to accessing support and, in some cases, led to the need for heightened mental health supports. For example, in one case, where police conducted COVID-19 lockdown checks for people who tested positive:



*For 10 days, twice a day the police would be at the front of the house yelling. This was during the delta period... I was so so scared... I wasn't just physically sick, I was suffering terrible anxiety and panic attacks... I am still suffering these symptoms.*⁵⁷

Considering increased community confusion and fear as a barrier to accessing services, Linking Hearts prioritised maintaining cultural and social connections during lockdown periods. Linking Hearts management explained that *"There was a very conscious effort of reframing the messaging and the communication structure with caseworkers and clients to make sure that they're checking in on their health and wellbeing to make sure that they're planting the seeds around physical distance but social togetherness."*⁵⁸



The service also countered problematic narratives about CALD communities in the media. Staff found there was a misinformed perception in Western Sydney that “multicultural communities don’t understand, multicultural communities don’t care” about the COVID-19 regulations. However, such narratives overlooked structural issues related to access to information and resources, including a lack of information about vaccines and limited access to vaccine supplies and medical appointments.⁵⁹

Linking Hearts prioritised the translation of accurate, culturally-appropriate information to clients to empower communities. One client reflected:



*COVID was so so scary for all of us... Linking Hearts staff were always in contact, and they would share information with us, we were so stressed, but **they comforted us**.*⁶⁰

The experience of Linking Hearts during COVID-19 highlighted gaps in crisis communication protocols that could be improved in similar future circumstances. There is a need to better engage CALD communities in designing, planning and delivering crisis messaging to ensure that future communication strategies are culturally appropriate.



A policy agenda for NSW

This research has produced specific, actionable opportunities for the NSW Government to build more resilient family violence service systems in the future. These recommendations emerge directly from the experiences of multicultural service providers and victim-survivors from CALD communities during COVID-19, offering evidence-based pathways to strengthen services as well as the family violence sector against future social system disruptions.

1 Establish sector-wide, sustainable baseline funding and crisis funding mechanisms

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the need for state and federal governments to meet baseline funding needs and explore alternative models for crisis funding. One such approach would be to replace ad hoc emergency funding with predesigned, rapidly deployable support systems that scale automatically and provide flexibility in service delivery during crises, without lengthy application processes.

Current crisis funding structures proved inadequate during the COVID-19 period, forcing services to rely on what was described as “pockets” of emergency relief funding on an ad hoc basis.⁶¹ While services did receive additional grants, such as COVID-19 partnership funding through the NSW Department of Communities and Justice and Multicultural NSW, these were temporary measures that ended well before the elevated COVID-19-related demand eased.⁶² In this way, COVID-19 compounded, rather than created, chronic funding issues. The case for increased baseline funding has been made widely across the sector. Most prominently by DVNSW, which has advocated for increases in baseline funding for family violence services and highlighted the inadequacy of current funding arrangements (see Image 1. below).⁶³ The NSW Government’s 2026–27 budget item – increasing funding by 50 per cent for six frontline specialist domestic and family violence programs over four years – provides welcome relief, however, marks only the first step in building a sustainable sector.⁶⁴

Specialist domestic violence services in NSW are being forced to do the impossible, with some supporting more than

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the **number of victim-survivors** than the NSW Government funds them to support.

Without an immediate stabilisation investment of 50%, the next 12 months could see COVID-level pressures across the domestic and family violence system.

With rising cost-of-living expenses, increasingly complex forms of technology-facilitated abuse and a system already beyond capacity, the impacts of not investing will ripple through every single sector – health, justice, policing, housing, education and more.





Importantly, funding should be underpinned by a coordinated intergovernmental effort, reflecting the shared responsibility of state and federal governments in addressing family violence as a national priority. This should be complemented by a whole-of-government approach, with sustained and integrated funding allocations across relevant portfolios.

Pre-existing conditions, i.e. structural underfunding of the sector, had tangible consequences for service delivery during the pandemic. Despite demand for family violence services increasing by 73 per cent across the board and case complexity rising during the lockdowns, services had to navigate applying for fragmented funding streams on top of the existing pressures of service delivery.⁶⁵ As one staff member at Linking Hearts explained, *“There needs to be a really proactive approach to adequately resourcing the social services sector and domestic and family violence sector in order to be able to respond to need and respond to demand with flexibility”*.⁶⁶

Flexibility in this context speaks to the need for funding policies to align with sector-wide resourcing needs and move beyond funding limited to one provider or one pilot program. Without adequate resourcing for services and workforce support, services will be unable to meet increasing community needs, regardless of potential future social crises that may acutely compound them.

Alternative crisis funding models could be considered and would include:

- Creating crisis activation protocols that automatically trigger additional family violence service funding when emergencies are declared, eliminating the need for services to seek and/or apply for funding during crisis periods on an ad hoc basis.
- Designing flexible funding and grants that can be scaled based on crisis intensity and duration, with funding levels tied to demand indicators – such as increased case complexity and extended client need in terms of duration of service provision, in addition to increased case numbers.
- Establishing clearer (and stronger) cross-jurisdictional agreements to ensure temporary visa holders receive support during crises, addressing the jurisdictional gaps that arise between federal and state responsibilities. This is a known space where vulnerable cohorts continue to fall through the gaps in the system.

2 Strengthen workforce resilience infrastructure

There is a need to establish permanent support systems for family violence sector workers that recognise the inherent and ongoing stresses of family violence work, alongside the provision of additional supports during crisis periods. While crises such as COVID-19 significantly intensify workload and emotional strain, the impacts on workers extend well beyond the formal end of the crisis, with lasting consequences including burnout and overwhelm.⁶⁷

Inadequate sector resourcing is intrinsically linked to excessive caseloads and sustained workload stress, making the prioritisation of staff wellbeing during non-crisis times critical. Risks such as secondary trauma and burnout are not unique to crisis contexts but are endemic within the family violence sector, requiring more robust, systemic workforce supports rather than reliance on individual organisational responses.

The NSW Department of Community and Justice initiative to make the Employment Assistance Program (ordinarily for their own staff) available to all family violence services staff in 2021 was viewed positively. The possibility of extending this initiative in the long term could be explored.



Additional actions that could be taken to support workforces including:

- Creating workforce support guidelines for crisis periods, including protocols for managing increased caseloads and associated stress, wellbeing check-ins for staff and measures to practically support staff wellbeing when working from home (in cases where mobility restrictions are in place).
- Developing crisis staffing protocols based on the successful 'Team A/B' model implemented by Linking Hearts, where services can split operations to ensure service continuity if outbreaks or other disruptions affect staff availability.

3 Develop remote service delivery standards for family violence services

The lessons from COVID-19 present an opportunity for governments to develop comprehensive guidelines that support services to maintain effective service delivery via digital platforms while also ensuring victim-survivor confidentiality/privacy and preserving the essential human elements of family violence casework.

While acknowledging the benefits of improved access to services via digital technologies, the rapid shift to digital service delivery during COVID-19 also presented new challenges. Ensuring confidentiality and privacy while staff worked from home and, in some cases, where clients were locked down with family members who were using violence. For many, online service provision could not replicate the ordinary level of interaction between caseworkers and clients. As a result, the service had to focus on meeting immediate and crucial needs.

The following opportunities could be considered:

- Develop technology protocols for confidential remote assessments, including guidance on secure platforms, privacy verification procedures and risk assessment adaptations for digital environments.
- Develop specialised approaches for supporting children who are experiencing family violence when services are delivered remotely.
- Establish hybrid service delivery standards to ensure in-person options are available while maximising digital accessibility.⁶⁸

4 Address widespread housing insecurity beyond crisis periods

The respondents in this research highlighted the importance of mechanisms that protect victim-survivors of family violence from housing instability during social system disruptions. Such mechanisms are particularly important given the ongoing housing and cost-of-living pressures felt even in non-crisis times that can compound the impacts of family violence.

During the post-COVID period, housing insecurity has emerged as the ongoing challenge – with rental and cost-of-living crises putting victim-survivors of family violence at risk. This was starkly contrasted to the experiences of some clients during COVID-19, with victim-survivors highlighting how, during the pandemic, they felt protected by mechanisms that prevented rent hikes and evictions. While acknowledging that housing security was an issue for other clients during the pandemic, participants offered notable reflections on the housing security they experienced under these mechanisms compared to the pressure they felt post-pandemic, when these mechanisms were no longer in place. As one client powerfully stated:



Housing is a big problem in Australia. How can there not be a solution to this? It causes so many problems at an individual level and at a family level – it causes so many problems... I want my message to reach the government and people in power – please take these concerns into account.⁶⁹

There are opportunities for government to emulate the housing supports they provided during the pandemic during future crises and to further expand support, including:

- Establishing crisis housing protection protocols that automatically activate during emergencies to prevent evictions and rent increases for family violence victim-survivors, building on the success of COVID-era protections.
- Creation of rapid rehousing mechanisms for post-crisis periods, recognising that many services provided in the family violence sector are contingent on housing stability for victim-survivors to be effective in the long term.⁷⁰
- Developing emergency accommodation partnerships with private providers to ensure increased housing availability during social system disruptions.

5 Embed CALD community consultation in crisis response planning

Research revealed how CALD communities were often marginalised in crisis planning and communication, particularly when government messaging failed to reach communities effectively.⁷¹ There is a need to design and embed engagement mechanisms with CALD communities and service providers in the design, development and implementation of crisis responses. Embedded engagement in both design and implementation stages ensures that diverse community needs are reflected in system design rather than addressed as an afterthought.

Although there were efforts from government to conduct consultations, in practice these ran more like one-way information sessions, undermining community trust and cultural safety.⁷² In the future, consultations could play a role in building relationships between the government stakeholders and the communities served by frontline family violence providers. With better consultation processes, lived-experience-based feedback could be considered more efficiently and effectively to course-correct approaches. One staff member raised the need to communicate with service providers and engage with leaders “on the ground ... those organisations that have actually got their doors open”.⁷³

As illustrated by Linking Hearts’ daily translation and interpretation of government messages – when done well, culturally-appropriate communication can be highly effective at both conveying information and improving community engagement and trust.

Greater engagement with CALD communities and specialist service providers through genuine consultation is required. This could be achieved through:

- Developing and embedding formal consultation frameworks with multicultural family violence services that prioritise authentic co-design, rather than one-way information provision.
- Creating cultural competency guidelines for crisis communication that set clear standards for CALD community messaging during emergency periods.
- Introducing targeted crisis messaging protocols that address mistrust, fear of authorities and immigration related barriers.



Conclusion

Building resilient family violence services is not just about crisis preparedness but also about creating better outcomes for all communities during everyday operations. When services are equipped with adequate and sustainable funding, strong workforce support, culturally competent communication protocols, opportunities for genuine community consultation and technological use that carefully balances privacy with accessibility, they can serve all communities more effectively. The innovations developed by Linking Hearts during COVID-19 – daily check-in protocols for staff and culturally-appropriate, accessible community messaging – demonstrate how crisis adaptations can become permanent improvements that strengthen the entire service structure and approach.

COVID-19, as a crisis period, compounded (rather than created) pre-existing issues, particularly the need to increase funding for family violence services to meet community demand for service provision. An under-resourced sector is systemically vulnerable. To improve systemic resilience, the sector needs to be adequately resourced during both non-crisis times and acute crises.

The policy opportunities outlined in this report provide pathways to bring about greater resilience in family violence service provision systems in the long term.

The future of family violence services lies in structuring systems that are strong enough to handle social system disruption while remaining fundamentally focused on victim-survivor safety, cultural responsiveness and community empowerment. NSW's most vulnerable communities rely on the government to learn from their experiences during COVID-19 and act on these insights to remedy systemic vulnerabilities in the family violence sector ahead of future crises.

”

I hope that everything that we've gone through during this period can be impactful in creating long-standing change.⁷⁴

Endnotes

¹ Domestic Violence NSW, *The impact of the 2021 Greater Sydney COVID-19 lockdown on specialist domestic and family violence services, and their clients* (Sydney: Domestic Violence NSW, 2021).

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⁸ Ministers for the Department of Social Services, "Training for Faith Leaders and CALD Communities to extend care to women and children in crisis," 22 February 2024, <https://ministers.dss.gov.au/media-releases/13906>.

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¹² Domestic Violence NSW, *Stretched Beyond Capacity: The Unmet Demand Crisis Facing Domestic and Family Violence Services in NSW* (Sydney: Domestic Violence NSW, 2026).

¹³ Domestic Violence NSW, *The impact of the 2021 Greater Sydney COVID-19 lockdown on specialist domestic and family violence services, and their clients* (Sydney: Domestic Violence NSW, 2021).

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¹⁶ NSW Government, "Investment to help more women and children escape violence", 23 June 2026, <https://www.nsw.gov.au/ministerial-releases/investment-to-help-more-women-and-children-escape-violence>; No to Violence, "NSW Budget Delivers Long-Awaited Funding Boost for Family Violence Services", 23 June 2026, <https://ntv.org.au/nsw-budget-delivers-long-awaited-funding-boost-for-family-violence-services/>.

¹⁷ Domestic Violence NSW, “Domestic violence sector stabilisation welcomed as first step towards lasting reform”, 23 June 2026, <https://www.dvnsw.org.au/press/domestic-violence-nsw-welcomes-sector-stabilisation-investment-in-state-budget-calls-for-continued-reform/>.

¹⁸ Interview with senior management (Linking Hearts, 2023).

¹⁹ Interview with senior management (Linking Hearts, 2023).

²⁰ While both the Commonwealth and NSW Governments have a responsibility to resource initiatives which seek to address family violence and provide support for victim-survivors, the precise source of funding depends on whether the budget item falls within an area of federal or state responsibility. The reference to the state ‘stepping into the gaps’ left by Commonwealth Government refers specifically to support for victim-survivors who are on temporary visas.

²¹ Temporary visa holders cannot access Commonwealth support (e.g., Job Keeper or Job Seeker), but during COVID-19 were able to access state-based support packages, such as funding from Multicultural NSW. Multicultural NSW, *Multicultural NSW Annual Report 2020–2021* (Parramatta: NSW Government, 2021).

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²³ Interview with Client 9 (Linking Hearts, 2023).

²⁴ Domestic Violence NSW, *The impact of the 2021 Greater Sydney COVID-19 lockdown on specialist domestic and family violence services, and their clients* (Sydney: Domestic Violence NSW, 2021).

²⁵ Staff focus group (Linking Hearts, 2023); Interviews with Clients 5, 7, 13 and 17 (Linking Hearts, 2023); Interview with senior management (Linking Hearts, 2023).

²⁶ Interview with Client 6 (Linking Hearts, 2023).

²⁷ For more information on the Muslim Women Australia model during COVID-19, see Amira Aftab, Balawyn Jones and Ghena Krayem, “The Contribution of Muslim Women Australia in the Domestic and Family Violence Space: Victim-Survivor Perspectives from the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Religions* 15:7 (2017), 772.

²⁸ Interview with senior management (Linking Hearts, 2023).

²⁹ Internal data provided by Muslim Women Australia.

³⁰ Muslim Women Australia, *Serving with a Purpose: Domestic and Family Violence, CALD Communities and COVID-19 Preliminary Report* (Lakemba, NSW: Muslim Women Australia, 2020).

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³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Interview with senior management (Linking Hearts, 2023).

³⁵ Interview with Client 9 (Linking Hearts, 2023).

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Staff focus group (Linking Hearts, 2023).

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³⁹ Interview with senior management (Muslim Women Australia, 2023).

⁴⁰ Interview with senior management (Linking Hearts, 2023).

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⁴² Interview with senior management (Linking Hearts, 2023).

- ⁴³ Staff focus group (Linking Hearts, 2023).
- ⁴⁴ Interview with senior management (Linking Hearts, 2023).
- ⁴⁵ Staff focus group (Linking Hearts, 2023).
- ⁴⁶ Interview with senior management (Linking Hearts, 2023).
- ⁴⁷ Interview with senior management (Muslim Women Australia, 2023).
- ⁴⁸ Interview with senior management (Linking Hearts, 2023).
- ⁴⁹ Ibid.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid.
- ⁵¹ Ibid.
- ⁵² Interview with senior management (Linking Hearts, 2023).
- ⁵³ Ibid.
- ⁵⁴ Legislative Assembly Committee on Community Services, *Improving crisis communications to culturally and linguistically diverse communities* (Sydney: NSW Parliament, 2022); Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry, *Roundtable Summary – Experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse communities* (Canberra: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2024).
- ⁵⁵ Staff focus group (Linking Hearts, 2023).
- ⁵⁶ Interview with senior management (Muslim Women Australia, 2023).
- ⁵⁷ Interview with Client 15 (Linking Hearts, 2023).
- ⁵⁸ Interview with senior management (Linking Hearts, 2023).
- ⁵⁹ Ibid.
- ⁶⁰ Interview with Client 7 (Linking Hearts, 2023).
- ⁶¹ Interview with senior management (Linking Hearts, 2023).
- ⁶² Ibid.
- ⁶³ Domestic Violence NSW, *Fund a Safer Today: 2026–27 Pre-budget submission* (Sydney: Domestic Violence NSW, 2025).
- ⁶⁴ NSW Government, “Investment to help more women and children escape violence”, 23 June 2026, <https://www.nsw.gov.au/ministerial-releases/investment-to-help-more-women-and-children-escape-violence>.
- ⁶⁵ Domestic Violence NSW, *The impact of the 2021 Greater Sydney COVID-19 lockdown on specialist domestic and family violence services, and their clients* (Sydney: Domestic Violence NSW, 2021).
- ⁶⁶ Interview with senior management (Linking Hearts, 2023).
- ⁶⁷ Ibid.
- ⁶⁸ Staff focus group (Linking Hearts, 2023).
- ⁶⁹ Interview with Client 7 (Linking Hearts, 2023).
- ⁷⁰ Interview with senior management (Muslim Women Australia, 2023).
- ⁷¹ Interview with senior management (Linking Hearts, 2023).
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- ⁷³ Interview with senior management (Muslim Women Australia, 2023).
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