

## **DFV Survivors with No Access to Income**

**Emily Goldsmith, Senior Project Officer, Domestic Violence NSW.**

*"I had no savings, no access to income, no friends of family, and nowhere to go except to return to my violent partner or stay sleeping in the car". – Survivor residing in a Western Sydney refuge*

As the peak body for domestic and family violence services in NSW, our organisation's mission is to eliminate domestic and family violence through leadership in policy, advocacy, partnerships and the promotion of best practice responses to women, families and communities impacted by violence. Over the last twelve months we have been overwhelmed with stories from women who have no access to income and are experiencing domestic and family violence.

This group of women are not entitled to Centrelink benefits or work rights, or are unable to find paid work. In our experience, this cohort primarily includes women who have arrived as spouses or partners of skilled migrants, NZ residents who arrived after 2001 and other visa categories that have restrictions.

Women and children impacted by domestic and family violence with no access to an income rely heavily on the domestic and family violence (and the homelessness) sector for support in NSW. The particular circumstances of these families results in long stays in homelessness and domestic and family violence support accommodation with no exit options, which also prevents entry of new families to that service. In practice this means that crisis services have to make difficult decisions about the number of 'no income families' that they are able to support and is often dependent on the homelessness service's access to transitional housing. It is a terrible situation to be in for our service providers.

These women are incredibly vulnerable. In addition to the trauma resulting from domestic and family violence, women in this situation are often experiencing substantial distress due to language and cultural barriers, social isolation and, for some families, the impacts of post-traumatic stress disorder from events experienced in their country of origin. There are fears of police, government institutions and authorities, often the perpetrator has threatened that if they seek help they will be deported and that no-one will believe them. There are a number of challenges associated with finding a support service that understands the complexities of their experience and can assist.

Supporting survivors of domestic and family violence in navigating the complexities of Centrelink and Immigration rights and entitlements is very difficult and time consuming work which requires detailed understanding of the systems and trauma-specialist skills. Many mainstream and specialist services are unable to assist due to the particular challenges inherent in the nature of this work and the lack of specific funding for this cohort. There are some migrant and settlement services funded by the Commonwealth Government to provide specialist casework in this area however, these services cannot usually provide accommodation and may not always be accessible to women, particularly when they are in regional areas. Access to safe accommodation is a major challenge for this cohort of families. Information is limited around what support programs are available, and already overstretched services often struggle to navigate the system.

While a client is waiting for the Department of Immigration to process a change in visa status, she has no access to income. Anecdotal evidence from services suggests that the processing of the paperwork

for this takes approximately 12 weeks on average. During this period, while the woman has no access to income she must rely almost entirely on the support service for accommodation, food and other basic amenities. This places additional pressure on services that rarely have access to resources for this client cohort.

In our experience, lack of flexibility in Centrelink's communication processes negatively impact on survivors of violence, who are already highly vulnerable and traumatised. The direction for all documentation to be submitted online is unsuitable for many of these women, particularly when a client's level of English is low. Lengthy wait times for face to face interviews or to have a call answered can be extremely challenging for women experiencing trauma, particularly when their first language is not English and they have been prevented from interacting with official systems by an abusive partner.

DVNSW continues to lobby the Government to improve the interactions of these highly vulnerable women and their families with the Centrelink system and ultimately assist them to a more rapid recovery. These recommendations come from work undertaken in partnership with the NSW Department of Family and Community Service Homelessness Unit and through forums with domestic and family violence services and partner organisations such as the Immigrant Advice and Rights Centre who work frequently with women who have no access to income to help improve their lives.

DVNSW has recommended the development of:

- 1. A consistent, coordinated approach and protocols for working with these cohorts of clients with clear guidelines for client advocates and families on accessible assistance. This should include ensuring that each Centrelink office has access to a migration lawyer with training in domestic and family violence cases who is available to assist clients and/or services.**

Due to the complex nature of migration law and challenges relating to the navigation of support pathways for victims of DFV, a coordinated approach with clear guidelines on how to elicit assistance is urgently required. There should be clear policy and advice on the support available for visa applicants experiencing domestic and family violence in all circumstances. Where applicants do not have access to documents that evidence a genuine relationship, there needs to be a consistent and flexible approach to accepted alternative forms of evidence.

- 2. Further consideration of the Family Violence exception and its application to secondary visa holders on a 457 visa.**

If the family violence exception cannot be applied then we would recommend that Centrelink entitlements are expanded for 457 and NZ Family Relationship visa (subclass 461) holders who experience domestic or family violence.

- 3. Improved integration between Centrelink staff and the homelessness sector.**

The entitlements of an individual are often difficult to understand and interpret and the information on the Centrelink website is not easy to understand for both clients and their advocates. Information and advice given by Centrelink may conflict with that given on the Australian Government's *Guide to Social Security Laws* and the Department of Immigration and Border Protection websites. Linkages between Centrelink and the homelessness sector

are required – particularly with staff who have experience in migration and visa systems in each district as specialist homelessness service staff do not have the expertise to interpret complex policy interactions. The homelessness sector have indicated their willingness and desire to work with Commonwealth colleagues to find the best outcome for clients.

4. **Regular, ongoing training for frontline Centrelink staff so that policies and practices relating to the complexities of intersecting trauma, domestic and family violence, visa and immigration issues (particularly spousal visa issues) and access to Centrelink support can be developed internally and staff can develop strong collaborative relationships with domestic and family violence and migration support specialists.**

Domestic and family violence support workers across NSW frequently report on the inconsistencies in their dealings with Centrelink employees. These inconsistencies relate to both their knowledge and understanding of domestic and family violence and application of Centrelink policies in special circumstances. Regular, embedded training opportunities for all Centrelink employees that recognise that a proportion of your workforce and clients are survivors or perpetrators of domestic or family violence would result in better outcomes for all.

We hope that Government make the systemic changes needed to ensure these highly vulnerable women are able to live in a safe, free, supported and empowered way.