

## **‘We don’t turn anyone away’: Demand for DV legal aid grows amid epidemic**

Demand for help with domestic violence from Legal Aid NSW has surged, particularly for Apprehended Domestic Violence Orders (ADVOs), amid Australia’s domestic violence crisis. Legal Aid NSW expects that demand will grow with the commencement of coercive control reforms later this year, with victim-survivors reminded that free legal help is available and can be life-saving.

New data from Legal Aid NSW’s [Domestic Violence Unit \(DVU\)](#) shows calls to its hotline grew 36 per cent over two years, while duty lawyer services – advice provided by lawyers in court – grew by 61 per cent. Duty lawyer services for ADVOs specifically have grown 25 per cent.<sup>1</sup>

The DVU is a specialist team of lawyers, domestic violence case workers, mental health workers and financial counsellors that operates across NSW. The service was established as part of a \$100 million Women’s Safety Package announced in 2015, and is funded by the Commonwealth Government through the National Legal Assistance Partnership until mid-2025.

Domestic violence is also driving increased demand across Legal Aid NSW’s wider family law division, including in the Family Advocacy and Support Service and Family Law Service for Aboriginal Communities.

The DVU data comes after Commonwealth Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus last week described the death of one woman every week to domestic violence as an epidemic that “must end”.

Executive Director, Family Law, Alexandra Colquhoun said the DVU does not turn anyone away from initial advice, and legal help can be pivotal in stopping domestic violence continuing.

“Twenty-five women dying to domestic violence so far this year is an epidemic which is preventable, including by having early access to legal advice to help clients to stay safe. A lawyer can help seek changes to an ADVO to better protect the victim or their children, or to connect them with a case worker for safety planning,” she said.

Legal Aid NSW’s DVU specialist domestic violence lawyers are trained to provide trauma-informed services to women at risk. They can help those in rural, regional, or urban areas. “Our help is free and we do not turn anyone away from advice,” she said.

Data from the DVU shows most victims require help with an ADVO, parenting arrangements or divorce.<sup>2</sup> Of the more than 7,700 duty lawyer services provided in 2022-23, 94 per cent were to women and 36 per cent to those in regional NSW.

“Most people require help taking out or varying an ADVO to ensure that it keeps them safe. In the past year alone, there have been more than 22,500 breaches of AVOs<sup>3</sup> so we stand ready to help women who may need to vary or add conditions, such as no contact.”

Ms Colquhoun said broad demand for Legal Aid NSW’s services has most likely grown as a result of a combination of factors, including the overall increase in reports of domestic violence to police,<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Duty lawyer services in the two years to the 2022-23 FY.

<sup>2</sup> Duty lawyer services for the 23-24 FY to April 2024.

<sup>3</sup> BOCSAR NSW DV breach AVO data in the 12 months to Dec 2023

(<https://www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/Documents/RCS-Quarterly/NSW Trends in Domestic n Family Violence - Quarterly report 2023Q4.pdf>PowerPoint Presentation ([nsw.gov.au](https://www.nsw.gov.au))).

increased awareness of domestic violence, the cost of living and housing crises, and the expansion of the Family Advocacy & Support Service (FASS) through which the DVU provides duty lawyer services in regional NSW. “Data shows domestic violence assaults have increased in regional NSW<sup>5</sup> so we want people in the regions to know help is available.”

“We expect demand to grow once the new laws criminalising coercive control come into effect in July this year. This will likely see more victim-survivors seeking legal advice about whether their circumstances may constitute coercive control,” she said.

Ms Colquhoun said lawyers are a critical pathway for access to other support services: “We are a one stop shop as we work with domestic violence caseworkers, mental health workers and financial counsellors to support victims, along with the Women’s Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service and Relationships Australia.

Legal Aid NSW CEO Monique Hitter said the DVU was essential to change as part of the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032. “Our staff provide early advice and assistance to clients experiencing violence or in fear of violence and assist clients in crisis to get to safety, with positive and long-lasting change,” she said. “Our help can stop legal issues from compounding into other social problems like mental illness, homelessness or children ending up in the care system. It is an essential part in addressing the scourge of domestic violence in NSW,” she said.

“The Chief Justice of the Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia last week acknowledged the role of legal assistance services in addressing domestic violence while the Commonwealth Attorney-General highlighted the importance of legal assistance for those experiencing domestic violence.”

**Alexandra Colquhoun is available for interview.**

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<sup>4</sup> BOCSAR NSW Trends in Domestic & Family Violence – Quarterly Report Data to December 2023 [Domestic violence statistics for NSW.](#)

<sup>5</sup> BOCSAR NSW domestic violence assaults (<https://www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/Documents/RCS-Quarterly/NSW Trends in Domestic n Family Violence - Quarterly report 2023Q4.pdf> PowerPoint Presentation ([nsw.gov.au](https://www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/Documents/RCS-Quarterly/NSW Trends in Domestic n Family Violence - Quarterly report 2023Q4.pdf)))