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Human rights lawyers warn of crisis conditions in specialist domestic violence services for women and children

Human rights lawyers have voiced their grave concerns about the government's continued relentless push to privatise essential specialist domestic violence services for women by awarding contracts to religious and other for profit agencies. The latest service facing possible closure, is Rape and Domestic Violence Services Australia (**RDVSA**) – a vital service first established by the Women's Liberation Movement in 1971.

The RDVSA was run by volunteer staff until funded by the Whitlam government in 1974. In 2010 the internationally acclaimed service was chosen to provide counselling for the Federal Government's 1800 RESPECT domestic violence hotline. However, the specialist counselling service has now been put out to tender with the potential to be contracted to a private provider.

Australian lawyers for Human Rights (**ALHR**) Women and Girls' Rights Subcommittee Co-Chair, Dr Rita Shackel said, "we are very concerned that the Government will demand future service providers "streamline" the service based on dubious claims that only a quarter of calls require counselling.. Rather than increasing qualified staffing to meet overwhelming demand for this service, the government is favouring a more perfunctory processing of calls to this number. The reality of this change would be a reduction in the services and support available to at risk victims of domestic violence.

ALHR Women and Girls' Rights Subcommittee Co-Chair Anna Kerr warns "This move risks prioritising efficiency of processing calls over delivery of high quality specialist counselling and trauma support. The priority of such a service must, without compromise, be to respond to each individual caller with care, respect and understanding, The threatened closure of this crucial telephone support service to women joins with the dismantling of the NSW Women's Refuge Movement to aggravate the crisis conditions facing women and children attempting to escape domestic violence."

Kerr continued, "women needing emergency accommodation are being referred to a centralised telephone Link2Home hotline which services all homeless people and processes women through generic services which fail to recognise their actual needs and circumstances. They are then likely to be offered temporary accommodation in a motel room or a place within a generic service also accommodating those homeless on account of mental health or substance abuse issues, often including men."

"Gone are the days when women could access women's refuge services 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, staffed exclusively by women trained specifically in relation to domestic violence and providing specialised programs for traumatised women and their children," said Kerr.

Shackel added, "These actions by government are in breach of its international human rights obligations pursuant to the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women. ALHR calls upon the Federal Government to stop mainstreaming and privatising specialised women's services, but to instead reserve funding to ensure women and children have support when they need to escape domestic violence."

To arrange an interview with Dr. Rita Shackel or Anna Kerr, please contact Matt Mitchell on 0431 980 365 or media@alhr.org.au

ALHR was established in 1993 and is a national organisation of Australian solicitors, barristers, academics, judicial officers and law students who practise and promote international human rights law in Australia. ALHR has active and engaged National, State and Territory committees and a secretariat at La Trobe University Law School in Melbourne. Through advocacy, media engagement, education, networking, research and training, ALHR promotes, practices and protects universally accepted standards of human rights throughout Australia and overseas.