



Submission to the Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence

We are responding to the Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this critical Royal Commission. As Aboriginal community leaders, deeply connected to our land, culture, and family, we believe that the practices we uphold—those rooted in care, respect, and connection—benefit all communities, not just Aboriginal communities. This submission advocates for a system that prioritises safety, dignity, and wellbeing for all, ensuring that every person affected by domestic, family and sexual violence can live free from harm and thrive.

We are Aboriginal community leaders, and our perspectives are independent of any political affiliations. The views in this submission reflect those of the Tiraapendi Wodli Leadership and Community Evaluators, who speak with cultural legitimacy and integrity. Tiraapendi Wodli is South Australia's first Justice Reinvestment initiative, established in 2017, and remains the only one receiving funding from the South Australian Department of Human Services.

The Justice Reinvestment approach, central to Tiraapendi Wodli, focuses on redirecting resources from the criminal justice system into community-based initiatives that prevent offending and improve social outcomes. Tiraapendi Wodli's services are designed to strengthen cultural identity, support reintegration after incarceration, and promote long-term community safety. The key elements of Justice Reinvestment:

- Aims to reduce Aboriginal offending
- Aboriginal community-led
- Systems approach
- Place based approach
- Informed by evidence and data.

When we apply the elements of Justice Reinvestment and consider the work and approach of Tiraapendi Wodli, we know we are working at the pace of families and community.

Tiraapendi Wodli is collecting the evidence and using community and systems data to inform, educate and design new ways of working so that Aboriginal families are thriving. We invest time and resources with families, and together we are building leadership qualities by applying the Justice Reinvestment principles. We are building capable and confident individuals to ask for help earlier and we are learning about what it will take for a family to reclaim their personal power and make well-informed decisions that impact the lives of their children and their family positively.

Justice Reinvestment principles are informed by community truth-telling and operating at the universal approach so that other systems have the capacity to change how they are working with Aboriginal families; the collection of data and stories are used to design locally led solutions. We identify missing gaps in service delivery, families and services are learning how to respond to cultural needs and positively build partnerships to create better results for families.

The Aboriginal community of Tiraapendi Wodli is deeply concerned about the structural inequalities that allow family and domestic violence to persist.

As community members, we have come together to share our lived experience and discuss our concerns about systemic barriers such as limited access to culturally safe services, and a justice system that fails to hold perpetrators accountable while leaving victims and their families to bear the physical, emotional and financial burdens.

The role of Tiraapendi Wodli in addressing family, domestic and sexual violence

Tiraapendi Wodli provides a forum for Aboriginal people to have a direct role in shaping policy development and service design to ensure they reflect the needs and lived experiences of those most affected. In this way, the drivers of domestic, family and sexual violence are directly addressed providing opportunities for early intervention, healing and community-based responses which are trauma-informed. There is an urgent need to expand culturally informed, community-based initiatives that combine prevention, early intervention and responses to domestic, family and sexual violence which address the unique challenges faced by Aboriginal victims and survivors, strengthening both family and community bonds. We believe that by expanding opportunities for Aboriginal people with lived experience to directly inform policy development and service design, there will be greater efficacy in the system and safer communities.

Tiraapendi Wodli is currently undergoing a comprehensive evaluation using Aboriginal Participatory Action methods to implement an Understanding, Measuring, Evaluating and Learning strategy. This rigorous process—drawing on auto-ethnography, collective and community voices, multiple case study design, and cost-benefit analysis—ensures that our approach is both informed by lived experience and backed by robust evidence. The evaluation will contribute to the growing body of research supporting Aboriginal-led, community-based justice reinvestment initiatives that directly address the drivers of justice involvement.

Tiraapendi Wodli operates as a vital hub for domestic violence support. It provides safety measures for women facing active threats, and offers ongoing advocacy for those seeking refuge and assistance. At Tiraapendi Wodli, we prioritise innovative, culturally informed approaches that are grounded in lived experience. Our work is driven by problem-solving and community collaboration, and we have seen real change occur. For instance, our '20-step program' for individuals leaving prison has successfully supported men who have used violence to change their behaviour. However, despite these successes, we have observed significant systemic barriers that hinder transformative change. Long-term resourcing

sustainability remains a critical challenge. With secure funding and the capacity to extend our reach, Tiraapendi Wodli could amplify its impact, ensuring more individuals can access the support they need. This would not only strengthen intervention efforts but also drive lasting, community-wide change in addressing domestic, family and sexual violence.

These barriers relate to inadequate service responses, and the lack of trauma-informed and culturally safe responses, with such service gaps leading to further victimisation.

Systemic barriers

Our group has seen the profound and multi-generational impact of long-term trauma on victims, compounded by the lack of mandated programs for perpetrators in prison, such as domestic violence or parenting classes. We feel that patterns of violence perpetuate cycles, particularly when children are involved. This leads to trauma transfer, including to unborn children through "Domestic Violence Syndrome," and to future generations through epigenetics. We know that women who have worked to keep their children safe have often been wrongly treated by the Department for Child Protection as perpetrators. This exacerbates the harm and injustice they endure.

We emphasise that domestic, family and sexual violence is not part of Aboriginal culture.

Our group has identified systemic failures, including a lack of preventative work and early intervention, poor coordination between agencies, limited access to already overstretched support services, and significant barriers to accessing entitlements. Agencies often operate in silos, with inconsistent policies and processes preventing people from being informed of or accessing their full entitlements.

We believe there is limited systemic support for early intervention or monitoring of high-risk individuals, which increases risks to potential victims. Our group has experienced that the lack of preventive policing mechanisms represents a significant system failure.

Our group also highlight the restrictive policies in public housing that can prevent families from offering refuge to family in need. This undermines their ability to care for and protect family members and conflicts with Aboriginal cultural practices. SA Housing Trust policies restrict additional occupants for reasons such as already being a tenant of another property or having an unarranged SA Housing Trust debtⁱ. These restrictions prevent families from supporting family in need, conflicting with cultural practices where extended family support is integral. ***This is not our culture.***

We also note that emergency response measures, such as "red lighting" a house for 2–3 months, do not always ensure timely responses, leaving victims feeling unsafe. Additionally, the "red-lighting" period is often insufficient to address the ongoing risks faced by victims, particularly in cases where perpetrators continue to pose a threat.

Members of our group have raised concerns about whether crisis call centres are adequately staffed, particularly with Aboriginal workers who can provide culturally informed support. We are also aware of safety concerns regarding shelters:

- Known locations are sometimes exposed through media coverage, jeopardising the safety of victims.
- Travelling to shelters can be dangerous if the perpetrator is nearby.

Members of our group have shared that personal safety devices, such as alarms requiring a pin pull, are often impractical during emergencies.

Perpetrators making threats to kill from jail remain a significant concern. Members of our group have been left without adequate protections against ongoing intimidation and harassment during the perpetrator's incarceration.

We have experienced that the current risk assessment tool used by police does not adequately account for patterns of escalating violence, failing to build a comprehensive case as the threat intensifies. Victims in our group have shared how they are often required to use specific language to convey urgency, leaving them without the support they need.

We have also experienced the ineffectiveness of restraining orders, lenient sentencing that does not reflect the lifetime impact of domestic and family violence, a lack of accountability for repeat offenders, and inadequate programs for perpetrators. Members of our group feel that programs for offenders are often used to reduce prison sentences rather than address offending behaviour, or that access to such programs is limited only to offenders with longer sentences, meaning that offenders with shorter sentences do not receive support for behaviour change, which can lead to a cycle of reoffending and ongoing risk to victims.

Lack of trauma-informed responses including the ongoing victimisation created by service systems

Victim-survivors in our group shared experiences of lasting mental health impacts, often beginning in adolescence. We also highlighted poor support for victim-survivors, with long waiting lists for services and a failure to address their immediate and long-term needs.

Members of our group have faced ongoing threats and psychological distress. They describe the constant fear of being pursued: "It felt like he was always behind me. Even in my dreams, he was killing me."

We know that the impact of domestic violence often extends beyond the individual victim, with perpetrators targeting extended family members, further jeopardising their safety and well-being.

We also know that victims of family, domestic and sexual violence continue to be victimised by the system that should be protecting and supporting them.

Our group has observed a significant lack of publicly available and accessible specialised programs specifically designed to build resilience in women experiencing violence, leaving a critical gap in addressing their long-term recovery and rebuilding.

Members of our group carry significant financial debts under SA Housing Trust policies for property damage caused by domestic violence. These debts have not been transferred to the perpetrator. This has left members of our group burdened with unjust financial obligations for damages they did not cause, resulting from the violence they endured.

Notifications of perpetrator release from jail, while intended as a precaution, frequently induce significant anxiety for victims, as members of our group have experienced.

Members of our group feel that current laws often provide greater protections to perpetrators than to victims, leaving victims with limited options to defend themselves or ensure their safety.

Recommendations

Establish a pathway for Aboriginal leadership and involvement in policy development to:

- Create a clear and supported pathway for Aboriginal people to have a direct role in policy review and development, recognising the value of lived experience in shaping effective solutions.
- Support initiatives like Tiraapendi Wodli, which is eager to contribute to this process by sharing insights and proposing culturally informed strategies.

Expand and fund culturally informed initiatives to strengthen family and community bonds while addressing the unique needs of Aboriginal victims and survivors. These initiatives should:

- Promote roundtable discussions to foster inclusive dialogue
- Incorporate the voices of people with lived experience to ensure practical, effective solutions
- Facilitate informed, collaborative problem-solving to create meaningful and lasting impacts.

Revise Housing Trust SA policies on additional occupants in public housing to allow families to support one another and to better align with cultural practices, particularly those of Aboriginal communities, where extended family support is integral.

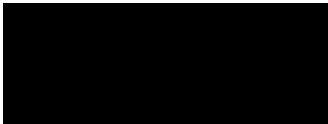
Mandate participation in evidence-based rehabilitation programs for offenders to address offending behaviour and reduce recidivism, separate from considerations of sentence reduction.

Improve risk assessment tools and risk assessment scales used by law enforcement to better account for patterns of escalating violence and cumulative threats, ensuring more accurate evaluations and appropriate responses.

Address historical Housing Trust SA debts by retrospectively reviewing cases where public housing tenants experienced family violence resulting in property damage. Transfer liability for the property damage from tenants to the perpetrators responsible, ensuring victims are no longer burdened with unjust financial obligations.

Expand resources for trauma-informed and resilience-building programs for all people affected by domestic, family and sexual violence.

Respectfully submitted by



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ⁱ SA Housing Trust. (2022, December 14). *Visitors, other occupants and overcrowding policy*. Version 4. Retrieved from <https://www.housing.sa.gov.au/about-us/policies/visitors,-other-occupants-and-overcrowding-policy>