



**Life Course Centre**

ARC Centre of Excellence for Children  
and Families over the Life Course

**REPORT**

# Engaging with the Domestic Violence Action Centre Survivor Experiences



A summary of interviews with 11 survivors who have previously engaged with DVAC's services.

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Survivors' quotes, marked with this symbol, have been de-identified and are labelled only by order of appearance in the report.

## Gratitude

The researchers would like to thank the 11 courageous and inspiring women who so generously shared their experiences.

# Executive Summary

The Domestic Violence Action Centre (DVAC) operates from two locations in South-East Queensland and provides a range of specialist services to survivors of gender-based violence. In this report, we present the findings of an empirical study of survivors' experiences engaging with DVAC's services.

In September 2023, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 survivors—all of them women—who had been engaged with DVAC's services over the past 12 months. These interviews provided insights into survivors' journeys with DVAC, the most effective forms of support DVAC provided, and the main barriers that survivors faced as they moved towards safety and healing.

In this executive summary, we provide an overview of our main findings and our key recommendations for the provision of domestic violence support services moving forward.

The report is broken down into 3 broad themes:

**1. Survivors' journeys with DVAC**

**2. What aspects of DVAC support are most useful?**

**3. What major challenges do survivors face?**



## Executive summary

*continued*

# 1. Survivors' journeys with DVAC

## # Key findings

## Recommendations

**1a**

Many of the survivors in our study were referred to DVAC by external services including the police and telephone helplines. In some cases, survivors were not actively seeking help for gender-based violence when they were first referred. For example, one survivor was referred to DVAC after calling Relationships Australia to request couples counselling, and another was referred by Lifeline after seeking financial advice. This finding can be understood within the context of survivors' broader narratives. Experiences of violence had induced feelings of fear, mistrust, guilt, and self-doubt in many survivors, making it difficult for them to reach out for help.

Moving forward, it will be important to continue having strong referral pathways within the community, as these are critical for informing survivors about DVAC and encouraging them to engage. DVAC should continue to make pamphlets accessible in areas that are frequented by survivors and draw on other avenues to make themselves visible to survivors.

**1b**

Survivors who engaged with DVAC benefited from a range of services, including advocacy, counselling, referral to other services, safety planning and upgrades, and financial and in-kind support. Survivors reported that these services were highly beneficial for helping them come to terms with the violence they had experienced and begin to move forward with their lives. In particular, practical guidance and support to keep themselves safe during times of risk were highly valued by the survivors.

We recommend that DVAC continues to provide a holistic range of services that are tailored to respond to survivors' diverse needs. In particular, we recommend the continuation of practical support, including safety planning and training in psychological skills that can be drawn on in everyday life.

**1c**

Survivors demonstrated courage, resilience, and a strong determination to build a better life for themselves and their children. Many had recently entered paid employment or commenced studying. With the holistic and specialist support provided by DVAC, they and their children were starting to thrive.

We recommend that the Queensland Government provides DVAC with the long-term funding required to continue effectively supporting survivors of gender-based violence to move forward with their lives and thrive.



## Executive summary

*continued*

# 2. What aspects of DVAC support are most useful?

## # Key findings

## Recommendations

2a

DVAC support workers created a safe and welcoming environment where survivors felt comfortable to be open, honest, and ask for the help they needed. In building these trusting relationships, the staff ensured that survivors knew they would be heard and understood without fear of judgement or criticism. This was particularly important given how many survivors faced dismissal and judgement from their friends, family, and communities as a whole.

We recommend that the DVAC support workers continue their current practice of creating a safe and supportive environment for survivors to come to when they need help, and to maintain the trust that survivors will receive the help they need without judgement.

2b

DVAC supported survivors to understand and come to terms with the violence that had been perpetrated against them. Many survivors did not fully understand domestic violence beyond its physical forms prior to engaging with DVAC. The caring and educational approach taken by DVAC enabled them to learn about and come to terms with their domestic violence experiences. With DVAC's support, survivors were confident that they could break the cycles of violence they had experienced across their lives.

We recommend that DVAC continues its current approach to counselling and educating survivors about their experiences, as this was experienced as a highly valuable form of support.

2c

The diverse range of services provided by DVAC, as well as the affirming and survivor-led modes of delivery, were critical for supporting survivors to build their confidence and feelings of self-efficacy. This empowered survivors to exert agency in their lives and make the choices they felt comfortable with, safe in the knowledge that DVAC would support them whatever their decision.

Moving forward, we recommend that DVAC maintains its commitment to survivor-led practice and continues to support survivors to build their confidence and self-efficacy.



## Executive summary

*continued*

# 3. What major challenges do survivors face?

## # Key findings

## Recommendations

**3a**

In line with key findings 1b to 2c, we find that DVAC provides a breadth and quality of invaluable services for survivors. However, survivors spoke about DVAC having limited capacity to fully meet their support needs, both in terms of the long wait times to access the services, as well as the time-limited nature of the support. Although the survivors appreciated the work DVAC did to help transition them to other support services at the end of their support period, they felt that having to change support workers after building strong and trusting relationships with their DVAC workers was disruptive and anxiety-provoking, as it meant reliving past traumatic experiences.

We recommend that the Queensland Government provides additional funding to DVAC to help meet the service needs of survivors in their catchment area. In particular, additional resourcing is required to help reduce intake times and provide longevity of service to support survivors in their long-term journeys towards safety and healing.

**3b**

The survivors in our study strongly believed that there was a critical lack of understanding of domestic violence among the community as a whole. This lack of understanding contributed to them feeling unsupported during times when they needed their experiences to be heard, believed, and validated. Along with this lack of understanding came community responses that were experienced as unsupportive and at times disempowering for survivors who were already struggling.

Moving forward, more work needs to be done to educate communities, including at the individual, organisational, and system levels to ensure community members are equipped to respond safely to survivors' disclosures of domestic violence. In the meantime, survivors need avenues through which to build their own supportive networks, such as through peer support groups, which may enable them to access much needed support over the long term from people who have a deep understanding of their experiences.

**3c**

Survivors referred to financial hardship as one the largest barriers they faced on their journeys to safety and healing. Inadequate child support, debts and expenses accrued by abusive ex-partners, the weaponisation of financial processes by ex-partners post-separation, and the rising cost of living were all mentioned as contributing factors.

We recommend that Australian State and Federal Governments implement in full the First Action Plan of the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032, and the recommendations of the Women's Economic Equality Taskforce report, to prevent and ameliorate the financial hardship experienced by survivors of gender-based violence.



# 1. Survivors' journeys with DVAC

## 1.1

**I think there was a sense of relief when Relationships Australia said, go do counselling with DVAC, because I felt like, perhaps, that was my glimmer of hope. That maybe this was going to be my way out.**

## Key Findings

In this chapter, we provide an overview of survivors' journeys with DVAC. We explore how they first came to connect with DVAC, the types of services that they accessed once engaged, and how DVAC supported survivors to move forward with their lives. We find that:

Almost all survivors were referred to DVAC by external services, such as telephone helplines and police, rather than because they were actively seeking domestic violence support.

Once engaged, survivors benefited from a range of services through DVAC, including advocacy, counselling, and safety planning. Survivors experienced these services as highly beneficial.

Survivors were determined to rebuild a better life for themselves and their children. The support they received from DVAC enabled them to move forwards with strength and optimism.

## Referral pathways to DVAC

The survivors in our study reported several different referral pathways that prompted their engagement with DVAC. Significantly, most survivors did not initially set out to connect with DVAC. Rather, in most cases they were attempting to access other services who then referred the survivors on to DVAC. For example, the police were frequently mentioned as referral sources by participants:

## 1.2

**The support services that I was given through the police department here in [suburb], was DVAC... So when I did receive that information from the police officer, I reached out to DVAC and contacted them and booked an appointment.**

## 1.3

**I first came to have contact with DVAC through the Police Station when I went to see them about some domestic violence that I was experiencing. They actually did the referral through to DVAC.**

Although not mentioned as often as the police, helplines such as Relationships Australia, Lifeline, and women's helplines, were another significant entry point into DVAC:

## 1.4

**My husband and I had decided to do marriage counselling, and I said we would try Relationships Australia, again. I rang them and I did an intake call with them. She said because there's active domestic violence still going on in your marriage, we can't do counselling with you. But she said, I recommend contacting DVAC.**

## 1.5

**Lifeline put me onto DVAC... I separated from my husband and he left me with a lot of debt. So, they were helping me with that but also the situation that I was in with emotional and domestic violence.**

Only one participant spoke about calling DVAC without an explicit referral from elsewhere:

## 1.6

**When I first came into contact with DVAC was from a women's support group... I then found out through my solicitors there were some brochures. I read, okay, this is DVAC. I rang them up and I went on a waiting list.**

These findings foreground the importance of having strong referral pathways within the community to inform survivors about DVAC and encourage them to engage. As we explain more fully in the following chapter, many of the survivors had yet to acknowledge or come to terms with the extent of the violence they were experiencing prior to connecting with DVAC. This could help explain why so few of them were actively seeking help from a domestic violence service. In some cases, survivors were afraid of the repercussions from an abusive partner. Feelings of guilt, shame, self-doubt, and mistrust were also experienced as barriers to seeking help. Altogether, this highlights the importance of other key services within the community recognising when a person is in an abusive situation and providing referrals where appropriate.



## 1. Survivors' journeys with DVAC

*continued*

### Types of support accessed through DVAC

Participants spoke of many different forms of support accessed through DVAC, including advocacy, counselling, referrals to other services, safety planning and upgrades, court support, and financial and in-kind support (e.g., help with food, medications):

1.7

**...definitely the resources are a huge thing; you know, something like a packet of wipes meant so much to me at that time. Little things like that just to help. All of it together gives you hope.**

Here, we focus on the three forms of support most commonly spoken about: Advocacy, counselling, and safety planning.

### Advocacy

Survivors spoke about DVAC's ability to advocate on their behalf, and how useful this was during times where they were still developing the confidence to speak up for themselves. This included DVAC advocating for: fines and bills accrued in the context of domestic violence to be waived; support payments to be implemented by Centrelink; and advocating for police to appropriately listen, and provide information, to survivors. For example:

1.8

**She was able to advocate for me with – I had, like – my son got a parking fine on his learners and [ex-partner] was the person who was [in the car with him]... She wrote to the council for me, so we got that waived. Those kind of things behind the scenes where I felt like she really went in to advocate for me and do a lot of ground work for me.**

1.9

**It was like with the [DVO] breach, it seemed to take forever for the police to actually do anything about it... and [support worker] just says, do you want me to call them for you? I'll call them and just find out what's happening, and just being that person because sometimes you just don't feel like you've got the strength anymore to stick up for yourself like that.**

1.10

**[Support worker] was very helpful in that way of ringing up on my behalf and things like that, and then something actually got done about it, you know, she was advocating for me.**

As the above quotes show, this advocacy was important as DVAC workers had the skills, knowledge, and capacity to navigate the systems and know what to ask for. This was experienced as extremely helpful by survivors whose primary focus was on staying safe and rebuilding their lives, and thus didn't always feel able to advocate for themselves at the time.

### Counselling

Survivors also spoke at length about how they engaged in counselling services provided by DVAC. Importantly, counselling wasn't just about working through and coming to terms with what had happened; it was about providing survivors with the coping skills they needed to help get through the day-to-day.

1.11

**The tools that [support worker] gave me to ground myself... she gave me the tools that I knew I had that I just need to, say, dust off and know that - and the confidence to be able to deal with anything thrown my way.**

1.12

**Just basically talk about ways of dealing and explaining...and then ways to cope or different ways to look at it, and a lot of reassurance. That's been very, very helpful is the reassurance she's provided.**

1.13

**It was just someone to listen, to give me a bit of guidance and to help me to plan a bit of what was that next immediate step, because I couldn't think long term. It's okay, what's the next thing I've got to do? What's that next thing I've got to do?**

As we discuss in more detail in Chapter 2, counselling that was targeted at helping survivors process their experiences of domestic violence was seen as an especially valuable service.





## 1. Survivors' journeys with DVAC

*continued*

### Safety planning

As well as advocacy and counselling, safety planning was spoken about as a core and important feature of DVAC's services.

1.14

**When I spoke with [support worker] about that, we spoke about getting a safety plan in place. That was another long appointment because we had to do safety planning... Then, [support worker's] working out things like, okay, so once we get him out, then we can do X-Y-Z with security cameras and changing your locks, and Victim Assist, and all that kind of stuff.**

1.15

**It makes you quite frightened though, I have to say, when they go through, okay, safety plan, so we need to think about this, this, this and this. There are all these things that you didn't consider... Ways that you were vulnerable. It is frightening in a way, but it is also about being pragmatic, I guess, about the needs that you have. Very practical advice.**

As the second quote above suggests, although safety planning was experienced as practical and helpful, it also could contribute to feelings of fear and vulnerability. This foregrounds the significance of DVAC's coupling of safety planning with ongoing counselling for the survivors.

### Moving forwards

The survivors that we spoke to encountered numerous challenges on their journeys to safety and healing, which we discuss in more detail in Chapter 3. However, the holistic, specialist support provided by DVAC enabled survivors to begin moving forwards towards the lives of their choosing. Many participants were in paid employment or were studying for the first time in a long time or, indeed, the first time in their lives. They expressed strong determination to build a better life for themselves and their children and were optimistic about their futures:

1.16

**...my achievement that I will have by mid next year will be that I will be in employment that I enjoy. I will have friends in my life, whether they're co-workers or not and my children will be happy. My children will be content like they are starting to really be...**

1.17

**I want to graduate nursing, and then just set myself up with the girls. They're going fantastic at school. Just be happy and healthy, which we are.**

1.18

**Well, I've started applying for jobs...I've never liked myself, before, but I feel like I like me for the first time. I'm not who I used to be. I feel content and I'm excited about the future for the first time.**

1.19

**...my dream would be that I graduate, and I can go on to do my research masters which I'm really keen on... Yeah, yeah, and enter into the workforce with a lot of passion and a lot of energy. That's what I'm really looking forward to.**





## 2. What aspects of DVAC support are most useful?

### 2.1

**Being heard. Being seen. Feeling validated in choices made, stands taken. Just yeah, I think that it's just helped me to take a completely fractured self and just to start to mould it back together again and go forward.**

## Key Findings

In this chapter, we delve more deeply into which aspects of DVAC's services worked especially well for supporting survivors to stay safe and begin to heal. We find that:

Support workers played a critical role in creating a safe space where survivors felt able to share their experiences without fear of judgement.

Within this safe space, survivors were supported to come to a better understanding of the violence they had experienced and had their experiences validated.

DVAC's survivor-led approach and practical training in skills such as mindfulness was experienced as empowering by the survivors and important for helping them to build their confidence and self-efficacy.

### Support workers creating a safe space

A core foundation underpinning the positive experiences survivors had of DVAC was the relationships they built with DVAC support workers. The survivors we interviewed spoke very highly of their support workers, discussing how they often went 'above and beyond' to support them and meet their needs. This was an important first step for making survivors feel safe and supported through their interactions with DVAC.

### 2.2

**But as soon as I got here and I saw [support worker] and I spoke to her, she was just so kind and so comforting and all of those things that, I don't know, you just kind of felt right at home.**

### 2.3

**I think as well, if it wasn't for the girls and the bond that you have with them, I wouldn't have engaged. I would've just probably just stopped.**

Support workers' caring approach to supporting survivors was particularly valued as it went beyond supporting them with violence-related matters. Indeed, it included a range of holistic support, including checking in on their wellbeing and being a 'cheerleader' to support the survivors through the ups and downs of their journeys:

### 2.4

**Just being able to share those little wins and the big wins and then if something doesn't quite come off, just go in and go argh. That's the thing with [support worker], it's the holistic thing. It's everything... that's one of the points that's been so healing.**

### 2.5

**Once we started the counselling and the training, she really stepped up with the check ins all the time, making sure I was okay before every session and after every session. Explaining. It was a lot that we dealt with, and she wanted to make sure I was okay.**

Feeling like they were in a safe space and with a support worker they trusted and who cared about them was also key for enabling survivors to open up and share their stories freely. Where the survivors had previously encountered judgement and dismissal of their experiences, this was not the case in their interactions with DVAC. As some survivors explained:

### 2.6

**It's not about persecution with DVAC. It's about recovery. It's just so much of those little things that we, as victims, we need. We need the support. We need to feel listened to. We need to get confidence back... DVAC made me feel that I could safely open up.**

### 2.7

**So that's definitely like another positive thing is that the rapport that's built with DVAC myself was never an inspected, a judgmental...It always felt relaxed which allowed me to make decisions on my life.**



## 2. What aspects of DVAC support are most useful?

*continued*

2.8

**it's been a wonderful experience, and it will continue to be a wonderful experience with DVAC. They are such a supportive network. They don't make you feel silly. They make you feel like, yes, you're a victim but we can help you recover. You can make those steps to recover with our help.**

As the above quotes foreground, the safe and supportive space created by the DVAC support workers was important for making the survivors feel comfortable to open up. More importantly, it also made the survivors feel safe and confident to make decisions about, and move forward with, their lives.

### Helping to understand violence and validate experiences

The survivors in our study also spoke about the importance of DVAC helping them understand that what they had experienced was indeed domestic violence. Several survivors spoke about not fully understanding the different forms of domestic violence beyond physical violence prior to engaging with DVAC. Once they connected with DVAC, the support workers were able to help the survivors understand the violence, come to terms with their experiences, and identify the 'red flags' to help keep themselves safe in the future. For example:

2.9

**[Support worker] made me realise a lot more of what was going on that was domestic violence related... It was very heavy stuff to process, and she helped me through that... DVAC was that first step. That first step to being able to open up and wake up and realise that everything that I did go through was real and was domestic violence.**

2.10

**She gave me a lot of advice so she just, I guess, brought me out of my shell for me to be able to talk about what had happened to me, but also for me to realise more so what I've been through as well. Because you don't always realise that it is a domestic violence situation.**

Several survivors mentioned that their support worker had helped them identify, understand, and ultimately break the cycles of violence that had played out in their relationships and across their lives:

2.11

**Together, [participant] and [support worker] are working through all the relationships across [participant]'s life, identifying patterns and understanding the cycle...[Participant] described this as being hugely beneficial for her. She has been able to identify the impact of childhood abuse on her life, and on making her more vulnerable to abusive relationships in adulthood. She has been able to identify predatory and grooming behaviours in others that she wasn't always aware of in the past. (Interviewer notes)**

One participant went on to explain how the approach DVAC took to providing education around domestic violence was particularly useful given the headspace she was in at the time:

2.12

**During those sessions we talked around what domestic violence is and how to recognise things and recognise these traits, so it was more – excuse me, academic almost... and treating it in that clinical, sort of more academic way helped, because I think everything was just a bit too hard to process emotionally and bringing it back to that, this is what it is. Black and white.**

As well as helping to understand that their experiences constituted domestic violence, survivors felt that DVAC was instrumental in validating their experiences. This was particularly important as some survivors reported lacking this form of validation from families, friends, and even other community organisations who did not fully understand the complexities of domestic violence.

2.13

**DVAC has been the first institute or first organisation that actually asked me if I'm all right, actually told me that I'm not all right and that my situation is like, it's - they didn't tell me my situation isn't good but just by being there - and I know my situation isn't good but it's the first time in my life.**



## 2. What aspects of DVAC support are most useful?

*continued*

2.14

**It's also given me that feeling that you know what? I am being listened to. I'm not being called a liar. I can say this was going on and I don't feel like I have to justify or feel like an idiot or feel stupid.**

The simple act of being listened to, and believed, was important for survivors to know that the violence they were experiencing was not normal or okay. It also helped contribute to the feelings of trust and safety that characterised their interactions with DVAC.

### Building self-efficacy

Another important aspect of DVAC's services was how they supported survivors to build their confidence and self-efficacy in a range of areas, including keeping themselves and their children safe from violence, speaking up for themselves, and rebuilding their lives after violence. For example:

2.15

**That I'm a damn good mum and I'm a good person and what he did was wrong. I can't wait to have my say in court. Finding my voice, that's the word. They helped me - DVAC and my counsellor - find my voice. I felt like I was heard.**

2.16

**I'm not the person that I was four months ago. I'm not - I didn't have the strength that I have now. I didn't have the inner personal confidence and esteem. That's been from my journey from being able to rebuild my confidence, esteem and life simultaneously with just the sisterhood of DVAC.**

For some of the survivors, this confidence and self-efficacy was enabled by the constant support provided by DVAC, and knowing that DVAC would be there to support them through:

2.17

**They've been there every step of the way. They've given me every bit of confidence and every bit of you're okay, you're doing well, we're here...It's just having the support of having someone that goes, you know what? You're not stupid. You made mistakes but we learn from them but, hey, here's the extra up to make sure it doesn't happen again.**

Some of the survivors spoke explicitly about how the support provided through DVAC not only improved their self-efficacy but was also instrumental in getting them to where they are today. For example, when talking about the support provided through DVAC, one survivor explained:

2.18

**I can't really even put it into words. It's been an absolute lifeline... I'm completely aware that this journey is going to take years of healing and possibly some things will never be healed. But at least we're actually thriving now and we're growing. We're just in such a different place than we were nine months. It's been extraordinary. Extraordinary.**

An integral aspect of supporting survivors' journeys to self-efficacy was DVAC's focus on being survivor-led. Being survivor-led meant that survivors were in control and did not feel pushed into doing anything they were not ready for. For example:

2.19

**What I loved from the start, she said, they're not here to make the decisions for us, but that they're here to support us in whatever decision we chose to make. That was really empowering... whatever I decide, they're 100 per cent, I will support you in whatever you need to do.**

2.20

**It was really reassuring, and it's nice knowing that you've got somebody holding your hand, but you're in control of making that decision. When, for the last 23 years I haven't had any control to make my own decisions at all.**

2.21

**So I had the freedom and even that was told to me that by [support workers], that we're just going to go by your choice... we'll stand by you as you save yourself.**

The support being survivor-led was experienced as both empowering, and important for supporting survivors to 'follow their gut' so they could feel safe. It positioned survivors as the experts in their own experiences and enabled them to feel an agency and control over their own lives, which their violent partners had previously taken away.



## 3. What major challenges do survivors face?

### 3.1

**I think that's the sad thing about it, is that until change is put in place... We are going to have those commissions of inquiries or deaths in relation to DV because no one is of the understanding or no one is listening.**

## Key Findings

This chapter explores the major challenges survivors faced in their journeys to safety and healing, both in terms of DVAC support specifically as well as broader structural challenges. We find that:

Long wait times, limited service hours, and caps on the amount of support a survivor could access all contributed to survivors feeling that they required more support than DVAC could provide. This suggests that specialist domestic violence services such as DVAC are not adequately resourced to meet growing demand.

In terms of broader challenges, many survivors spoke about the lack of community understanding and support. Survivors' experiences suggest that much more work needs to be done at the community level to educate individuals and organisations about domestic violence and effective ways to respond.

Economic insecurity was a large challenge for many survivors. The lack of adequate child support, being burdened with debts and expenses accrued by an abusive ex-partner, and the rising cost of living all contributed to the financial stress experienced by survivors.

### Capacity of support providers Long intake times

In terms of DVAC support specifically, the survivors spoke about how the support itself was invaluable, but they felt there was not enough of it to fully meet their needs—or indeed the needs of other survivors. From the first intake call, survivors were made aware of just how in-demand DVAC's services were, and how long they would have to wait to receive support:

### 3.2

**At the very start of that conversation she said, there is a long wait, she said, because we've got so many people needing to access our service. Then after I told her my story she said, you need urgent support. She said, you can't wait, we need to get you in ASAP... But I think it was maybe another – I want to say, maybe two and a half to three weeks before I was able to actually get in.**

### 3.3

**I believe it was like an intake of a couple of months. They said it could take up to that.**

One survivor relayed that she was initially refused ongoing counselling from DVAC, apparently due to her ongoing mental health issues. She wondered if in truth it was a lack of resources that led DVAC to turn her away. DVAC's decision was reversed after she complained, and she was extremely satisfied with the support she had received from them since. However, at the time she felt stigmatised, abandoned, and distressed.

Another survivor went on to explain how women who are unable to access support through DVAC often do not know where else to go for support.

### 3.4

**In the Facebook groups I'm in, I'll always list all the numbers that women can reach out to. They'll say, oh, I've rung DVAC, but, well, I can't get in. Or, I can't get in for six weeks, three months or whatever. What can they do? I don't know, where do they go?**



### 3. What major challenges do survivors face?

*continued*

This is significant, as making the call to ask for help was a big step for survivors, and one that took a lot of time, consideration, and courage.

3.5

**I didn't know how my husband was going to feel, going to DVAC to get counselling. So, it probably took me about another six weeks before I eventually called DVAC, because I think I was anxious.**

3.6

**I had that [DVAC] number for about a month. I just had it sitting there... I don't know the female version of it but I feel emasculated if I have to ask for help... I feel like an idiot.**

This foregrounds the importance of ensuring that when survivors make the step to ask for help, this help is made available to them.

One survivor raised the additional point that DVAC services are only available during working hours, and that this impacted who was able to access the services. In particular, this survivor noted that people who work standard hours, or have long commute times, may struggle to access the support they need:

3.7

**There should be, and it doesn't matter who is – what council, or whoever, is involved, I think they need to make sure that there is people who have allocated time slots for after hours... Because I think they're very limited to who they can help, and how many they can help, and for the duration of time that they can help because of they finish at a certain time during the day, and they can't help after hours.**

As the above quote alludes to, and as several other survivors acknowledged, funding restrictions appear to severely limit the forms of services DVAC can provide, as well as the number of people to whom they can provide support. We therefore recognise that while these are challenges raised by the survivors we interviewed, they are not necessarily challenges DVAC has the capacity to address in the absence of increased and dedicated funding.

#### Capacity of support providers *Limited support periods*

Survivors also raised concern over the limited DVAC support periods. Although there appeared to be some confusion around whether eligibility to access DVAC services was based on the number of months engaged or the number of support sessions attended, several survivors spoke about the anxiety that came with knowing their support period was coming to an end. For example:

3.8

**My biggest concern at the moment is when we get to the end of that time limit. That's my biggest concern because it's so ongoing, the healing process and stuff like that. I understand that they need to make room for new people coming in... But from a very selfish and personal point of view, to me, it's a bit challenging to have to move on and leave that and start afresh with someone new.**

3.9

**It was only for six months. That would be one thing I'd change. If it could last longer than six months if you needed it... I wish that – if I found out my court's next year that, say, two weeks before I could meet with [support worker] for a couple of sessions just to do those breathing techniques. It's just an extra confidence boost.**

For these survivors, the limited support periods were incongruent with their long-term journey to healing. After building strong and trusting relationships with their support providers and receiving intensive and quality support, they struggled with the idea of not being able to access that support anymore, particularly as they knew they still faced difficult challenges ahead. The survivors would have liked the option to dip in and out of DVAC support as they needed to over the long term.





### 3. What major challenges do survivors face?

*continued*

Although survivors were not able to stay with DVAC in the long term, they did appreciate how DVAC was able to link them in with other support services that were able to provide support. For example:

3.10

**But within saying that, she did line up and say that she'll refer me onto other organisations. Now every week, I do go to another local support area for women.**

These findings are significant for three reasons. First, survivors' reluctance to disengage with DVAC speaks to the trusting and supportive relationships that the support workers built with the survivors, as well as the quality of the support DVAC provides. Second, they reinforce our earlier point regarding the limitations that arise when services are not adequately funded to meet demand. Third, they foreground how, even when DVAC was unable to continue providing services, they took steps to ensure survivors were linked in with other services that could provide continuity of care.

To help combat the challenges of DVAC's limited capacity to provide ongoing support, one survivor suggested:

3.11

**I think it would be great if there were some kind of program or support group for victims, because we get each other. Because you don't want to just sit down and burden your friends with everything... If there was something local where you could actually build community and friendships, because we actually understand each other and understand the world that we're living in, that would be amazing.**

For this survivor, regular face-to-face interaction with other women who had similar experiences to her was identified as a useful means of building a supportive community network of others who had a deep understanding of what she was going through. The importance of supporting survivors to building understanding and supportive networks will become particularly apparent in the following section.

#### Lack of community understanding and support

As well as the challenges involved in having their service needs met, survivors also spoke about broader challenges they faced within the community; namely, a lack of community understanding of domestic violence, and a lack of community support. Police, in particular, were seen as having an insufficient understanding of the complexities of domestic violence. This, in turn, meant that survivors sometimes felt dismissed, disempowered, or at greater risk after engaging with the police:

3.12

**[Participant] said that police take action and confront the perpetrator without the victim's consent, against the victim's wishes, and with no safety planning. This just increases the risk. (Interviewer notes)**

3.13

**It's being believed. I really – that's just – that's probably been one of the hardest things. Like I went and saw the police a couple of times last year, asking for help and various things and they dismiss because the ex or the perpetrator in question, they talked to them, and they come across so - I can only speak from my experience - but so well spoken and calm and "we really don't know what your problem is".**

Survivors also spoke about how other organisations, such as lending institutions, Centrelink, and utility providers, also lacked an understanding of domestic violence. This made it difficult for them to access the support they required to rebuild their lives after violence. For example:

3.14

**I'm still trying to get back on my feet financially. Lending institutions... it's like they don't have that understanding out there that domestic violence it can take years to recover from. It's not just putting you on payment plans for two years and then going, well... we need to put you through financial counselling.**



### 3. What major challenges do survivors face?

*continued*

3.15

**With our electricity account it was in [partner's] name. We owed almost \$4,000. He was pressuring me about paying it as he had no means to pay it. It was putting my safety and mental health at risk. Origin energy at first didn't want to waive the bill because they thought it would be enabling the perpetrator.**

Workplaces, too, were places where survivors felt they were not understood or well supported. As one survivor explained:

3.16

**Especially my workplace weren't supportive because I rocked up at work covered in bruises and they told me to go and put makeup on them because it was embarrassing. Not once did anyone pull me aside and say, are you okay? Are you okay?**

Another survivor spoke about how they had found a very understanding and supportive workplace that was able to be flexible to meet their needs. They were grateful for this as they found the job was manageable and within their comfort zone. However, the survivor recalled how a Centrelink financial advisor recommended she find a different job:

3.17

**I've had a Centrelink finance advisor say to me to go and look for another job. Even though [current job] is – it beats my capacity for what I can handle. They're advising us to go one step further and go to a job where we can't do, where there are lots of people and everything. I don't feel like that's fair. There's not that understanding of, oh yeah, you might have anxiety.**

For this survivor, the financial advisor's recommendation reflected a fundamental lack of understanding of the ongoing impacts of domestic violence and the importance of finding a job that felt safe and supportive.

Survivors also experienced a lack of understanding and support from their friends and family. As the survivors explained:

3.18

**Nothing prepares you for the feeling of isolation when you leave... You're very, very isolated. People don't treat you the same. I feel like people just stopped talking to me.**

3.19

**Like for me and my family, I hid a lot from them because they never understood DV. It was that, why didn't you leave? Why did you let it happen to you?**

The isolation that the women felt was thus identified as stemming both from being ostracised by the community, as well as from self-isolation due to friends and family not providing adequate understanding and support. This lends support to the earlier suggestion that peer support groups may be a useful means for enabling survivors to build their own supportive networks.

#### Financial hardship

For most of the survivors we spoke to, financial hardship remained one of the biggest barriers that they faced on their journeys to recovery:

3.20

**In all honesty, the hardest thing with recovery from domestic violence is when you're put in financial hardship from it. I mean, even now, I'm still trying to get back on my feet financially.**

3.21

**I've got my family, and my best friends, and support, and everything. But sometimes I feel like it's not enough. I don't have the money to go out and move. I don't have the money to go and do things that the kids want to do... Everything costs money.**





### 3. What major challenges do survivors face?

*continued*

This hardship was especially acute for the mothers we spoke to, many of whom were left supporting their children on their own while recovering from the violence they had experienced. Child support payments from ex-partners were often inadequate or not forthcoming:

3.22

**I get the parenting payment from Centrelink. I get that, but I don't get any child support or anything from my ex. So, yeah, I look after the kids on my own really.**

3.23

**...he still wasn't working and then he was working, but child support was \$40 a month, so did nothing. For a long time, things were very tight.**

Some perpetrators weaponised financial processes post-separation as a way to continue exerting control over their former partners. For example, one participant spoke about how her ex-partner refused to submit the paperwork or attend mediation to reach a financial settlement:

3.24

**He hadn't provided anything...and the only recourse I have is to take him to court to do it, which has cost me about \$15,000 so far, which not many people could do...Again, it's just another way for them to keep perpetrating what they're doing...**

Several survivors were left with debts or expenses accrued by their ex-partner:

3.25

**The person used my vehicle in a \$38,000 collateral loan and I'm wondering why I've got debt collectors coming to repossess my car. This person has pretended to be me, been found guilty of offenses of fraud, but it still affects me today... What do I do to recover that money? Go through them civilly? That's a big thing.**

Meanwhile, survivors were struggling with these hardships against a backdrop of a rapidly rising cost of living:

3.26

**...when rent went up, it went from \$380 to \$430... It is a nightmare, so I'm worried because if he puts it up again, I can't afford it. It's already over the 30 per cent of my income and it's ridiculous. It's \$120 over my income and I'm only paying it because I don't want to be homeless. I don't want my kids to be homeless. I don't want to be living out of my car.**

These findings underline the stark choice so many survivors of domestic, family, and sexual violence face: to stay in an abusive situation, or to leave and risk entering poverty. While one survivor emphasised that this was the right choice for her, it is a choice that no person should be forced to make:

3.27

**I was thinking about how hard we're doing it financially, but I've never felt so free my entire life... We're broke but we're so fricking happy.**



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## Conclusion

The 11 survivors that we interviewed were unanimous that the support they had received from DVAC had been instrumental in their becoming safe, beginning to heal, and rebuilding a life of their choosing. They spoke of feeling validated, respected, believed, cared for unconditionally, self-confident, self-aware, optimistic, and strong for the first time in a long time—or, for some of the women, the first time in their lives. As a result, most of our recommendations in this report are for DVAC to continue doing what they are doing, and for the Queensland Government to provide adequate funding for them to do so.

However, our study also identified some broader changes that are required at the societal level to better support survivors on their journey to safety and healing. Most survivors were experiencing financial hardship and encountered a lack of understanding and support when dealing with the police, courts, real estate agents, banks, utility companies, Centrelink, the child support agency, employers, their church, and sometimes even their family and friends. While DVAC often advocated for the women and acted as a go-between in their dealings with these actors and institutions, the survivors acknowledged that there was only so much DVAC could do. We have therefore recommended that Australian State and Federal Governments implement in full the First Action Plan of the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032, and the recommendations of the Women’s Economic Equality Taskforce report. Doing so will lead to a community that is more educated about and less accepting of gender-based violence. In addition, it will help prevent and ameliorate the financial hardship experienced by survivors of gender-based violence so that no Australian is forced to choose between violence and poverty.

Finally, survivors were clear that criminal justice proceedings and healing journeys last longer than the support that DVAC is currently able to provide. While the survivors looked forward to their futures with strength and optimism, they also expressed fear and sadness that their healing journeys with DVAC had or would come to a premature end. For this reason, we have recommended that the Queensland Government increase funding to DVAC to help reduce intake times and provide longevity of service to support survivors in their long-term journeys towards safety and healing.

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## Methods

This project involved semi-structured interviews with 11 survivors of domestic violence who had (1) engaged with and were close to exiting DVAC services, or (2) exited DVAC services within the past 6 months. Conducting these interviews enabled us to gain insight into the needs of domestic violence survivors, their experiences engaging with DVAC services, the challenges and barriers that survivors encounter when seeking support, and any additional supports survivors need to facilitate their journeys to safety and healing. Semi-structured interviews were the most appropriate method of data collection for this project as they allowed research participants to tell their own stories in their own words while still enabling us to compare across cases and identify common themes.

Given their expertise and existing relationships with their clients, our research partners at DVAC identified and invited survivors to participate in the research. We provided DVAC with Participant Information Sheets and a script explaining the research in an accessible manner. DVAC used these to inform prospective participants about the research and invite them to participate. Once survivors indicated a willingness to take part, DVAC either provided them with the contact details of the research team or, with participants’ consent, passed their details onto the researchers. Importantly, DVAC staff had the expertise to assess who might be in an appropriate position to participate safely in the research and give voluntary informed consent. All participants provided voluntary informed consent prior to participating in the research.

With participants’ consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. One participant declined to be recorded; in this case, detailed notes were taken by the interviewer. The transcripts were then analysed thematically by two members of the research team. First, both researchers familiarised themselves with the transcripts. They then came together to create a coding frame that captured the core themes in the transcripts. Both researchers independently coded the first interview and compared the results to ensure that coding was being done consistently. The remaining 10 interviews were evenly divided between the two researchers for coding. After coding was complete, core themes were drawn out, synthesised, and are presented in this report.