

## **ACTU submission to the Inquiry into the Delivery of National Outcome 4 of the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and Their Children**

**D No. 122/2017**

Right now in Australia, approximately 800,000 predominately women workers are living with the trauma of sexual or family violence. One in three Australian women has experienced physical or sexual violence in their lifetime.<sup>1</sup> Family and domestic violence results in the deaths or injury of thousands of women every year. Given that such large numbers of Australians are affected, family violence must be considered to have reached epidemic proportions in Australia and deserving of only the most serious and dedicated efforts from government and society as a whole. A key element of any strategy to address violence against women must be access to expert advice from well-trained, well-paid expert staff whose primary purpose is to provide the best assistance possible. The union movement is committed to the workers of Australia, and their families, having access to a world class sexual assault and family violence telephone and on-line counselling service. The changes being made to the 1800RESPECT line, which the ACTU and broader union movement have supported for years, will fundamentally undermine this requirement. It will result in the loss of an expert, well-paid and effective workforce providing advice to vulnerable women all around Australia. There is the additional reality that this move will further damage to pay equity in this sector and in the wider economy as a predominantly female workforce is forced onto lower paid, less secure positions. All of this is compounded by the fact that these negative outcomes will arise from nothing less than corporate greed, profit-seeking behaviour and the desire of the government to save a few dollars. The ACTU calls on the government stop this needless damage to this vital service by reinstating The Rape and Domestic Violence Service Australia's (RDVSA) funding to supply their services - ensuring that 1800RESPECT will be there for the next woman, man or child to pick up the phone.

The most immediate negative impact of these changes will be the loss of secure, well-paid jobs held by a highly-qualified and effective workforce. This is hugely important in terms of providing high quality advice to women, men and children experiencing family violence and is of course a significant loss to the workers themselves. RDVSA currently employs 110 staff including specialist sexual assault and family violence trauma counsellors, clinical support and supervision specialists, policy and research workers and administrative support. All of their workers hold at least a four year degree qualification and often further post-graduate qualifications, are subject to regular ongoing professional monitoring and review and are eligible for membership of the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) and/or the Australian Psychological Society (APS), Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (PACFA) and/or Australian Health Practitioners Registration Agency, (AHPRA). But these workers will see their well-paid, secure jobs disappear, forced to work for less on fixed-term contracts or to be replaced with cheaper and most likely less well-qualified staff. This is not conjecture, it is clear to everyone involved that this is what is occurring. On 10 August 2017 MHS reduced the contract to RDVSA by approximately 75% and offered this proportion of the funding to three other services that did not currently employ the similarly skilled,

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<sup>1</sup> ABS, *Personal Safety: Australia*, 2012 cat no. 4906.0

experienced and qualified workers to carry out this work. The three new sub-contractors have all since advertised to employ workers to carry out the work that MHS asserts is the same as the work carried out previously by RDVSA. The new roles on offer are being advertised at both significantly reduced wages and conditions, but also universally on an insecure basis. As an example, RDVSA specialist counsellors providing support to callers of 1800 RESPECT are currently paid a base hourly rate of \$49.83. The employees who will be providing support to 1800 RESPECT will be paid a base hourly rate of \$38.88 in Queensland, \$34.26 in Victoria and \$34.26 in South Australia. This is a significantly reduced rate of pay for workers, who must either accept less money for the same work or leave and be replaced by potentially less well trained and resourced workers. This will be devastating for these workers, losing secure and well-paying jobs and resulting in significant financial hardship for them and their families. If these workers are unwilling to accept this loss, then women, men and children needing the assistance they provide will suffer, potentially receiving lower quality assistance.

But the impacts of these job losses will be felt beyond the 100 workers who face pay cuts and lost conditions. It will have a significant symbolic impact also. The RDVSA has an entirely female workforce. The loss of a significant number of well-paying jobs for women workers is unacceptable when, according to the Workplace Gender Equality Agency, the gender pay gap in Australia in 2017 remains at 15.3%. This is on top of that it is a well-established fact that female-dominated industries such as the social, community and disability services industry are traditionally undervalued on the basis of gender. We see here one of the causes of this sad fact in real time. RDVSA appropriately pays their employees according to the Social Community Home Care and Disability Services (SCHADS) Award and high wages are paid to attract high quality staff. This practice, far from being lauded, is now being punished with a loss of business – resulting in more low-paid and insecure work for women in a ‘feminised’ industry. For a relatively well-paid female-only workforce to have their wages slashed is a disgrace. The wages of women workers have barely grown in years, due to lowest on-record wage growth, and now we are seeing a group of highly qualified, well-trained workers once again have their work undervalued, their labour dismissed and their contribution to society effectively denigrated. As is so often the case with the work women do, the assumption has been made that it can be done cheaper - because it was once done in the community for free. This decision is truly emblematic of why the wage gap exists as it does today.

That this decision has been motivated by nothing more than a desire to increase profits makes it all the more unacceptable. As MHS has previously made media statements that they are seeking to double their profits from this area of service delivery, we can draw no other conclusion than MHS has defunded RDVSA because they appropriately remunerate their employees and offer job security, in favour of other sub-contractors who pay their employees considerably less and offer no job security. We consider this to be a disgraceful example of wage theft at the expense of dedicated committed workers and vulnerable Australians who rely on their skills and expertise. This decision is only about one thing: growing inequality and insecure work and wage theft due to corporate greed

For a government contract for a vital community service to be used by big business to make a profit is disgraceful. That it involves, in this case, the loss of 100 secure, well-paid jobs for woman workers and that it will possibly result in a lower quality of service being delivered to vulnerable women, men and



children is unacceptable. This decision will leave more than 100 workers significantly worse off and will undermine the work being done by a critical service. It devalues the work these women are doing and all so a large company can make higher profits. The ACTU hopes that these points, and those raised in the ASU submission which the ACTU fully supports, will result in the only acceptable outcome– the reversal of this decision.