



An inquiry into the delivery of
National Outcome 4 of the National
Plan to Reduce Violence Against
Women and Their Children 2010-
2022

Finance and Public Administration References Committee

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Introduction

1. Unions NSW is the peak body for trade unions and union members in NSW and has over 65 affiliated unions and Trades and Labour Councils representing approximately 600,000 workers across the State. Affiliated unions cover the spectrum of the workforce in both the public and private sector.
2. The belief that any person who experiences domestic or sexual violence must have access to sound, publicly funded counselling and support is at the heart of this submission. Rape and Domestic Violence Services (RDVSA) has been this service for over 40 years. Since 2010 they have provided support and counselling through the phone and online platform of 1800 RESPECT.
3. The recent awarding of the 1800 RESPECT service contract to MHS has results in funding cuts and a significant change to the operation of the service. Under the current model, high value jobs are being replaced with lower paid, insecure work. This will undoubtedly affect service delivery and impact thousands of Australians who have come to rely on the service in their darkest hours. Unions NSW believes this seriously undermines the quality of this world class service.

1800 RESPECT and MHS

4. In 2015, RDVSA sought \$2 million from the Federal Government to fund additional counsellors and telephone hardware that would allow them to answer more lifesaving calls. Instead of funding the RDVSA, the Liberal-National Government awarded the contract to the multinational private health insurance fund, Medibank Health Solutions (MHS) to provide the service.¹ Unions NSW opposed this decision and is deeply concerned by the Government's action to allow a company to make a profit on rape and domestic violence counselling,
5. After winning the Government contract, MHS put the 1800 RESPECT counselling service out for tender in February 2017. In August 2017, MHS informed RDVSA the tender process had been 'cancelled without award' and MHS would be developing their own model of service delivery. Under the new service delivery model MHS required significant funding cuts, which would have resulted in RDVSA making 50-70

¹ ASU, *Who are RDVSA?* (2017) No Profit From Rape <http://www.noprofitfromrape.org/who_is_rdvsa>

employees redundant. MHS also required the introduction of new counselling models and the recording of counselling sessions. This did not align with the values and expertise of the Board of RDVSA. The significant changes made by MHS would have significantly altered the delivery and quality of the service and RDVSA withdrew from 1800 RESPECT. Consequently, MHS has subcontracted counselling services to three non-profit counselling organisations, with significantly lower wages, qualifications and experience.

6. This is another example of the Liberal-National government using the privatisation of essential services as a tool to drive down wages and conditions and undermine the quality of the service.
7. The Government's actions have demonstrated they are not concerned with providing quality services, but rather withdrawing government accountability, and allowing private companies to use public money to maximise profits. 1800 RESPECT is a world renowned, quality service which is being undermined by profit maximisation sanctioned by the Liberal-National Government.

Women, Work and Violence

8. Domestic and family violence is a workplace issue. Almost two-thirds of women affected by domestic and family violence are in some form of paid employment, this equates to around 800,000 Australian women.²
9. More often than not the workplace is the only place where women experiencing domestic violence feel safe. Secure paid work and the resulting financial independence it provides is critical in enabling workers, especially those with children to leave an abusive relationship.
10. NSW Unions are currently campaigning to have ten (10) days paid domestic violence leave included in the National Employment Standards. This is an important campaign for unions, as it will ensure any worker who experiences violence in their home has the time and support they need to attend court hearings, provide evidence to the police, find somewhere to live and find a new school for their children.

² Elizabeth Broderick, *Violence against women is a workplace issue* (6 March 2013) Australian Human Rights Commission <<https://www.humanrights.gov.au/news/speeches/violence-against-women-workplace-issue>>

11. The NSW union movement refers members living with violence to 1800 RESPECT's services because we believe the RDVSA provides world class counselling and support for people who have experience sexual assault and violence.
12. It is widely recognised and understood that violence against women is a form of discrimination and is violation of a woman's rights. This violation has been repeatedly acknowledged by the Australian Human Rights Commission and demands recognition and protection.³ The obligation to prevent and eliminate violence is a direct responsibility of the State as is their duty to act with due diligence. By undermining the world class service provided by RDVSA and replacing it with a profit driven model, the Liberal-National Government are attacking domestic violence services in Australia.
13. Unions NSW believes the Liberal-National Government's actions work against the above-mentioned obligations and through the removal of their funding for RDVSA's operation of 1800 RESPECT will significantly reduce the quality of service, remove job security and reduce pay conditions for workers, all of whom are women.
14. Since its inception in 2010, 1800 RESPECT has proven itself to be the leading service provider for telephone and on-line counselling services for domestic and sexual violence in this country. As a result of this Government's penchant for profit, victims will receive substandard service and women will lose well paid and secure jobs.

Straight from the workers' pockets

15. The expertise of RDVSA's employees cannot be understated. This is a highly qualified, specialised, all female workforce. Under the new MHS business model, their tireless work would have been undermined by poor conditions of employment. The model would have also forced RDVSA to make upwards of seventy staff redundant. Under RDVSA's funding guidelines, they are specifically directed they cannot accrue money for staff redundancy. The misguided expectation that RDVSA, a non-profit, would have available the \$1 million dollars required to pay staff the redundancy required by law under the NES, comes as no surprise from a

³ Ibid

Government that is woefully out of touch.

16. The reduction of well-paid secure work for the sake of maximising corporate profit is wage theft.
17. The Minister and MHS have claimed on numerous occasions the counselling work and service is comparable under the new model. This simply isn't true when you have increasing job insecurity and a significant cut to employment conditions.
18. It is a well-established fact female dominated industries such as social, community and disability services are traditionally undervalued on the basis of gender. This places the all-female workforce at RDVSA in a perilous position as the MHS business model begins to be rolled out.
19. It has always been the intention of RDVSA to retain and fairly remunerate the highly qualified workers of 1800 RESPECT. Their commitment to this is demonstrated by their above-award pay conditions. Specialist counsellors are paid a base hourly rate of \$49.83, this includes a trauma allowance in recognition of the nature of the work they perform.
20. The positions currently held by 1800 RESPECT employees are not only well paid, they are also secure. Permanency is an integral factor in continuing the high-quality level of service at 1800 RESPECT. The current operating model allows clients continuity of service, allowing them access to the same counsellors who are aware of their situation and can provide ongoing support. Under the new MHS model of triage call response, clients would be made to repeat their stories to multiple operators before accessing a qualified counsellor. This runs counter to the mandate of 1800 RESPECT as it currently stands under the management of RDVSA. Under their guidance, client safety and security is the priority, not the streamlining of service. Permanency of employment is not only critical to the wellbeing of employees, in knowing that their work is valued and secure, but just as important to the clients who turn to 1800 REPSECT.
21. Job advertisements listed by the new service providers contracted by MHS to perform counselling in Queensland, Victoria and South Australia indicate roles will be insecure and paid at the Award rate. Employment contracts are short term. Decent pay and job security will all be sacrificed in order to meet profit demands. Counsellors

are already seeing the shift in workplace culture, and have noted ‘the focus of the first response to calls used to be service, not its speed’.⁴

22. MHS and the Minister for Social Services have asserted the counselling roles under MHS’s operating of 1800 RESPECT will be unchanged. Essentially this means that women will be performing the same work, but with a significant reduction in take home pay and limited job security.
23. This economic rationalist approach sees client advocacy take a back seat to profit generating strategies. This runs counter to the intention of RDVSA’s work which is to support and counsel victims of domestic and sexual violence.

Services saving lives, not making a profit

24. Under MHS’s new operating model, all counselling sessions will be recorded. This is a significant breach of client confidentiality and runs counter to Australian privacy legislation. It also seriously undermines the quality of counselling, as clients may feel uncomfortable or unsafe disclosing the details of violence if they are aware they are being recorded.
25. MHS has had difficulty with confidential medical data in the past. In 2015, it was revealed the personal health details of hundreds of Defence personnel were mistakenly sent offshore to China. Potential data and confidentiality breaches of clients who have experienced rape or domestic violence places both clients and staff at risk and undermines the foundation of trust and confidence that RDVSA has spent decades building.
26. MHS is planning on doubling its operating profit in areas such as online services and call centres Andrew Wilson, MHS’ group executive on healthcare and strategy has claimed, ‘we have put a stake in the ground and said we’d like to double the operating profit of this part of the business in the next three years’.⁵ 1800 RESPECT is included in this profit segment.⁶ This raises fundamental questions over the

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Sarah-Jane Tasker, ‘Medibank’s plans to be much more than a health insurer’, *The Australian* (online) 27 February 2017 < <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/business/companies/medibanks-plans-to-be-much-more-than-a-health-insurer/news-story/5ff0564ae5dd6901b68c3c51baa28662>>

⁶ Ibid

integrity and priorities of MHS's plans for this vital and lifesaving service.

27. The MHS model of sub-contracting triage services with limited funding has led to an increase in complaints. In the first three months of MHS' model, 60 complaints have been filed, compared with 79 in total over the previous two years.⁷ This has also meant that RDVSA has had to allocate a specific person to deal exclusively with complaints. This is a poor use of already dwindling resources, not to mention a waste of expertise.

Conclusion

28. 1800 RESPECT is a world class service. Changes to the funding of the service and the implementation of a new service model by the for-profit MHS, seriously undermines the quality of counselling and support offered to people who have experienced rape or domestic violence. The new model is also a clear attack on the working conditions of a highly specialised and skilled all female workforce.

29. Unions NSW requests the Federal Government reconsider the funding of 1800 RESPECT and intervene to uphold the quality of this essential and life-saving service. The Government must take immediate action to ensure the vital community service provider, Rape and Domestic Violence Services Australia, can continue to provide this service.

⁷ Jenna Price, 'Domestic violence hotline 1800 RESPECT flooded with complaints after system changed', *Sydney Morning Herald* (online) 12 December 2016 < <http://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/news-and-views/news-features/domestic-violence-hotline-1800-respect-flooded-with-complaints-after-switch-to-triage-system-20161211-gt8oq9.html>>