



# TOP END WOMEN'S LEGAL SERVICE INC.

FREE LEGAL ADVICE FOR WOMEN

Advice | Information | Referral | Advocacy

A | 2/17 Lindsay Street, Darwin NT 0801

P | GPO Box 1901, Darwin NT 0801

ABN | 42 830 944 178

T | (08) 8982 3000 or 1800 234 441

F | (08) 8982 3009

E | admin@tewls.org.au

26 February 2021

Hon Selena Uibo MLA  
Attorney-General and Minister for Justice  
GPO Box 3146  
Darwin NT 0801

*By email to minister.uibo@nt.gov.au*

Dear Madam Attorney General,

## **Top End Women's Legal Service Inc. – Critical need for a specialist domestic and family violence counsellor – Women incarcerated at the Darwin Correctional Centre**

The Top End Women's Legal Service (TEWLS) would like to bring to your attention the critical need for a specialist domestic and family violence (DFV) counsellor at the Darwin Correctional Centre (DCC).

TEWLS is a community legal centre which provides free, high quality, responsive and culturally secure holistic legal services to women living in the Greater Darwin region. TEWLS is the only service which provides face to face civil and family law services to women incarcerated at the DCC.

In 2019, TEWLS conducted Legal Health Checks (LHC)<sup>1</sup> over the course of 12 months with female prisoners at the DCC. The data obtained highlights the urgent need for trauma-informed DFV counselling services, as:

- 92% did not think there was good mental health support whilst incarcerated.
- 76% had experienced DFV either as a child or an adult.
- 76% had received an injury from a violent act.
- 74% had issues with alcohol and/or drugs.
- 53% had a pre-existing mental health condition.
- 63% wanted to speak to a DFV or trauma counsellor.

Further analysis of these statistics is laid out in the final report published by TEWLS in November last year: **Women Incarcerated at Darwin Correctional Centre – Advocating for and Shining a Light on Women Ordinarily Invisible at a Policy, Systems and Structural Level**. A copy of this report is enclosed for your reference.

A key theme in the final report is the high prevalence of complex trauma among women prisoners. In order to address this trauma, therapeutic service provision is required, and the number one ask of incarcerated women is for a specialist DFV counsellor. Unfortunately however, there is currently no DFV counselling available to women at the DCC. Additionally, the services that are provided are aligned with criminal sentencing, and do not holistically

---

<sup>1</sup> A legal health check is a legal screening tool that we adapted to 'diagnose' the precursors to incarceration and to identify the multiple legal needs of women incarcerated in Darwin.

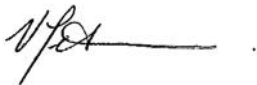
address either the needs of incarcerated women, or the issues foundational to their incarceration or cycles of recidivism.

The criminogenic profile of women prisoners is profoundly different from that of male prisoners. While women on average serve significantly shorter sentences than male offenders, they tend to have higher recidivism rates. Their experiences of complex trauma contribute directly to their risk of re-offending. In the event specialist DFV counselling were available, women would be greatly assisted to address pre-existing trauma, such that upon their return to the community, they are assisted to break out of their own cycle of detention.

With respect to upcoming budgetary decisions, we note that whilst a specialist DFV counsellor would cost approximately \$120,000.00 per annum, there is much evidence to suggest equivalent or additional cost savings in the longer term.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss this very important issue and we thank you for your efforts in prioritising the safety of women and their children in the NT.

Yours faithfully,  
**TOP END WOMEN'S LEGAL SERVICE INC.**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'V. Lethlean', followed by a horizontal line and a period.

Vanessa Lethlean  
Managing Solicitor