

12 February 2026

Secretary
Legislative Scrutiny Committee
Northern Territory Parliament
LA.Committees@nt.gov.au

Re: Sentencing Amendment (Murder) Bill 2026

Thank you for your time in considering our submission. As one of the Northern Territory's largest specialist domestic, family and sexual violence services, we would like to comment on some aspects of the proposed Sentencing Amendment (Murder) Bill 2026.

Women's Safety Services of Central Australia (WoSSCA) has been operating across our region since 1977. WoSSCA operates under the vision that *all women and children live safely, with respect and dignity, free from violence in their chosen communities.*

To fulfil that vision, WoSSCA works to prevent and respond to gendered violence in Central Australia. We are committed to driving systemic change through strong advocacy and collaborative partnerships, working with the communities we serve.

WoSSCA provides the following services:

- A 30-bed crisis accommodation service for women and children experiencing Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence (DFSV); with access to specialist workers, including Case and Senior Case Workers; Central Intake workers; a Child Advocate; and an Aboriginal Cultural Advisor
- Proactive outreach including risk assessment, safety planning and case management to women and children experiencing DFSV in Alice Springs, and the remote communities of Papunya, Yuendumu, Yuelamu, Ntaria, Ti Tree, Mt Liebigh and Atitjere
- Women's partner contact and safety work alongside the Tangentyere Men's Behaviour Change Program
- Coordinated, collaborative and timely DFSV support to victim survivors through the Co-responder Program based in Alice Springs

Support and advocacy at the Alice Springs Local Court and Alice Springs DFV

In addition to the above services, WoSSCA's Community Development and Training (CDT) engages with the community across primary prevention initiatives, training and resource development across the following domains:

- Providing foundational education and workshops, as well as customised workshops for community and Government organisations across Central Australia
- Raising community awareness of DFSV through events; programs and campaigns (including, but not limited to, 16 Days of Activism and International Women's Day)
- Secretariat and Chair support to the Central Australian Family Violence and Sexual Assault Network (CAFVSAN)
- Partners with key stakeholders to respond to development and training needs across the NT e.g. WoSSCA was an integral consortium member for the development, implementation, and delivery of the Prevent, Assist, Respond training (PART) for frontline NT Police and Health
- Focus on Primary Prevention and Early Intervention e.g. [U Right Sis](#) - a community led, workshop-based response to preventing technology facilitated abuse and staying safe online, and [Talking Respect](#) – a community-led education resource designed to support teachers, youth workers and other professionals about having conversations with young people about respectful relationships.

The Northern Territory's Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence sector represents a critical source of expertise and frontline experience. WoSSCA expresses its deep concern and disappointment at the failure to undertake meaningful and broad consultation prior to the introduction of the proposed Amendment, instead seeking stakeholder views only after the policy has been drafted, introduced and released to the media. WoSSCA does not believe that the voices of people with lived experience, First Nations women, community members from regional and remote NT, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and specialist DFSV services have been adequately heard or genuinely considered in this process.

WoSSCA acknowledges that the proposed Amendment is likely positioned as a response to the cumulative harm caused by intimate partner homicides, with reference to the following from the Bill's *Explanatory Statement*:

In the Inquests into the deaths of Miss Yunupingu, Ngeygo Ragurk, Kumarn Rubuntja and Kumanjayi Haywood [2004] NTLC 14, the Coroner recorded the domestic and family violence related homicide rate in the Northern Territory is seven times higher than the national average. The amendment is intended to reflect the severity and profound harm to victims, families and communities caused by the murder of a current or former intimate partner.

██████████ if the severity and profound harm experienced by victims, families and communities is to be treated as a genuine priority – namely, at the core of this Amendment – then meaningful consultation with those directly affected must occur before legislative amendments are

advanced — particularly where those changes are framed as being made ‘for them.’ We highlight that among the Coroner’s 35 recommendations, there is no recommendation for mandatory life sentences without parole for murder.

WoSSCA proposes the following for consideration in response to the Sentencing Amendment (Murder) Bill 2026:

Amendments should be evidence based – and the evidence is not in favour of incarceration

WoSSCA acknowledges that this Amendment sends a message to the broader community across the Territory that the most extreme forms of violence will not be tolerated. We note, however, that while there is no available evidence to support the notion that sentences of life-imprisonment create greater safety for women by acting as a deterrent to offenders, there is a significant body of evidence that suggests incarceration does not lead to behavioural change.

The concept of longer prison sentences as a deterrent offers a theory of choice in which the individual may consider the benefit vs. the cost of a crime. Unfortunately, we understand all too well through the reviews of the lives and deaths of women who have been murdered by their partners, that men rarely commit murder at random, but rather demonstrate a pattern of behaviour and control over time that ultimately results in fatality. Men who are enacting power across many forms of violence are likely not considering the ‘cost’ of a crime, and as such, research indicates that increasing the severity of punishment, by way of longer sentences, do not increase deterrence¹. As we learnt through the Inquests into the deaths of Miss Yunupingu, Miss Ngeygo Ragurk, Miss Kumarn Rubuntja and Miss Kumanjaya Haywood, prior periods of incarceration for the perpetrators of violence were no deterrents to future offending, even when they have prior records of manslaughter and longer terms of imprisonment.

On the frontline of DFSV, we witness the rotation of people using violence entering and exiting the carceral system. We note that for many of these prisoners, there is little to no opportunities to meaningfully engage with supporting services to address their use of violence while incarcerated. The most recent ABS data indicates an increase of 24 per cent of the NT’s prison population (between June 24-25), with 44 per cent of prisoners on remand and at least six out of 10 prisoners returning to prison within two years of being released². As the countries most imprisoned jurisdiction – alongside the highest rates of intimate partner homicides – this Amendment, like all forms of carceral punishment, will do little in changing behaviours and therefore, little in our collective and ultimate efforts to create a Territory that is free from violence for women and children.

¹ Sentencing Matters: *Does Imprisonment Deter? A Review of the Evidence*. Ritchie, Donald. Sentencing Advisory Council (April 2011)

² Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2025). *Prisoners in Australia*. ABS. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/prisoners-australia/latest-release>.

WoSSCA recommends that other priorities will go further in increasing the safety of women and children across the Territory than this Amendment, such as:

1. Demonstrate an ongoing commitment to Recommendation 20 in the NT Coroner's findings: *alternatives to custody for perpetrators of domestic and family violence*. Greater efforts in providing intensive supports to people using violence outside of the prison system, and before violence escalates to murder, will have better outcomes for achieving greater community safety in the long-term
2. Focus on prevention, rather than harsher penalties only after the harm has occurred. WoSSCA calls for adequate funding and delivery of prevention strategies that create greater safety in the long-term by addressing underlying causes that lead to intimate partner homicides. The additional five years non-parole period would cost, at minimum, half a million dollars per prisoner³ - and despite decades of prison expansion and burden of public spending, we see no effect on the rates of reoffending. Funding prevention over punishment makes sense if we are genuine in our commitment to create sustainable, safer communities.
3. Consider reforms and amendments that have been called for by survivors, legal experts and advocates across the sector e.g. the removal of 'good character' references in proceedings of child sex offences and acts of violence against women and children – as we've recently seen in NSW – before the proposed Amendment

The Amendment risks misidentification and further criminalisation of women as primary victims

WoSSCA holds significant concerns that the proposed Amendment risks further trauma and criminalisation of women who have killed their partners, but who are also the primary victims of violence. It is feared that this Amendment holds considerable potential for misidentification of the primary aggressor and does not allow for deep consideration of the complexities of DFSV. Research indicates that intimate partner homicides committed by females towards their male partners are an endpoint of a pattern of extended coercive control and significant violence – which is not the case for men ending the lives of their current or former partners⁴. WoSSCA strongly opposes an Amendment to the Murder Bill that would see a life-sentence imposed on women who have experienced ongoing violence and who – because of this violence – have ended their partner or former partner's life.

WoSSCA recommends that any legislative reform to sentencing explicitly recognises and incorporates responses to systemic and gendered contexts of violence – including severe and prolonged abuse, coercive

³ Estimated on the latest financial figures of the Northern Territory Government, Department of the Attorney-General and Justice, *Pathways to the Northern Territory Aboriginal Justice Agreement*

⁴ AIC report, *Female perpetrated intimate partner homicide: Indigenous and non-Indigenous offenders*, Voce, Isabella & Bricknell, Samantha, Australian Institute of Criminology, Australian Government (2020)

control and compounding trauma – consistent with the evidence of women who kill in these contexts. Specifically, in consideration of the proposed Amendment, we recommend the following:

1. Incorporate statutory recognition of abuse contexts – as relevant considerations in the application of homicide offences, defences and sentencing principles
2. Ensure courts are supported to understand and consider expert evidence on trauma, violence and dynamics in homicide cases
3. Develop guidance for judicial officers in the context of DFSV – rather than relying on ‘standard’ training
4. Expand and commit to ongoing specialist training for police, prosecutors and defence counsel in understanding trauma, gendered violence and coercive control (to improve early responses and pre-trial assessments)

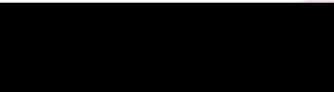
Contrarily, the proposed Amendment does not clarify how the ‘exceptional circumstances’ clauses may be used and ultimately they may protect the primary perpetrator of violence, noting that the Bill’s *Explanatory Statement* outlines the following:

For there to be exceptional circumstances, the court must be satisfied that the offender is otherwise a person of good character, unlikely to reoffend, and the victim’s conduct, or conduct and condition, substantially mitigate the conduct of the offender.

Without clarification as to the application of these exceptional circumstances — alongside the continued acceptance of character references to establish ‘good character’ — there is a real risk that courts may place undue weight on subjective assessments of reputation and perceived future risk, rather than the pattern, context and seriousness of the violence. This may inadvertently create a pathway through which primary perpetrators of domestic and family violence are shielded from the full intent of the legislation; ultimately operating in opposition to the outlined intent of this Amendment.

In summary, **WoSSCA does not recommend passing the Sentencing Amendment (Murder) Bill.** In acknowledgement of the points outlined in this response, we believe that this Amendment is more of a symbol of victim-centred justice, more about public denunciation and appearing to take action than about providing a victim’s family more power in the judicial process; or honouring the life of a victim; or ultimately preventing future intimate partner homicides and creating greater safety for women and children across the Territory. We call on the Northern Territory Government to engage in genuine, meaningful consultation with survivors, those with lived-experience, and experts across the DFSV sector to ensure that any DFSV law reform reflects the calls of those with lived-experience in our communities.

Yours sincerely,



Ms Larissa Ellis - Chief Executive Officer