



Government of Western Australia
Department of Justice

Our Way Forward: Supporting Aboriginal Families Experiencing Family Violence





Our Way Forward: Supporting Aboriginal Families Experiencing Family Violence



Acknowledgement of Country

The Department of Justice respectfully acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land as being the First Peoples of this country. We embrace the vast Aboriginal cultural diversity throughout Western Australia, and recognise their continuing connection to Country, water and sky. We pay our respects to Elders past and present.

Context and purpose

This document sets out the Department of Justice Aboriginal Family Safety Strategy, *Our Way Forward: Supporting Aboriginal Families Experiencing Family Violence (Our Way Forward)*. This document sits within a broader framework of international, national, state and departmental policies that guide efforts to improve Aboriginal family safety and wellbeing.

This Strategy will be a tool for the Department of Justice to use when making decisions related to planning, funding, design and delivery of services for Aboriginal people experiencing family violence in Western Australia.

It is dedicated to all Aboriginal people who are surviving or have survived family violence, and honours those who did not.

Thank you to everyone who has been involved in the development of *Our Way Forward* and to those who will continue to contribute to its delivery.

This report contains material that some readers may find confronting. It discusses family violence, intergenerational trauma, racism, colonisation, incarceration and related issues that may be distressing for some readers. Readers are encouraged to take care when engaging with this material and to seek support if required. Available support services are:

- 1800 Respect 24/7
- Call 1800 737 732
- Text 0458 737 732
- NRS 1800 555 677
- Interpreter 13 14 50

Aboriginal Interpreting WA

- Freecall 1800 330 331

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Foreword from the Director General

Family violence is one of Australia's most urgent challenges. For Aboriginal families, its impacts are shaped by a long and painful history of displacement, trauma and systemic inequality. These impacts are not only immediate: they echo through families, relationships, and across generations.

Aboriginal communities have long asked for responses that reflect the unique contexts in which Aboriginal family violence occurs. *Our Way Forward: Supporting Aboriginal Families Experiencing Family Violence (Our Way Forward)* builds on these longstanding calls and provides practical direction required for us to act, as much as is possible, within the scope of our responsibility.

Although Western Australia has a whole-of-government strategy to address family violence, the Department developed *Our Way Forward* because up to 90% of Aboriginal women in custody have experienced family or other violence. The justice system intersects with family violence in ways that are both profound and disproportionate for Aboriginal people, making a dedicated, justice specific-response essential.

We have been privileged to work closely with Professor Victoria Hovane, a Ngarluma, Jaru and Gooniyandi psychologist, researcher, consultant, and practitioner with extensive experience having worked in universities, legal systems child protection, justice, courts, and corrections. Her leadership and guidance in developing this strategy, has ensured that *Our Way Forward* rests on compelling evidence and a clear understanding that Aboriginal family violence stems from colonisation, and has its own origins, contexts, and pathways that are distinct from mainstream Western experiences. Her deep knowledge of intergenerational trauma and healing has profoundly shaped the approach we now take forward.

Our Way Forward aligns with key national and state frameworks: the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022 - 2032 and its Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Action Plan 2023 - 2025, supporting Target 13 under Closing the Gap. It is also consistent with Western Australia's Aboriginal Family Safety Strategy 2022 - 2032 and the Department's Innovate Reconciliation Action Plan 2025 - 2027 deliverable 13.5.

Our Way Forward reflects our commitment to embedding Aboriginal ways of working across policy, planning, and service delivery. In implementing this commitment, we will honour all Aboriginal people who are surviving or have survived family violence, as well as those whose lives have been lost to it.

To everyone who contributed to *Our Way Forward*: Thank you. Your willingness to share your stories will shape far more than a document. You have paved the way for greater understanding for safer families, stronger communities, and better outcomes for generations to come. Your partnership is valued and essential to the journey ahead.

As Professor Victoria Hovane reminds us:

"Our approaches and methods were developed over tens of thousands of years..."

In that wisdom lies strength, and powerful guidance to implement *Our Way Forward*.



Kylie Maj
Director General
Department of Justice

About this strategy

Background

Our Way Forward is the culmination of an extensive process and engagement to develop a dedicated Department of Justice Aboriginal Family Safety Strategy, focused on supporting Aboriginal families experiencing family violence.

It has been informed by a wide-ranging program of engagement and review, including consultations across metropolitan, regional and remote locations, as well as in prisons and youth detention.

More than 690 people contributed to this work, the vast majority being Aboriginal women, men and young people. Their experiences and priorities are central to *Our Way Forward*. The work also drew on input from government and non-government stakeholders, analysis of research and policy, and consideration of national and international frameworks.

Engagement and evidence identified consistent themes that are critical in shaping a new approach to Aboriginal family safety:

- The need to acknowledge the ongoing impacts of colonisation and systemic discrimination, and to address the racism still experienced within daily life and institutions.
- The importance of Aboriginal perspectives on family violence: how it is defined, what drives it, and what safety looks like in different contexts.
- How intergenerational trauma, and the use of alcohol and other drugs to manage its pain, are key drivers of family violence.
- The importance of culture being placed at the centre of solutions, for self-determination to guide decisions, and for Aboriginal-designed, Aboriginal-led, place-based programs to be resourced.
- The role of connection to culture and identity and recognising the effects of social disadvantage on Aboriginal wellbeing.

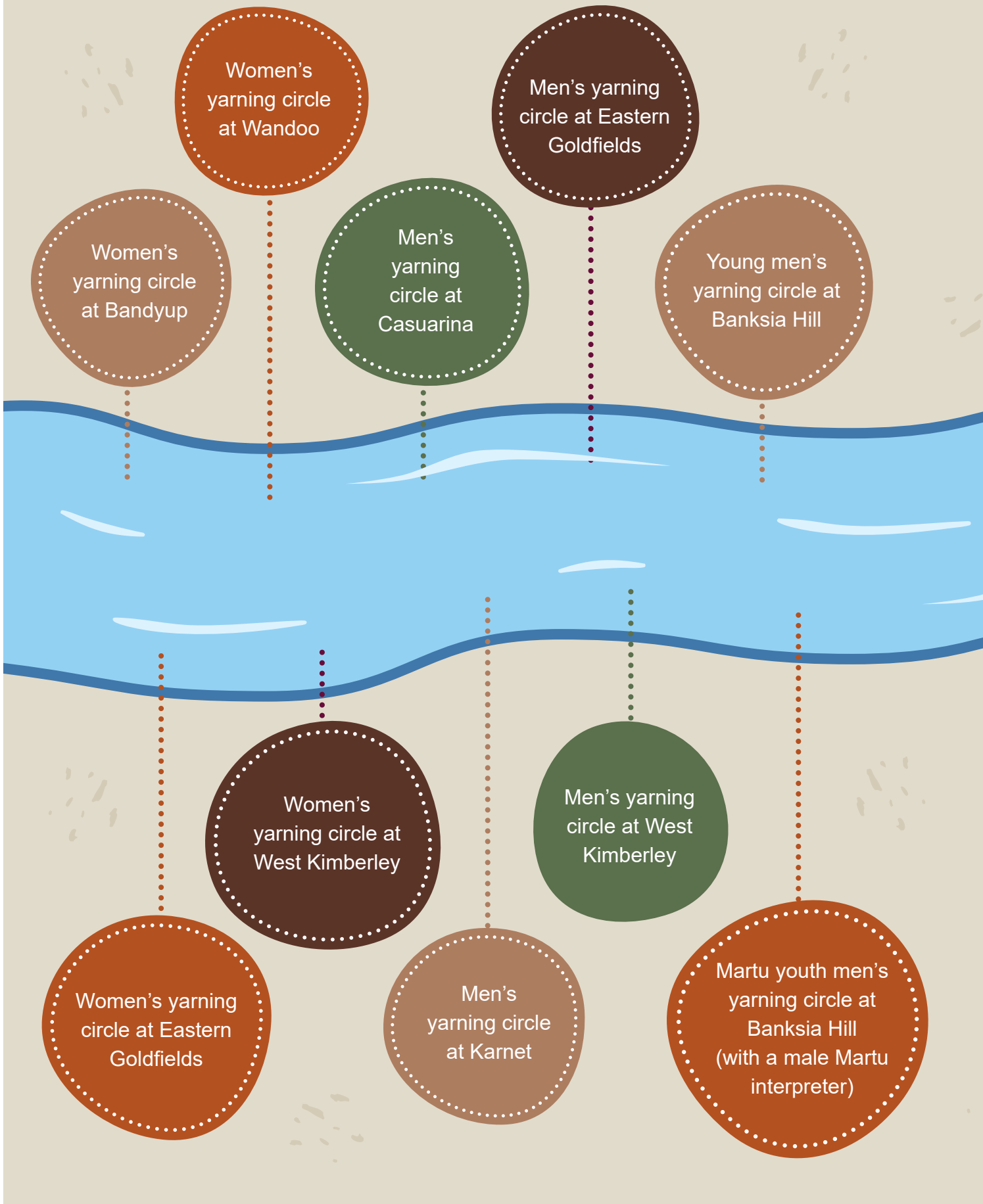
Our Way Forward has been informed by the work and research undertaken by Tjallara Consulting Pty Ltd (Tjallara Consulting) for the Department of Justice, which provides the broader policy context, analysis and evidence base supporting this document.

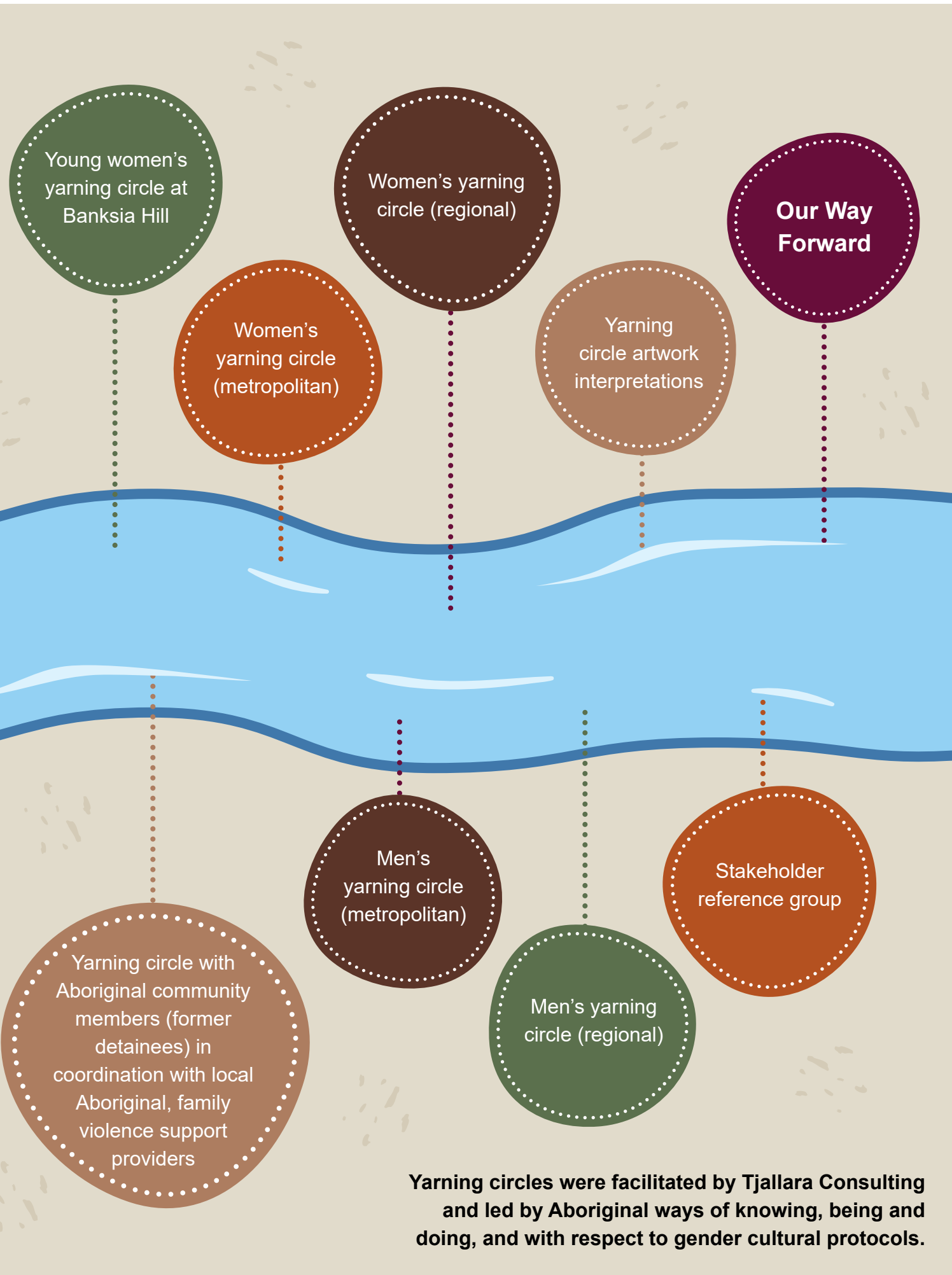
Tuna Blue imagery featured throughout was created in response to insights shared during Yarning Sessions held in community and prisons, reflecting the lived experiences and cultural perspectives that underpin *Our Way Forward*.

This has resulted in a strategy that reflects Aboriginal perspectives on family violence and sets a clear path for reform.



Our Way Forward: Culturally safe and supportive collaboration





Why a different approach is needed

Family violence is a major driver of Aboriginal over-representation in the justice system, affecting Aboriginal people as those who experience violence and those who use it. Turning to formal systems is rarely a straightforward choice. For many, past interactions have shown that seeking help can expose families to new risks, scrutiny, and processes they can't control, rather than offer protection.

Current responses too often do not match Aboriginal realities. Experiences of colonisation, systemic racism and discriminatory treatment continue to influence how Aboriginal people view mainstream services. These experiences have created a legacy of distrust that persists today and affect how comfortable people feel approaching services.

For many Aboriginal families the possibility of child removal, imprisonment of loved ones or unsafe treatment within custodial settings remains a very real concern. These risks mean that justice responses are often approached with caution and, for some, avoided unless every other avenue has been exhausted.

A reliance on incarceration has proven costly and ineffective. It consumes significant public resources yet fails to reduce violence. Four out of five sentenced Aboriginal prisoners in Western Australia have already served a prior sentence, showing that prison has become a revolving door, rather than a pathway to rehabilitation.

At the same time, around 72 per cent of assault hospitalisations involving Aboriginal people are due to family violence, with Aboriginal women 34 times more likely and Aboriginal men 29 times more likely to be hospitalised than non-Aboriginal people. These figures demonstrate both the scale of harm and the failure of current responses, despite the cost.

The evidence shows a one-size-fits-all system, shaped by Western assumptions is not delivering safety for Aboriginal families. A different approach is needed, one that reflects Aboriginal experiences, places culture and healing at the centre, and rebuilds safety and trust through community-led, culturally grounded responses.



“ Equal justice does not mean treating everyone in the same way. Treating people fairly requires identification and an understanding of their different circumstances . . . and . . . to remove or ameliorate disadvantage and inequality without prejudicing other participants in the legal process. The best way of doing that is to be informed by specialised knowledge and experience.”

The Hon Justice Peter Quinlan, Chief Justice of Western Australia, Supreme Court of WA, (2021)
Equal Justice Bench Book, 2nd Edition.



This photograph is courtesy of the women who contributed their time and experience through the Tjallara Consulting Yarning Circles in support of developing *Our Way Forward*.

Introducing the strategy

A vision for safer families and stronger communities



At a glance

Our Way Forward begins with a vision that defines the overall goal of safer families and stronger communities. This is underpinned by values that serve as guiding principles for action. Building on these foundations, *Our Way Forward* identifies four key values that direct practical change and ensure responses to family violence are culturally informed, community-led and focused on healing.

The key principles and priority areas are set out on the following pages, with further detail later in this document.

Vision

Aboriginal people and families experiencing violence, experience the justice system as culturally safe, and responsive to their needs, so that they are safe, can access preventative and rehabilitative healing programs, and live their best lives.

Goal

Improve Aboriginal family safety and reduce the number of Aboriginal people experiencing or using violence. This will be supported by collaboration with government agencies, Aboriginal communities and the wider community to enable Aboriginal-led, culturally safe, and trauma-informed place-based solutions.

Values



Priorities

Our Way Forward identifies three interconnected priorities that must be progressed together. They are not intended to be pursued in sequence or in isolation. Progress must occur across all three areas at the same time, to ensure Aboriginal people in contact with the justice system have immediate access to improved supports, and communities see safer outcomes.



Key concepts and terminology

These concepts provide the foundation for *Our Way Forward*. They place Aboriginal culture, experience and knowledge at the centre of how family violence is understood and addressed.

How family is defined and understood

Family is understood broadly through Aboriginal kinship, which shapes roles, responsibilities and obligations. This wider definition means the impact of violence, and the pathways to safety, extend beyond immediate households.

Family violence includes not just physical violence, but emotional, psychological, cultural, social and economic abuse. It recognises Aboriginal kinship systems extend beyond the nuclear family to include partners, siblings, extended family and carers.

The term '**people who use violence**' is preferred over 'perpetrators'. It acknowledges people who use violence often carry unresolved trauma linked to colonisation and intergenerational harm. The label 'perpetrator' is stigmatising and a barrier to seeking help.

The term '**victim – survivors**' or 'people who experience family violence' is preferred over 'victims', as it emphasises strength and resilience while recognising ongoing harm.

Culture, law and safety

Aboriginal Law: is a sophisticated system of governance that has guided Aboriginal societies for millennia. A system grounded in Aboriginal cultures, laws and contexts.

Culture: encompasses language, law, kinship, spirituality, and connection to Country. Aboriginal designed and led programs that strengthen connection to culture are central to the response to family violence.

Cultural safety: exists when Aboriginal people feel welcomed, respected, believed, as well as when culture is central to services. Non-Aboriginal organisations must achieve cultural safety by addressing racism, acknowledging colonisation, and respecting cultural protocols.

Cultural load: the expectation that Aboriginal staff carry responsibility for cultural representation and education within institutions.

Colonial load: the added burden of having to explain the ongoing impacts of dispossession, trauma and systemic racism to non-Aboriginal audiences.

Self-determination: the right of Aboriginal peoples to manage their own affairs and influence decisions that affect themselves. High-impact policy decisions about Aboriginal people must be made with Aboriginal people.

Trauma and healing

Trauma: a normal response to extreme stress that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope, affecting physical, emotional and psychological wellbeing. In Aboriginal contexts, trauma is compounded by colonisation and its legacies.

Intergenerational trauma: colonisation, dispossession and the forced removal of children severed Aboriginal families from their culture and extended families. The resulting grief and loss have been handed down across generations, leaving many people with unresolved trauma that continues to affect parenting, relationships and family safety today.

Lateral violence: arises from historical, cultural and social dynamics linked to colonisation and trauma. It can take the form of gossiping, jealousy, bullying, shaming, family feuding, organisational conflict or physical violence.

Holistic healing: healing is understood as physical, emotional, spiritual and cultural, not just addressing isolated incidents of violence. Whole-of-community, holistic approaches are central to Aboriginal family safety.

Approaches to change

Trauma informed practice: an approach to healing that is based on an understanding of, and responsiveness to, the impacts of trauma. Services must recognise how trauma shapes behaviour and design responses that avoid re-traumatising people. This approach emphasises safety, trust, and respect.

Intersectional approach: recognises family violence is intensified when multiple forms of disadvantage intersect (e.g. colonisation, systemic disadvantage, cultural dislocation, forced removal of children, and trauma.) Policy must account for these overlapping realities.

Child-centred practice: gives priority to the needs, rights and voices of children. Recognises that children may directly or indirectly experience violence, be witnesses, or users, of violence, and that they are often affected by the incarceration of caregivers.

Justice reinvestment: shifts resources away from punitive measures (such as prisons) and into Aboriginal-led, place-based initiatives addressing root causes of violence, including poverty, housing insecurity, discrimination and intergenerational trauma.

What we heard

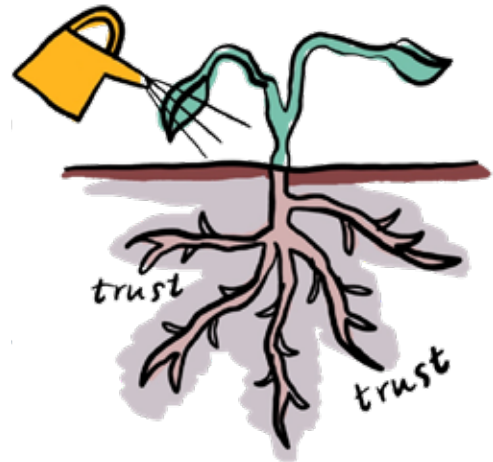
Justice responses and the realities of Aboriginal peoples' lives

1. Distrust in the Justice system:

- Linked to colonisation and past discriminatory policies.
- Family imprisonment, chronic health issues, mental health challenges, substance use and low literacy, make contact with the system harder.
- Experiences of feeling dehumanised, degraded and re-traumatised.

YOU NEED TO BUILD TRUST

WE DON'T TRUST ANYONE



2. Fear of reporting family violence:

- Fear of child removal, harsh treatment by police, deaths in custody, or unintended harm from restraining orders.
- Fear of retaliation from people who use violence or their families; belief that issues should stay within families.
- Interventions that separate parents, disconnect children from culture and Country, and weaken community bonds.



EFFECTS WHOLE FAMILY
ONE LITTLE THING
AND KIDS GONE

3. Barriers to rehabilitation:

- Mainstream programs don't fit cultural needs and are worsened by systemic racism and harmful language.
- Programs don't focus on healing or keeping families together; have long waiting lists, require high literacy, and lack follow-up after completion.
- Few programs outside prisons (especially for men), culturally safe options, or Aboriginal-led community programs.
- Language barriers, distrust in lawyers (due to poor communication), lack of legal rights knowledge, and issues with parole or risk assessments.



**RETURN TO COUNTRY
PROGRAMS PRIOR TO RELEASE.
TO SET PEOPLE UP FOR THEIR
RETURN THE THE COMMUNITY.**

4. Social and economic challenges:

- Remote locations limit access to programs.
- Poverty and unstable housing increase the chance of reoffending.
- Shame and stigma stop people from seeking formal help.



**TELL THEM THEY
HAVE SUPPORT ON
THE OUTSIDE BUT
THERE IS NOTHING.
START THE WHOLE
CYCLE AGAIN**

Understanding family violence in Aboriginal contexts



Understanding family violence in Aboriginal contexts

Family violence is understood differently across Western and Aboriginal contexts, shaped by distinct histories and lived experiences. These differences influence how violence is interpreted, the forms it takes, and the kinds of responses that are seen as effective.

Aboriginal communities are richly diverse, and no single perspective can capture the full spectrum of their experiences. The contrasts described here are broad themes that emerged during consultations. While these themes were commonly raised, it is important to recognise that local contexts vary significantly.

Western context	Theme
Aims to punish offenders, deter future violence, and uphold the law.	Objective of intervention
Seen as a product of patriarchal systems, where men use power and control over women, reinforced by unequal gender roles.	Causes of family violence
Typically defined as physical, emotional, sexual, and financial abuse, and coercive or controlling behaviour.	Forms of family violence
Relies on formal systems such as police, courts, prisons, and behaviour change programs focused on individual accountability.	Culturally acceptable responses
Usually framed as men causing harm and women being harmed, with women's use of violence often seen as self-defence.	Relationships between people involved
Historically male-dominated society. Social and family structures have limited women's equal participation in public life, and taboos exist around men showing care or emotion.	Roles of men and women
Rehabilitation is often constrained by fragmented services, long wait times, and a justice focus on individual blame rather than collective or systemic factors. These limitations reduce opportunities for sustained change.	Systemic and cultural constraints on rehabilitation
Emphasise deterrence and accountability through imprisonment, legal sanctions and behaviour change programs. Broader gender equality and women's empowerment initiatives also aim to address underlying causes and prevent future violence.	Opportunities to break the cycle

These perspectives are shaped by connections to Country, kinship, language, and community. They reflect the lived experiences of individuals whose identities are grounded in collective belonging.

The following differences help explain why past approaches have not always worked. Building family safety requires more than one tool in the toolbox. Effective responses must reflect Aboriginal perspectives alongside mainstream systems, with culture and healing at the centre.

Aboriginal context

Focuses on restoring safety, repairing harm, and rebuilding relationships within families and communities.

Rooted in colonisation, loss of land and culture, intergenerational trauma, structural racism, financial stress, and substance use as a coping mechanism.

Includes conventional, as well as community-specific forms such as lateral violence that emerge from internalised oppression rooted in colonisation and intergenerational trauma (bullying, gossiping, shaming), humbugging (demands for money with threats), and jealousy (jealousy-driven conflict).

Draws on culturally grounded approaches involving Elders, community leadership, On-Country programs, and family-based healing and mentoring.

Roles are less fixed: anyone can experience harm or use violence. People using violence often carry their own trauma and require support to break the cycle.

Men and women are regarded as different but equal. Both can care, lead, and express emotion. Family and group support allows women to raise children while participating in community life. These norms have been weakened by colonisation and social change.

Intergenerational trauma and deep mistrust of government systems continue to limit engagement with services. Many people fear child removal, imprisonment or mistreatment, and there is a shortage of culturally safe, community-led support. Language barriers, limited access, and chronic underfunding of locally designed programs further constrain opportunities for recovery and rehabilitation.

Change is most effective when it supports the whole person and restores cultural strength. Approaches grounded in trauma, grief and addiction recovery, together with strong family and cultural ties, create space for accountability through Elders, family and kin.

Aboriginal contexts and realities

Research and policy analysis, reinforced by what Aboriginal people shared in consultations, highlight the contexts that shape Aboriginal experiences of family violence.

Aboriginal people have long argued that mainstream family violence approaches do not match their social realities, do not align with their own understanding of the problem and do not provide responses that increase the safety of the community over the long term. This disconnect means that a justice response may be an option of last resort.

Developing a deep understanding of the contexts surrounding Aboriginal family violence is critical in changing the way responses are designed and delivered.

Drivers of family violence

Trauma is a major driver of Aboriginal family violence. It comes from colonisation, the forced removal of children during the Stolen Generations, and the disruption of Aboriginal Law, culture and kinship. These experiences left deep scars that are still carried by families and communities.

Trauma continues in the present through ongoing racism, child removals, poverty and incarceration. These layers of harm affect parenting, relationships and safety. Trauma can show up in grief, loss, shame, poor health, mental distress and disconnection from family or culture. Without safe ways to heal, these wounds can pass from one generation to the next.

Trauma is a major driver of Aboriginal family violence. It comes from colonisation, the forced removal of children during the Stolen Generations, and the disruption of Aboriginal Law, culture and kinship.

Alcohol and drugs are often used as a way to cope with the pain of trauma, discrimination and disadvantage. They can numb feelings of grief, stress and disconnection in the short term, but over time they can make family violence worse. Alcohol and drug use can intensify conflict, increase the risk of injury, and add to problems with health, employment and housing.

This cycle of trauma and substance use places heavy pressure on families, making it harder to find stability and safety. Many Aboriginal people stressed the importance of culturally safe services that deal with both trauma and alcohol and drug use together, rather than treating them as separate issues.

Racism and systemic discrimination increase the risks of family violence and make it harder to find help. This affects wellbeing, contributes to stress and trauma, and can push families into crisis. At the same time, many Aboriginal people do not feel safe turning to mainstream services because they are often experienced as discriminatory or culturally unsafe. This can lead to further harm and creates a major barrier to seeking support. Addressing racism and building culturally safe systems is essential if Aboriginal families are to feel confident reaching out for help.

Family dynamics and gender norms

Aboriginal family violence is also shaped by gender norms and family dynamics that differ from those assumed in Western models. Extended kinship responsibilities, cultural authority and family obligations influence how conflict, safety and accountability are understood. While women are most often those who experience violence, women may also use violence, sometimes in self-defence. Men can also be victim-survivors. Without an understanding of these dynamics, services risk misidentifying who most needs protection and who most needs support to change.

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Unique forms of violence

Family violence is not a single or uniform problem. In Aboriginal contexts, the ongoing impacts of colonisation, structural violence and systemic discrimination have given rise to forms of violence that are unique and require tailored responses. Recognising these differences is essential for designing effective justice approaches.

Aboriginal dispute resolution

Aboriginal Law has long provided systems to address wrongdoing. Physical punishment, when used traditionally, was controlled, proportionate and conducted according to cultural rules. Today, staff may encounter violence linked to dispute resolution, such as 'payback' or fights. Some practices are still regulated by Law, but in other cases retributive violence may occur outside cultural sanction and can cause serious harm.

Coercive control and situational violence

In mainstream contexts, family violence is often explained as coercive control – a pattern of behaviours used to dominate another person. In Aboriginal contexts, while power and control may exist, family violence is more often described as situational violence – arising in moments of conflict, stress, or trauma, rather than as a deliberate strategy of domination. Responses must reflect this distinction and focus on the underlying drivers of violence, including intergenerational trauma, cultural disconnection and substance use.

Jealousing

Jealousing is a term used in many Aboriginal communities to describe dynamics of jealousy where one or both partners provoke or respond to jealousy through conflict. It can escalate into physical fights and ongoing cycles of violence. Community members link jealousing to the history of colonisation, including the widespread sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women by non-Aboriginal men, which left Aboriginal men powerless to protect their partners. Jealousing also reflects trauma and fears of abandonment that continue to shape some relationships today.

Humbugging

Humbugging describes the persistent and often aggressive demands for money or resources from family members. While the reciprocal sharing of resources is an important cultural practice, poverty, disadvantage and substance use can distort this practice into exploitation. Humbugging can involve threats, harassment or violence if demands are resisted.

Family violence restraining orders

Family violence restraining orders (FVROs) are intended to protect victim-survivors, but in some Aboriginal contexts they may be misused. Participants in consultations explained that FVROs can sometimes be taken out as a form of control or retaliation, particularly in situations involving jealousing. This can result in unintended harms, such as imprisonment, when conditions are breached. Responses must account for this complexity and ensure FVROs are not weaponised in ways that increase risks to Aboriginal families.

Culture, Law and self-determination

For tens of thousands of years, Aboriginal families and communities were kept safe through Aboriginal Law, culture and kinship systems. These systems provided roles, responsibilities and rules that maintained order, protected children and guided relationships. Colonisation deliberately undermined these foundations, fracturing kinship networks, banning cultural practices and weakening the authority of Law. This disruption continues to affect family safety today.

Culture and identity are central to healing. Programs strengthening connection to culture, Law and Country help restore balance, build resilience and provide pathways out of violence. Community consultations highlighted the need for whole-of-family approaches, led by Elders and grounded in cultural practices, to address trauma and promote safety.

Self-determination is a fundamental right. It means Aboriginal people and communities must be able to shape decisions about the policies, programs and services affecting their lives. Embedding Aboriginal authority, cultural leadership and shared decision-making within justice and family safety responses is essential for sustainable change.

Placing culture, Law and self-determination at the centre makes responses effective and respectful of Aboriginal people's rights, worldviews and aspirations for safer families.

Programs that strengthen connection to culture, Law and Country help restore balance, build resilience and provide pathways out of violence.

The role of healing

Healing is central to breaking cycles of violence and trauma. In Aboriginal contexts, healing is holistic, bringing together physical, emotional, spiritual, psychological and social wellbeing. It means restoring harmony, reconnecting with culture, Law and Country, and strengthening identity and belonging.

Community voices in the consultations emphasised that family itself can be a source of healing. Whole-of-family approaches, supported by Elders, cultural practices and community-controlled services, are vital. Culturally safe spaces, healing circles, on-Country programs and other Aboriginal-informed initiatives provide pathways for individuals and families to process hurt, rebuild relationships and move forward safely.

A healing lens should inform all levels of the system, from prevention and early intervention, to rehabilitation, reintegration and long-term community recovery. Healing is not only about addressing harm, but also about building resilience, restoring cultural strength and enabling Aboriginal self-determination in creating safer futures.



Unique barriers to reporting family violence

Family violence is significantly under-reported in Aboriginal communities. Research shows around 90 per cent of violence against Aboriginal women, are never formally reported.

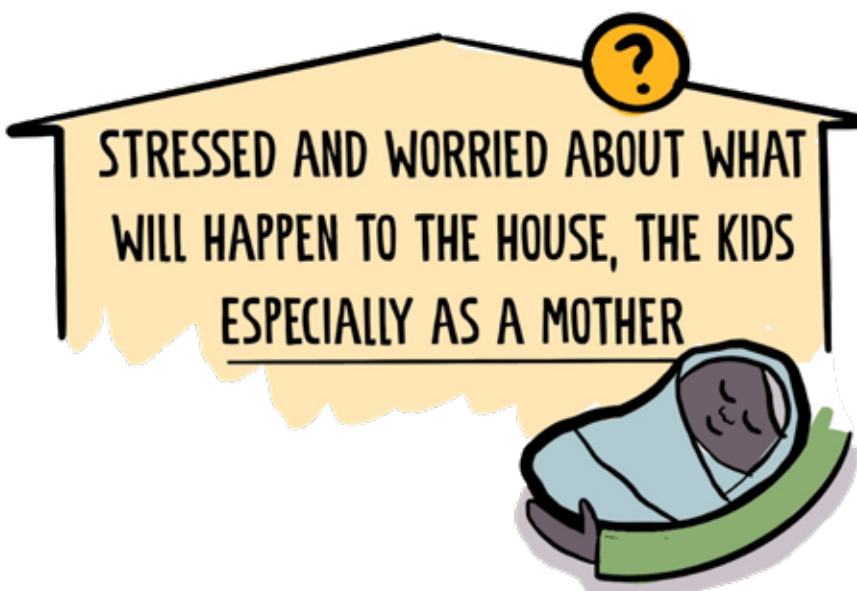
Many Aboriginal families want violence to stop but do not feel safe turning to mainstream services. Past experiences of discrimination, punitive system responses and interventions by services shape expectations of what will happen if help is sought. As a result, formal reporting is often a last resort.

Barriers include:

- Wanting safety without triggering a full Western justice response, and having limited Aboriginal-led, place-based alternatives.
- Fears about child protection involvement, shaped by past experiences of intervention and the impact of mandatory reporting requirements within certain services.
- Experiences of racism or culturally unsafe treatment within services.
- Concerns about unsafe or traumatic encounters with police.
- Misidentification of victim-survivors as offenders, including in cases of defensive violence.
- Fear of retaliation within community.
- The likelihood of further incarcerating Aboriginal men can create pressure within families and communities not to report violence.
- Concerns about confidentiality and whether services will respect victim-survivors' wishes.
- Limited access to information about legal rights and support options.
- Practical difficulties such as lack of transport or phone access, especially in remote areas.
- Risk of losing housing, especially in social or community-controlled settings.
- Poverty, social isolation and embarrassment.

These barriers make clear that mainstream systems alone cannot provide safety. Building trust requires culturally safe, community-led pathways that Aboriginal families feel confident to use.

When victim-survivors call for help, they are not calling to activate a long, hostile criminal proceeding. They are usually calling to make something happen immediately.



Aboriginal children and young people

Children and young people are often the most affected by family violence. They may experience violence directly, witness it in their homes, or become users of violence themselves. When home is unsafe and no safe alternatives exist, children are left more vulnerable, both to further harm and to policing on the streets.

Exposure to family violence in childhood has serious and lasting consequences. It affects emotional regulation, learning, relationships and health. It increases the risk of depression, anxiety, substance use, self-harm, and suicide. In Western Australia, family violence is a factor in more than 70 per cent of cases where an Aboriginal young person has died by suicide.

Family violence is also the leading reason Aboriginal children enter the child protection system, resulting in being significantly over-represented in out-of-home care. Once in the system, children may face further disconnection from family, culture and Country, compounding the original harm.

Neurodevelopmental needs are also a contributing factor. Rates of acquired brain injuries (ABI) and Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) are disproportionately high in Aboriginal youth justice populations. Behaviours associated with FASD, such as impulsivity, explosive outbursts, vulnerability to social influences are often misinterpreted and can lead to escalated system responses.

Children and young people who use violence, need therapeutic services and programs that are designed specifically to meet their needs. Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) know what works and have the knowledge and capacity to design and deliver culturally safe, place-based programs that could fill this gap.

Supporting Aboriginal children and young people means creating safe places to go when home is unsafe, ensuring access to therapeutic and healing programs, and resourcing ACCOs to lead solutions. Their wellbeing is central to breaking cycles of violence and building safer families for the future.



Voices from consultations

“ During the time spent on the hill [Banksia Hill Detention Centre], learning about the importance of supporting Aboriginal women and ending the violence towards them, the young people opened up and spoke freely on why it was important to them.

With the young people mentioning that it is important because it is our Indigenous women that keep our culture strong, from providing for our families present and future, to the cultural safety they provide. The boys stated that without protecting our Indigenous women, the future of us Indigenous people are in danger.

The young people stated that it was very important to have the researchers come to Banksia Hill to discuss this as it gave them a sense of someone caring for the future of Indigenous women and the cultural safety we are trying to install in our mob. ”

Our next steps: putting the strategy into practice



What our values mean



Truth-telling

Acknowledge the full history of colonisation and its enduring impacts on Aboriginal people. Within the context of family violence, this value means making space for Aboriginal communities to frame the problem as they see it, identify the root causes, and determine appropriate responses consistent with their laws and cultures.

What this means for:

Service design	Those who access services	Department of Justice
<p>Acknowledge trauma: Recognise the impacts of colonisation and resulting intergenerational trauma as a key driver of family violence. Acknowledge that the non-Aboriginal community shares responsibility for truth-telling and actively addressing racism and discrimination.</p>	<p>Safe spaces: Individuals have access to safe spaces to share their stories about their lived experiences.</p>	<p>Support truth-telling: Promote truth-telling within the justice system and fund workplace initiatives to build staff capability - both to respond appropriately, and to ensure workforce sustainability.</p>
<p>Privilege Aboriginal worldviews: Ensure design, delivery, and evaluation of all services is informed by Aboriginal knowledge and ways of working, with Aboriginal voices centred and respected.</p>	<p>Validation: Experiences of family violence, racism, and trauma are heard, believed, and validated.</p>	<p>Embed self-determination and cultural authority: Make Aboriginal people partners in decisions from design to implementation, and recognise Aboriginal Law, culture and knowledge as central to healing from family violence.</p>
<p>Recognise resilience and create safety for healing: Services acknowledge and build upon the strengths and resilience of Aboriginal people while providing safety to share stories, acknowledge trauma, and heal.</p>	<p>Build resilience: Individuals are supported in developing resilience against the ongoing impacts of racism and systemic discrimination.</p>	<p>Invest in Aboriginal-led healing: Prioritise long-term investment in place-based healing approaches that are designed, led, and delivered by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.</p>



Culture and identity at the centre

Placing culture and identity at the centre recognises that Aboriginal cultures, with their values, Laws, kinship systems, and spiritual connections to Country, are a primary source of strength and safety for families. A strong cultural identity links individuals to family, community, and Country, clarifying roles and responsibilities. Strengthening cultural identity is not an adjunct to family safety, but a critical pathway to regulating behaviour, fostering respect, and achieving lasting wellbeing.

What this means for:

Service design	Those who access services	Department of Justice
<p>Place-based and Aboriginal-led: Services are community-owned and Aboriginal-led; from design, through to development, delivery, and evaluation.</p>	<p>Elders as leaders: Elders are recognised as central to healing and prevention.</p>	<p>Acknowledge culture's role in safety: Recognise culture as fundamental to Aboriginal family safety and healing.</p>
<p>Strengthen cultural connections: Build ties to family, language and Law, supporting holistic healing on Country.</p>	<p>Reinforce cultural identity: Support individuals to strengthen culture, identity and belonging.</p>	<p>Commit to self-determination: Support Aboriginal-led approaches to justice and family safety.</p>
<p>Whole-of-family approach: Provide whole of family services where it is safe to do so, avoiding stigmatising labels.</p>	<p>Access cultural healing: Enable access to cultural healers and recognised programs.</p>	<p>Prioritise holistic programs: Fund culturally grounded, place-based initiatives directed through appropriate Aboriginal governance.</p>
<p>Value the wisdom of Elders: Integrate Elders' knowledge and authority into all aspects of design and delivery.</p>	<p>Gender-specific services: Distinct services for men and women, recognising gender roles in practice.</p>	<p>Remove systemic barriers: Eliminate barriers that block ACCOs or individuals from engaging in cultural healing.</p>



Aboriginal-led governance and cultural leadership

Elders and cultural leaders hold the knowledge of what works for communities. Aboriginal leadership should be respected and resourced.

What this means for:

Service design	Those who access services	Department of Justice
<p>Embed Aboriginal governance: Programs are governed by Aboriginal-led structures with community authority in decision-making.</p>	<p>Respected as knowledge holders: Individuals are respected as knowledge holders about their culture and needs.</p>	<p>System-wide Aboriginal governance: Aboriginal structures guide all stages of policy and service cycles.</p>
<p>Privilege Aboriginal providers: Funding and delivery prioritise Aboriginal service providers, underpinned by Aboriginal worldviews.</p>	<p>Voice in priorities: Community members shape justice-related priorities for their own communities.</p>	<p>Prioritise Aboriginal funding: Shift funding from mainstream to Aboriginal organisations for design, delivery and evaluation.</p>
<p>Offer genuine choice: Services respect local decision-making and cultural protocols, providing culturally appropriate options.</p>	<p>Choice in services: Families select supports that best meet their needs, strengthening empowerment and recovery.</p>	<p>Community-defined success: Success is measured by Aboriginal communities, not external metrics.</p>
<p>Co-design services: Services are co-designed with communities at the centre.</p>	<p>Culturally safe and empowered: People feel safe, supported and empowered in their recovery.</p>	<p>Sustain effective approaches: Secure long-term funding for approaches proven to work locally.</p>



Safety, trust and empowerment

Aboriginal people need to feel safe, and to trust those providing programs and services. Culturally safe approaches must include holistic and diverse responses that cater for people of all ages, and support Aboriginal people to have a strong connection to culture and identity.

What this means for:

Service design	Those who access services	Department of Justice
<p>Embed cultural safety: Services consider cultural safety at every stage of service design, delivery and evaluation.</p>	<p>Safe and supported: Families, children and youth thrive when they feel safe, supported and culturally secure.</p>	<p>Fund place-based initiatives: Prioritise Aboriginal-led, community-based centres for holistic women's, men's and youth wellbeing, safety and rehabilitation.</p>
<p>Aboriginal-led governance: Services are designed and governed by Aboriginal people, with Elders and cultural leaders central to decision-making.</p>	<p>Clear access: People know what services exist and how to reach them.</p>	<p>Evaluate effectively: Resource evaluations that measure cultural safety and effectiveness of programs.</p>
<p>Support cultural connection: Provide access to cultural programs, events and activities, and include whole-of-family responses.</p>	<p>Safe spaces: Children and youth have access to culturally and physically safe places, mentors, role models and meeting places for community business.</p>	<p>Support long-term healing: Recognise recovery, behavioural change and rehabilitation take time, requiring flexible, sustained responses.</p>
<p>Prioritise safety: Foundational needs for safety, housing and food are met, with the safety of children non-negotiable.</p>	<p>Healing for all: People who use family violence are supported in healing, recognising many are also victims.</p>	<p>Build the Aboriginal workforce: Invest in workforce capacity and retention, addressing vicarious trauma, cultural and colonial load.</p>

What our priorities mean

1

Systems transformation

The Department will operate in ways that are culturally informed, trauma-informed and responsive to the needs of Aboriginal families experiencing violence. This means reshaping systems and services to reflect Aboriginal realities, to recognise the impacts of colonisation, the Stolen Generation and intergenerational trauma.

Transformation requires Aboriginal-led, holistic and place-based approaches that respect the diversity of Aboriginal communities. It also requires truth-telling, genuine local decision-making and, where necessary, legislative or structural reform to enable new and culturally appropriate pathways for safety and accountability.

Holistic and therapeutic programs can play a powerful role in reducing family violence, even if they are not formally labelled as “family violence” or “behaviour change” programs. Programs that strengthen cultural identity, support healing from trauma, reduce stress and help families reconnect in safe and respectful ways can make a real difference. When people feel connected to culture, community, and each other, they’re more likely to build strong, healthy relationships.

Principles

- Responses must be Aboriginal-led, holistic and trauma-informed, addressing the complex needs of Aboriginal people, including children and young people who experience or use violence.
- Services must respond to the racism and intergenerational trauma that contribute to family violence, suicide and substance use.
- Aboriginal knowledge and wisdom must be respected and centred, with Aboriginal people, including young people, leading the design of justice responses.
- Appropriate responses may require legislative or structural change to recognise alternative ways of supporting Aboriginal people.
- Solutions must reflect the diversity of Aboriginal families and communities, encouraging Aboriginal-led local decision-making.
- Truth-telling and hearing all sides of the story are essential to accountability and change.
- Aboriginal peoples strong connection to culture and identity must be recognised and valued.

2

Safety for people who experience violence

Safety in this context goes beyond protection from physical harm; it means being culturally, emotionally and spiritually safe, and supported to live well.

This priority recognises that many Aboriginal people face barriers when seeking help. Building safety means creating culturally safe pathways to support, strengthening families, and ensuring access to services that understand the realities of Aboriginal life. Safety grows from trust, connection to culture and Country, and the ability to thrive within family and community.

Principles

- Support Aboriginal people (including children/young people) and their families to access culturally therapeutic healing.
- Support Aboriginal children/young people (including witnesses) to understand and heal from violence via culturally informed services, strengthening families and breaking cycles.
- Increase access to Departmental support and linkage to culturally safe community/health services.
- Support people who experience violence to reduce future risk of experiencing or using violence.

3

Rehabilitation for people who use violence

Breaking cycles of harm requires supporting healing and rehabilitation for those who use violence. Many Aboriginal people who use violence are themselves living with trauma, grief and disadvantage.

Culturally informed rehabilitation focuses on restoring balance, building accountability and strengthening family and community connections. Whole-of-family and community-led approaches create opportunities for healing that prevent future violence and support wellbeing for everyone affected.

Principles

- Recognise that Aboriginal people/young people who use violence often experienced violence and live with trauma.
- Recognise Aboriginal Law and culture alongside Australian law for culturally informed accountability.
- Support healing in culturally therapeutic ways.
- Support Aboriginal children/young people who use violence to understand drivers and heal via culturally informed services.
- Address underlying contributors (poverty, housing, alcohol and other substance abuse, etc.) to reduce future risk of using/experiencing violence.
- Tailor programs for men and women (including young people) who use violence.
- Programs must be informed by Aboriginal people who experience violence and family needs.

Policy context

Our Way Forward is shaped by a wide-ranging policy ecosystem which sets the mandate for action and establish the standards the Department of Justice must meet in responding to family violence affecting Aboriginal people.

The diagram below shows the key policies and frameworks that make up the wider ecosystem of obligations and commitments connected to this document.



Policy overview

International

International agreements establish universal standards for safety, dignity and human rights. They recognise family violence as a violation of fundamental rights and affirm the rights of Indigenous peoples to self-determination, cultural preservation and community-led priorities. These agreements provide the global foundation for this document.

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) – affirms the rights of Indigenous peoples to culture, self-determination, and safety from violence.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR) – sets minimum human rights standards of dignity and equality for all people.

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) – protects life, liberty, and security, requiring justice responses that support rehabilitation.

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) – links safety to health, housing, and cultural participation.

International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) – safeguard children and require action against racial discrimination and violence.

National

National frameworks and strategies translate international commitments into an Australian context. They set shared national goals for preventing family violence and improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. These national directions guide the development of state and territory strategies.

National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032 – sets Australia's 10-year vision for ending gender based violence.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan (2023-2025) & First Action Family Safety Plan 2023-2027 – commit to Aboriginal-led, self-determined approaches.

National Agreement on Closing the Gap – binds governments to ensure Aboriginal families and households are safe.

State Government

Western Australian strategies contextualise national priorities for the state. They commit the whole public sector to Aboriginal empowerment, cross-government Aboriginal family safety, and system reforms that prioritise Aboriginal-led solutions.

Path to Safety 2020-2030 – first required an Aboriginal-specific family safety strategy.

State Aboriginal Family Safety Strategy 2022-2032 – cross government initiative that drives Aboriginal-led, community-controlled solutions anchored in culture.

Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy 2021-2029 – commits to shared decision-making and self-determination.

WA Closing the Gap Implementation Plan 2023-2025 – reinforces collective action to achieve safer Aboriginal lives.

System Reform Plan 2024-2029 – strengthens Aboriginal-led responses to family and domestic violence.

Department of Justice

The Department's frameworks provide the direct mandate for *Our Way Forward* by requiring the Department to co-design an Aboriginal Family Safety Strategy and embed it into family and domestic violence responses.

DoJ Family and Domestic Violence Strategic Framework 2022-2025 – commits the Department to its own Aboriginal Family Safety Strategy.

DOJ Reconciliation Action Plan 2025 - 2027 (Deliverable 13.5) – requires the Department to implement *Our Way Forward*.

Implementation and accountability

Governance

An appropriate governance model will be developed to provide oversight of the delivery of *Our Way Forward*. The governance model will take into account existing governance mechanisms, ensuring governance of *Our Way Forward* is Aboriginal-led, and local decision-making structures are prioritised.

Monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation will form a key part of implementing the Strategy. Progress towards the Strategy's vision and goals will be tracked through a combination of internal oversight and Aboriginal-led evaluation approaches. This will include:


- Relevant actions from *Our Way Forward* are to be linked to the Department's Family and Domestic Violence (FDV) Steering Committee.
- Aboriginal led independent evaluation together with the Western Australian Office of Crime Statistics and Research (WACSAR) which embeds Indigenous Data Sovereignty Principles
- Process evaluation of implementation.
- Aboriginal designed outcome measures, based on Indigenous Data Sovereignty Principles.



Contacts

Family Violence Services (Court Support Services):


A free and voluntary service for family violence victims in the court system.

 1800 600 476

 FamilyViolenceService@justice.wa.gov.au

Victim Support Service:


A voluntary and free service assisting victims of crime with court matters.

 61 8 9425 2850 or 1800 818 988

 VictimSupportService@justice.wa.gov.au

Child Witness Service:


A voluntary and free service available to children under 18 years of age who are to give evidence to a court.

 61 8 9425 2850 or 1800 818 988

 ChildWitnessService@justice.wa.gov.au

Office of the Commissioner for Victims of Crime

Commissioner for Victims of Crime

 1800 214 655 (general enquiries only. 8.30 am to 4.30 pm)

 victims@justice.wa.gov.au

Aboriginal Interpreting WA:

Provides interpreting and translation services to clients anywhere in Australia offering registered, trained and supported interpreters in over 40 WA Aboriginal languages. The service operates across all fields, including justice matters.

 Freecall on 1800 330 331

 aiwaac.org.au

 bookings@aiwaac.org.au

Information

Research: the development of *Our Way Forward* was informed by a substantial body of literature, in addition to stakeholder engagement and consultation. If you'd like to know more, please contact the Department of Justice by emailing afss@justice.wa.gov.au

Accessibility: this publication is available in alternative formats for people with a disability or language translation needs, on request to the Department of Justice by emailing afss@justice.wa.gov.au



