

GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE No. 2

Wednesday 15 October 2008

Examination of proposed expenditure for the portfolio area

WOMEN

The Committee met at 2.00 p.m.

MEMBERS

The Hon. R. M. Parker (Chair)

The Hon. M. A. Ficarra
The Hon. K. F. Griffin
Reverend the Hon. G. K. M. Moyes

Ms L. Rhiannon
The Hon. C. M. Robertson
The Hon. H. M. Westwood

PRESENT

The Hon. V. H. Firth, *Minister for Education and Training, and Minister for Women*

Department of Premier and Cabinet

Ms G. Ferguson, *Director, Office for Women's Policy*

Dr A. Shehadie, *Manager, Violence Prevention Coordination Unit, Office for Women's Policy, Department of Premier and Cabinet*

CORRECTIONS TO TRANSCRIPT OF COMMITTEE PROCEEDINGS

Corrections should be marked on a photocopy of the proof and forwarded to:

**Budget Estimates secretariat
Room 812
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000**

CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the budget estimates for 2008-09 by General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2. I welcome the Minister and departmental officials. Most of the media are aware that only members of the Committee and witnesses may be filmed or recorded and that people in the public gallery should not be the primary focus of any filming or photographs. Messages may be passed to departmental staff by Committee staff. Please could everybody turn off their mobile phones and keep them away from the microphones. It should be noted that the Hon. Kayee Griffin is substituting for the Hon. Greg Donnelly and the Hon. Helen Westwood is substituting for the Hon. Tony Catanzariti.

GILLIAN FERGUSON, Director, Office for Women's Policy, Department of Premier and Cabinet, and

ALEXANDRA SHEHADIE, Manager, Violence Prevention Coordination Unit, Office for Women's Policy, Department of Premier and Cabinet, affirmed and examined:

CHAIR: Minister, I want to ask you some questions firstly in relation to domestic violence. Could you tell us the number of women and children who have died as a result of domestic violence particularly in the years 2006-07 and 2007-08? You could take that on notice if you like.

Ms VERITY FIRTH: I think we are going to have to take that question on notice to find out the specific number. I can tell where this is going: I presume we are now about to talk about domestic violence homicide review processes?

CHAIR: If you would like to tell us your view on the homicide review team proposal and what representations you have made to the Premier about enacting a homicide review team and getting some proper statistics and data.

Ms VERITY FIRTH: I will respond to that and I will also respond in terms of what is happening at the Federal level too because there are some interesting things happening there. We are obviously all shocked and saddened by any domestic and family violence related homicides. No-one could fail to be moved by the tragic deaths of women and children in Cowra and Bega earlier this year as well as other deaths that have occurred in recent times. I am aware that there have been recent calls for the Government to establish a domestic homicide review process. I am also aware that the Domestic Violence Committee Coalition organised a forum on this issue on 18 September. I regret I was unable to attend, but I did ensure that a senior representative from our new Violence Prevention Coordination Unit [VPCU] in the Office for Women's Policy was present.

It is a very complex issue that demands careful consideration. We all recognise the tragedy of domestic violence related fatalities. The Government will continue to rigorously examine options for the prevention of domestic and family violence. In fact, what I will take you through later on in this process is our new domestic violence policy program in the unit we have set up because I think you will be very interested in that. We are committed to ensuring that it develops and implements the right options, including those that can demonstrate long-term positive outcomes for women and children. The new Violence Prevention Coordination Unit, which is now located in the New South Wales Office for Women's Policy, Department of Premier and Cabinet, has begun work on the development of a whole-of-government strategic framework, and that is where this is heading. It is going to provide a blueprint for responses to domestic and family violence.

CHAIR: Minister, I do not want to be rude and interrupt but I guess the Government will possibly give you some time to expand at length on those details. I have limited time. I am aware of what the Government is doing but I am specifically interested in just some cold details in terms of what you have done about discussing it with the director general and the Premier and when you propose to have a homicide review team up and running.

Ms VERITY FIRTH: What I am trying to say is that in the developing of this strategic framework what we are seeking, and have actively sought, is data from the New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research [BOCSAR] and the Australian Institute of Criminology on trends and patterns in relation to domestic violence related assaults and homicides. That is what we are doing now in the preparation of this framework. Once received, this data, as well as information from a range of other sources, will be a part of this process. This framework is currently in consultation and then we will go out to proper public consultation in the 16 days of activism against violence later on this year. That is when we are first going to be able to properly be informed of best practice policies and programs in relation to domestic violence related homicides.

In relation to how we think that is going to fit into the broader relationship with the Commonwealth, you will know that the Commonwealth is also closely examining the issue of domestic violence related homicide. It is investing in research focused on domestic violence related homicides through the National Homicide Monitoring Program to inform interventions that will protect women and children. The Commonwealth has boosted Australian Institute of Criminology funding to enhance the National Homicide Monitoring Program. I understand that work is progressing to identify individual and situational risk factors associated with domestic violence related homicides and identify early intervention and prevention strategies from high-risk individuals and communities, including Aboriginal communities. I look forward to the outcomes of this research and anticipate that it will provide important information for the New South Wales Government's domestic and family violence strategic framework and the way that we then deal with domestic violence related homicide.

CHAIR: You may or may not know this answer, but you can take the question on notice. How many women, following the granting of an apprehended violence order, have been subsequently assaulted or harmed by the perpetrator?

Ms VERITY FIRTH: I will take that question on notice, unless Dr Shehadie has anything to add.

Dr SHEHADIE: I will have to take that question on notice.

CHAIR: What is the Government actively doing to reduce that figure?

Ms VERITY FIRTH: I can take the Committee through some of that with regard to the sexual assault law reform. Do members want to hear about that now?

CHAIR: I am aware of sexual assault law reform. We will ask more questions about that.

Ms VERITY FIRTH: We are also streamlining process for apprehended violence orders and the provision of witness evidence to make it easier for victims. That involves the use of things such as closed circuit television and so forth. I am happy to take the Committee through that if members would like that detail.

CHAIR: I am aware of the restructure of the Violence Against Women Program, or its removal and the subsequent restructure. Is the Office for Women the lead agency with regard to domestic violence?

Ms VERITY FIRTH: Yes. The new structure enables us to have a Violence Prevention Coordination Unit at the heart of government. We wanted that partly because it had been called for for many years by experts in the field. As all of us know, dealing with domestic violence involves a range of government agencies working from the criminal justice perspective and policing all the way through to support, social services, housing and so forth. We need a central coordination body that is able to engage with both agencies and the non-government sector to better align criminal justice and human service responses so that women and families who experience, or who at risk of experiencing, domestic and family violence have the best possible services and supports. Within our restructure we have a central coordination that is working on the whole-of-government framework. We also have people working in the field. Again, I can go through this.

CHAIR: No, I understand it fairly well. How much of the total \$16.8 million budget for dealing with domestic violence is available to the Office for Women?

Ms VERITY FIRTH: We do not get much from the women's budget for the Violence Prevention Coordination Unit because it has just three positions. The unit is organising the strategic framework. The bulk of the increased funding in our budget goes in grants to the non-government organisations dealing with domestic violence, and specifically to Aboriginal organisations dealing with domestic violence. The budget was increased from \$2.4 million to \$5.3 million in 2008-09. The vast majority of that was the \$2.9 million worth of new grants for non-government organisations. The \$16.8 million referred to was then directed to the five statewide positions and the nine regional coordinator positions. Of course, on top of that were the 35 extra domestic violence liaison officers in the Police Force and five specialist domestic violence liaison officers in the Police Force head office.

CHAIR: How effective has it been to remove the regional Violence Against Women Program coordinators? Many questions have been asked about that in my region. How can you justify taking the regional coordinators out of that program?

Ms VERITY FIRTH: Firstly, there is no loss of on-the-ground services. In fact, this restructure will increase on-the-ground services, including those provided by the 35 additional domestic violence liaison officers. Most importantly, we now have nine regional coordinator positions in the Police Force. These are important because those positions have greater bureaucratic status. They are in the heart of the Police Force, which is where we need coordination. I am not being critical, but sometimes we also need some cultural changes, although we are getting better at that. These positions are very senior and they report only to the regional commander. Those officers will coordinate criminal justice responses with social services responses or other human agency responses. I do not believe that this has resulted in less on-the-ground access for people suffering from family violence. In fact, we have enhanced that. We have also provided five statewide coordinator positions.

CHAIR: I understand the structure.

Ms VERITY FIRTH: My advice is that, since the abolition of the Violence Against Women Specialist Unit, five former senior regional strategic violence prevention officers—the positions the member has been talking about—have been appointed to the new more senior police regional coordinator positions.

CHAIR: I understand the restructure. I want to know how that has translated into a reduction in real terms of violence against women, and particularly domestic violence.

Ms VERITY FIRTH: We can start at the beginning about why—

CHAIR: I do not want to do that. I understand the changes that have been made and the structure. I want to know whether you can demonstrate how that has worked. I want the statistics.

Ms VERITY FIRTH: Firstly, there are significantly more resources on the ground. That is the first thing. Secondly, there are significantly more resources for the non-government organisations that provide services to these women.

CHAIR: Can you demonstrate any reduction in violence against women and domestic violence statistics as a result of the restructure?

Ms VERITY FIRTH: I appreciate the environment we are in. However, that is a difficult ask given that the new funding was allocated only about six months ago. The point is that there are significant new resources, significantly more domestic violence liaison officers on the ground and significant numbers of people working in senior positions in the Police Force. The five statewide coordinator positions that the Chair glossed over are significant because those officers are delivering to the rest of the State programs that in the past were delivered only to key little areas because they were lucky to have someone who was interested in that program. The Staying Home Leaving Violence program is brilliant. It is all about forcing the perpetrator to leave the home.

CHAIR: Minister—

Ms VERITY FIRTH: Listen to me. It is worth saying this. This was at two locations in the State. We are providing the resources to run that out to 18 locations.

CHAIR: I understand that. Minister, when the Government members have an opportunity to ask questions, you will be able to speak at length and glowingly about those programs. The specific questions are about actual deliverable results and meeting objectives.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: I refer to the point about cultural change. We want to know that this restructure will effectively reduce domestic violence. What did you mean by the "cultural change"?

Ms VERITY FIRTH: I have regional consultations with women around the State. When we hold our regional Cabinet meetings I always have consultations with women as well. One of the issues that is raised with me by women, especially in regional and rural areas, is that often domestic violence liaison officers tend to be the most junior police officers in the area. That is not necessarily a bad thing. They are often very good at their job and dedicated to their task. However, it is important that the people who are in charge of domestic violence policy and domestic violence criminal justice response are senior officers. That is what we are trying to do.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: When will the first review of the effectiveness of the restructuring be conducted?

Ms VERITY FIRTH: I will take that question on notice.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: Will it be an independent review? We all want to achieve the best result for women.

Ms VERITY FIRTH: We will take that question on notice. I do not think there is a statutory time frame for a review. The reason I was getting passionate is that I believe this will work. It is significantly about providing status to the people who run this policy and proper coordination between agencies.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: With regard to violence, bullying and harassment of women in our public sector agencies—plenty of members have had instances where this has been brought to our attention—what are you doing to work with the public sector agencies to make sure that this is minimised?

Ms VERITY FIRTH: Harassment against women in public sector agencies?

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: Yes, bullying and harassment. We have just had a public inquiry into bullying and harassment in the Ambulance Service. Part of that involves women, but it is across all public sector agencies. What are you doing to overcome that?

Ms VERITY FIRTH: You are right. The New South Wales public sector, as one of the largest employers in Australia, has a significant amount of women's representation. In fact, it has reached a record 60 per cent. I just released a new resource called Making the Public Sector Work Better for Women. It is a sector-wide women's employment and development strategy to improve women's improvement, development and most specifically retention, which I think probably goes to your point. Intimidation and bullying in the workplace is not just a women's issue. If managers in the workplace are intimidating and bullying their staff, that is a significant workplace issue and, if there is any sense that that is happening because of discrimination based on sex, that is illegal. So, my answer to that would be that we have pretty strict processes already in the public service for dealing with these sorts of issues.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: With all due respect, Minister, it has been occurring for years and years in the Ambulance Service and we will soon be tabling the report on that. It occurs, it is still occurring. My question was how effective do you believe that your office has been in reducing that and bringing to the attention of senior managers that it is not to be tolerated and what procedures they have in place?

Ms VERITY FIRTH: The source of resources I am talking about, Making the Public Sector Work Better for Women, is more about that. It is about making the public sector attractive for women to work in, to make sure they are treated equally, that they are not discriminated against, and also that they have career pathways after they give birth to children and have proper parental leave processes, and so forth. We always had an active response to make sure our workplaces are acceptable and that illegal behaviour is not happening there. It seems to be working. We are focusing specifically on women's representation in non-traditional occupations. It is a bit of the critical mass issue: The more women you get into positions, especially when they are male dominated, the culture tends to change. So, it is also about attracting women into those sorts of positions as well. I think the public sector is better placed for women to work.

Ms LEE RHIANNON: In May last year the Ombudsman recommended that New South Wales Police adopt the primary aggressor policy recommended in the Redfern Legal Centre report. To date this has been ignored by police and the Government overall. Are you planning on implementing this or responding to the Ombudsman's recommendation with regard to why you are not implementing it?

Ms VERITY FIRTH: That is a matter, obviously, for the Minister for Police. I am prepared to let the Committee know that I have been making representations to the Minister for Police on that issue and also met with the Redfern Legal Centre on that issue. Ultimately, that will be a decision for the Minister for Police.

Ms LEE RHIANNON: So you have recommended that it should be adopted?

Ms VERITY FIRTH: I made representations to that effect.

Ms LEE RHIANNON: In May this year there was quite a stand-off between the Attorney General, Mr Hatzistergos, and Don Weatherburn about the interpretation of crime statistics. You may remember that Mr Weatherburn said that the bureau's report into a trial for guilty pleas in domestic violence cases had not shown the levels of success in Campbelltown and Wagga Wagga courts. He stated at the time that the Minister had exaggerated the results. Can you tell us your interpretation of those figures and how you think that trial is going?

Ms VERITY FIRTH: I know it is a trial that we believe is good, good enough to be given more funding in the latest round of our policy, in the review of our Violence Prevention Coordination Unit and the new funding we have rolled out. I may cross to Alexandra Shehadie to see if she has anything to add on that?

Dr SHEHADIE: I have to take part of your question on notice and get back to you, but in that evaluation a number of issues were raised. I know the participants were happy with the process themselves, but there are other issues I will have to get back to the Committee on.

Ms LEE RHIANNON: So, you are taking on notice, as well as what you have said, giving the Committee the Minister's evaluation if the program is successful in terms of numbers? Had there been more guilty pleas in the trial? I just want to clarify that.

Ms VERITY FIRTH: Yes, that is all right.

Ms LEE RHIANNON: Back in 2004 I think we were all surprised when the New South Wales Department of Women was effectively abolished and taken into the Premier's Department. We remember the arguments that were given for that—it was elevating women's issues—but I am sure you are aware that many people were disappointed because there was a downgrading in the staff, the budget, the grants program, et cetera. Now we have a new Premier who has stated that he leads a new government. Can we look forward to an upgrading of women's issues in the New South Wales Government, and will the New South Wales Department of Women be restored?

Ms VERITY FIRTH: There are no plans I am aware of. You will need to talk to the Premier about what he plans to do. There are no plans I am aware of to restore a separate Department of Women. I will say that I believe the location of the Office for Women's Policy in the Department of Premier and Cabinet has worked well. It has enabled us to be at the heart of government. I know that sounds trite but it means we are there where we can most influence government decision making. Also, when you consider that our budget has essentially doubled in the past year, it shows that we are very serious about that. We have also had a restructure of the way I would like the Office for Women's Policy to operate too. It is now much more about delivering coordinated advice across government agencies in relation to women's policy. So, a little bit like the Cabinet office feeding into advices and policies that come up from different agencies. We would like the Office for Women's Policy to operate that way and we believe it is now doing that.

Ms LEE RHIANNON: With all due respect, Minister, I think people who worked in the New South Wales Department of Women over many decades—who came in under Wran and did some fine work—would be disappointed to hear how you structured that answer. It gives the impression that this holistic approach to government only came when it was taken into the Premier's Department. Seriously, the New South Wales Department of Women had an all-of-government approach. I am speaking up for what it did.

Ms VERITY FIRTH: As you know, this is way before my time. This is a decision I did not have anything to do with, nor have anything to do with now. All I can do is speak on my experience as a Minister, and I have found the Office for Women's Policy to be strategically placed at the heart of government. It has enabled us real bureaucratic strength to be able to provide that cross-agency leadership. That is exactly how it is working within the Violence Prevention Coordination Unit too. The way these agencies are structured is, if you are at the heart of government, that enables you to become the coordinator of the cross- government approach. I cannot really comment on how it worked in 2004. It is before my time. I can only comment on how it works now, and I am pleased with it.

Ms LEE RHIANNON: I take it from that that you are not advocating for a new department to be restored? You are happy because you certainly see it is working across departments. You will probably need to take this question on notice, and I know some of this is in the budget papers but they are not easy to read, and I am after a comparison. In the first, and I think the second, year after 2004 when the department went, there was

a drop in funding for women. You have stated there was an increase—I think you said it was quite a sizeable increase?

Ms VERITY FIRTH: Just in the past year, yes.

Ms LEE RHIANNON: So, are we back to where we were in 2004 or are we still way below that? I think we are still way below that, and inflation has gone up in that time. I am interested in that comparison. With that additional money, how many staff are you employing? Has the number of staff gone up and has the grants program been restored?

Ms VERITY FIRTH: I sort of partially answered this before. I will have to take on notice the 2004 figures. I just do not have that information. The majority of our increase in funding, which has doubled in the past year, has gone to grants programs for domestic and family violence NGOs. That is where the vast majority of the funding increase has gone. It is specifically \$900,000 for Aboriginal organisations.

Ms LEE RHIANNON: In the last election, neither Labor nor the Coalition parties had much to say about their women's policy, which was clearly disappointing. One of the changes many of us feel with that downgrading of women's issues within the Labor Government is that women's advocacy organisations have been effectively marginalised in policy debates over the past decade. I appreciate that probably does not apply to the issue of domestic violence, because I acknowledge the considerable work you have done in that area, although there is obviously room for improvement. However, I would be interested in what your office is doing with regard to the issue of pay rates and with regard to the hardship that particularly women in regional and rural areas are suffering because of cutbacks in health and the lack of transport options?

Ms VERITY FIRTH: I am happy to provide that. As I was saying before, when we have our regional cabinets I always have a women's regional consultation as well. One of the great achievements, I would say, of the Government recently in terms of women's health has been considerable expenditure in breast screening, cervical screening programs and in a major roll-out of digital mammography equipment that provided for significant opportunities for women in rural and regional areas. In 2008-09, \$55.8 million will be invested towards breast and cervical screening programs. That is an increase of \$8.3 million over the past year.

The most important thing about this new technology is that it is digital mammography, which means that even if you are in Broken Hill, you can have your mammography taken—the spanking new technology—and the mammography of your breast can be viewed by somebody at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, as the case may be. It means that the technology beats the tyranny of distance—and we were talking a bit about this in the Education estimates as well—and women in rural and regional areas have much greater access now to health services and, most importantly, prevention services. Especially, with things like breast cancer, early detection is vital. If you can get it especially before it has gone beyond the breast, you really can defeat it. We have phenomenal success rates now in defeating breast cancer. There has been a rollout of significant women-based health initiatives across rural and regional sectors. I had to dispute that Labor had no policy of women.

Ms LEE RHIANNON: But you did not hear about it, with all due respect?

Ms VERITY FIRTH: That might not be our fault.

Ms LEE RHIANNON: You cannot find it on your website.

Ms VERITY FIRTH: We can send a copy of it to you. It was called Better Services for Women. It was a comprehensive pre-election policy.

Ms LEE RHIANNON: You should get it on your website; you should get it out so we can actually get it beforehand.

CHAIR: In the interests of transparency and no spin.

Ms VERITY FIRTH: I can send you a copy. Also, as Minister for Women, I meet with peak women's advocacy organisations quarterly. Every three months I sit down with all the peak women's organisations that are both advocacy groups, which range across the issues. In terms of pay equity, as you would also be aware, there are a number of round tables happening at the Federal level around pay equity. I agree with you that pay equity is an ongoing problem. For every dollar earned by a man, a woman still takes home only 67¢. It is

something that has not got better over the last 30 years and it is something we do now need to tackle. It was raised at the most recent women's ministerial council and New South Wales is joining the Federal Government in tackling pay equity.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Lee and I have not spoken together but it may look like collusion because I, too, was concerned that the department's activities are not obvious and its image within the community has to be lifted quite strongly. I remind you that in 1904 this State gave the right to women to vote and then to come into Parliament. But it took another 20 years before dear Millicent was elected in 1925 and it took another 20-odd years before a second woman was elected, and the third and fourth were not here until the end of the 1940s. So that is half the century gone. Today we have 91 women in this Parliament and only five of them are Ministers.

Ms VERITY FIRTH: Actually it has gone up. There are seven now.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: You got rid of a couple of men, I acknowledge that, but keep saying seven because I think there are only five female shadow Ministers. A former commissioner is sitting behind me who has always been strong nationally on getting springboard programs for women and mentoring programs out in the community. It seems that it is the Government that is slack in this area. Every business, every corporation and large group has programs clearly in place.

Ms VERITY FIRTH: I take on board that you may not be hearing about them, but I want to reassure you that they are happening. As I mentioned before, we have just released a document particularly about public sector women's employment and maintaining them. In terms of women's leadership and increasing women's participation, I pat the Labor Party on the head for a second. Now 33.4 per cent of our representatives in this Parliament are women. I would like to make it 50 per cent but at least we are much better off than we were 10 years ago, and we are better off than our Coalition colleagues are doing. We are committed to increasing women's participation.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: I am waiting for the Greens to say that they have 50 per cent.

Ms VERITY FIRTH: We are doing a range of things to increase women's leadership, including increasing women's anticipation on boards and committees. I am advised that as at June 2008 women held 36 per cent of government board positions in New South Wales and this is significantly better than the private sector, which often is around 9 per cent. We have an active strategy of making sure we appoint women to boards because that gives them experience.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: I understand that. If that is not being seen and heard, you are perpetuating the barefoot, pregnant, silent and in the kitchen syndrome.

Ms VERITY FIRTH: I agree it is sometimes about what the media is interested in, to be brutally honest, but we do make sure that we have ongoing consultations all the time with peak women's group. Often the women's groups are aware of what is going on. We have an extensive grants program and 121 councils received funding for International Women's Day events, so a lot of grassroots activities are happening. Whether or not it gets into the frontline of media eye, that is something I cannot control.

CHAIR: I turn now to Government members.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Before Government members start to ask questions, I would like to say that General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2 at its next deliberative meeting will be making a firm recommendation to those who organise the timing for these estimates, because three-quarters of an hour is appallingly insufficient time to discuss these important issues. Unfortunately, it will mean that the Minister and department officials will receive many questions on notice.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Minister, you have already outlined some of the details of the Government's new approach to domestic and family violence. Would you like to add to what you have already outlined to the Committee?

Ms VERITY FIRTH: As I was explaining before, we recognise that we need a whole-of-government approach to domestic and family violence. This is about making sure that women and families who experience

or are at risk of domestic and family violence have the best possible support. To do this, we are focusing on better coordination of agencies and services and better engagement with the non-government sector. A number of key elements form the new structure, which was announced in February this year. A centralised Violence Prevention Coordination Unit located in the Office for Women's Policy in the Department of Premier and Cabinet has been established.

This unit is responsible for coordinating the whole-of-government response to domestic and family violence and is developing the strategic framework that will underpin statewide responses to domestic and family violence. Locating the unit in the Department of Premier and Cabinet means that it is at the very heart of government, as I was discussing before. The VPCU provides strategic advice to the Premier and to me. The unit is strategically placed so that it can drive policy across all Government agencies. The intention in creating the Violence Prevention Coordination Unit is to ensure that agencies respond to domestic and family violence in a coordinated way and as a priority issue within their core business.

Another part of the structure is the establishment of five statewide project coordinators to oversee five key domestic and family violence projects. The projects include the Staying Home Leaving Violence initiative, the Domestic Violence Integrated Court Model and the Domestic Violence Risk Assessment Tool. These projects are central to the Government's commitment to prevent domestic violence, intervene at the earliest possible time, effectively support women and families, and hold offenders accountable for their actions. All five senior project officers connected to these projects have been appointed and will oversee the development and/or roll-out of key initiatives.

In terms of these projects, I would like to highlight the Staying Home Leaving Violence initiative because I believe it is an example of an initiative that is a real step in the right direction. Staying Home Leaving Violence is a specialised domestic violence program aimed at preventing victims' homelessness. The service model is based on intensive casework that is long term, needs based and integrated with key agencies such as the police, courts and the women's domestic violence court advocacy services, or legal aid. Staying Home Leaving Violence enables women to remain separated from a violent partner by addressing common barriers to leaving violent relationships, namely: stable accommodation, maintaining support networks and secure employment, education and child care. In other words, it says that it is the perpetrator that should leave the family home, not the victim of the violence.

Two Staying Home Leaving Violence programs currently operate. One is located in Eastern Sydney and one in Bega. Following successful evaluations, the Government has committed to expanding Staying Home Leaving Violence to a further 16 sites, making a total of 18 sites. Six new sites will be funded in 2009-10, and a further 10 sites in 2010-11. The locations are still to be finalised. The Department of Community Services funds the program and it is administered by that department's communities division. Another key project—the development of the risk assessment tool—aims to assess the risk to individuals and families of domestic and family violence, and identify and coordinate interventions to manage or reduce this risk. I am advised that the project will commence as a six-month trial by the middle of next year. The trial locations will include one urban and one regional community. One of these locations will include an Aboriginal community.

CHAIR: Which one?

Ms VERITY FIRTH: That is still being determined, but we will advise you when we know. To ensure the new structure has a regional focus at a senior government level, we have established a network of nine region coordinators within the New South Wales Police Force. These coordinators are located in Newcastle, Coffs Harbour, Dubbo, Tamworth, Wollongong, Wagga Wagga, Surry Hills, Bankstown and Parramatta. Their focus is on ensuring that local domestic and family violence service delivery and statewide strategic priorities are linked. Their role is also to promote change across agencies so that regional criminal justice and human service responses are delivered in an integrated, coordinated manner.

These coordinators are critical to making sure that all relevant agencies in a given region are working together so that women and children have proper supports and services available to them—whether criminal justice or human service. I am pleased to advise the Committee that all positions in the new structure have been filled and officers are now working hard in these important roles. The region coordinators will maintain a strong regional focus and will eventually work closely alongside the 35 new domestic violence police specialists being rolled out by the New South Wales Police Force. Five new specialist officers are already deployed in the Police head office, in the domestic and family violence team. Importantly, the region coordinators are in senior roles so they can drive change and be able to liaise with key senior agency representatives.

The new structure also includes a \$2.9 million annual grants program, which I referred to earlier in terms of our budget increased. Funding under this program is provided to non-government organisations for projects that address domestic and family violence. \$900,000 of this is specifically quarantined for Aboriginal projects. The first round of funding through this grants program has now been delivered and expressions of interest for the second round will be advertised shortly. I would, of course, be delighted to provide the Committee with more details of the projects funded under the first round if time permits.

This funding is on top of the \$40 million we are investing to improve responses to domestic and family violence through increased counselling, case management, and accommodation and support services. To ensure proper engagement with the non-government sector, the Premier's Council on Preventing Violence Against Women has been created. Chaired by me and reporting to the Premier, the council is made up of eminent and experienced women who have been involved in violence against women issues for many years. The council will meet for the first time tomorrow, and I know that both I and the Premier are looking forward to working with this dedicated team of experts to further our crucial work for women in this area. I am confident that the new approach and structure will ensure that the services this Government provides to women in the most dreadful circumstances are the best equipped and coordinated, and ultimately reduce the impact of domestic and family violence on victims and society.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: We have some very important questions we wanted to ask. I advise the Committee that we will place those questions on notice.

CHAIR: Minister, I apologise for the muttering that has gone on between Committee members while you have been speaking. Most of us were completely caught unaware that this was a 45-minute hearing only, given that this morning's hearing on Education was allocated four hours. There is an opportunity to put questions on notice; I think you will receive a number of them. As the Hon. Christine Robertson has said, we will discuss this issue further as a Committee, with the possibility of supplementary hearings. I am sorry for the confusion that must have been evident from all of us; we simply had not observed the fact that the hearing was scheduled for 45 minutes only. Thank you for your attendance today.

(The witnesses withdrew)

The Committee proceeded to deliberate.
