

Scoping the Gap: Unfunded Support and Unmet Needs in DFSV Response for Migrant and Refugee Women and Families

February 2026

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Executive Summary

Scoping the Gap explores the reality of unfunded domestic, family and sexual violence (DFSV) support provided by settlement and multicultural organisations and services working with migrant and refugee women and families. The research seeks to make visible systemic gaps and to depict the load carried by this sector in supporting women's safety, despite limited recognition or resourcing.

Over a six month period in 2024-25, five participating organisations reported over 200 instances of unfunded DFSV-related activity (largely in the domain of early intervention), and 151 service requests for support they could not meet or appropriately refer out, most commonly in specialised service responses and crisis accommodation and housing needs. This service data was supplemented by qualitative insights from 11 organisations on the nature and impact of unfunded effort and unmet need for victim-survivors as well as services and staff.

These research insights provide a snapshot of critical role of settlement, multicultural and migrant support organisations acting as an unfunded backbone of the DFSV service system, enabling early intervention and access for migrant and refugee victim-survivors. In-language assistance and documentation and application support facilitate access, while casework escalating in complexity requires ongoing support at a higher intensity than services are funded or trained to deliver. Unmet demand tends to arise where sustained capability and

specialisation in DFSV or other areas is required. Visa-based eligibility settings and routine referral from specialist DFSV and universal services to settlement, multicultural and migrant support services appear to concentrate complexity in a small number of trusted organisations. Migrant and refugee women often seek help from organisations with whom they have established, trusted relationships when other generalist DFSV service pathways feel uncertain.

In light of these patterns, there is need for structural, strategic and programmatic reflection on the role of the settlement, multicultural and migrant support sector in responding to DFSV, to better reflect the reality of its immense contribution to early intervention and facilitation of access to the service system for migrant and refugee victim-survivors.

The report makes a series of recommendations related to:

- Acknowledging and resourcing the role of the settlement, multicultural and migrant support sector in DFSV prevention and early intervention
 - Enhancing responsibility sharing and partnerships between the specialist DFSV sector and the settlement, multicultural and migrant support sector
 - Improving data collection to elucidate unfunded support and unmet needs
 - Addressing structural barriers to service equity based on visa status.
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Acknowledgements

Settlement Services International (SSI) extends sincere thanks to all participating organisations for their time, insights, and contributions to this research. Your willingness to share experiences, qualitative reflections, and data on unfunded DFSV support and unmet needs has been essential to building an accurate picture of the service landscape. We also acknowledge your ongoing commitment to supporting migrant and refugee women and children, despite the immense resourcing challenges captured in this report.

Participating services include:

- Asylum Seekers Centre
- Cambodian-Australian Welfare Council of NSW
- Chinese Australia Service Society
- Gymea Community Aid and Information Service
- House of Welcome
- Lebanese Muslim Association
- North Coast Settlement Services
- Mt Druitt Ethnic Communities Agency
- Mosaic Multicultural Connections
- Muslim Women Australia
- SydWest Multicultural Services

Safety in Settlement Community of Practice (SISCoP)

The Safety in Settlement Community of Practice (SISCoP) was established in July 2024, bringing together over 20 settlement, multicultural and migrant support organisations across NSW to exchange knowledge, reflect on practice, and share strategies for effective DFSV prevention and response in migrant and refugee communities. Facilitated by SSI, SISCoP comprises subgroups on prevention and early intervention, and response and recovery. Members actively engage in discussion, collaboration and evidence building around good practice and practice challenges related to community engagement, service quality and systemic issues to support safety access for migrant and refugee victim-survivors of DFSV.

Introduction

The Scoping the Gap project investigates the delivery of unfunded DFSV support for migrant and refugee women and children in NSW. As a result of necessity and community expectation, settlement, multicultural and migrant support organisations regularly provide DFSV-related support without dedicated funding. These efforts, and the parallel shortfalls in service availability, remain under-documented, limiting commissioning and policy responses, stretching under-resourced frontline teams and presenting quality and safety risk for victim-survivors seeking safety.

To elucidate these systemic gaps, between 1 September 2024 and 28 February 2025, evidence was gathered from 11 settlement and asylum seeker support agencies operating across NSW.

The report aims to:

- Document the nature and volume of unfunded DFSV support provided by settlement, multicultural and migrant support organisations
 - Identify where and why unmet needs arise
 - Describe service access barriers affecting migrant and refugee communities
 - Outline implications for service quality, system performance and equity of safety outcomes.
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Background

Although not typically recognised as a core part of the DFSV sector (aside from a small number of organisations that operate at the intersection of specialist DFSV response and support for migrant and refugee communities), multicultural, settlement and migrant support organisations provide a range of prevention, early intervention and response support for migrant and refugee communities.

The *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032* identifies the need to support settlement services, multicultural, ethno-specific and faith-based organisations to identify and respond to women, children and LGBTIQ+ people at risk of gender-based violence in the context of its early intervention priorities. However, the National Plan does not set out how this can be achieved, nor does it reflect the resourcing environment in which these organisations operate.

Within the framework provided by the National Partnership Agreement on Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence Responses, state-based commissioning processes resource the DFSV sector across Australia to deliver specialist DFSV services through block or project-based funding. In contrast, settlement, multicultural and migrant support organisations offer culturally tailored, non-specialised support but often through limited, time-bound grants or as an unfunded extension of settlement program grants. Funding streams vary across this landscape, from federal and state/territory governments, philanthropic (particularly for those supporting people on temporary visas), or a mix; each with different eligibility rules, reporting requirements and timeframes. Geographic coverage varies widely: metropolitan centres generally have greater service density, while regional and outer-metropolitan areas rely heavily on a small number of community organisations to fill the gaps.

In this context, settlement, multicultural and migrant support organisations function as trusted first points of contact for people at risk of or experiencing DFSV. Migrant and refugee women often have established relationships with these organisations, and value the ongoing support, in-language communication and cultural familiarity they offer. As a result, they are more likely to disclose DFSV and seek help through these services. Despite playing a critical role, these organisations are not always recognised or resourced as integral components of the DFSV system.

Background

At the national level, recent changes to Settlement, Engagement and Transition Support (SETS) program funding have added further pressure. While limited DFSV support was previously available within SETS, reductions in the 2024–25 Budget made it difficult for some services to maintain trained DFSV workers. Community expectations, shaped by past assistance and ongoing trust, have not diminished; women continue to present for help. In this context, staff have less capacity to undertake comprehensive risk assessment and safety planning, and those with relevant expertise are stretched.

A growing body of analysis highlights chronic underinvestment in the DFSV sector's capacity to meet the full spectrum of community needs.^{1,2,3} Funding frameworks consistently show that project-based grants fail to cover core operational costs such as interpreting, brokerage, and legal advocacy.⁴ Agencies note that funding cycles rarely align with the long-term, trust-based interventions required by migrant and refugee victim-survivors. Moreover, despite an increasingly multicultural population, specialist DFSV services frequently refer 'culturally diverse' clients to providers dedicated to supporting migrant and refugee communities, who, in turn, refer clients experiencing abuse to DFSV services for specialist supports – a repeated shifting of responsibility without expanding overall sector capacity. This referral loop exacerbates service bottlenecks and contributes to significant unmet need.

It is also important to note that parallel gaps exist in the system's capacity to work with men who use violence, or are at risk of using violence, particularly within multicultural communities. *The National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022–2032* acknowledges the need for perpetrator interventions and early intervention services in community settings, however, the availability of practitioners with the cultural and linguistic capability required for this work remains limited. While perpetrator interventions are outside the scope of this report, long-term strategic investment in the capacity of settlement, multicultural and migrant support services to provide perpetrator intervention services, and particularly early intervention for people at risk of using violence, is a critical consideration.

1 Campbell, E., Fernando, T., Gassner, L., Hill, J., Seidler, Z., & Summers, A. (August 2024). *Unlocking the prevention potential: Accelerating action to end domestic, family and sexual violence* (Report of the Rapid Review of Prevention Approaches). Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

2 Queensland Audit Office. (2022). *Keeping people safe from domestic and family violence (Report 5: 2022–23)*: Report on a page. Queensland Audit Office

3 Domestic Violence NSW (December 2024). *We can end the violence: Domestic Violence NSW Pre-Budget Submission 2025-26*.

4 Campbell, E., Fernando, T., Gassner, L., Hill, J., Seidler, Z., & Summers, A. (August 2024). *Unlocking the prevention potential: Accelerating action to end domestic, family and sexual violence* (Report of the Rapid Review of Prevention Approaches). Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

Background

For the purposes of this report, following definitions of ‘unfunded support’ and ‘unmet needs’ have been adopted:

Unfunded support

Activities delivered by an organisation in response to DFSV that are **not** covered by formal funding agreements with government agencies. Examples include documentation and applications support, casework at a higher complexity than funded, and advocacy for service access.

Unmet needs

Instances where a client’s request for DFSV-related support cannot be fulfilled due to resource constraints (e.g., no available staff, lack of funding, or service outside organisational mandate) or a lack of appropriate referral options.

These definitions guide the analysis that follows, ensuring a consistent understanding of the invisible workload and service gaps across diverse providers.

Methodology

Research Design

This research used a mixed-methods approach to capture both the scale of unfunded DFSV support and the lived, operational experience of organisations providing this support.

Findings were generated by analysing these streams to identify consistent patterns and actionable gaps.

Timeframe

Data collection covered 1 September 2024 – 28 February 2025, capturing half a year of service provision.

Data Collection Streams and Instruments

Detailed template + structured interview

Five organisations completed a standardised spreadsheet template recording unfunded activities, service types, staff hours (where available), and instances of unmet need for the six-month period. A follow-up semi-structured interview explored operational context, decision-making, case examples, and data-recording practices.

Interview-only

Five organisations participated in the same semi-structured interview to provide comparable qualitative insights.

Simplified online survey

Three organisations participated in a brief online survey that collected core quantitative metrics and targeted open-text questions to broaden sector participation and capture organisations unable to join the other streams.

All instruments were developed from a common question framework to ensure conceptual alignment across streams.

Methodology

Recruitment and Participants

Participating organisations were drawn from the membership of SISCoP, as well as other organisations active in supporting migrant and refugee victim-survivors of DFSV in NSW. Of the 11 participating organisations, nine are funded by the Australian Government to deliver the SETS Program in NSW. Some of these organisations are also funded by the NSW Government to deliver Targeted Early Intervention and other programs, and one is a Specialist Homelessness Service providing case management and crisis and transitional accommodation for migrant and refugee women experiencing DFSV. Two participating organisations specifically support people on temporary visas and are funded philanthropically, without receiving any government funding for their work.

Organisations contributing quantitative data did so under a MOU that set out the purpose and scope of participation, data items to be reported, confidentiality and data-handling arrangements, and the reporting schedule. The MOU covered completion of the common data-collection template focused on unfunded DFSV activities and unmet needs.

In addition to the MOU signatories, other SISCoP members participated through structured interviews and/or the simplified online survey where capacity or systems did not allow template submission. The participant group spans settlement, multicultural and migrant support organisations of varied size and geographic coverage (metropolitan and regional), reflecting diverse service models and client profiles.

Analysis Approach

Analysis followed a mixed methods design in which quantitative and qualitative streams were examined in parallel and then integrated. The objective was to estimate the scale and character of unfunded DFSV activity and unmet need, while explaining the operational conditions that produce them.

Quantitative material from the data-collection template and the simplified survey was first harmonised to a common set of activity categories and reporting periods. Obvious entry errors were queried where feasible; otherwise, values were retained as reported, with estimates clearly marked. Interview transcripts and notes and the open-text fields from templates and the online survey went through thematic analysis, with recurring issues highlighted and grouped into themes (e.g., unfunded activities, unmet needs, workforce pressure, referral bottlenecks, access barriers).

This approach centres what organisations report and what women are experiencing. It foregrounds the reality of unfunded DFSV work, the scale and basis of unmet community needs, and the ways current program and funding models constrain service delivery. In doing so, the analysis centres the voices of participating organisations and the women who rely on these services.

Methodology

Limitations

The following should be considered when interpreting findings:

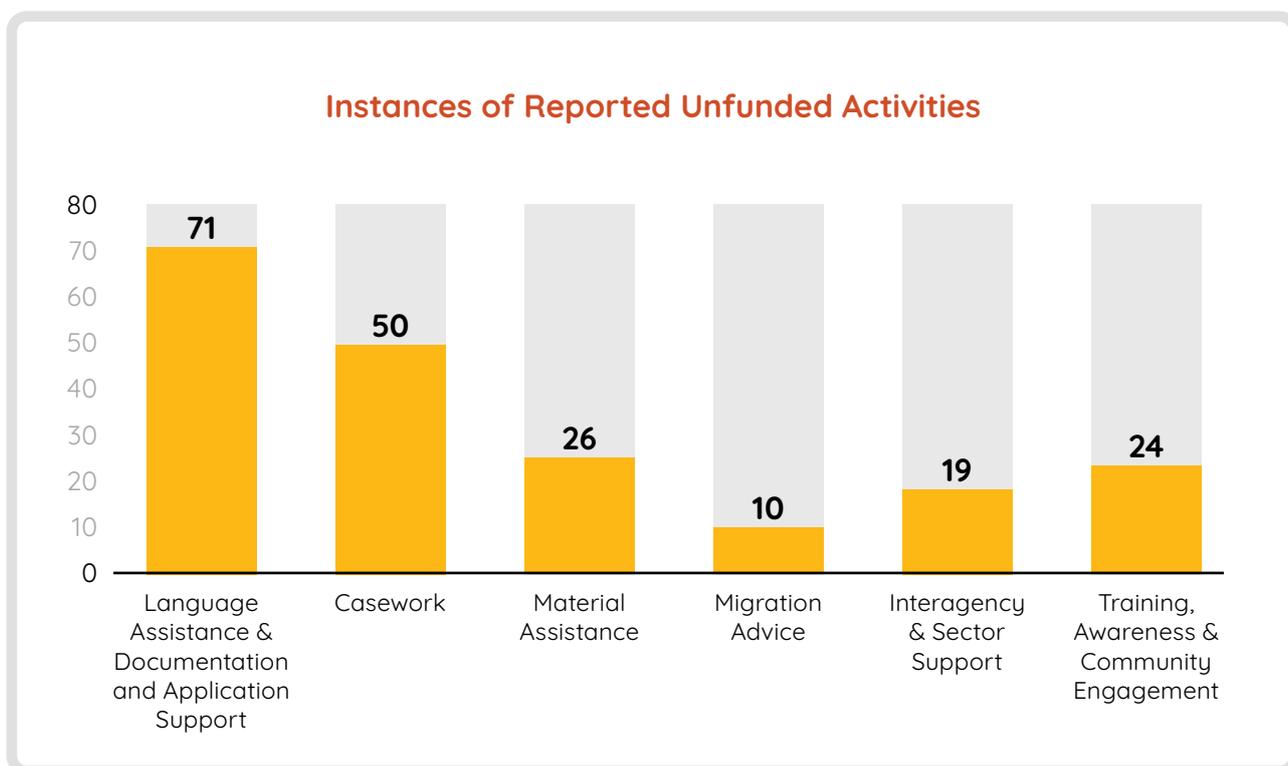
- Heterogeneous data-recording practices. Organisations use different systems (case-management platforms, spreadsheets, manual logs), resulting in variable granularity and comparability of reported figures.
 - Mixed funding models. Organisations operate under diverse funding arrangements, which affects what is recorded as 'unfunded' activity and complicates cross-organisation comparison.
 - Variation in organisational size. Large multiservice organisations and small specialised support organisations have different capacity and service portfolios; this influences both the volume and types of unfunded activities reported.
 - Non-response and selection bias. Organisations under the greatest pressure or those without capacity to participate may be under-represented, possibly underestimating unmet need in some contexts.
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Quantitative findings: what the service data tells us

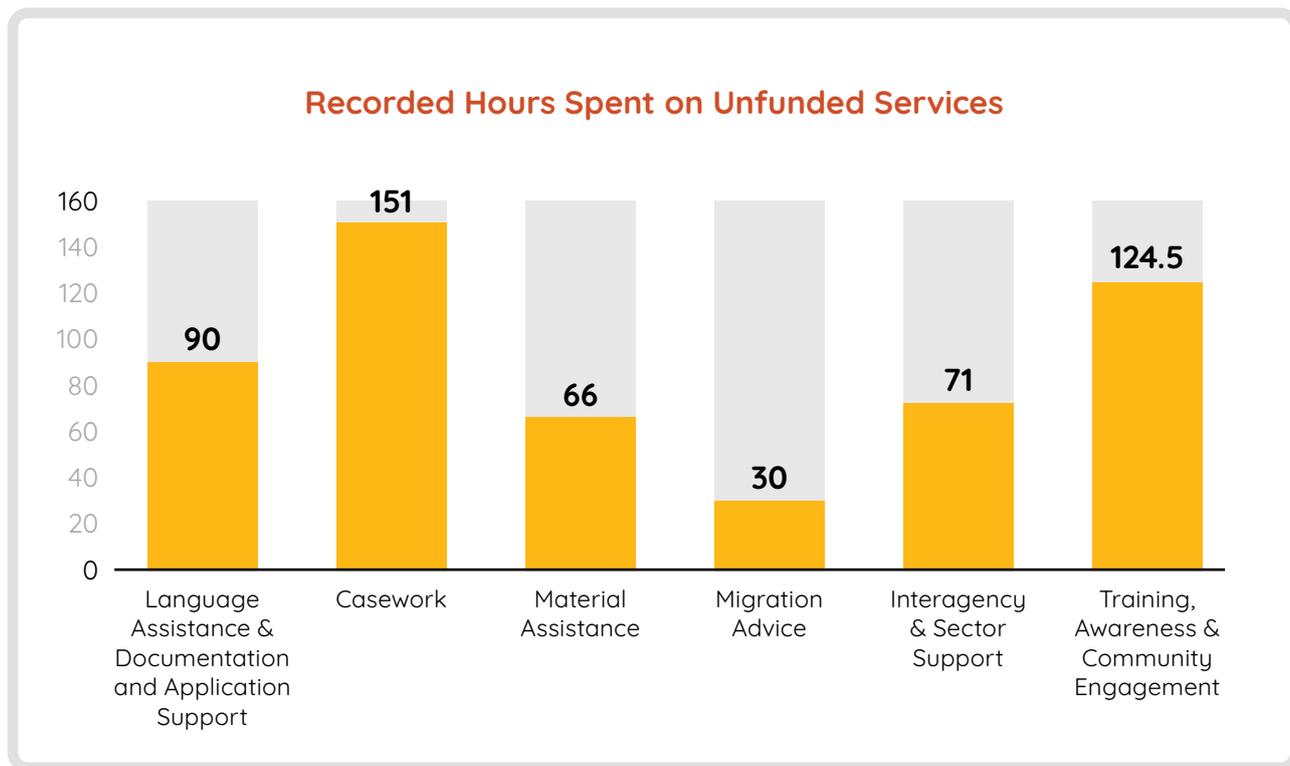
Unfunded Support

This section summarises the support that participating organisations reported providing without dedicated funding over the six-month period from 1 September 2024 to 28 February 2025. Five organisations submitted service and activity data focusing specifically on unfunded DFSV services. Noting varying local recording practices, figures should be read as minimum activity rather than a sector total.

Across five participating organisations, 200 DFSV-related unfunded support instances were recorded over the six-month period, with 532.5 staff hours logged across six activity types (around 40 instances per organisation on average). These figures should be read as minimums given variation in record-keeping, but they make clear that a substantial share of the work required to connect women to safety supports sits outside funded program parameters.



Quantitative findings: what the service data tells us



Unfunded effort is anchored in access and continuity; that is, support for early intervention and bringing victim-survivors into the DFSV system. Language assistance and documentation and application support is the largest component (71 instances; 35.5%) and reflects basic, in-language casework support (often delivered by volunteers) that make DFSV support accessible (e.g., arranging interpreters, completing crisis accommodation referrals and housing applications, assisting with paperwork for protection orders and, where needed for safety, supporting with linked income, health or migration forms). DFSV

casework itself accounts for 50 instances (25.0%) and 151 hours (28.4% of recorded time). This is not a separate funded program; it typically arises when clients in existing settlement caseloads disclose DFSV, and settlement workers, who are resourced for lower-intensity support, continue at a higher intensity to maintain safety and coordinate across agencies. In practice, this often approximates -Tier 3-type complexity, however the boundary can be blurry so the hours logged here represent additional, unfunded effort.

Quantitative findings: what the service data tells us

The remaining activity mix includes training, awareness and community engagement (24 instances; 12.0%) with 124.5 hours recorded, and interagency engagement and sector support (19 instances; 9.5%) with 71 hours. Although these categories appear smaller by count, they are time-intensive (approximately 5.2 hours per training and community activity and 3.7 hours per interagency engagement) and frequently involve large, multiagency events or cross-sector collaborations and advocacy. The significance of these activities is therefore not reflected by the raw numbers: they build the relationships, shared protocols and awareness that make individual client support possible. Material assistance (26 instances; 66 hours) and migration advice (10 instances; 30 hours) round out the picture, providing the practical supports. Migration advice is generally provided in the form of consultations with a migration lawyer offering pro bono services, though one organisation previously had an in-house migration lawyer whose role was defunded in 2024. For context, indicative time per instance is roughly 1.3 hours for language and application support, ~3.0 hours for casework and migration advice, and ~2.5 hours for material assistance.

There is a separate tranche of unfunded referral activity undertaken by organisations funded philanthropically to support people on temporary visas (and which receive no government funding to provide DFSV support). These referrals are not included in the counts or charts above, yet they are fundamental to service access and safety: at least 140 referrals were completed during the period, each typically taking 2–3 hours, equating to an additional ~400 staff hours of unfunded work. Taken together, the pattern points to an unfunded backbone that supports systems access for migrant and refugee victim-survivors - work that is essential to securing safety outcomes even though it rarely appears in program specifications.

Quantitative findings: what the service data tells us

Unmet Needs

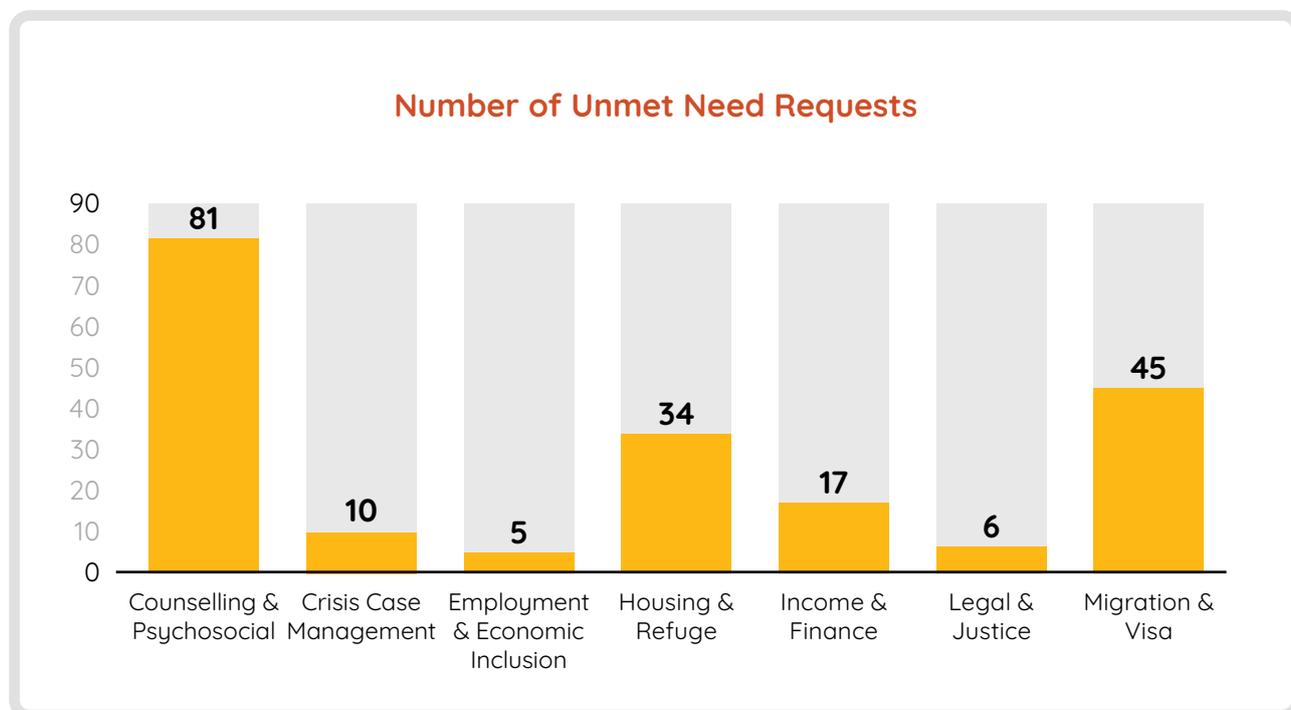
This section summarises client requests that could not be met or appropriately referred by participating organisations during the six-month window from 1 September 2024 – 28 February 2025. Organisations reported unmet demand across counselling, legal assistance, housing pathways, crisis response and financial and administrative supports. Given differences in local record-keeping, the figures should be read as minimum counts, not a sector total.

Across the period there were 198 unmet requests for support. Gaps concentrate in three areas:

- **Counselling and psychosocial support:** 81 unmet requests (41% of all unmet demand), raised by all organisations

- **Migration and visa support (legal advice):** 45 unmet requests (23%)
- **Housing and refuge (including exit pathways into longer-term housing):** 34 unmet requests (17%).

Smaller but important shortfalls include income and finance (17 unmet requests; 9%), crisis case management (10 unmet requests; 5%), legal and justice (court support – 6 unmet requests; 3%), and employment and economic inclusion (5 unmet requests; 3%). The pattern is consistent with what frontline teams describe: when women require sustained care, legal resolution, or stable housing pathways, available capacity and settings do not keep pace with need.



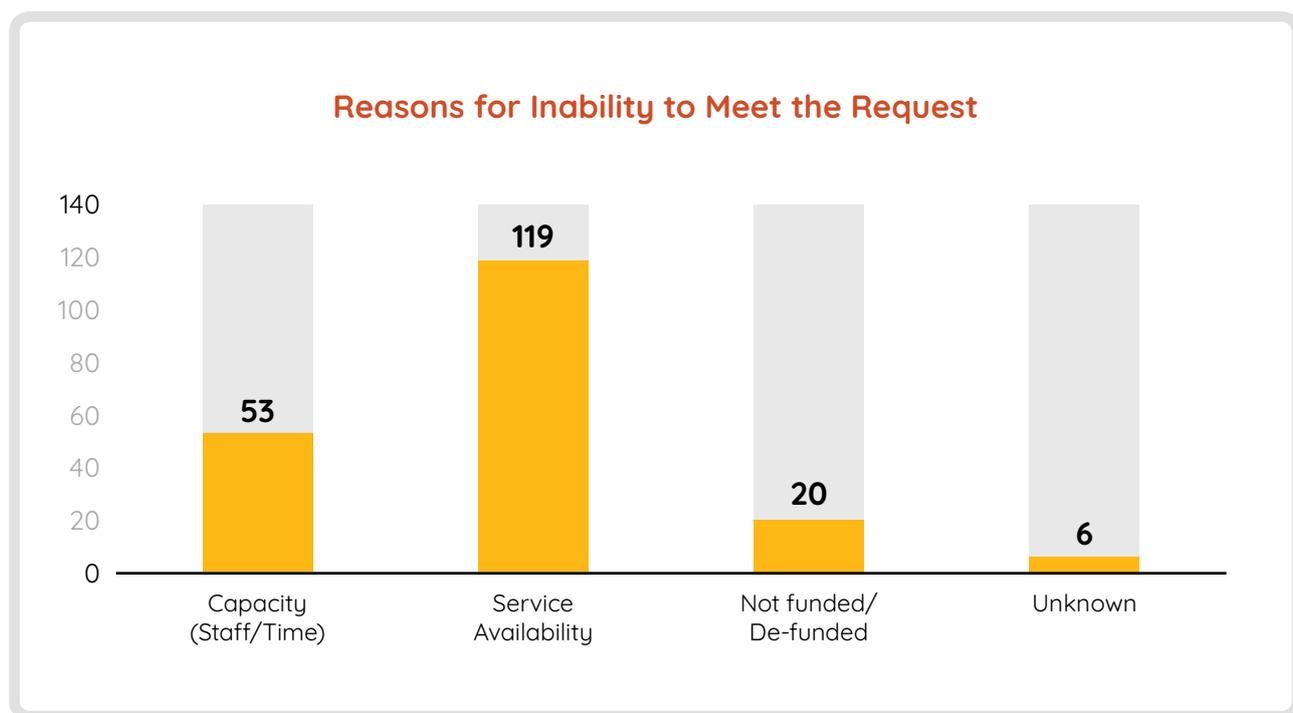
Quantitative findings: what the service data tells us

Over half of unmet requests arose because no service was available that could take the client, exposing structural gaps. Where services do exist, capacity limits and housing system settings were the next most frequent barriers to service needs being met. Reasons were grouped into the following domains from free-text entries in the dataset:

- **Service availability: 119 unmet requests (60%)**
Service availability is the most common barrier. This reflects circumstances where no accessible service existed to accept the referral (e.g., no counselling or legal service available for the client profile and need, or no program line covering the request). In practice, this often includes services not being appropriately

equipped to support clients from migrant and refugee backgrounds, prompting default referral to settlement, multicultural and migrant support organisations to respond, despite their lack of specialist expertise.

- **Capacity (staff/time): 53 unmet requests (27%)**
Providers lacked the staffing or time to deliver, even where a funded service or program is in place.
- **Funding and mandate (not funded/defunded): 20 unmet requests (10%)**
A small number of instances referenced mandate and funding settings, including services that had been previously, but were no longer, funded.



Quantitative findings: what the service data tells us

The situation of unmet needs mirrors that of unfunded support. Organisations are sustaining triage, language support and other tasks that facilitate access without funding, yet when women require ongoing specialised DFSV or housing support (counselling, legal support, crisis accommodation or stable housing), the system does not respond adequately to need. The dominant ‘no provider available’ (service availability) signal underscores a structural reliance on settlement, multicultural and migrant support organisations to absorb migrant and refugee clients’ requests for support, even where they are not resourced or equipped to respond to specific needs. The housing system presents gaps for all victim-survivors of DFSV, however these are exacerbated by eligibility constraints for people on temporary visas.

Qualitative findings: the nature and impact of unfunded support and unmet needs

Across interviews and survey responses, unfunded support is described as the everyday backbone that keeps women engaged in the service system and on a pathway to safety. Unfunded activities comprise first-contact risk assessment and safety planning; language and applications support to facilitate service access; continued case coordination when risks remain; community support groups for victim-survivors, and interagency education and advocacy to keep statutory systems engaged with clients on temporary visas. Where organisations lack a dedicated DFSV role, staff stretch limited hours to cover complex, ongoing needs. As one respondent put it:

“ Our organisation has one focal person working on DFV; however, this person has only one dedicated full day for DFV work. This doesn’t respond to the need in the community.”

Unfunded work also includes bridging gaps otherwise uncatered for by other services: explaining rights and processes, helping with Centrelink interactions, accompanying clients to services, and persistent advocacy in response to access barriers.

A dominant theme is visa-based ineligibility, which excludes people on temporary visas from access to many services. This limits referral pathways and pushes the burden of response back onto settlement, multicultural and migrant support organisations.

Frontline teams also describe routine referral of clients from migrant and refugee backgrounds to the settlement, multicultural and migrant support sector, regardless of their specific needs.

“ [Child Protection] will send referrals to our agencies with the expectation that housing and financial needs... are covered by the sector. This simply is not the case.”

The result is a structural loop: specialist DFSV and other universal services remain under-equipped or unwilling to provide culturally responsive support, while settlement, multicultural and migrant support organisations absorb unfunded triage and case support at scale – a vital contribution to early intervention, but safe and effective approaches can only be assured by appropriate resourcing and training.

Qualitative findings: the nature and impact of unfunded support and unmet needs

Insufficient staffing and the absence of specialist DFSV casework capability are evident.

“ Nil capacity – our service has [caseworkers] who are not specialised in providing DFSV services... victim-survivors require intensive casework support... and we do not have the resources to conduct this work meaningfully.”

Without flexible funding, prevention and early intervention work is minimal. Where specialist training is unavailable, the risk of re-traumatisation rises. Respondents highlight the need for DFSV training tailored to working with people from migrant and refugee backgrounds both within the settlement, multicultural and migrant support sector and, critically, across the DFSV sector as a whole.

The human impacts for victim-survivors described are consistent and grave: uncertainty, depression, stress, and prolonged absence of support. When mainstream services and supports are inaccessible and the sector lacks capacity or expertise, women face impossible trade-offs. Repeated messages about ineligibility and repeated referral to other organisations erode help-seeking behaviour.

“ Constant messages around ‘lack of eligibility’ due to visa status reinforce the idea that there is no point in seeking help.”

“ Clients with language barriers have lost their confidence. They don’t want to go to multiple organisations to tell their story. They fear saying the wrong thing; they have a fear of authority.”

Respondents link these barriers to escalation of mental health challenges, financial destitution, homelessness and prolonged housing insecurity, and heightened child protection involvement for families on temporary visas.

“ Leaving a stressed client uncertain about their status... can be detrimental... often without shelter, financial support, or even basic food for their kids.”

A recurring thread is broken trust in mainstream or universal systems and a corresponding reliance on settlement, multicultural and migrant support organisations that have previously provided consistent care and support for women. Repeated knock-backs, often due to ineligibility based on visa status, long waits, or being redirected elsewhere, lead women to believe that they are unlikely to gain access to generalist services. The result is that women return to the organisations that have supported them before, where staff speak their language (often literally and culturally).

Qualitative findings: the nature and impact of unfunded support and unmet needs

This trust is relationally built; through accessible communication, consistent follow-through, and persistent advocacy for access to services and support. By contrast, the impact of uncertainty regarding service access and eligibility creates fear and disengagement, especially for people on temporary visas. Women report that they are not adequately informed about rights and options, and sometimes encounter untrained staff (both in specialist DFSV services lacking cultural responsiveness, and among settlement, multicultural and migrant support organisations responding to DFSV), compounding a sense that the system is not for them. Settlement, multicultural and migrant support organisations nonetheless function as trusted points of entry, absorbing unfunded triage and case coordination precisely because trust sits with them.

Settlement, multicultural and migrant support organisations should be recognised as crucial to DFSV early intervention and response. Communities turn to these organisations first because of established relationships, in-language support and cultural familiarity; this trust creates opportunity for disclosure, early intervention and warm, appropriate referrals to specialist services.

There is opportunity to better recognise and resource this role explicitly in policy and commissioning. This could involve approaches such as supporting culturally responsive practice, and sustained partnership arrangements between specialist DFSV and settlement, multicultural and migrant support organisations. Recognising such organisations as facilitators of early intervention rather than informal backstops would help preserve the trust that brings women through the door, while aligning resources to where help-seeking actually occurs.

The implication is twofold: first, trust is an outcome that requires resourcing (e.g., time for careful explanation, language support and ongoing guidance and advocacy). Second, culturally responsive DFSV service capability must improve so women do not feel bound to choose between safety support and service disengagement. Until then, the system will continue to rely on settlement, multicultural and migrant support organisations to carry the relational load of safety, often without funding, because that is where women believe help is real and reachable.

Organisations consulted are clear about what would reduce risk and reliance on unfunded support: sustainable funding for DFSV casework and brokerage, particularly for people on temporary visas lacking other financial support; policy changes to enable consistent access to crisis and transitional accommodation for migrant and refugee DFSV victim-survivors, including those on temporary visas; and upskilling mainstream services to work in a culturally responsive manner with people from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

Qualitative findings: the nature and impact of unfunded support and unmet needs

Organisations stress that meaningful change needs to take place at the systemic level. Progress is likely to come from commissioning and policy settings that make the DFSV system more accessible for people from migrant and refugee background, leveraging the settlement, multicultural and migrant support sector's community connections and expertise. Eligibility settings to support temporary visa holders' access to crisis and transitional accommodation remain critical. So too is embedding language support and cultural responsiveness as baseline requirements across all services; providing stable core funding for trusted settlement, multicultural and migrant support organisations providing access and early intervention points; and commissioning counselling and legal capacity that is explicitly reachable in-language. In the absence of these levers, organisations lean on collaboration and pro-bono contributions (e.g., exchanging trainers, seeking volunteer time, and forging local partnerships). While pragmatic, this approach places additional pressure alongside funded activities: limited staff time and operational budgets are stretched, prevention and outreach can be compressed and wait times in other areas may lengthen. Safety implications for victim-survivors are evident.

Teams report wellbeing pressures (burnout, moral distress, vicarious trauma) and an increased need for supervision and clear escalation to manage risk, as well as workforce strain arising from turnover, backfill gaps and uneven access to training. Reliance on volunteers adds coordination overhead, and over time all above mentioned dynamics create opportunity costs (e.g., less room for practice development, data quality, evaluation and partnership building).

The qualitative record portrays a system quietly reliant on unfunded labour to deliver an accessible pathway to safety services for migrant and refugee women. Visa-based exclusion and routine client referral concentrate complexity in under-resourced settlement, multicultural and migrant support organisations; limited staffing and DFSV specialist capability heighten burnout and risk; and women face extended danger, destitution, and disengagement. The solutions repeatedly named by consultation participants, such as funding access-enablers and specialist casework, unlocking accommodation options, and building sector-wide capability for cultural responsiveness, are not add-ons; they are the conditions under which safety outcomes can be secured and sustained.

Integrated analysis: a snapshot of systemic challenges

Participating organisations recorded 200 unfunded service instances and 532.5 staff hours across six activity types. The largest share by count is language assistance and documentation and application support – activities which actively support access to the DFSV system. Casework accounts for 25% of instances and carries 28% of all recorded time, reflecting the higher-intensity coordination that follows disclosure of DFSV within existing settlement caseloads. Training and community engagement and interagency activity appear smaller by count, but together account for nearly 200 hours – these activities often involve multiagency events and sustained cross-sector collaboration; their significance in terms of resourcing implications is not revealed in the raw numbers.

There is a separate bulk of unfunded referrals of people on temporary visas undertaken by organisations not funded by government to deliver DFSV support. These referral services equate to ~400 additional staff hours during the period. If included, they would further weight the evidence toward unfunded early intervention activity, reinforcing that a significant share of access-enabling effort remains beyond the bounds of formal contracts.

When this access support is set against the unmet-needs profile, the cause-and-effect chain becomes clearer. Unmet demand concentrates where sustained specialist capability is required, in services such as counselling and psychosocial care, and legal and justice support. Crisis accommodation and housing options remain elusive. The most frequent reason for unmet needs is recorded as ‘no provider or service available’. This aligns with qualitative accounts of mainstream or universal services that are either unavailable or not equipped to engage people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, resulting in routine referral to settlement, multicultural and migrant support organisations. First-contact work, interpreting and documentation support are completed so women can enter the system, but the pathway commonly stalls at the point where ongoing specialised casework, therapeutic care, legal resolution or stable housing is needed. In these gaps, settlement, multicultural and migrant support organisations continue to ‘hold’ risk through higher-intensity casework that is essential but frequently delivered without funding or adequate training.

Integrated analysis: a snapshot of systemic challenges

Trust dynamics reinforce this pattern. Repeated experiences of ineligibility, long wait times, or redirection erode confidence in DFSV and related services, while settlement, multicultural and migrant support organisations that have previously ‘shown up’ become points of trust for the community. Women return to the organisations with whom they feel comfortable even when those organisations lack formal mandates, resources or DFSV specialisation. This trust can be protective and enable early intervention and basic case support, but it also concentrates complexity and risk management in under-resourced teams, contributing to workforce strain and masking system shortfalls when outcomes are achieved despite the model rather than because of it.

There are safety and quality implications where teams lack access to DFSV-specific training. Culturally responsive practice brings immense value, yet it is most effective when undertaken by appropriately trained staff and in collaboration with specialist DFSV services through structured, well-resourced partnerships that enable warm, appropriate referrals.

Equity implications are pronounced. As widely acknowledged elsewhere, visa-based exclusion and eligibility settings narrow access to essential supports, pushing people on temporary visas into a patchwork of ad hoc responses. This indicates that structural barriers to DFSV service access are borne at the greatest intensity by

those least able to navigate or pay for alternatives. In this environment, the sector’s unfunded work is not discretionary or ‘nice-to-have’; it is the precondition for safety and service engagement.

Overall, the evidence converges on a structural reliance on unfunded support to enable access and deliver activities that make DFSV responses conceivable for migrant and refugee women. The DFSV system as a whole remains under-resourced, however acknowledging and supporting the contribution of the settlement, multicultural and migrant support sector provides opportunity to leverage their connections, commitment and culturally responsive capabilities to strengthen access, experience and pathways to safety outcomes for migrant and refugee victim-survivors. Addressing this disconnect requires commissioning that explicitly funds the sector’s early intervention activities (language support, documentation and applications support, low and medium intensity casework), as well as high intensity, specialist DFSV casework. This may be achieved by investing in the capacity of this sector and/or strengthening partnerships and capabilities for culturally responsive support within the specialist DFSV sector. Capability to service and facilitate safety for multicultural communities must be a shared responsibility.

Recommendations

It is critical that the DFSV system addresses the structural reliance on unfunded support to facilitate early intervention for migrant and refugee victim-survivors identified in this research. Similarly, equity of access to specialised DFSV case management, counselling and legal support through the development of culturally responsive capability is essential for responding to unmet needs, as is addressing crisis and transitional accommodation eligibility for victim-survivors on temporary visas.

There are several complementary mechanisms through which this can be achieved.

Acknowledging and resourcing the role of the settlement, multicultural and migrant support sector in DFSV prevention and early intervention

1. Formally recognising at the national level the role of the settlement, multicultural and migrant support sector in DFSV early intervention and facilitating migrant and refugee victim-survivor access to DFSV responses. This includes identifying and resourcing the sector as a key actor in national DFSV strategies and action plans, supported by interdepartmental coordination (particularly between the Department of Home Affairs and the Department of Social Services) to clarify financing responsibilities.
2. Enacting federal and state/territory-based service commissioning to ensure adequate resourcing so that prevention and early intervention activities can be delivered by the settlement, multicultural and migrant support sector with appropriate training of staff and in line with best practice safety principles.

Recommendations

Enhancing responsibility sharing and partnerships between the specialist DFSV sector and the settlement, multicultural and migrant support sector.

3. Upskilling the specialist DFSV sector to respond to the needs of migrant and refugee victim-survivors (through development of culturally responsive service delivery capability) in an active effort to prevent unnecessary or inappropriate referrals away from specialist services and/or client disengagement from the DFSV support system.
4. Facilitating resourced partnerships across the specialist DFSV sector and the settlement, multicultural and migrant support sector to maximise the connections and expertise of both, and to enhance warm, consistent responses to referrals.

Improving data collection to elucidate unfunded support and unmet needs

5. Initiating intentional data collection on time and resources dedicated to providing DFSV support and activities outside funded capacity within the Australian Government's Settlement, Engagement and Transition Support (SETS) program.
6. Improving intentional and consistent data collection on unmet needs and turn away rates and reasons, broken down by visa status, to provide a broader evidence-based snapshot of the scale of demand faced by both the specialist DFSV sector and the settlement, multicultural and migrant support sector.

Addressing structural barriers to service equity based on visa status

7. Addressing unmet needs by reviewing residency and visa barriers to essential supports, particularly crisis and transitional accommodation, expanding family violence provisions to more visa subclasses, and creating bridging visa pathways for victim-survivors.
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Conclusion

This report has aimed to make more visible the reality of the burden that settlement and asylum seeker support organisations carry in facilitating DFSV early intervention. It is evident that access to safety supports is underwritten by unfunded labour, that unmet demand is most common where sustained specialist DFSV capability is required, and that migrant and refugee women's help-seeking rests heavily on trusted community access points. The impact of trust and the ways in which uncertainty, ad hoc responses, ineligibility and referral loops can erode confidence in support systems has been highlighted.

Progress will be most durable where funding, partnerships and workforce capability move in step, allowing the settlement, multicultural and migrant support sector to honour the trust placed in it and provide reliable, equitable responses for migrant and refugee women and families.
