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## **Consultation – Third Family and Sexual Violence Action Plan**

### **Sexual Assault Support Service Inc. (SASS) submission**

**May 2022**

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Sexual  
Assault  
Support  
Service

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## ***Third Family and Sexual Violence Action Plan***

### ***SASS Submission***

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#### **Introduction**

Sexual Assault Support Service (SASS) Inc. is a community-based organisation committed to providing trauma-informed support and information services to survivors of sexual assault, carers and support people, professionals, and the broader community. The range of support options available at SASS includes counselling, case management and advocacy, 24/7 crisis support (including assistance and support at Forensic Medical Examinations and Police Statements) and therapeutic interventions for children and young people who are engaging in harmful sexual behaviours. We also provide information and support to professionals and deliver evidence-based training workshops and community education activities in a range of settings, including schools and colleges.

As part of our goal to provide responsive and holistic services to individuals, families, and the broader community, SASS facilitates therapeutic intervention services for children and young people (aged under 18 years) who are displaying harmful sexual behaviours.<sup>1</sup>

SASS is pleased to see the development of Tasmania's Third Family and Sexual Violence Action Plan and welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this.

#### **Focus areas**

Our feedback will focus on four main areas; recommendations from the Commission of Inquiry; primary prevention of sexual violence; appropriate funding for responding to sexual violence; and continuation of the PAST program.

#### **A. Recommendations from the Commission of Inquiry**

The Commission of Inquiry into the Tasmanian Government's Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Institutional Settings (the Commission) is due to hand down its final report by May 2023. This report will contain important recommendations for the Tasmanian Government.

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<sup>1</sup> Alternative terminology is 'Problem Sexual Behaviour' (PSB) and 'Sexually Abusive Behaviour' (SAB).

It is vital that the Action Plan be framed in such a way as to commit the Government to timely implementation of these recommendations.

We note that the Tasmanian Government accepted or accepted in principle all recommendations of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (the Royal Commission) requiring action from state and territory governments. SASS commends the Government for its action on implementing a number of these recommendations already, and notes the progress outlined in the *Fourth Annual Progress Report and Action Plan 2022*. The new Family and Sexual Violence Action Plan provides a valuable opportunity to outline a roadmap for how the Tasmanian Government will continue towards full implementation of all Royal Commission recommendations.

### **Recommendations**

The Third Action Plan outlines how the Tasmanian Government will implement the recommendations coming out of the current Commission of Inquiry.

The Third Action Plan re-affirms the Tasmanian Government's commitment to implementation of the Royal Commission recommendations, and outlines how this will be achieved.

### **B. Primary prevention of sexual violence**

SASS recommends that the Action Plan specify clear actions to promote primary prevention of family and sexual violence. We note the importance of school-based educational programs on sexual consent and ethics in lowering rates of sexual violence and creating a healthy, respectful culture amongst young people. Whilst the 2019-22 Action Plan did reference the need to 'embed Respectful Relationships education' in Tasmanian Government schools, SASS asserts that this is not enough to create meaningful individual and cultural change amongst the next generation of Tasmanians. We strongly recommend that in this next iteration of the Action Plan the Tasmanian Government commit to facilitating specific sexual safety and consent education in all Tasmanian schools.

The need for primary prevention within schools has been highlighted in community research currently being conducted by UTAS on sexual violence in southern Tasmania. Community feedback indicates that more resources need to be committed to primary prevention in schools, and that these programs should be offered to children and young people at various points throughout their schooling careers – not just through one-off sessions. Feedback noted the importance of detailed, explicit and clear conversations around consent, sexual health, sexual behaviour and choice in a context that is safe for people of all identities (beyond the normative male/female biological-focused approach).

SASS currently runs funded workshops in eight Tasmanian government schools each year. These primary prevention workshops aim to stop intimate partner violence and sexual harm from occurring. Workshops identify and reduce contributors to harm while promoting healthy, ethical sexual decision making. SASS has been delivering this program to secondary schools for over four years, and in 2018 won a National Crime Prevention award for the program. Program evaluations have indicated the following:

Prior to training;

- One-fifth of students do not know or understand what consent is
- 64% of students report that making sexual choices is 'scary' or 'difficult'
- 30% of students report that they would not know where to find help if they or a friend needed it

Following training:

- 91% of students reported that they would now know how to seek help if they or a friend needed it
- 84% of students reported increased knowledge about respectful relationships
- 82% of students reported increased knowledge about sexual consent
- 92% of students reported that learning about ethical sexual decision making was helpful

The first point is particularly salient, with the above-mentioned recent UTAS/SASS research noting that young people will often disclose abuse to another young person (a friend), which can be a huge burden for the person to carry and is obviously problematic if the friend doesn't know how to help them to choose a pathway for help-seeking.<sup>2</sup>

As noted above, current funding only allows for a select number of schools to be provided with this training each year and does not allow for an ongoing training model. Such a model would involve visiting the same school each year, delivering the full program for the incoming grade and refresher forums for grades who have received the full program in previous years. This approach supports the creation of consistent positive culture change in the longer term by allowing students to continually interact with program content and thus reinforce and build upon learnings year on year. This is clearly a gap and means that most Tasmanian school students do not have the opportunity to participate in this vital primary prevention program.

Another important aspect of the program is the capacity it builds amongst school staff – who play a vital role in supporting young people to become responsible for their own and others' sexual safety. School staff are also likely to be the first responders to sexual abuse disclosures, and therefore must be equipped to respond appropriately so that the experience is positive, rather than re-traumatising.

#### **Recommendations:**

- The Third Action Plan includes implementation within all Tasmanian schools of Whole-of-School Primary Prevention of Sexual Assault and Family Violence Awareness and Prevention Program
- The Ongoing Training Model is adopted for all schools.

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<sup>2</sup> Research paper forthcoming.

### C. Appropriate funding for responding to sexual violence

Over the past six years SASS has seen a 162 per cent increase in referrals to our counselling and support services. We attribute the high increases in demand for our services to a range of factors, including:

- The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, which was announced in 2012-13. The Royal Commission brought increased media coverage of sexual assault and the impacts of trauma. The Royal Commission's final report was tabled in the Australian Parliament in December 2017.<sup>3</sup> The National Redress Scheme for people who have experienced institutional child sexual abuse commenced in 2018-19.
- SASS's increases to promotion and geographical service coverage, as a Royal Commission Support Service (RCSS) and a Redress Support Service (RSS) respectively.
- Awareness-raising through SASS's Training services, including our Whole of School Primary Prevention of Sexual Violence Program.
- The #MeToo movement from 2017-18.
- Heightened levels of distress and anxiety experienced by individuals and families as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The #LetHerSpeak movement, which led to changes to the Tasmanian *Evidence Act* in 2019-20.
- Allegations of sexual misconduct by politicians and staff at Federal Parliament (including two allegations of rape) made in 2020-21, and associated media coverage.
- Commission of Inquiry into Tasmanian Government's Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Institutional Settings in 2021-22.

Recently, SASS's referral data was given to an external data analyst for perusal and preparation of a series of referral projection scenarios, based on trends observed over time.<sup>4</sup> The data analyst's projections were informed by the factors listed above. Of the different scenarios explored, the following scenario of approximate projected referral numbers was considered most likely:

Year	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024	2024-2025	2025-2026
Referrals	1,202	1,374	1,494	1,578	1,636

<sup>3</sup> We note that in the Final Report of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, there is a section titled 'Enhancing the capacity of specialist sexual assault support services'. Recommendation 9.6 (see p.31 of Final Report Recommendations) states that:

The Australian Government and state and territory governments should address existing specialist sexual assault service gaps by increasing funding for adult and child sexual assault services in each jurisdiction, to provide advocacy and support and specialist therapeutic treatment for victims and survivors, particularly victims and survivors of institutional child sexual abuse. Funding agreements should require and enable services to:

- be trauma-informed and have an understanding of institutional child sexual abuse
- be collaborative, available, accessible, acceptable and high quality
- use collaborative community development approaches
- provide staff with supervision and professional development.

<sup>4</sup> For full details of the referral projection scenarios please see SASS' Tasmanian State Budget 2022-23 Budget Priorities Statement.

Should this scenario prove accurate, SASS could be looking at a 36% increase in service demand over the next few years. Whilst the current increase in funding announced in the 2022 budget is very much welcomed and will support SASS to meet current demand, services require funding processes that are flexible and timely in meeting changing demand.

Specialist sexual assault support organisations lead the way in sexual violence prevention, responding to allegations of assault, and supporting survivors to recover from trauma. The new pilot Multidisciplinary Centre for sexual violence, due to commence in Tasmania in 2023, will further enhance how support services are delivered to survivors. To be effective, however, these services must be able to keep up with community demand.

We therefore recommend that the Third Action Plan outlines how funding for sexual assault support services will be adaptable and responsive to changing demand. In our view, this investment is logical and worthwhile as it will help to decrease the societal and economic costs of interpersonal violence and associated trauma in Tasmania in the longer term.

### **Recommendation**

The Third Action Plan commits to sustainable funding for sexual assault support services that is adaptable in meeting increasing program demand.

### **D. Continuation of the PAST program**

Recognising the issue of harmful sexual behaviour, the Government included the delivery of a Problem Sexual Behaviours and Sexually Abusive Behaviours program for children and young people as a key action under the Primary Prevention and Early Intervention focus. In 2021 the Tasmanian Government funded a pilot program within this area. This program has now been operating for over one year, and to date has received 120 referrals from across the state.

Whilst the program has yet to be formally evaluated (this is due to happen in 2023) anecdotal evidence from workers and families suggest that harmful sexual behaviour is decreasing in the majority of children and young people taking part in the program.

Despite challenges due to COVID-19, we have also seen positive uptake and participation in the training component of this program. Training evaluation indicates that a strong majority of participants feel more confident in understanding, identifying and responding to harmful sexual behaviour upon completion of the training.

This program is a critical strategy in both preventing and addressing sexual violence within Tasmania. It is uniquely positioned to offering primary prevention strategies as well as tertiary interventions.

### **Recommendation**

The Third Action Plan provides a commitment to addressing harmful sexual behaviour through an appropriately funded, specialised program.