

Employment - a pathway to safety, housing stability and economic independence

Shaping the future of employment services

Submission from McAuley Community Services for Women

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For many victim-survivors of family violence, employment is not simply a job outcome. It is one of the critical foundations that enables women to leave violence, secure housing, support their children, rebuild confidence and achieve long-term economic independence.

Yet women experiencing family violence continue to face substantial barriers to workforce participation. Recent research by Professor Anne Summers found that women who had experienced partner violence within the previous five years were less likely to be employed than women who had never experienced such violence (76.1% compared with 81.4%).¹

The impact was even greater for women who had experienced economic abuse, who faced an employment gap of 9.4 percentage points compared with women who had not experienced violence. Summers' analysis also found that women often reduce working hours following violence and are more likely to exit the workforce altogether. More than one third of women employed while violence was occurring reported taking time off work because of the abuse, with women taking an average of 31 days away from work following violence and workforce impacts continuing years after the violence has occurred.

These findings reflect what McAuley has observed over a decade of supporting women experiencing family violence and homelessness. Women frequently describe perpetrators actively undermining their ability to work through coercive control, economic abuse, interference with transport and childcare arrangements, stalking, harassment and ongoing legal disputes. For example, one woman described how her partner let down her car tyres so that she couldn't get to work on time. Another stole her car leaving her to transport five children to school on public transport before getting herself to work.

Employment disruption is often a direct consequence of violence rather than a lack of motivation or capacity, which is the premise underpinning job services requirements.

McAuley's experience demonstrates that women experiencing family violence are generally keen to work. Whilst some need 'job readiness' assistance, others need specific employment support that understands the realities of family violence and the long tail of coercive control, trauma, housing instability and economic abuse and works alongside them to overcome those barriers.

McAuley's central recommendation is that addressing family violence is a core component of the future employment services system. This means employment staff are trained and resourced to identify family violence and respond appropriately.

This includes establishing specialist employment pathways for victim-survivors of family violence that integrate employment assistance with family violence, housing, legal and financial support services.

Recommendation 9 of the 2023 *Rebuilding Employment Services* report calls on the Australian Government to develop, trial and implement measures to embed pre-employment and vocational supports within a person's primary human service, including mental health, homelessness and family violence services:²

- Capacity for individualised, flexible support over time
- Outreach (i.e. go to where the person is, not necessarily office based)
- Capacity for wrap around to address other issues impacting on ability to work
- Voluntary participation
- Ability to reengage if necessary

Evidence from McAuley Works demonstrates that when support is family violence and trauma-informed, relationship-based and integrated, women facing significant disadvantage can secure and sustain employment, strengthen their economic security, maintain housing and build lives free from violence.

¹ Anne Summers, "Addressing the impact of domestic violence on women's employment and education," *The Policymaker*, 18 July 2025.

² House of Representatives Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services, *Rebuilding Employment Services: Final report on Workforce Australia Employment Services, Recommendation 9*, Parliament of Australia, November 2023.

1. Introduction

McAuley works at the intersection of family violence, homelessness, mental health and economic insecurity.

For more over four decades, McAuley has supported women and children experiencing family violence and homelessness through accommodation, outreach, education and specialist support services.

In 2010, McAuley established **McAuley Works**, Australia's first employment program embedded within a specialist family violence organisation. The program was developed in direct response to women seeking support to find employment after being assessed by mainstream employment services as "not ready" to work.

McAuley's experience challenged this assumption.

Many women desperately wanted employment but were simultaneously navigating family violence risk, court proceedings, housing instability, financial abuse, sole parenting responsibilities and trauma. What they needed was not exclusion from employment services, but specialist support capable of working alongside these realities.

2. Why reform is needed

Research consistently demonstrates that financial independence is one of the key factors enabling women to leave and remain free from violent relationships.³

The 2017 McAuley Works evaluation drew on Australian research showing that four conditions are critical if women are to successfully recover from family violence:⁴

- safety
- coordinated service responses
- housing stability
- financial independence.

The consequences of violence do not end when a relationship ends. The economic and employment impacts often continue for years.

Professor Anne Summers' research found that:

- women who experienced partner violence in the previous five years were less likely to be employed than women who had not experienced violence;
- the employment gap increases significantly for women who have experienced economic abuse;
- young women reduce their hours of work following violence;
- women become less likely to work full-time over subsequent years;
- some women leave the workforce altogether following violence.

More than one-third (34.6%) of women working while partner violence was occurring reported taking time off work because of the violence, with women taking an average of 31 days away from work following the abuse.

These findings highlight an important reality: family violence is not only a safety issue. It is also a workforce participation issue, a poverty issue and a housing issue.

³ Anne Summers, *The Choice: Violence or Poverty: Domestic violence and its consequences in Australia today*, University of Technology Sydney, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.26195/3s1r-4977>.

⁴ McAuley Works Evaluation, 2017.

3. Family violence, homelessness and employment are deeply interconnected

For women experiencing family violence, barriers to employment rarely occur in isolation.

Women supported through McAuley's services frequently face a combination of:

- ongoing family violence risk
- housing instability
- economic abuse and debt
- disrupted work histories
- mental ill-health
- legal proceedings
- sole parenting responsibilities
- social isolation
- lack of access to transport
- cultural and language barriers.

National homelessness data illustrates the extent of labour market exclusion experienced by people facing housing instability.

Among Specialist Homelessness Services clients nationally, 53% of clients were unemployed when support commenced and a further 31% were not participating in the labour force. In Victoria 43.6% were unemployed and 37.7% were not participating in the labour force.⁵

Research examining homelessness and employment similarly identifies multiple intersecting barriers, including trauma, poor mental health, low confidence, disrupted education, caring responsibilities and social isolation.⁶

For victim-survivors of family violence, employment support therefore cannot be effectively separated from housing, safety, legal and recovery needs.

4. What current employment services often miss

McAuley Works was developed because women experiencing family violence repeatedly reported being told they were not ready to work whereas many of these women were highly motivated to find employment.

They were however managing complex circumstances that mainstream systems often struggled to understand, including:

- continuing coercive control, whether separated from the perpetrator or not
- intervention order proceedings;
- family law disputes;
- court attendance;
- child custody arrangements;
- emergency accommodation;
- relocation to maintain safety;
- financial abuse;
- recovery from physical and psychological trauma.

A woman relocating because a perpetrator knows her address may miss appointments.

⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Specialist homelessness services annual report 2023–24, including national data and Victoria factsheet, 2025.

⁶ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Homelessness and homelessness services, Australia's welfare, 2025.

A woman attending multiple court dates, often a systems abuse mechanism weaponised by men who use violence, may be unable to participate in scheduled employment activities.

A woman whose children have been traumatised by their experience of violence, and who are unable to attend school may be unable to go to work due to caring responsibilities

A woman whose confidence has been systematically undermined through years of coercive control may need intensive support before attending an interview.

Rather than being indicators of poor motivation, these are indicators of why employment services need to be family violence and trauma-informed and integrated.

The Rebuilding Employment Services Inquiry recognised this challenge and recommended that the Australian Government:

“develop, trial and implement measures to embed pre-employment and vocational supports within a person's primary human service, such as mental health, homelessness, or family violence services”.

McAuley's experience strongly supports this recommendation.

5. What McAuley learned through McAuley Works

McAuley Works embedded employment support directly within a specialist family violence organisation.

Employment advocates understood:

- family violence risk assessments;
- court processes;
- housing instability;
- safety planning;
- economic abuse;
- trauma and recovery;
- parenting pressures and caring responsibilities.

Women did not need to repeatedly explain their circumstances to different providers. Employment planning occurred alongside broader recovery planning.

This reduced fragmentation, minimised re-traumatisation and enabled support to adapt when circumstances changed.

5.1 Employment outcomes

35 former McAuley Works clients responded to an evaluation conducted two years after the program ceased. The evaluation found:⁷

- 49 per cent of respondents were directly assisted into employment through the program (24 of the 19 supported);
- 55 per cent secured employment following participation;
- 30 per cent maintained continuous employment after securing work;
- 63 per cent were employed at the time of follow-up

⁷ ACSO Research and Evaluation Unit, McAuley Works Evaluation 2011–12, Attachment JB-3 to the witness statement of Jocelyn Bignold, Royal Commission into Family Violence, 13 July 2015, http://rcfv.archive.royalcommission.vic.gov.au/CustomData/Exhibits/JB/WIT.0022.001.0094_R.pdf.

Importantly, every participant had experienced unemployment alongside family violence, homelessness, mental illness or a combination of these circumstances.

Women who secured employment worked an average of 23 hours per week and remained employed for an average of 102 weeks – almost two years. All but three women retained employment for more than the mandated 26 weeks.

The evaluation found that McAuley Works achieved strong employment outcomes for women facing significant and intersecting barriers to work. This was later recognised during proceedings connected to the Royal Commission into Family Violence, where Deputy Commissioner Tony Nicholson described the program's results as "quite remarkable" and "far superior" to those achieved by Commonwealth employment services for similar cohorts.

5.2 What women said worked

Participants consistently identified the most valuable aspects of the program as:

- one-to-one support;
- trusted relationships with workers;
- confidence building;
- practical assistance;
- interview preparation;
- advocacy and encouragement.

The evaluator concluded that confidence-building and personalised support were central to enabling women to overcome barriers and engage successfully in employment.

This is a critical lesson for reform.

For victim-survivors of family violence, employment success is often built on trust, confidence and recovery, not simply job matching.

5.3 A lesson from the Royal Commission

The effectiveness of McAuley Works was recognised during proceedings connected to the Royal Commission into Family Violence.

Deputy Commissioner Tony Nicholson observed:

"I will say that the results that you achieved are quite remarkable and far superior, as far as I am aware, of anything that the Commonwealth Government's employment services have achieved for similar cohorts. So it is very, very significant."

This observation remains highly relevant today.

The question is not whether women experiencing family violence can secure employment.

McAuley's evidence demonstrates they can.

The question is whether the future system is prepared to provide the specialist support required to achieve those outcomes consistently.

5.4 Employment is a housing and homelessness prevention strategy

The strongest lesson from McAuley's work is that employment outcomes cannot be viewed in isolation. Employment outcomes translate to income which in turn delivers safety, housing stability and long-term recovery.

A subsequent McAuley study examined a cohort of 49 women who had been supported through McAuley Works to better understand the relationship between employment and housing outcomes.

The findings were powerful:

- 79.5 per cent were employed;
- 56 per cent of those employed were working full-time;
- women consistently identified employment as critical to maintaining housing;
- employment was strongly linked to financial independence and the ability to remain safely housed.

Importantly, many women remained affected by family violence yet continued to identify employment as central to their long-term safety and stability, repeatedly describing employment as the pathway that allowed them to remain safely housed and avoid returning to violent relationships.

Case study: Eva's story — "I could finally breathe again"⁸

When Eva first came to McAuley, she had recently left a violent relationship and was caring for her two daughters alone. She had no job, no income, a large business debt and no family in Australia to fall back on. The violence had deeply affected her mental health and confidence. Eva later said she did not know whether she could even find "just a basic job", because she felt she had nothing left to give.

Through McAuley Works and the Restoring Financial Safety program, Eva received integrated support that addressed both her employment goals and the financial abuse that was holding her back.⁹ With legal and financial advocacy, her debt was wiped. With practical employment support, interview preparation and encouragement from her case manager, Eva began to recognise the value of her skills and experience again.

Eva went on to secure work with John Holland and has since rebuilt her career as a Quality Engineer, working on major infrastructure projects in Victoria. Employment gave her more than income. It restored confidence, stability and a sense of possibility. As Eva described it, getting the job was "the start of a new chapter" for her and her daughters: "I felt like I could finally breathe again."

The impact flowed directly to her children. With a stable income, Eva could provide opportunities they had gone without, including violin lessons for her older daughter and gymnastics for her younger daughter. Her eldest daughter, who was in Year 12 when Eva first connected with McAuley Works, finished school, went on to tertiary education and is now thriving. Her younger daughter is continuing her secondary education. Eva says the support was "life-changing" — not only for her, but for her daughters' futures.

These findings strongly suggest that employment services for victim-survivors should be viewed not solely as labour market interventions, but as an integral part of Australia's response to family violence and homelessness.

⁸ McAuley Community Services for Women, "Eva's story: 'I could finally breathe again'," <https://www.mcauley.org.au/evas-story-i-could-finally-breathe-again/>

⁹ See Westjustice, Restoring Financial Safety project information, <https://www.westjustice.org.au/restoring-financial-safety>.

5.5 Employment as a long-term safety strategy

Perhaps the most significant lesson from McAuley's work is that employment outcomes cannot be viewed in isolation.

For women experiencing family violence, employment is not simply an economic outcome. It is often the mechanism through which women achieve housing stability, financial independence and long-term, and intergenerational safety.

McAuley's research into the housing outcomes of women supported by McAuley Works found that 79.5 per cent of participants were employed and that all participants identified employment as critical to their ability to maintain housing. Women consistently linked employment to safety, financial security and freedom from homelessness.

These findings suggest that employment services should not be understood solely as workforce participation programs. For victim-survivors of family violence, employment support can also be a homelessness prevention, housing sustainment and recovery intervention.

Future employment service design should therefore recognise and measure outcomes beyond job placement, including economic security, housing stability and progress towards long-term independence.

One participant stated:

"Securing employment is a lifeline for me and my family. It would mean that we would be financially stable and there would not be that constant threat of not being able to pay the rent and again becoming homeless."

Another explained:

"I am still being watched and controlled. I feel that because I have no financial security that I won't be able to continue to live in my own home, so I am constantly living with the fear of being homeless. Having a secure job would take so much pressure off me. To have financial security again would be a dream come true. Living on Centrelink is not living."

A third woman reflected:

"Having the support of McAuley Works enabled me to stay in my home and find a job."

6. Reform principles

McAuley recommends that the future employment services system be guided by five principles that recognise employment support as part of prevention, recovery and long-term safety for victim-survivors:

1. **Safety first** - Employment participation cannot be separated from safety, and must be violence informed.
2. **Integrated, flexible and person-centred support** - Women experiencing family violence should not be required to repeatedly disclose traumatic experiences across multiple service systems. Coordinated, integrated service delivery improves engagement and enables employment support to be responsive to safety, housing and recovery needs.
3. **Employment is a prevention and recovery outcome** - Employment contributes to safety, housing stability, wellbeing and economic independence. It should be recognised as part of preventing homelessness and supporting long-term recovery.
4. **Specialist supports for specialist needs** - Victim-survivors should have access to specialist providers with family violence expertise.
5. **Progress matters** - Progress should not be reduced to a single 26-week continuous employment outcome¹⁰, particularly where that benchmark determines provider payment. For victim-survivors, meaningful progress may include re-engagement with work, increased confidence, safe participation, increased hours, improved financial security, maintaining employment through periods of instability or being assisted into a second or subsequent employment.

7. Recommendations

McAuley recommends that the future employment services system move beyond a narrow focus on job placement and recognise employment support as part of a broader safety, housing and recovery response for victim-survivors of family violence.

1. **Recognise family violence as a significant barrier to employment within assessment, triage and support processes.**
Future employment services should explicitly recognise family violence, economic abuse, housing instability and trauma as factors that affect workforce participation. Assessment processes should be designed to identify these barriers safely and sensitively, without requiring women to repeatedly disclose traumatic experiences or demonstrate “job readiness” in ways that ignore their safety and recovery needs.
2. **Establish specialist employment pathways for victim-survivors of family violence.**
Victim-survivors should have access to specialist employment support that is embedded within, or closely connected to, family violence and homelessness services. This would enable employment planning to occur alongside safety planning, housing support, financial counselling, legal assistance and recovery work, rather than as a separate or disconnected service response.
3. **Fund specialist providers with demonstrated expertise in family violence, homelessness and employment support.**
Employment support for victim-survivors should be delivered by providers with the skills, relationships and service models needed to work safely with women experiencing family violence. Funding should support flexible, relationship-based practice, including outreach, one-

¹⁰ The 26-week outcome has long been used as a payment and performance point in Commonwealth employment services – as references in Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, Employment services reform, <https://www.dewr.gov.au/employment-services-reform>. McAuley is not aware of evidence establishing 26 weeks' continuous employment as a validated measure of success for victim-survivors of family violence.

to-one support, advocacy with employers and the capacity to remain engaged with women over time.

4. Make participation voluntary, flexible and able to respond to changing circumstances.

Women experiencing family violence should not be penalised when safety, court matters, housing instability, parenting responsibilities or trauma affect their capacity to participate in appointments or employment activities. Future service design should allow women to pause, reduce or re-engage with support as circumstances change, without losing access to help.

The same principle should apply to assessment and intake. Women experiencing family violence should not be turned away or assessed as not 'job ready' simply because they are presenting with family violence-related issues.

5. Measure outcomes beyond job placement.

Funding and performance frameworks should not rely on a rigid 26-week continuous employment benchmark as the primary trigger for provider payment. While employment retention is important, there is no clear evidence that 26 weeks is an appropriate or sufficient measure of success for victim-survivors of family violence. For women whose work patterns may be interrupted by safety risks, court processes, housing instability, parenting responsibilities or trauma recovery, such a benchmark can create perverse incentives and fail to recognise genuine progress toward economic security and independence.

6. Invest in specialist workforce capability across the employment services system.

All employment services should have access to training and guidance on family violence, trauma-informed practice, economic abuse, coercive control, safe disclosure and referral pathways. This capability should be embedded in service standards, commissioning and quality assurance, rather than treated as optional professional development.

7. Recognise employment as a homelessness prevention and Safe at Home intervention.

Employment support should be incorporated into broader family violence and homelessness responses, including Safe at Home approaches. For many women, the ability to earn an income is central to maintaining housing, avoiding homelessness, supporting children and remaining free from violence. Future employment service design and evaluation should therefore include housing and safety outcomes.

Women experiencing family violence achieve better employment outcomes when employment support is integrated, trauma-informed and delivered alongside the services they already trust.
