

SUSTAINABLE TRANSFORMATIVE EMPLOYMENT PATHWAYS (STEP)

Final Evaluation Report

2019 - 2023

PREPARED BY :



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

WIRE acknowledges that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the traditional custodians of country across Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples maintain their wisdom and rich culture—the oldest continuous culture on the planet—despite having experienced genocide, dispossession and colonisation. We recognise their continuing connection to land, waters and culture and pay our respects to their Elders, past and present. Sovereignty has never been ceded. This land always was, and always will be Aboriginal land.



PROJECT ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Supporting family violence victim-survivors to find employment through the **Sustainable and Transformative Employment Pathways (STEP)** project has been a collective effort over 4 years. WIRE gratefully acknowledges the contribution of the Commonwealth Bank of Australia (CommBank), who have supported the project through Commbank Next Chapter, a program designed to respond to family violence and financial abuse for their customers and the community.

Thank you to the victim-survivors and human resources professionals who co-designed the project - your guidance was invaluable. Thank you to Elyse McInerney, Ellie Cooper, Bree Allingham-MacLaren and Tayla Hansen for leading and delivering this worthwhile project, and to all the other WIRE staff who contributed knowledge, skills and ideas to its successful delivery and evaluation. Thank you to the job coaches and guest speakers who generously provided their time and expertise to the Job Seeker Program. Thank you to the workplaces and professionals who have contributed so far to the development of standards designed to create safe and inclusive workplaces for victim-survivors of family violence. Thank you to The Centre for Multicultural Policy and Program Evaluation for capturing WIRE's journey and enhancing the robust monitoring and evaluation framework for the project.

Finally, we thank the STEP Job Seeker Program participants, who generously shared their knowledge and insights to evaluate the effectiveness of this project. Your contribution will help build better financial independence interventions in the future.



Introduction

Family violence is a complex and pervasive social problem

In 2021/22, 5606 women (an average of 15 women/day) were hospitalised due to family and domestic violence [Australian Institute for Health and Welfare (2022)] and 27% of women have experienced violence, emotional abuse, or economic abuse by a cohabitating partner since the age of 15 [Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2021-22) Personal Safety Index]. When people have disabilities, live in rural and remote regions, or socioeconomically disadvantaged areas, have not completed Year 12, are migrants or refugees, are from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, identify as LGBTIQ+, or have histories of mental illness, substance abuse or homelessness, the rates of family violence against them increase.

In close to 50% of intimate partner relationships where there has been emotional abuse, women also experience financial abuse. Financial hardship and insecurity caused by financial abuse are significant barriers to victim-survivors ending abusive relationships. [University of New South Wales (UNSW) Gendered Violence Research Network, 'Understanding Economic and Financial Abuse in Intimate Partner Relationships', CommBank (Sydney, Oct. 2020), 32, [unsw-report-1-financial-abuse-ipv.pdf \(commbank.com.au\)](https://www.commbank.com.au/financial-abuse-ipv-report)]

Financial independence makes it possible for victim-survivors to leave a relationship. It makes it possible for them to obtain safe and stable housing or independently maintain their existing home, buy groceries, pay for transport and utilities, and engage private lawyers to negotiate child custody and financial

settlement or cover the costs of trauma counselling. It also enables them to move beyond survival, to building sustainable wellbeing.

Achieving financial independence is critical to victim-survivors' recovery. Finding and sustaining appropriate paid work is central to this. However, family violence victim-survivors encounter a range of barriers to gaining and maintaining appropriate paid work. These include the ongoing and direct impacts of family violence, but also includes being employed in workplaces designed on the presumption that workers will be men, and that employees' caring duties or personal circumstances (such as being victim-survivors) will not impact their work performance. Attitudes are also, too often, a significant barrier including victim-blaming, and a lack of understanding about the ongoing social, emotional and psychological impacts of family violence.

Approaches are needed that both acknowledge the unique barriers victim-survivors experience and support them to overcome them, while simultaneously working with employers to incorporate an understanding of family violence and its impacts into their policies and processes. And equally the support to create inclusive workplaces where victim-survivors can be constructive and productive contributors.

The overall project goal is to improve access to job opportunities for victim-survivors and enhance job retention by building the capacity of workplaces.



PROGRAM DESIGN:

In 2019, WIRE established an innovative project designed to assist family violence victim-survivors to gain and maintain paid work: the Sustainable and Transformative Employment Pathways (STEP) project. While many job seeker programs are focussed on addressing the barriers that victim-survivors uniquely encounter while job seeking, STEP created an opportunity to develop a more effective and supportive program, using best practice approaches drawn from specialist family violence work.

WIRE co-designed the project with family violence victim-survivors from a range of backgrounds, as well as human resources (HR) professionals.

Co-design creates relationships based on mutual trust and respect, enabling shared understanding of the problem (and solutions) through acknowledging and valuing the expertise victim-survivors bring.

Perspectives and ideas are shared and negotiated, enabling all to learn and develop and actively participate in making program decisions.

Best practice approaches for working with victim-survivors of family violence were also embedded into the program design:

- Trauma-informed practice
- Strengths-based practice
- Intersectional feminism
- Use of a village-of-support-type

This co-design process identified what meaningful and appropriate employment is, what the key barriers are, and strategies to address these barriers.

Strategies included the STEP job seeker program model of a series of workshops (a mix of online and in-person) covering specific topics such as developing financial capability skills and job preparation skills scaffolded by 1-1 mentoring from job coaches. On the employer side, standards for victim-survivor inclusive workplaces, plus capability-building tools and training were also identified strategies.



Figure 1 - Strategies for working with employers and victim-survivors to reduce and overcome barriers to victim-survivors gaining and maintaining employment from STEP Project: CO Design Learning Paper .

See the '[STEP Background Knowledge Paper April 2023 - Effectively Supporting Victim-Survivors to Find Employment after Family Violence](#)' by Bree Allingham-MacLaren for a discussion of these concepts and how they were applied in the STEP program.



STEP PROJECT EVALUATION QUESTIONS:

The evaluation of any project is essential to determine its value as an investment of time and resources, and for social research especially the impact on participants. The following evaluation questions were posed in the STEP program across 3 group cohorts:

1

Do victim-survivors achieve meaningful and appropriate employment?



2

Do they feel more in control of their financial situation & optimistic about their financial wellbeing?

3

Do they have the skills, knowledge and support needed to confidently seek work and receive resources, training and skill development to support job seeking and work preparedness?



4

How well did the STEP job seeker program address the fundamental 2 trauma and context of victim-survivors and address their strengths, needs and aspirations?

5

Were the program goals achieved?



This next section details the outcomes achieved against the project evaluation questions from across the 3 cohorts of the STEP job seeker program.

Outcomes



Do victim-survivors achieve meaningful and appropriate employment?

Cohort	Period	Participants recruited	Graduates	Employed at end	Job coaches
2021	October 2020 – June 2021	19	11	10	10
2022	Nov 2021 – June 2022	13	7	9	11
2023	July – December 2023	18	12	4	6
Total		50	30	23	27

Across the three cohorts,



76% of STEP graduates achieved employment.

Many mainstream employment readiness programs achieve **30–40%** employment rates for participants. The Victorian Government’s targeted Jobs Victoria Employment Network (JVEN) initiative ran over the same period as STEP and achieved a mean job placement rate of **41%**.

While **76%** of participants gained employment, others also re-engaged in meaningful activities such as commencing study or volunteering. For example, in the 2023 cohort, 1 participant started study and 3 begun volunteering, both activities recognised as employment pathways. This highlights that the STEP job seeker program was very successful at supporting participants on their journey to financial independence.

Some participants’ employment could be described as ‘survival’ jobs only – giving them income to support their grocery and housing costs. However, while not providing long term sustainable income, these roles did provide current experience and often the confidence to transition to meaningful and appropriate roles in the future.

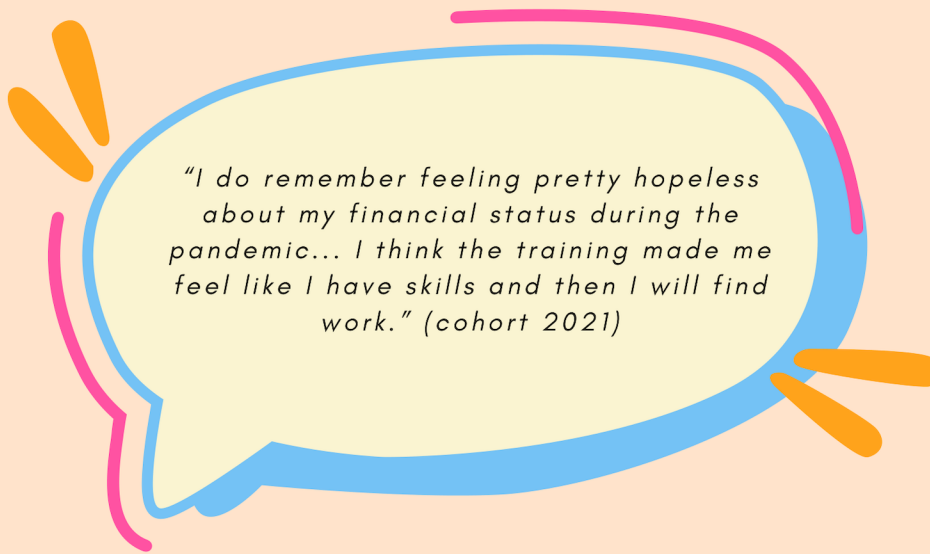
It should be noted that retention rates of employment were not part of this evaluation.

As systemic and workplace barriers significantly impact how receptive or inclusive a workplace is to victim-survivors, the employer side strategies identified in the co-design process becomes relevant, and are discussed in the Recommendations section below.

2

Do victim-survivors feel more in control of their financial situation & optimistic about their financial wellbeing?

Financial independence can assist a person to escape or recover from family violence; consequently, if participants feel they are improving their financial situation or financial wellbeing, then they feel less at risk of financial hardship and are more able to make decisions about their lives.



Identified as essential during the original co-design stage, financial literacy training was embedded into the job seeker program to meet that need and build resilience. A workshop from the jobseeker program was devoted to this, with guest speakers from the Good Sheppard Financial Independence Hub presenting on financial literacy and financial considerations when starting work.

All participants in the 2023 cohort reported either agreeing or strongly agreeing that the workshop's content was useful and increased their knowledge.



In the 2023 post-program survey, 75% of respondents reported that they feel more optimistic about their financial future. This is consistent with previous cohorts where 88% agreed or strongly agreed that they feel more optimistic about their financial future after completing the STEP program.

Given the economic environmental impacts of when the STEP program ran (COVID disruption and interest rates and cost of living increases), this outcome is especially pleasing to observe.

3

Do victim-survivors have the skills, knowledge and support needed to confidently seek work and receive resources, training and skill development to support job seeking and work preparedness?



From the 2023 cohort,



87.5% of the post-program survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the STEP job seeker program provided useful skills and knowledge for their job seeking and work preparedness. Also, all felt STEP built confidence in their existing skills, knowledge and experiences for their job seeking journey. These rates are higher than the first 2 cohorts (**50%** and **75%** respectively) and reflect the improvements made to the program following earlier reviews.

The combination of a defined schedule of topics delivered by skilled co-facilitators and guest speakers in online workshops interspersed with curated face-to-face group sessions and 1-1 job coaching meant participants knew what to expect at each stage. That way, they could concentrate on the content, receive resources, and training, as well as practice building friendships again and *'trust [their] ability to talk to other people'*, [Quote from a 2021 respondent.]

STEP's program design model builds a safe space for participants to share their experiences and explore strategies to support skill development. This was achieved by arranging activities that enabled participants to gradually, and at their own rate, engage with each other and overcome the sense of social isolation that frequently accompanies family violence.

In the post-program survey from the first 2 cohorts combined, **75%** reported a sense of social connection resulting from the STEP program, and **62.5%** reported the same in the 2023 group.

Another aspect of the program design, the use of volunteer job coaches, was effective in reinforcing skills development and building confidence. **75%** of participants from cohorts 1 & 2 found the skills, knowledge and support the job coaches provided useful, with **88%** of 2023 participants also agreeing or strongly agreeing with the value of the job coaches for their work preparedness journey.



Usefulness was utilised as a measure of participants' perception of the STEP program content and its ability to meet participant needs. The following table identifies the most highly ranked aspects of the program by client perceived usefulness across all three cohorts.

Session topic	Useful	Very useful	Total
Identifying values & setting goals	8	4	12
Safe & strategic LinkedIn use	8	3	11
STEP program introduction	5	5	10
Writing job applications	4	5	9
Identifying skills, capabilities, and interests	5	4	9
Where to look for work	6	3	9
Writing & tailoring CVs	7	2	9
Preparing for an interview	5	3	8

The inherent logic of co-design ensured that the job seeker program met the diverse needs of victim-survivors, whatever their intersecting barriers were. The 1-1 job coaching and weekly group workshops with defined topics were chosen to focus on common employment barrier causal factors.

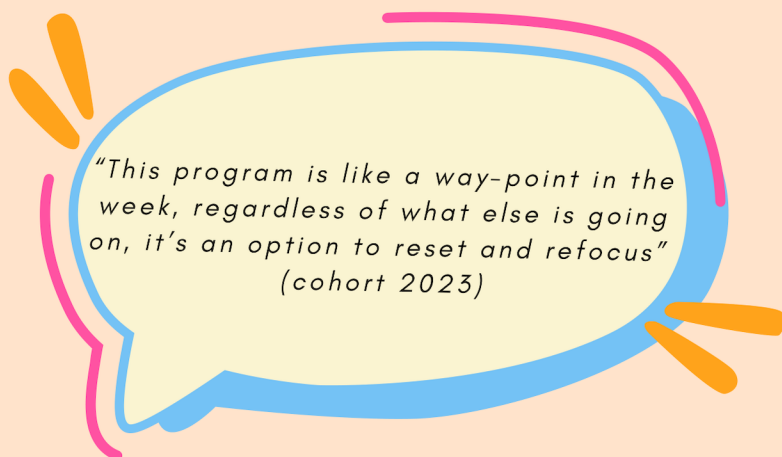


The topics were well-received and 85% of participants felt their unique needs and aspirations were addressed in the STEP program, reflecting the strengths-based approach taken.

Change in Design

The original co-design process called for in-person workshops, but this quickly switched to mostly online due to COVID restrictions in 2020-2022. It was decided to continue this pattern in 2023 to encourage non-metropolitan residents to participate. Six of the 2023 cohort (**33%** of those recruited) lived 45 km or more from Melbourne's CBD.

Interestingly, 4 of them (2/3) gained employment or commenced volunteering during the STEP program. This may demonstrate the value of investing in employment preparation programs outside of metropolitan areas.



4

How well did the STEP job seeker program address the fundamental trauma and context of victim-survivors and address their strengths, needs, and aspirations?

There are 6 well-established principles that are considered best practice when designing trauma-aware projects and programs. These are:

1. **Safety** should be supported to feel physically, emotionally, and psychologically safe
2. **Trustworthiness and transparency:** participants need to feel a sense of trustworthiness and transparency with program providers
3. **Peer support:** participants need to have access to peers, to share experiences in a safe way
4. **Collaboration and mutuality:** participants can and are expected to contribute to the activities
5. **Empowerment, voice, and choice:** participants have control over their participation
6. **Cultural, historical, and gender** issues are considered.

The STEP job seeker program included all these principles, evidenced by feedback from participants across all cohorts. Two-thirds of each cohort's post-program survey reported agreeing or strongly agreeing that they felt **safe** in the learning environment.

Peer support and social connections are valuable resources to draw on when responding to the trauma victim-survivors have experienced. As discussed previously, across all cohorts' post-program surveys, 71% of respondents reported a sense of social connection following the STEP program. Peer support was observed by STEP facilitators during small break-out activities followed by whole-group discussions. This order led to participants engaging more, demonstrably supporting each other and connecting more. The content delivery was revised to incorporate more activities in this format.



Frequent feedback reinforced that peer-based sessions were also useful to practice how to **safely share** victim-survivors' stories and experiences without experiencing or creating distress - valuable for **workplace preparation**.

Job coaches received training in trauma-informed practice, strengths-based, and intersectional feminism to assist their coaching role. All coaches across all the cohorts reported that WIRE's training and capacity-building community of practice supported their role, helping with self-care, clarifying boundaries, and knowing where and how to refer participants for specialist support. This is especially important given the complex circumstances victim-survivors experience.

Participants came to the STEP program for a variety of reasons. While each had unique circumstances and backgrounds, they shared some common needs and aspirations:

Anxiety about being back in a workplace
Support provided along the way for what comes up during the program

To build confidence
To gain financial independence so they can leave a relationship where there is family violence
Have been in jobs they didn't enjoy, or which weren't appropriate for their skill set, for the sake of being employed
Being part of a community of people who've been through similar experiences
Need a targeted approach to job seeking and guidance

Want to find employment that's suitable for their experience and skills
Feel they don't have time to waste due to the stage of life they're in
Female empowerment

Have been unable to work for a long period due to visa restrictions
Have been in jobs they didn't enjoy, or which weren't appropriate for their skill set, for the sake of being employed
New to the country and the job market is different here

Want to feel excited about working
Need to build financial stability
Being part of a community of people who've been through similar experiences

Don't know what job to do next or where to start in terms of deciding on a career path
Being part of a community of people who've been through similar experiences


Have been out of paid work for a long time
Looking forward to discovering and being their authentic self

The co-design process ensured that victim-survivors' needs were met.

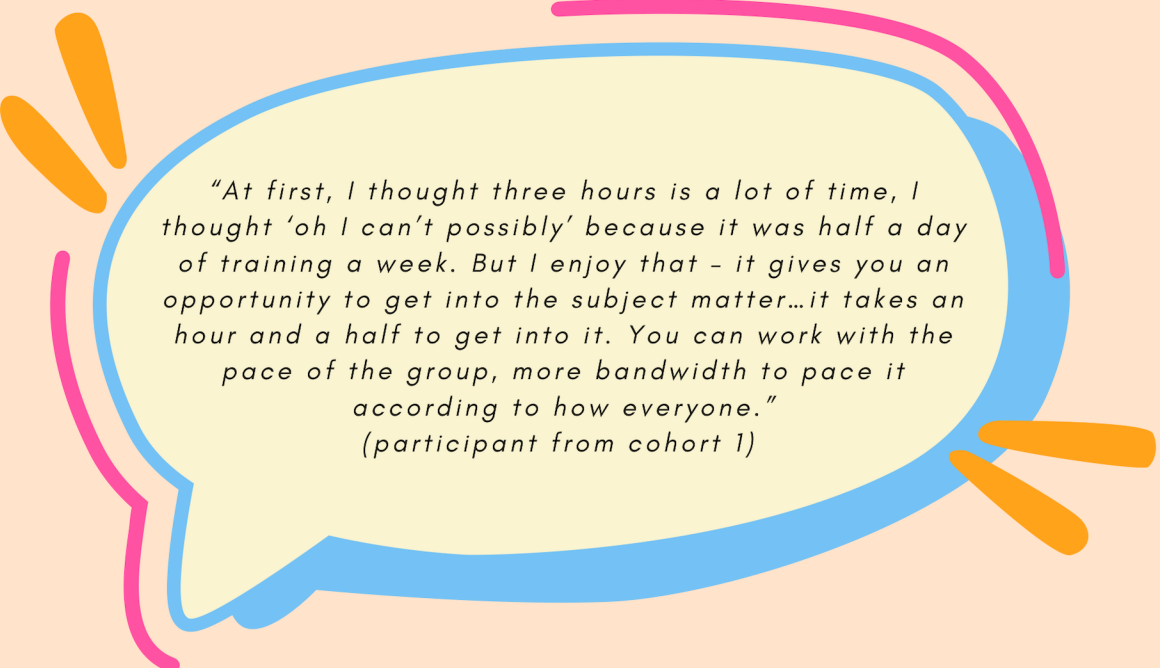


As an example, **85%** of the second cohort reported agreeing or strongly agreeing that their needs and aspirations were addressed by the program, confirming WIRE's trauma-informed practice.

Across all cohorts, 50% of post-program respondents reporting accessing other support services. This demonstrates an increase in confidence and optimism for participants and willingness to re-engage with the social services and community sector, vital following the social isolation of family violence.



"I am very grateful to have been able to participate in the STEP program and the validation, support, information and skills have been invaluable at the stage I am at in my post separation journey."
- Participant



*"At first, I thought three hours is a lot of time, I thought 'oh I can't possibly' because it was half a day of training a week. But I enjoy that - it gives you an opportunity to get into the subject matter...it takes an hour and a half to get into it. You can work with the pace of the group, more bandwidth to pace it according to how everyone."
(participant from cohort 1)*

5

Were the program goals achieved?

The overall goal for the STEP project was to improve access to job opportunities for victim-survivors and enhance job retention by building the capacity of workplaces. The job seeker program goals were for victim-survivors to build financial independence, gain employment, increase confidence, skills, knowledge and work preparedness, scaffolded by increased social connection and peer support for sustainable outcomes.



- **76% of graduates gaining employment**
- **75% or more reporting increased optimism about their financial future.**
- **87.5% reported increased skills, knowledge & work preparedness,**
- **75% social connection ...the answer is YES.**

Many participants noted in feedback that the skills and confidence they have gained in this program will continue to support them in the future, as they aim to build their career and apply for future roles, pointing to the STEP program being a sustainable intervention.

Building on WIRE's co-design approach, participants were invited to act as an advisory group following the evaluation of each year's program. They helped review initial evaluation findings, sense checking validity, accuracy and fairness from their perspective. This reinforced participants' agency and empowerment (their opinions matter) , as well as encouraging them to practice expressing their ideas.

An integral part of the best practice 'village of support' approach used in the STEP job seeker program was the complementary role of job coaches. The majority of participants found the support offered by their job coach valuable and beneficial, working with someone with job

seeking and employment knowledge, skills and experience to further explore and practice what they had learned during workshops.

As a separate unintended outcome, job coaches reported that their practice has improved post-STEP program, with them now being more client-led, respecting clients' knowledge and own life expertise, as well as taking time to listen to clients' stories. Gaining an understanding of gender diversity and the impacts of family violence has also enhanced their skill set.

Overall, to create economic security for women and gender-diverse people, the STEP job seeker program has given insight into how important it is for victim-survivors to participate in wrap-around intensive employment preparedness programs on their pathway to financial independence & recovery. Whilst recognising STEP is a resource-intensive approach, the results achieved appear to reflect the effectiveness of this approach.

About WIRE:

WIRE's purpose is to be a trusted source, supporter, changemaker and advocate for women and gender-diverse people. We have applied the gender lens across our 40 years of serving the community.

At WIRE, our aim is to generate opportunities for change by creating self-awareness and self-reflection in systems contributing to gender inequality to break the cycle of trauma-responses on individual as well as systemic levels and help find sustainable solutions for creating gender equitable social systems.

To achieve our purpose, we work with individuals, organisations and systems to create possibilities for change in gender and financial equity through information sharing, capacity-building and advocacy.



RECOMMENDATIONS

The Sustainable and Transformative Employment Pathways (STEP) project is a demonstration of what successful interventions for victim survivors of family violence can look like. Of course, all evaluation should include opportunities for improvement or enhancement in a future program. This section highlights our key recommendations.



RECOMMENDATION

Six month follow up of STEP participants

This evaluation has demonstrated that the STEP job seeker program has been effective in meeting its goals for victim-survivors of family violence. Anecdotally, throughout the STEP project, however, we heard that victim-survivors found it hard to maintain employment when also dealing with legal, housing, or custody issues as well as psychological and emotional distress that resulted from the family violence. The project design and evaluation did not call for follow up of participants after the intervention, so it is not possible to judge employment retention levels.

1

RECOMMENDATION

Further work on inclusive employment practices and the development of Standards of Practice should continue.

We note that the original co-design process called for employer-side interventions too, policies and protocols that support victim-survivors scaffolded by awareness and behaviour change training.

2

RECOMMENDATION

Further work is undertaken to explore scalability of the model

A question for future employment preparedness interventions: how to scale up the successful STEP model but reduce the cost of program? As an intensive program, it required significant resources, but was rewarded with significant results. We have proved that a mix of online and in-person interactions is effective to create safe spaces for victim-survivors to share their experiences and build capacity. This model of mostly online interactions could be used to expand to regional areas that have limited services.

3



RECOMMENDATIONS

4

RECOMMENDATION

Support the capacity of employment services to identify and respond to victim survivors of family violence.

It was noted in discussions with job coaches that there is a need to build the capacity in employment services to identify and respond appropriately to victim-survivors of family violence. Discussions have commenced with 2 employment services about how to build awareness at scale of the advantages of using trauma-informed and strengths-based approaches with job seekers who are also victim-survivors of family violence.



5

RECOMMENDATION

Include employment-generating activities such as commencing volunteering or studying as a measure of work preparedness.

This would enable future projects to ensure a more comprehensive evaluation of the effectiveness of the chosen model of intervention and may help reflect the needs and levels of readiness amongst program participants

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