

FACT SHEET

CHECKING IN WITH TENANTS YOU ARE CONCERNED ABOUT, OR SUSPECT ARE LIVING WITH DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE DURING LOCKDOWNS

As a housing provider there will be tenants who you know are living with domestic and family violence. There will also be new cases you become aware of as the COVID-19 social isolation practice progresses. We recommend that before contacting any tenants, you create a plan for how this can be done as safely as possible so that your intervention doesn't unintentionally increase a perpetrator's use of abuse to punish or further isolate a victim/survivor.

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So that this is carried out in a safe way, the following tips and a suggested script in order to minimise the risk that the perpetrator becomes aware of your intentions is provided. If the perpetrator becomes aware of what you are doing, this runs the risk of making things far worse for the victim/survivor and any children in the household. The safest way to undertake this check in is face to face with the tenant. However, given the safe work practices established as part of the response to COVID 19, there will be occasions where this check in needs to be undertaken via phone contact.

TIPS FOR MAKING SAFE CONTACT BY TELEPHONE

Where possible, contact the tenant's mobile number and avoid landlines.

Ask to speak to the person you are concerned about and if questioned why, say where you are calling from and explain that you are carrying out a courtesy call and asking to speak with the first named person on your records for the household.

If they are not available, ask if there is a better time to call back. If they say no, you could try to ask some basic questions to avoid raising suspicion. This might help you gather information about the victim/survivor. For example:

- Are you self-isolating? Is anyone in your household considered to be in the high risk/vulnerable category?
- Of those in your household, has anyone shown any symptoms?
- Is there any COVID-19 related support that you need that we can look into for you?

If you do get to speak to the person you are concerned about, it is important to check if it is safe to talk openly about your concerns.

It will not be safe for victim/survivors when they are in proximity of their perpetrator as this can increase their risk of harm if the perpetrator becomes aware or suspicious.

You should start the conversation by using a generic reason for making the call, which reduces the likelihood of raising suspicions:

“Social distancing is likely to negatively affect some people which is why we are contacting all of our tenants to check in on them and to make sure they are safe and have what they need”.



Before expressing any concerns about domestic and family violence, you should ask whether anyone is in the home/room with them and if it is safe for them to talk. For anyone experiencing domestic and family violence, this gives them control over the conversation and an opportunity to say no and to keep safe.

It is important that callers do not press victim/survivors for information as some perpetrators will monitor phone calls as part of their abuse (i.e. by listening in or making sure all calls are on speaker phone), which will prevent the victim/survivor from being able to speak freely. In this instance, consider whether it is possible to implement a monitoring call regularly.

OFFERING A HELPFUL RESPONSE IF IT IS NOT SAFE TO TALK

If the person says no when you ask whether if it is safe to talk, it is recommended that you offer information about your opening hours so that they can call back if they get a chance.

You could suggest that they call back when they are on their own, when alone at home or when they are out for a walk or buying food. If you can, find out when the perpetrator is likely to be out.

If you have identified that this person is someone who you are concerned about and will want to make regular check in calls with them, ask them if they would like you to call back and what day and time would suit them for you to call them back. Make sure you follow through with this.

OFFERING A HELPFUL RESPONSE ONCE YOU HAVE ESTABLISHED IT IS SAFE TO TALK

At the outset, establish a code word or sentence, which the victim/survivor can say to indicate that it is no longer safe to talk and they can then end the call. You could say:

“If your situation changes and it is no longer safe to talk, please say, “thanks but I’m not interested” and I will know you have to go. I will then try to call you back at another time.”

It is recommended that you gather the following information:

- Ask how you can safely check in with them next. Are there times when the perpetrator is out of the house? Is it safe to send text messages?
- Find out what the person is frightened of and what they are worried might happen.
- Ask if the victim/survivor has any concerns about their children (if applicable) or other people living in the household.
- Check if they are safe to remain at home and if they feel safe to call 000 in an emergency.

- Find out what they want to happen and want to do next.
- Let them know what essential shops will remain open as they may become safe places to escape to during an emergency. This includes food retailers, pharmacies, hardware stores, corner shops, petrol stations, shops in hospitals, post offices, and banks.
- Check if it is safe to offer them information about specialist domestic and family violence services. Check if it safe for them to store the state or territory domestic violence help line phone number or 1800 RESPECT details, which they can do under a different name, like a hair salon or GP practice. If not, explain that 1800 RESPECT is an easy number to remember because after 1800 the numbers spell out the word RESPECT minus the T).

OFFERING ASSISTANCE

The victim/survivor may not be aware of what options are available and it may not be possible for them to investigate their options so they may need your help to do this. They may also be limited in their ability to access other services for help while in isolation.

In this instance, you could offer to:

- **Provide** them with information about the state or territory domestic violence help line, 1800 RESPECT or their local domestic and family violence crisis shelter.
- **Check** if they need assistance with repairs, lock changes and/or safety modifications. (Prior to making the phone call, establish what safety modifications your organisation can organise and pay for). Inform the victim/survivor that hardware stores are considered an essential shop and safety items can be purchased. Please note that adding additional security measures may not be recommended where the alleged perpetrator is living in the home, however, installing a lock for one room (i.e. bathroom) could be organised.
- **Speak** to your manager if rent arrears or antisocial behaviour are a factor so that systems are identified with a DFV flag and punitive actions are not taken against victim/survivors.
- **Check** if a rent payment break or implementing the minimal rent policy for a short period can be provided*.

*It is best to check this with your manager prior to calling the victim/survivor.

SUPPORTING STAFF AND COLLEAGUES

Domestic and family violence may also be experienced by staff and colleagues. Managers should take appropriate steps to ensure that their team members are supported whilst in self-isolation.