**Dr Marisa Paterson MLA**

MEMBER FOR MURRUMBIDGEE

**MEDIA RELEASE**

**21 August 2023**

**Open Letter, Call for a specialist sexual offences court in the ACT**

In Australia and the ACT, sexual violence is a pervasive issue that research evidence suggests is one of the most under-reported crimes, it is under-prosecuted, and results in very low conviction rates. “There is substantial awareness these days of the challenges that victim-survivors face in accessing justice processes, we need to turn that awareness into action, and address the systemic change that is needed. One idea that should be firmly on the table in these discussions is a specialist sexual offences court” states Dr Paterson.

Today, ACT Labor MLA Dr Marisa Paterson, alongside major ACT advocates including front line responders to sexual violence, are accelerating calls through an open letter to the Chief Minister calling for systemic change in the form of a specialist sexual offence court to be established in the ACT.

“I believe here in the ACT we have the opportunity to be nation-leading in how our justice system addresses sexual offences. The status quo is not sufficient. There is increasing international evidence highlighting the benefits of a specialist, trauma-informed, court in progressing justice”, said Dr Paterson.

The latest statistics from the ACT show that there were over 500 reports of sexual offences to the police in the 2021-2022 reporting period. Very few of those cases ever progress to the courts. Those cases in the ACT that did progress to court, saw a 7% conviction rate. Dr Paterson states “These statistics exacerbate community concern that our system is failing victim-survivors. In saying that, these statistics are a marked improvement from previous years, reflecting the substantial work that the ACT Government has implemented as a result of the *Listen. Take Action to Prevent, Believe and Heal* report published in December 2021. Exploration of a specialist sexual offence court in the ACT was also an agreed recommendation of the report. However, there is an urgency to do more”

Building on the *Listen. Take Action to Prevent, Believe and Heal* report and the Sofronoff Board of Inquiry report recommendations, the supporters of this open letter look to instill hope and push the ACT Government to think big picture on systemic reforms.

Dr. Paterson suggests that ‘a specialist court is not the sole answer to addressing this violence in our community – for that, there needs to be whole-of-community education driving cultural and attitudinal change. However, for those victims that do seek to pursue justice through the criminal system, we need to provide a system that does not exacerbate trauma, disempowerment and entrench violence against women, rather, present a system where justice can be fairly sought”.

The open letter recognises the diversity in experience of survivors of sexual assault, and recognizes sectors of the community for example Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women with a disability and gender divers people from the LGBTQIA+ community that experience substantially higher rates of assault, to be include in any process of consultation, design, implementation, and evaluation of a specialised court in the ACT, in line with community expectations.

Specialist court programs have been implemented by other countries such as South Africa, New Zealand and Scotland. All these case studies note that a key paradigm of the reform is the requirement of those in the justice system that respond to sexual offences, to be trauma-informed specialists in the field. Evaluations of these courts suggest that this enables timely progression of sexual offence cases through courts, and court processes and environments that don’t re-traumatise victims.

Dr Paterson MLA, alongside a host of ACT organisations including, the Canberra Rape Crisis Centre, Domestic Violence Crisis Service, YWCA, Meridian ACT, A Gender Agenda, Toora Women Inc., Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body, Women with Disabilities ACT and National Womens Safety Alliance have handed over an open letter to the Chief Minister, Attorney General, and Deputy Chief Minister urging them to explore the establishment of a specialist sexual offences court in the ACT.

Supporting quote from Frances Crimmins, CEO, YWCA Canberra

"YWCA Canberra welcomes this call by Dr Paterson and other advocates in sector to establish a specialist sexual offences court in the ACT.  This should not be controversial. The *Listen. Take Action to Prevent, Believe and Heal* report – which YWCA Canberra contributed to as a member of the Prevention Working Group, found that faith in the justice system among survivors was poor. Delays in proceedings meant the lives of many were effectively put on hold for years. Significantly, the Report recommended that steps be taken to investigate a specialist court for survivors of sexual violence that will fast-track their matters. This is a call for the ACT Government to follow through on that recommendation."

**Media Conference** – 9.45am, Members entrance, ACT Legislative Assembly.

**In attendance:**

Chrystina Stanford – CEO, Canberra Rape Crisis Centre

Sue Webeck – CEO, Domestic Violence Crisis Centre

Dr Vik Fraser, Executive Director, A Gender Agenda

YWCA

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body

Women with Disabilities ACT

**Statement ends**

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If these conversations bring up difficult feelings. Please feel free to take breaks as needed, and to contact free and confidential counselling services as needed.

**Service:** Canberra Rape Crisis Centre (CRCC)  
**Who can access:** all people impacted by sexual violence  
**Phone:**(02) 6247 2525  
**Available:** 7am – 11pm, 7 days a week.  
**Website:** crcc.org.au

**Service:** Domestic Violence Crisis Service (DVCS)  
**Who can access**: all people impacted by domestic and family violence  
**Phone:** 6280 0900  
**Available:** 24-hours a day, 7 days a week  
**Website:** dvcs.org.au

**Service:** Victim Support ACT (VSACT):  
**Who can access:** anyone who is a victim of a crime committed in the ACT is eligible for support or information from Victim Support ACT  
**Phone:** 1800 8222 72 or (02) 6205 2022   
**Available:** Business hours, Monday – Friday    
**Website:**[www.victimsupport.act.gov.au](https://www.victimsupport.act.gov.au/)