‘It’s got to stop’: Minister’s final message for men of NSW

In her final months as the state’s first ever Minister for the Prevention of Domestic and Family Violence and Sexual Assault, Pru Goward has a bit to say, writes Lucy Cormack, Sarah Keoghan and Nigel Gladstone.

When a middle-class, high employment area like Camden recorded an almost 50 per cent spike in domestic violence in the two years to 2018, Pru Goward had questions to ask.

“I spoke to Camden police, I said, ‘what’s this about’? They said, ‘mortgage stress’.”

It was a salient lesson for the state’s first ever Minister for the Prevention of Domestic and Family Violence and Sexual Assault, that understanding a domestic violence offender was at the heart of prevention. “It’s about what tips a bloke over the edge,” she said. “We have to get much better at understanding an offender instead of always focusing on the poor victim.”

As she finishes up in the role that was the culmination of more than two decades of service to domestic violence prevention, Ms Goward said the government and law enforcement could not do it alone.

“We need you now to take up that challenge; in your homes, in your discussions … and not just when a high profile sports person bashes their girlfriend, but when the bloke next door does.”

Last year 32 people died in domestic-violence-related homicides in NSW. More than 70 per cent were women and children.

In Australia, on average one woman a week is murdered by her current or former partner, while one in five have experienced sexual violence since the age of 15.

Last year NSW police recorded almost 30,000 domestic-violence related assaults, while as many apprehended violence orders (AVOs) were issued to perpetrators.

When Ms Goward took on the portfolio tasked with tackling the leading cause of preventable death, disability and illness in women aged between 15 and 44 in 2011, “NSW was considered a bit of an embarrassment.”

“Police just didn’t take it very seriously, and no wonder … the most common penalty for an offender was an unsupervised bond.

“Back then we were just so soft on perpetrators, they were invisible. What other crime is the perpetrator not central to your efforts, except domestic violence and sexual assault?” she said.

“In armed robbery do we spend 90 per cent of our efforts on the victim?”

And with that she made perpetrator accountability paramount, setting a target of a 25 per cent reduction in domestic violence reoffending by 2021.

Eight years on Ms Goward looks proudly on the fact that in NSW between 2008 and 2016 victimisation fell at a rate not seen in any other state or territory, while DV reoffending has been decreasing for nine consecutive months, after an initial spike.

On the flipside, the annual number of domestic assaults in NSW is the same as it was five years ago, and despite homicides and assaults declining overall, the proportion of both that are domestic-violence related assaults remains unchanged.

Last year the highest rates of domestic violence were recorded in regional NSW, with the top 23 areas all located outside major cities, led by Walgett, Moree Plains and Coonamble.

In Sydney, the highest rates were recorded in Penrith, followed closely by Blacktown.

“Something like domestic violence is often hard to understand through the data,” said University of Sydney criminologist Dr Garner Clancy.

“There’s the lived reality and the statistical reality, and it all comes down to how it is framed and represented, which means it’s ripe for partisan analysis.”

If you ask the state’s top crime statistician, he’ll tell you it’s coming down, “but it’s a glacial change”.

“Most of the change down happened between 2010 and 2014. It dropped down and it’s kind of remained fairly stable over last four years,” Don Weatherburn, the director of the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, said. “We’re not seeing the
dramatic drop we saw, for example, with alcohol-related assaults [post-lockout laws], which suggests to me it’s more a matter of cultural change.”

The fact that there has been a marked decline in domestic assaults occasioning grievous bodily harm – one of the best measures of domestic violence – is a good sign, Mr Weatherburn said.

“This is significant because the less serious forms of DV assault are more affected by variations in the willingness of victims to report assault to police.”

And while he was optimistic of further reductions, he said they were unlikely to be dramatic or sudden: “More women are definitely reporting assaults, but police are also taking it more seriously than ever – they are really out to arrest people”.

Every day, around 80 domestic violence AVOs are issued in NSW following a domestic violence incident. In the past five years the number of domestic violence-related AVOs issued in NSW has increased by almost 15 per cent, while the rise in the number of breaches has surpassed 20 per cent.

Head of the NSW Police domestic and family violence portfolio, Assistant Commissioner Mark Jones, said it’s evidence of a hardline approach to targeting perpetrators and saving lives.

Since joining the force 34 years ago, he has seen domestic and family violence “in all shapes and sizes”.

“In those days it was very much discussed as a social problem, we expected families to handle their own business. But we’ve come to realise we have a major role.”

He said perpetrator accountability was the top priority for specialist high risk offender units. “We basically do a risk assessment and create a program for high-risk offenders where we continually knock on their door, reminding them that we are always watching.”

Director of the Women’s Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service (WDVCAS) program Hayley Foster said the strength of AVOs has improved dramatically and confidence in their power is increasing, but an AVO alone “is not enough”.

“If we want to turn the tap off we need to invest in a comprehensive response,” she said. “We also need to make sure we adequately fund and prioritise legal services for survivors. Far too many women are still attending court, particularly in regional areas, without legal representation.”

Last year’s state budget committed $10.7 million to 29 WDVCAS services, with additional funding targeted to services for complex cases in Macarthur and Wagga Wagga.

WDVCAS is calling for an extra $14 million to be devoted to court advocacy services.

CEO of Domestic Violence NSW Moo Baulch said it was a good time to be campaigning for the domestic violence agenda, with the prospect of a government shake-up. “I think last time we were heading into a state election, it was sort of the beginning of this shift around domestic violence,” she said.

“This time around, we are seeing shifts in attitudes in general to women and gendered violence and we are now at this tipping point of the movement [heading into] the election cycle.”

As justice and law enforcement continued to target perpetrators, Ms Goward said the next frontier was understanding the drivers that got them there.

“Mental illness, the role of drugs … if they have grown up in extremely violent homes,” she said. “We have sometimes not looked hard enough at the various drivers and that to me is the next stage. The next minister really has to take that very seriously.”

Domestic Violence Line 1800 65 64 63.
Rallying call: Sydneysiders march for women's rights in Hyde Park yesterday. Photo: Dean Sewell

Mission: Pru Goward says 'understand the offender'. Photo: Steven Siewert