Government of Bermuda
Ministry of Youth, Social Development and Seniors

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

by

The Hon. Tinée Furbert, JP, MP
Minister of Youth, Social Development and Seniors

International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women and Building Safer Communities Together: A National Domestic Abuse Prevention and Response Strategy 2026–2031

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Mr. Speaker, I rise today to inform this Honourable House and the people of Bermuda of the Government's continued work to end violence against women and girls, and to update Honourable Members on *Building Safer Communities Together: A National Domestic Abuse Prevention and Response Strategy 2026–2031*. I also wish to highlight the progress already made by the Ministry of Youth, Social Development and Seniors, the Ministry of Justice and our community partners under the Strategy's first Action Plan.

Mr. Speaker, on Wednesday, 25th November, Bermuda will join the international community in marking the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. That day also launches the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence, which concludes on Human Rights Day, Thursday, 10th December. This year's global theme, "UNiTE to End Violence Against Women and Girls: Ensure justice, protect survivors, end impunity," speaks directly to the work of this Government. To mark the occasion, the Attorney-General and Minister of Justice, Senator the Hon. Kim Wilkerson, and I will hold a joint press conference next Wednesday. By standing together, we will make it clear that this Government is united in this effort.

Mr. Speaker, domestic abuse is not a distant problem. It is happening here in Bermuda, in our homes, relationships and workplaces and, increasingly, online, leaving lasting scars on women, girls, men, boys and families. The SafeLives *Bermuda: Public Health Approach Report* (November 2022), applying World Health Organization research to 2016 population data, estimated that around 27% of Bermuda's 27,723 adult women, more than 7,000, have experienced intimate partner violence in their lifetime, and more than 3,000 within a 12-month period. A 2026

community survey commissioned by SCARS Bermuda and conducted by KPMG found that 29% of 1,010 adult respondents, including nearly one in three females and nearly one in six males, experienced sexual abuse before the age of 18, and that 94% of survivors were abused by someone they knew. Every one of these figures represents a real person in our community.

Mr. Speaker, it is important that we continue to understand the scale and nature of domestic abuse in Bermuda.

- The Bermuda Police Service (BPS) recorded 704 domestic-related incidents in 2025 and has recorded 567 so far in 2026.
- In relation to enforcement of Domestic Violence Protection Orders (DVPOs), the BPS recorded 19 arrests in 2025 and 22 arrests in 2026.

Several emerging trends of concern warrant particular attention and are being closely monitored, including:

- Repeat breaches of DVPOs: over the past five years, the BPS has identified 24 males who have breached a DVPO more than once, presenting ongoing challenges for victim safety and enforcement.
- Technology-facilitated abuse and the use of digital platforms to harass, intimidate, monitor or control victims.
- The involvement of alcohol and substance misuse in domestic incidents.
- Contributing factors in child custody and access disputes; and
- Patterns of repeat offending, repeat victimization and increasing reports of victims that are guest workers.

Domestic abuse is not limited to women; in 2025/26, the Centre Against Abuse served 10 males, representing 5% of its caseload. References to survivors and victims are inclusive of all genders.

Domestic abuse also extends beyond physical or sexual violence to include psychological and financial abuse, coercive control, stalking and digital abuse, all of which can have devastating and long-lasting consequences. Children are also affected: in 2026, Child and Family Services received 119 new referrals to date for children exposed to domestic abuse.

Domestic abuse is not limited to intimate partner relationships. Of the 116 senior abuse reports received by Ageing and Disability Services this fiscal year, 53% are domestic-abuse-related, and nearly 80% of these involve abuse by non-intimate family members against an older person, often linked to mental health or substance abuse issues, financial challenges or financial exploitation.

Mr. Speaker, domestic abuse affects our workplaces, schools, healthcare system and communities. It is not a private matter; we all have a role in recognizing abuse, challenging harmful behaviours and supporting those affected. This is the shift the National Strategy seeks to achieve.

The Strategy is founded on the values of accountability, agency, dignity, safety, courage, equity and solidarity. Its vision is:

> *A society where domestic abuse is socially unacceptable and actively challenged by all because safety, dignity and accountability are shared responsibilities.*

Together, they also expose a wider challenge: Bermuda needs comprehensive, regularly monitored national data on domestic violence. This Government will work with stakeholders to close that gap, because what we do not measure, we cannot effectively address.

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members will recall that in 2022 the Government commissioned SafeLives, an independent United Kingdom domestic abuse organization, to conduct a six-month, whole-system review of Bermuda's response. Drawing on approximately 188 combined surveys, interviews with the public, survivors and professionals, and stakeholder workshops, the review made nearly 50 recommendations. It found real strengths on which to build: positive working relationships between practitioners, high levels of trust and a shared commitment to child safety and survivor support. However, it also found that our system lacked the formal policies, coordination, clear referral pathways, training and specialist services needed to keep victims safe, and that no funded services existed to address the behaviour of perpetrators. When these findings were made public in July 2023, I advised that the need for a National Domestic Abuse Strategy was one of the review's most significant outcomes. That commitment has now been delivered.

Mr. Speaker, the Strategy was developed during 2024 and 2025 by the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) Committee, using the SafeLives recommendations as its base framework, with support from Olive Branch Consulting. Key Government agencies, the Centre Against Abuse and third-sector stakeholders were consulted, and their feedback helped to shape the final document. The Strategy is jointly presented by the Ministry of Youth, Social Development and Seniors and the Ministry of Justice. The Strategy will be published on Government's website, with limited printed copies available at each Ministry, and I encourage every resident to read it.

Mr. Speaker, the Strategy's vision is clear: "a society where domestic abuse is socially unacceptable and actively challenged by all because safety, dignity, and accountability are shared responsibilities." To realize that vision, and to respond directly to the gaps the review identified, the Strategy sets six goals: to prevent abuse before it starts by engaging the whole community; to identify risk early and intervene before harm escalates; to ensure survivors receive the support services they need; to hold perpetrators accountable while providing services that challenge them to change; to reform our laws and strengthen access to justice; and to bind every agency together through strong multi-agency collaboration and governance. Domestic abuse does not stop at the doors of the courthouse or the police station, and neither can our response. That is why the Strategy takes a whole-system approach, designed to replace fragmented responses with a cohesive, data-informed system.

Mr. Speaker, this Strategy does not start from scratch. It builds on tangible progress made since the SafeLives review, much of which already advances the first Action Plan. Allow me to outline that progress for the benefit of Honourable Members.

Mr. Speaker, first, we have strengthened multi-agency coordination. Bermuda was the first jurisdiction outside the United Kingdom to implement a MARAC, a 2023 Throne Speech initiative arising from the SafeLives review. The MARAC brings together the Centre Against Abuse, the Bermuda Police Service, the Department of Child and Family Services, Ageing and Disability Services and other specialists to safeguard victims at high risk of serious harm, and interim MARAC policies and procedures are now in effect. In May 2025, the Ministry of Justice established the cross-government Domestic Abuse Reform Steering Committee, which meets quarterly and now incorporates the MARAC Committee. This collaboration has replaced a siloed approach with a joint national effort.

Mr. Speaker, second, we have expanded support for survivors. In April 2025, a dedicated domestic abuse liaison specialist post was created to support survivors at high risk, helping over 122 persons for the year of 2025 and the Centre Against Abuse has partnered with HOME on safe house placements and resettlement support. Our Sexual Assault Response Team, or SART, coordinates the response to survivors of sexual assault, and work is advancing on an improved SART facility within the Department of Child and Family Services. Words alone will not protect survivors; effective services require sustained investment. This Government therefore continues to fund community partners, including the Centre Against Abuse, and to work across Government, including through the Plan to End Homelessness, because no person should ever have to choose between staying in an unsafe home and having nowhere to go.

Mr. Speaker, third, we have invested in prevention, awareness and professional capacity having trained 338 persons between April 2025- March 2026. The Centre Against Abuse now provides domestic abuse training to police officers, beginning with all new recruits in 2025, and has delivered awareness training to organizations including but not limited to the Department of Financial Assistance, The Family Centre, HOME, the Women's Resource Centre and the Salvation Army. Ageing and Disability Services has introduced standardized safety assessments for domestic abuse cases involving seniors and delivers abuse prevention presentations in the community and in care homes. In January 2026, 24 participants from Ageing and Disability Services, the Bermuda Police Service and the Department of Public Prosecutions were certified in the forensic interviewing of older adults, and in March 2026 the Centre Against Abuse trained as lead facilitators for domestic abuse training for health professionals, in partnership with the Department of Health. Most recently, social workers and coordinators in the Department of Child and Family Services completed intensive training on family violence in the context of family law, strengthening how we protect children living with domestic abuse.

Mr. Speaker, fourth, we are holding those who cause harm to account. Breaking the cycle of violence requires us to confront abusive behaviour directly. Domestic Abuse Perpetrator Services, delivered in partnership with Arius Solutions, now challenge

and support individuals who have used violence or control in intimate relationships to change their behaviour. In 2025, Arius served three individuals, one of whom has graduated from the programme to date. On the justice side, evidence-led prosecutions are now enabled where a victim is not engaged in the process, and a proposal has been submitted to establish a domestic abuse court to provide survivors with swift access to legal protection. The Attorney-General and Minister of Justice will continue to lead the legislative and court reforms that form a key part of this work.

Mr. Speaker, fifth, we have strengthened our international partnerships. On 19 October, His Excellency the Governor, Andrew Murdoch, hosted a Women and Girls Roundtable on domestic abuse with the UK Minister for the Overseas Territories, the Caribbean and Global Technology, the Hon. Uma Kumaran, MP, during her first official visit to the Island. The Attorney-General and I joined Government officials and community organizations, including the Centre Against Abuse, the Women's Resource Centre, The Family Centre, SCARS, the Coalition for the Protection of Children, One Love Bermuda and Arius Solutions, alongside the Bermuda Police Service, the Department of Public Prosecutions, the Department of Child and Family Services and the Department of Court Services. Proposals arising from that discussion, including training and capacity building for frontline practitioners, better data collection and information sharing, and the exchange of best practice on safe housing for survivors, are being compiled for submission to Government House. This builds on Bermuda's participation as a case study in UK-commissioned research on technology-facilitated violence against women and girls.

Mr. Speaker, the Strategy will be delivered through successive two-year action plans. The first Action Plan, covering 2025 to 2027, assigns lead agencies, actions and timelines to each goal. Building on the progress I have outlined, lead agencies are now taking forward further actions, including: a review by the Bermuda Police Service of its domestic abuse risk assessment procedures and new guidance for officers attending domestic abuse incidents; a common risk assessment policy across partner agencies, led by the Centre Against Abuse; a memorandum of understanding to formalize information sharing through the MARAC; a court file identification system for domestic abuse cases; the roll-out of domestic abuse training for health professionals; healthy relationships education in schools through the One Love programme; and a review by the Ministry of Justice of best-practice legislation, leading to a policy proposal, public consultation and amendments to the law.

Mr. Speaker, accountability for delivery is built into the Strategy. The Action Plan is a living document that will be reviewed twice a year, and lead agencies will provide quarterly updates to the Domestic Abuse Reform Steering Committee, which will oversee implementation and share progress with the respective Ministries. Performance indicators will track progress across all six goals, including public awareness, professional training, risk assessment compliance, referrals, survivor access to support, perpetrator programme outcomes, access to justice and data quality. Where additional resources are required for safe housing, specialist services, perpetrator interventions, training and data collection, these will be

considered through the Government's planning and budgetary processes as actions progress.

Mr. Speaker, ending violence is not the work of Government alone. It requires all of us. For the remainder of the 16 Days of Activism, I ask every resident to play their part: believe survivors when they come forward; speak up when you see controlling, abusive or disrespectful behaviour, whether online or offline; teach our young people what healthy and respectful relationships look like; and wear orange as a visible sign of solidarity.

Mr. Speaker, to anyone who is experiencing abuse, or who knows someone who is, I say: you are not alone, and help is available. The Centre Against Abuse operates a 24-hour helpline at 297-8278, and in an emergency, please call 911.

Mr. Speaker, I extend my sincere thanks to the Attorney-General and Minister of Justice and her team, the MARAC Committee, the Domestic Abuse Reform Steering Committee, the Centre Against Abuse and all of our Government and community partners, whose dedication made this Strategy possible. Most importantly, I thank the survivors who shared their experiences, so that others may be better protected and supported.

Mr. Speaker, in closing, through this Strategy, sustained investment and our collective resolve, we will build a Bermuda where survivors are heard, protected and supported, and where safety, dignity and accountability are responsibilities we all share.

Thank you, **Mr. Speaker**.