

ATTACHMENT FM-1

This is the attachment marked "**FM-1**" referred to in the witness statement of Fiona Margaret McCormack dated 29 July 2015.

Domestic Violence Victoria

*Peak body for domestic violence
services for women & children*

Considerations for Governance of Family Violence in Victoria

*Domestic Violence Victoria Submission to the Victorian Royal Commission into
Family Violence*

19 June 2015

Acknowledgements

DV Vic would like to acknowledge the many women in Victoria who have experienced family violence, and whose courage and determination should be honoured. Enhancing the rights of these women and their children is at the heart of DV Vic's advocacy for an effective family violence system. DV Vic would also like to acknowledge the work of specialist family violence practitioners in general, and our members in particular. DV Vic members have been extremely generous in sharing their vast experience and thoughtful insights, all of which have informed our submissions and recommendations.

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About Domestic Violence Victoria (DV Vic)

As the peak body for family violence services in Victoria, DV Vic has a broad membership of over 60 state-wide and regional family violence agencies across Victoria, which provide a variety of responses to women and children who have experienced family violence, including every specialist family violence service in Victoria, community and women's health agencies, some Local Governments and other community service agencies. DV Vic holds a central position in the Victorian integrated family violence system and its governance structures.

Since our establishment in 2002, DV Vic has been a leader in driving innovative policy to strengthen sectoral and system responses to family violence as well as building workforce capacity and representing the family violence sector at all levels of government. DV Vic provides policy advice and advocacy to the Victorian Government about family violence prevention and response. DV Vic also plays a coordinating role in Victoria's work to prevent violence against women, particularly in our work through the media, though the former EVA media awards and the development of a framework for reporting on violence against women.

DV Vic represents the Victorian family violence sector on the current Ministerial Advisory Group on Family Violence and the Statewide Violence against Women and Children Forum; and has sat on numerous other advisory mechanisms with oversight of responses to family violence, violence against women, homelessness and community services of the state and federal governments over the past ten years.

List of Recommendations

Recommendation 1.

The original guiding principles that underpin the integrated family violence system should be reaffirmed and be re-established as the yardstick for all decision-making and policy development: the safety of women and children; the accountability of men who use violence; and the agency of women.

Recommendation 2.

That an independent statutory authority with oversight responsibilities for the family violence system be established as a key element of the statewide governance structure, to facilitate integration, best practice and quality assurance across the family violence system.

Recommendation 3.

That the Royal Commission considers models and functions of independent statutory bodies to recommend the best option for the Victorian family violence system.

Recommendation 4.

That the Royal Commission defines the role of peak bodies and their role in the integrated family violence system.

Recommendation 5.

That the work to build a functioning integrated family violence system (across government and non-government partners) – including a focus on effective risk assessment and management platforms, sustaining a skilled workforce, improved data collection, management and analysis - is prioritised and appropriately resourced.

Recommendation 6.

That the Royal Commission defines the portfolios relevant to the whole of government approach to family violence (under the purview of the Minister for the Prevention of Family Violence) including: Women's Affairs; Children, Youth and Families; Attorney General; Corrections; Community Services; Police; Local Government; Aboriginal Affairs and Housing. It should also define the roles and responsibilities of portfolios not historically included in the integrated family violence system such as Education and Health.

Recommendation 7.

That effective governance structures and processes at a statewide and regional level are defined and resourced to ensure that the systems issues are prioritised, and that there are clear lines of accountability for delivering them.

Recommendation 8.

That the governance structures for a fully effective and integrated family violence system are informed by specialist family violence knowledge and practice framework.

Recommendation 9.

That a review is conducted of the roles and responsibilities of the Family Violence Integration Committees and the Regional Family Violence Integration Coordinators with a view to strengthening consistency and alignment across regions.

Recommendation 10.

That the Regional Family Violence Integration Model is further developed to a Practice Framework for RICs to include protocols and practice standards on information sharing between RICS, community and agency engagement, recruitment and reporting.

Recommendation 11.

That the Practice Framework sets out specific objectives for family violence as it relates to other regional committees with overlapping stakes in the local family violence response including: Crime Prevention, Services Connect, Children's Partnerships and other relevant bodies, to ensure governance alignment.

Recommendation 12.

That professionals working in the integrated family violence system, including within government departments are mandated/supported to undertake 'introduction to family violence' training in order to ensure consistent levels of understanding of the issue.

Recommendation 13.

That gender literacy training is made compulsory for all public service positions, parliamentarian and their staff, to ensure that all policy, programs and legislation routinely subjected to a gender analysis.

Recommendation 14.

That the Victorian Government undertakes a comprehensive review of the Family Violence Risk Assessment and Risk Management Framework (CRAF) to include: mapping current use; addressing content gaps and providing additional guidance; establishment of an effective authorising environment to support consistent implementation.

Recommendation 15.

That the Family Violence Risk Assessment and Risk Management Framework is reviewed regularly to ensure currency and its use mandated for all core services in the family violence service system.

Recommendation 16.

That the Royal Commission analyses the current data challenges for the integrated family violence system in Victoria – including gaps in information – and provides solutions.

Recommendation 17.

That the Royal Commission provides solutions to better integrate existing data sources used by different parts of the family violence system

Recommendation 18.

Consider the creation of new data collection platforms that capture relevant information for family violence.

Recommendation 19.

That any new measures required to evaluate the effectiveness of the family violence system are developed in consultation with the sector to ensure they are appropriately targeted with matching data systems capability.

Introduction

DV Vic welcomes the opportunity created by the Royal Commission into Family Violence to interrogate and strengthen the family violence system in Victoria. We believe that a stronger, more effective system will improve the safety and well-being of women and children experiencing family violence and reduce the incidence of serious harm through more effective early interventions. It would also address the social and structural causes of violence against women through community prevention and policy and legislative reforms for gender inequality.

This submission, which focuses on the principles for governance of the Victorian family violence system, is one of four submissions focused on the key priority areas identified by our members: 1) Specialist Family Violence Services: the heart of an effective system; 2) the interface between family violence services and Police; 3) working with children.

This submission draws on evidence from national and international research and the experience of the DV Vic, its membership and the Regional Family Violence Integration Committees over the past decade. It recommends that the principles to underpin governance family violence policy and practice in Victoria should include:

- A shared vision
- A systems approach
- A partnership approach
- Clear roles and responsibilities
- Evidence and expertise.

Part 1: Background and context of family violence governance arrangements

What we have learnt

1.1 Reforming Family Violence Responses

Having recognised the imperative of improving responses to family violence in Victoria in the early 2000s, the Brumby government embarked on an ambitious process of systemic reforms. The family violence reform process was superseded in 2012 by the Baillieu Government's decision to apply the lens of violence against women and children to the issue of family violence, with the announcement of *Victoria's Action Plan to Address Violence Against Women and Children 2012-2015*.

- *Attachment A is the DHHS Regional Family Violence Integration Model*
- *Attachment B is a case study developed by the Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANSZOG) Victoria's integrated family violence system: from stalling to renewal, which tells the story of the family violence reforms.*

The architects of the family violence reform processes had to answer the following questions:

- What was the vision?
- Who was responsible for implementing it?
- Who should be involved?
- How would people know what their role was?
- How would we know if it was working?

The role of governance structures was central to answering all of these questions and in implementing the reforms; we refer to 'governance' as the structures, processes, rules and traditions through which decision-making was exercised.¹

As family violence touches so many aspects of life, unravelling the answers to all of these questions delved into wide ranging fields – from criminology, to sociology, psychology, health and mental health, and so on. What was clear from the outset was that looking through the lens of traditional government governance approaches – discrete ministerial and departmental portfolios tackling discrete problems – was not going to work.

At each point of reform, a genuine whole of government approach has been critical – both at a statewide level, where vision, policy and budgets are decided, as well as at regional and local levels, where the intended impacts of those decisions were to be implemented and their intent realised.

¹ It is important to note that governance and systems accountability is not the same, though accountability can be manifested through governance processes.

For the reform process to deliver, it was recognised that shared leadership and responsibility at every level of action was needed – from ministerial leadership across portfolios, to shared and complementary risk assessment and management practice amongst frontline workers who come into contact with women experiencing family violence.

1.1.1 The Family Violence Reform Period

A governance structure was established that incorporated statewide leadership and collaboration in support of a whole of government approach, which had explicit two-way consultation with a regional governance structure.

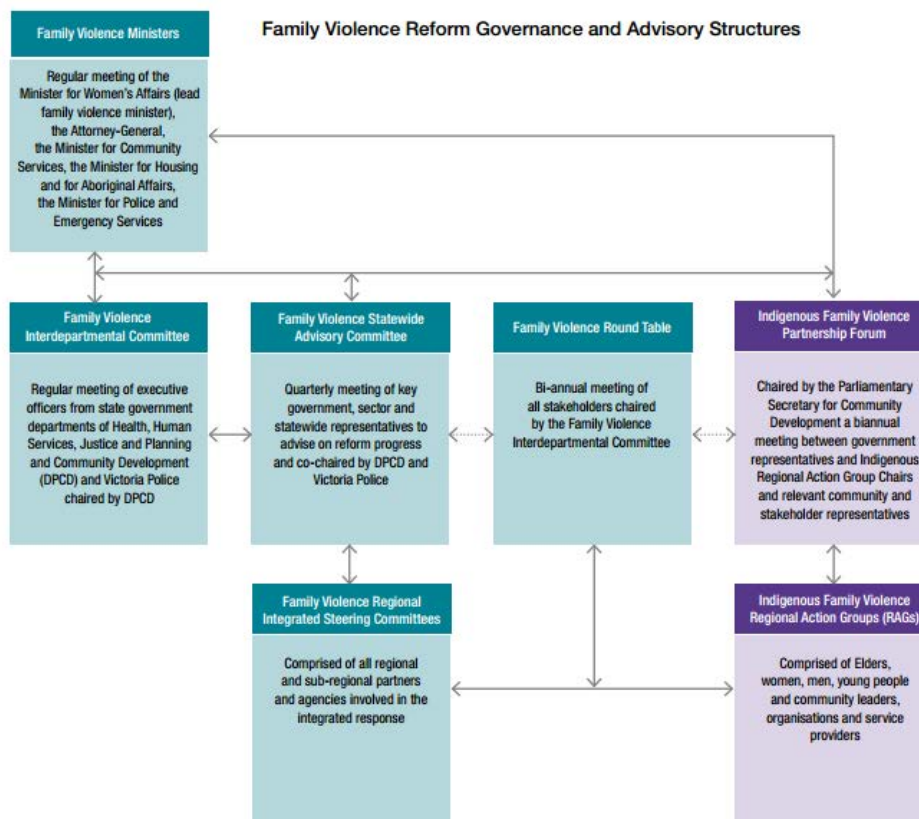


Figure 1: Governance and Advisory Structure – A Right to Safety and Justice 2010-2020

When the Victorian Family Violence Reform strategy was launched in 2005 'whole of government' leadership was driven by a group of five Ministers representing the portfolios of Police and emergency services; Attorney General; Community Services; Housing and Local Government; Aboriginal Affairs; Children; and Women. This group of five met quarterly to review progress against the reform objectives.

Supporting the Minister's group was a Family Violence Interdepartmental Committee, co-Chaired by the then Department of Community Development and Planning (DPCD) and Victoria Police, which was in turn supported by a Family Violence Coordination Unit (within the Office of Women's Policy, DPCD), with a mandate to drive integration. These structures also formally linked to the governance and advisory structures for the Indigenous ten-year plan.

1.1.2 The role of community – the early days

A critical aspect of the family violence reform was the collective effort by government and community sector leaders. At the request of government, community sector leaders who were part of Family Violence Statewide Advisory Committee (FVSAC) provided advice to government in the ground breaking report *Reforming the Family Violence System in Victoria* (2005). This document paved the way for the reforms. Key elements included: a guiding set of principles; a focus on integration across the three main systems – police, justice and the family violence service system, and developing common practices and processes to ensure consistent responses by individual agencies.

The Indigenous Family Violence Ten Year Plan Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families: towards a safer future for Indigenous families and communities was launched in June 2008 and was developed separately to the mainstream family violence reforms in recognition that family violence in Indigenous communities has unique dynamics and characteristics that intersect with the history of colonisation and dispossession, and in recognition of Indigenous family and kinship networks.

The Indigenous Family Violence Partnership Forum, established in 2005, continues to oversee implementation of the Ten Year Plan. It is a community–government partnership to address family violence in Indigenous communities and remains in operation.

“Indeed, it could be argued that whole of government processes are likely to be most effective where they involve the development of new values systems or the development of networks and partnerships that cross existing agency and service boundaries, allowing the development of political influence and policy consistency across what was previously a decentralised, autonomous but politically marginal and uncoordinated service sector.”

Ross, Stuart, Frere, Marion, Healey, Lucy & Humphreys, Cathy. (2011) ‘A whole of government strategy for family violence reform’. *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 70 (2): 131-142. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8500.2011.00717.x p. 141.

1.1.3 Statewide Governance

Having contributed to policy direction, the FVSAC became a key source of advice to the Victorian Government to shape, drive and evaluate the family violence reform program. It informed the Interdepartmental Committee on Family

Violence about identified gaps and challenges in the integrated system and worked in partnership with government to meet those challenges. FVSAC included representation from regions and the Indigenous Family Violence Partnership Forum, along with other key family violence stakeholders.

1.1.4 Regional Governance

At a regional level, Regional Integration Committees, bringing together local representatives of the sectors that made up the integrated family violence system, were established across Victoria. Each Regional Integrated Committee² was, and continues to be, overseen by a Regional Integration Chair³ and supported by a Family Violence Regional Integration Co-ordinator (RIC). These roles provide critical leadership to support continued development of

² In some regions there are sub-regional committees in operation.

³ The position of Chair may be elected or appointed.

the integrated system on the ground. They were responsible for developing regional plans based on family violence reform priorities. The Regional Integration Committees were represented on the Family Violence Statewide Advisory Committee to advise on regional perspectives and experience in implementation.

Composition of Regional Integration Committees varies across the state, but they seek to bring together expertise from women's, children's and men's family violence services, family services, women's health services, police, Corrections, child protection, court services, Aboriginal services, community legal services, sexual assault services, homelessness services, schools, youth services, disability, CALD services, local governments, health services and other services relevant to the regional response.

While there are differences across regions, they have provided a forum to innovate, develop and resource practical responses to local issues. For example, a number of regions in Victoria have trialled (and evaluated) different approaches to managing high-risk cases. Others have focused on issues such as improving responses to children experiencing family violence, through the adoption of Think Child Partnership Agreements and developing the Safe and Secure Framework for Working with Children. Depending on regional priorities and needs, others have undertaken considerable work in earlier intervention and primary prevention of violence against women.

1.1.5 Regional Integration Coordinators

The role of the Regional Integration Coordinator (RIC) is one of strategic leadership in steering integration initiatives and activities that support the achievement of the Regional Integration Committee priorities. RIC work is directed by the Regional Integration Committee's Strategic Plan. Broadly the role of the RICs is to facilitate the development of relationships that support integration between regional family violence services (women, children and men's services) and other key sectors and services, such as Child FIRST/Family Services, child protection, mental health services, homelessness services, housing services, Courts, Police and the Indigenous Family Violence Regional Action Group.

1.1.6 Indigenous Family Violence Regional Action Groups

Indigenous Family Violence Regional Action Groups (RAGs) were established in 2003 and have a leadership role in implementing community-led responses that educate, prevent, reduce and respond to family violence in Indigenous communities.

The Regional Integration Committees and RAGs work with each other to progress projects and initiatives to support responses to family violence in Indigenous communities. Whilst the mechanisms for these collaborations vary across the state, these relationships are critical for developing culturally competent practice⁴ across the system in responding to Aboriginal women, children and men affected by family violence.

⁴ Objective 1 of Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families: Towards a safer future for Indigenous families and communities 10-year Plan is cultural safety described as 'respects and empowers Indigenous communities to be involved in services which affect their health and wellbeing. It acknowledges the need of mainstream service providers and governments to analyse their culture and stop negative impacts this may have on the cultural rights of Indigenous communities' (35). Cultural safety is an underpinning of culturally competent practice and service.

1.1.7 State-wide coordination whole of government activity

The Family Violence Interdepartmental Committee had a broad membership, and was co-chaired by a Deputy Secretary of the Department of Planning and Community Development and senior police representation. It had senior and collective responsibility for driving the reform work across government.

Prior to the 2010 election, the then Family Violence Reform Co-ordination Unit was located in the Office of Women's Policy in the Department of Planning and Community Development (DPCD) – it was the coordinating body for the reform process. OWP had no direct service provision responsibility. This independence from service funding responsibility was regarded as a critical success factor. It has a clear mandate to drive the reform process without existing interests as a direct service provider.

It acted as an honest broker to get good whole of government outcomes and maintain a clear systems focus and was regarded as critical to the success of the reforms.⁵ It provided a platform to build trust to develop a successful whole of government Expenditure Review Committee (ERC) proposal in 2005-06 launch the long term reform process.

1.2 Policy Hiatus

Following the 2010 election, the incoming government considered policy and governance directions for family violence. Consultations about these directions took place in early 2012, with *Victoria's Action Plan to Address Violence Against Women and their Children 2012-2015* (Action Plan) being announced in September 2012.

The long silence from government about its intentions for family violence reform from the end of 2010 to September 2012, and the delays in establishing new governance processes, cost the reform process direction and momentum.

The Action Plan brought together the previous work areas – the family violence reforms, primary prevention work, and sexual assault reform into a single work plan. This, along with the loss of an overarching vision and focus on this work, resulted in the dilution of the work in all of these areas to support women's safety, recovery, justice and respect.

This was particularly reflected in the governance structures leading the Action Plan. From 2010 to 2014, the issue was overseen by the Minister for Community Affairs, with no formal involvement of ministerial colleagues. The Minister established a new level of governance – a Ministerial Advisory Group on Violence against Women and Children - which provided advice to ministers about issues relating to violence against women and their children, family violence and sexual assault. This group met biannually.

The Action Plan lacked an overarching social and justice policy framework. At a policy level, the Action Plan was not integrated with the other relevant social policy areas that were under review within DHS at the time, such as housing and homelessness reforms, mental health, alcohol and other drug and Child Protection. There were no linkages made at a governance or practice level.

⁵ Ross, Stuart, Frere, Marion, Healey, Lucy & Humphreys, Cathy. (2011) 'A whole of government strategy for family violence reform'. *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 70 (2): 131-142. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8500.2011.00717.x, p.139

In the meantime Services Connect models have been rolled out which aim to offer a ‘one-stop-shop’ for human services in a region, premised on the idea of breaking down silos of service delivery and dealing with the range of presenting issues for which a client or family group may seek help from DHHS funded services.

Services Connect models are currently being implemented and Children and Youth Area Partnerships have been established in some regions. DV Vic is aware that at the time of making this submission, our members across the state are experiencing the practical effects of these, which have been developed without any consistent understanding of, or indeed any requirement to have any regard for the nature and dynamics of family violence, in their work, nor the specialist role of family violence agencies. This puts women and children’s safety at risk.

The vision and clarity of purpose to uphold women’s safety must be reasserted. It is a fundamental human right which women across our state do not have.

Focusing government on women and children’s safety to organise its work and its investments is the only way we will reach our objectives to reduce the harm and suffering of thousands of women in Victoria.

1.2.2 Reversion to Portfolio Interests

As part of the Action Plan, the Minister for Community Affairs established an independent Ministerial Advisory Group on Violence Against Women and Children in 2013. The promise of this forum to strengthen whole of government support and accountability from other ministers or their departments was not realised. At a departmental level, DHS and Victoria Police co-chaired the Ministerial Advisory Group on Violence Against Women and their Children which met to discuss issues but the group had no formal advisory role and had no influence on government policy.

The Action Plan included a number of initiatives that were welcomed. However, the sector was concerned that some initiatives were not supported by the evidence on responses to women and children experiencing family violence, or holding men accountable for their use of violence. While some departments undertook discrete consultations about those issues – such as the Failure to Protect legislation, Services Connect, the Vulnerable Children’s Strategy – the consultation process did not engage existing whole of government governance and consultation mechanisms. This meant that the important conversations about the impact of one part of the system on others did not occur, and ministers and departments retreated to their ‘home silo’.

In summary, the strong statewide governance arrangements that had led and supported the family violence reform withered in recent years, as did genuine community consultation at a statewide level.

1.2.3 Impact on Regional Governance and the work of integration

Consequently, the state has provided little leadership and shown limited ambition for regional governance arrangements on family violence systems issues in recent years. The connection between statewide and regional governance processes has all but disappeared.

The decentralised approach, while allowing for local variance and differentiation also created significant inconsistency in practice between the regions. This remains the situation today. There are significant differences in

roles and approaches to family violence from region to region. This has also translated to a marked difference in the roles and responsibilities of Regional Integration Coordinators between regions.

In 2013, The Department of Human Services issued the Regional Family Violence Integration Governance Model [Attachment A] which was welcomed by the regions. Following a consultation process supported by DHS, this document provided guidance about the internal functioning of the Regional Family Violence Committees, roles and responsibilities – drawing on good practice that had emerged across the State, and seeking to build more consistency in the model. This was welcomed by the regions as an important step to build an integrated family violence system that provides consistent, evidence- based responses to women and children experiencing family violence. However, without statewide leadership – it is unlikely that this consistency and standardisation will be achieved.

Moreover, there has been a proliferation of place-based initiatives in regions, most notably Services Connect. These have been developed without consideration of family violence at a policy or practice level at a statewide level. The implications of this are now rippling through the regions – where women and children live and where justice and services are accessed.

At the same time, a number of family violence Regional Integration Committees have continued to build on the evidence on the need for systems approaches to address family violence in their regions. Regional Integration Committees are involved in planning, developing and implementing a range of innovative programs with potential for replication across the state.

For example, one metropolitan region has developed the following initiatives: in evidence and practice through initiatives such as these examples from the one metropolitan region:

- **Counselling and Support Alliance:** A coordinated regional framework for the planning, implementation and evaluation of family violence counselling and group work via community health services and key family violence services.
- **Mental Health and Family Violence Partnership Project:** Over a 10 year period, brought mental health (both clinical and community services), family violence and sexual assault services together to work towards better cross-sector collaboration.
- **Families@Home:** A multidisciplinary, early intervention initiative to keep women and their children safe and secure in their homes.
- **Whittlesea Community Connections:** An integrated place-based family violence prevention and response model, tailored to the multicultural community of City of Whittlesea.
- **Costing case study:** Research by Dr Kristin Diemer and factsheet highlight that the long-term cost of a crisis-driven model is almost twice that of a best-practice service response.

Tools for integration:

- **Family Violence Help Cards:** Business card sized resources with information to help a woman who is experiencing family violence (women's help card) or a man who is perpetrating violence (men's help card). The help cards have been translated into 14 community languages and have been adapted for the Aboriginal community.

Regional induction: Bi-annual induction sessions for workers who are new to the region or to the family violence sector.

- **Integration forums:** Quarterly forums to explore and strengthen integrated responses in a range of priority areas (eg children, responding to men)
- **Intake pathways and governance mapping:** Documentation of pathways into the family violence system for women, children and men and mapping of regional governance arrangements.
- **Identifying family violence training:** For generalist workers to increase their understanding and recognition of family violence, gain strategies to respond to disclosures and learn about appropriate referrals.
- **Week Without Violence:** A worldwide campaign which aims to raise community awareness of family violence. Services in Melbourne's northern metropolitan region are resourced to facilitate events for women, children, men and their communities in the third week of October.
- **Website:** A hub of information for workers supporting women's and children's safety in Melbourne's northern metropolitan region. The website features a service, events and training, intake pathways and resources for working with particular client groups.

Reflections

Victoria has had the benefit of a concerted, collaborative reform process. Where it worked well, it was effective in driving substantial and constructive change in Victoria. At the same time, it was substantially reliant on a collaborative good will. At departmental level, whole of government coordination to implement the government agenda was dependent on the capacity and mandate of the Office of Women's Policy to negotiate across portfolios.

In 2005-6, a successful whole of government budget bid was submitted which underpinned substantial aspects of the family violence reforms. Other important aspects of reform were undertaken by individual portfolios in consultation with the whole of government approach.

Ultimately however, there was a need for a single point of accountability for this work. The term 'accountability' is used here to reflect the pressures or parameters within which decisions must be made, requiring that there is a holding to account (compliance), giving an account (transparency) and taking account of prescribed issues or incidents (responsiveness).

There are a range of models and approaches that might be considered to create a single point of accountability for family violence responses in Victoria. These might include legislative and statutory approaches that set out clear expectations, roles and accountabilities for all portfolios. It would be important to any model to embed accountability carefully to ensure that the intended accountability would not be eroded.

The recent appointment of Australia's first Minister for the Prevention of Family Violence in Victoria is a very welcome first step in building a more robust accountability structure. This new Ministerial role however requires clear authority in respect to the whole of government approach to family violence including a decision-making role in funding services and programs that fall within the family violence remit.

Part 2: Considerations for governance

Based on the experience of DV Vic's members and engagement throughout the family violence reform period, this submission proposes the following:

2.1 A shared vision – The need for clarity at all levels of governance

In essence, the aim of the reform process, as first proposed by the Family Violence Statewide Advisory Committee in *Reforming the Family Violence System in Victoria 2005* was to increase safety for women and children; to improve accountability for those who use violence; and to uphold the agency of women.

The system's first accountability is to the women and children of Victoria who have and are experiencing family violence. Political will and funding must back that accountability.

The way in which this was to be achieved was to build a system of multi-agency and integrated response to family violence – in Victoria, this has become known as the integrated family violence system. These aims remain as relevant today as they were a decade ago.

We are at a point where the Victorian Government and partners must re-commit to building the integrity of responses to family violence in Victoria. Over recent years, work to provide seamless responses has been diluted through a lack of government focus and leadership. At the same time, lack of attention to this system in recent years, combined with high levels of family violence incidents are currently overwhelming the family violence system. This has dire consequences for the ways we manage the risks facing women and children living in danger, and dangerous men.

A clear and unequivocal statement about family violence including its gendered nature, and its causes, is critical to informing how we address it. To address and ultimately reduce family violence, we must maintain a disciplined focus on its determinants and a singular emphasis on managing risk to enhance safety.

A driving purpose and vision is needed to guide strong ministerial leadership and accountability. The accountability must extend beyond human services and traditional justice responses. The recent experience in Service Connect pilots provides convincing evidence that individual portfolios must be accountable to uphold and promote this vision. Tinkering with specific services or programs without regard for their implications for the wider system cannot happen. Too much is at stake.

This vision and the need for accountability should inform the structure and role of statewide and regional governance arrangements.

Recommendation 1.

The original guiding principles that underpin the integrated family violence system should be reaffirmed and be re-established as the yardstick for all decision-making and policy development: the safety of women and children; the accountability of men who use violence; and the agency of women.

2.2 An Independent Authority

Oversight and monitoring of the family violence system is an issue of perennial consideration for those involved in the system's governance. In the early days of family violence reform, this responsibility was established to sit with the relevant Ministers with responsibility for whole-of-government coordination provided by the Office for Women's Policy. However, more recently and largely due to the policy hiatus since 2010, this function has fallen away and resulted in ambiguous lines of accountability and a lack of system oversight.

In context of this year's Royal Commission ideas about an independent statutory authority responsible for the oversight of the family violence system have been proposed. Critically, this independent body would be protected through legislation from changing governments and their relative prioritization of family violence.

From DV Vic's perspective the purpose of establishing an independent authorising body would be to set the standards and key performance indicators by which all aspects of family violence prevention and response would be measured. It would monitor and evaluate the operation and effectiveness of the system and advise the government and other stakeholders accordingly. Having such an authority in place would also serve to introduce specialist and evidence-based family violence expertise into decision-making processes, build in long-term sustainability and guard against the vagaries of shifting political agendas and administrations.

In the current system, peak bodies including DV Vic provide some of this function, through leadership, advocacy and representation and ensuring a continued focus on the best interests of women and children in decision-making. Peak bodies set the practice standards by which their respective members should adhere, however they do not have a regulatory or compliance monitoring relationship with member agencies and no capacity to formally monitor or oversee practice nor collect data. An independent body would be able to establish a regulatory function that is currently not present in the family violence system.

DV Vic supports the need for such an independent statutory body. We are aware of two suggested models for such a body: a Women's Safety Commission and an independently funded statutory authority similar to the Victorian Traffic Accident Commission (TAC) and believe that both merit consideration.

However, we strongly believe that it is important that the establishment of an independent family violence oversight body, irrespective of form does not obviate government's role in adequately funding services across the system and its responsibility to keep women and children safe and hold perpetrators accountable for their use of violence. It should not replace, but complement the role of peak bodies whose role it is to represent and advocate for the best interests of women and children experiencing family violence and the agencies that support them.

Importantly the establishment of any such entity should be informed by broad consultation with the family violence sector, as its role should be to enhance and support quality practice - not to police the system.

Recommendation 2.

That an independent statutory authority with oversight responsibilities for the family violence system be established as a key element of the statewide governance structure, to facilitate integration, best practice and quality assurance across the family violence system.

Recommendation 3.

That the Royal Commission considers models and functions of independent statutory bodies to recommend the best option for the Victorian family violence system.

Recommendation 4.

That the Royal Commission defines the role of peaks bodies and their role in the integrated family violence system.

2.3 A Systems Approach

In Victoria, the family violence reform aimed, over time, to make “any door the right door” for a woman experiencing family violence to seek support, whatever her situation and wherever she lives.

The intention of the reform process was to build an integrated system so that the woman did not need to navigate her way around a service and justice system, to retell her story to each service provider, but that a client focused, wrap around service supported her to live a safer life.

Early in reform efforts, work began to build what became known as the integrated family violence system. This system had three broad key entry points for women to report their experience of family violence.

Justice and Statutory Services	Specialist Family Violence Services	Mainstream Services
Police intervention	Case management	Education
Court	Practical support and counselling	Health care and mental health services
Correctional services	Housing	Drug and alcohol services
Child Protection services	Peer support	Family services
Legal services	Healing centres/Indigenous family violence initiatives	Disability services
Victims’ support services	Men’s Referral Service	Centrelink
	Men’s Behaviour Change	Immigration services

During the reforms, the integrated family violence sector predominately comprised Victoria Police, Courts, specialist family violence sector, housing, family services, and Child Protection. Other allied agencies such as Aboriginal services, community legal, and homelessness services were also involved.

Participating in designing and implementing the new system, at a state and regional level, reform brought together

“Integrated systems build jurisdiction-wide models that encompass multiple tiers of management, changes to core agency practice, diverse aspects of service delivery, shared protocols and, often, integrated courts and a legislative base. Integrated systems are exemplified by the state-wide strategies established in Victoria...”

Understanding Domestic Violence and Integration in the NSW Context: A Literature Review, prepared on behalf of UNSW Global Pty Limited by the Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse

justice and human services.⁶ These ranged from women’s services, men’s services, CALD agencies, children’s and young people’s services, and service provided for Aboriginal communities by Indigenous organisations and agencies. Police and the Courts have been central players in the integrated system at a state and regional level.

Whichever agency or service a woman reported to, it was expected that it would have an appropriate understanding of family violence, knowledge of risk assessment and management, and make referral decisions based on an accurate

understanding of the risk she faced.

DV Vic’s submission on family violence specialisation discusses the role of specialist services working in partnership with universal services to develop effective early intervention approaches. This involves ensuring that universal services such as community health, hospitals, schools, Centrelink and ambulance services, are working from a specialist knowledge and practice framework.). Work is needed to develop a strategic statewide framework for early intervention that encompasses knowledge, systems, capacity and accountabilities across all sectors that work with women and children experiencing family violence.

In building a systems approach, responsibility for integration must be held by all involved and at all levels – from ministers to front line workers – individually and collectively.

During the family violence reform period, this saw legislative changes, policy, standards and protocols, practice and funding models. In simple terms, these changes were the beginning of a reform process to make it everyone’s ‘job’ to integrate. From the perspective of government and community organisations providing responses to women experiencing family violence, ‘integration’ is a critical concept.

“Integration of services is more than co-ordinated service delivery – it is a whole new service. Co-location of agencies, agreed protocols and codes of practice, joint service delivery, agencies reconstituting or realigning their core business to confront the challenges posed by a broadened conception of the problem: these are the key indicators of an integrated response.”

Family Violence Statewide Advisory Group, Reforming the Family Violence System in Victoria 2005

⁶ A range of policies and guidance documents have been developed to support this implementation. In particular, the document Guiding Integrated Family Violence Service Reform 2006-2009 effectively served to guide and support the work of the regional partnerships as they implemented the new approach to family violence over the previous three years. It provided a statewide framework within which local changes to services were planned, developed and implemented.

In its report for the NSW Government, UNSW Global said “A final barrier to effective integrated responses is a lack of additional resourcing. Although agencies drawn into initiatives are in general already involved in responding to domestic violence, collaboration takes time and requires support. Furthermore, although in the long-term the incidence of abuse and, therefore, demand for services declines, in the short-term the provision of improved responses should, and in general does, increase detection, reporting and responses to domestic violence, which puts additional demand on services. Even initiatives such as multi-agency risk assessment strategies which operate through regular meetings between existing services draw heavily on resources and flounder without additional resources (Robinson 2006; Marshall, Ziersch et al. 2008). It has been noted that even relatively modest injections of resources can make the difference to a strategy’s ability to achieve real gains (Gondolf 2009).”

Understanding Domestic Violence and Integration in the NSW Context: A Literature Review, prepared on behalf of UNSW Global Pty Limited by the Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse 19 October 2010, p.18

Building an integrated system is critically dependent on policy, legislation, guidelines and practice across the service system agreeing on what that means, how to implement it, and who was responsible for what to achieve safety and accountability outcomes.

It is important to get the balance and timing between the changes to the overall policy and legislative environment, and practice reform on the other. Both are needed and interdependent.

The experience from previous family violence reforms showed that system integration requires resourcing committed and continuous leadership time.

These are prerequisites to develop relationships and build shared vision, shared work and shared responsibility, collect and share data, and continuously re-focus people on the system, rather than their piece of it. This is work is time consuming as it cuts across people’s ‘day jobs’. This is true at every level of activity, from senior statewide whole of government engagement to the everyday work of Regional Family Violence Integration Coordinators. To build a sustainable system, this vision cannot rely on good will alone.

Recommendation 5.

That the work to build a functioning integrated family violence system (across government and non-government partners) – including a focus on effective risk assessment and management platforms, sustaining a skilled workforce, improved data collection, management and analysis - is prioritised and appropriately resourced.

Recommendation 6.

That the Royal Commission defines the portfolios relevant to the whole of government approach to family violence (under the purview of the Minister for the Prevention of Family Violence) including: Women’s Affairs; Children, Youth and Families; Attorney General; Corrections; Community Services;

Police; Local Government; Aboriginal Affairs and Housing. It should also define the roles and responsibilities of portfolios not historically included in the integrated family violence system such as Education and Health.

Recommendation 7.

That effective governance structures and processes at a statewide and regional level are defined and resourced to ensure that the systems issues are prioritised, and that there are clear lines of accountability for delivering them.

2.4 A Partnership approach built on expertise and evidence

At a systems level, the role of specialist family violence expertise is critical in the wider system and governance structures alike. Their expertise on family violence, as well as their experience of ‘what works’, is critical to realised fully integrated and effective family violence system. Risk and crisis situations are not the same but are often easily confused by non-specialist service providers – this has implications for where specialisation sits in at the statewide level, and how it is engaged at the regional level in both governance and practice.

Bringing together diverse sectors and government agencies to prioritise the safety of women and children has been a significant achievement has been the core business for the specialist family violence sector.

The specialist sector has a role to maintain a critical watch over the system, to monitor its gaps, themes and challenges, and to push for continuous improvement. This requires enormous energy and commitment.

In particular, women’s services exist because they support traditionally neglected, marginalised groups. It takes time and resources for specialist organisations, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and CALD services and programs, to build trust within communities and support women to engage with these services despite significant barriers and often generations of traumatic experiences with the services and justice system. It is due to this advocacy for women and children experiencing family violence that specialist services influence systems-level thinking.

Collaborative forms of government and shared accountability need different decision making processes, different levels of consultation, negotiation of shared understandings at all levels of policy deliberations. These reforms must be resourced and prioritised through clear accountability and performance management at every level.

Recommendation 8.

That the governance structures for a fully effective and integrated family violence system are informed by specialist family violence knowledge and practice framework.

2.5 Clear roles and Responsibilities

In addition to the need for a single point of accountability, DV Vic offers the following reflections on the levels at which responsibilities have been assumed.

2.5.1 Systems Accountability

Clear roles and responsibilities for governance at the statewide and regional levels are critical. This is equally important for cross portfolio issues including data collection and analysis, information sharing to manage risk, workforce development and so on. Throughout the reform process, no one 'owned' these issues. There have been collaborative attempts to address them, such as the Department of Justice support for the Victorian Family Violence Database, contributions to the SAFER Research Program, amongst others, but there is no single point of accountability for addressing them in Victoria.

In the absence of state government focus on systems issues in recent years, Regional Integration Committees have continued to work on these issues at a local and regional level, however, many of them are beyond the influence of regions.

Without the state assuming responsibility for shared issues, inconsistencies across regions will be inevitable and ensuring the uptake of good practice will be ad hoc. This in turn, will undermine consistent risk management practice across the state.

2.5.2 Regional Accountabilities

Strong partnership at a regional level has been a critical factor in building integrated family violence systems. It is at the regional level that integration is made a reality in the front line of services and justice provision. Regional innovation driven by the Regional Family Violence Integration Committees has been critical in building evidence and practice throughout the reform process.

It is DV Vic's view that the focus must now be on building statewide consistency to ensure that risks for women and children are identified and managed effectively where ever they live.

Regional Integration Committees across the state have brought together expertise from women's and men's family violence services, family services, women's health services, police, Corrections, court services, Aboriginal health services, community legal services, homelessness services, youth services, disability, CALD services, and local governments. Some have worked more strategically than others and achieved more; but all have been affected by the 'drift' in government focus on a strong systems approach to family violence.

Regional Integration Committees have overseen the development of information sharing, cross sectoral professional development, referral pathways, innovated and developed joint and complementary practices – all with the aim of improving the safety of women who live in their regions.

DV Vic believes it would be strategically sound to use these existing structures to build consistency of risk management across the state. We can leverage off the current governance bodies to strengthen place based service provision and provide the right platforms to consider the next steps for the state-wide high risk models under development, or indeed any initiative that has implications for any aspect of risk management.

It cannot be left to the persuasiveness of various RICs or other individuals in regions as to how engaged other players are in the region on systems issues. Integrated state endorsed platforms to support women and children's safety and perpetrator accountability, require articulated standards for agencies and regional groups to act and be accountable within the integrated family violence system. These must be clearly stated in policy, guidelines and protocols for service providers. Responsibility at a regional level must be shared. Funding and commissioning of services must be managed with clear performance measures that produce the collaborative systems outcomes needed.

Recommendation 9.

That a review is conducted of the roles and responsibilities of the Family Violence Integration Committees and the Regional Family Violence Integration Coordinators with a view to strengthening consistency and alignment across regions.

Recommendation 10.

That the Regional Family Violence Integration Model is further developed to a Practice Framework for RICs to include protocols and practice standards on information sharing between RICS, community and agency engagement, recruitment and reporting.

Recommendation 11.

That the Practice Framework sets out specific objectives for family violence as it relates to other regional committees with overlapping stakes in the local family violence response including: Crime Prevention, Services Connect, Children's Partnerships and other relevant bodies, to ensure governance alignment.

2.5.3 Portfolio Accountabilities

Learning from the family violence reform process, integration cannot be left to chance if we are to have consistent approaches across the state.

In recent years, the State has stepped back from driving the family violence reform process. At the same time, there has been a decentralisation of a wide range of government services and decision making. In the family violence area, this has been accompanied by a reversion from whole of government to individual portfolio approaches – most notably by the then Department of Human Services and the Department of Justice. Decentralisation of key portfolios has not always been accompanied by expertise or understanding of family violence issues. This has been further exacerbated by the rationing of the public sector over recent years and which has resulted in a significant loss of relevant corporate knowledge.

The Royal Commission provides an opportunity to consider building in accountability mechanisms to funding and commissioning models to support good safety outcomes for women. Government commissioning of services through Funding and Service Agreements should proscribe adherence to minimum standards and build in sustainable levels of specialist expertise in responding to family violence, as well as clear and specific requirement

for systems wide collaboration (please see Section 4.6 of DV Vic's submission – *Specialist Family Violence Services: the heart of an effective system* for our recommendations on standards and quality assurance).

Moreover, the accountability structure for funding and commissioning decisions must accommodate the diverse needs of women and children experiencing family violence, in particular those cohorts of women known to experience higher rates of family violence.

Recommendation 12.

That professionals working in the integrated family violence system, including within government departments are mandated/supported to undertake 'introduction to family violence' training in order to ensure consistent levels of understanding of the issue.

Recommendation 13.

That gender literacy training is made compulsory for all public service positions, parliamentarian and their staff, to ensure that all policy, programs and legislation routinely subjected to a gender analysis.

2.6 Risk as an organising principle

More than a practice tool, the Family Violence Risk Assessment and Risk Management Framework (CRAF) has provided a solid platform for integration across the various sectors comprising the integrated family violence system in Victoria. It is underpinned by a strong evidence base and robust consultation process. It has provided the basis for a shared understanding and approach to assessing levels risk across a diverse range of sectors that address risk factors associated with family violence.⁷

The CRAF has been regarded as a practice tool rather than the Framework it was initially designed as. The Framework elements of it underpinned the development of the 10 Year Strategy A Right to Safety and Justice 2010-2020 which merits revisiting.

While the CRAF is frequently upheld as one of key successes of the family violence reform, seven years after its introduction in Victoria there are concerns about the patchiness of its implementation across the sector, with many services adapting CRAF and/or using alternative risk assessment tools. This risks the original intention of CRAF: to guide consistent approaches to family violence risk assessment and risk management, as well as supporting the process of integration. It is our view that this cannot be left to go unchecked; the occasion of a Royal Commission provides opportunity to reaffirm CRAF as the common framework for Victoria and to indeed mandate and embed its use.

⁷ In Victoria, the integrated family violence system is comprised of Specialist services including, but not limited to family violence case management, practical support and counselling services, homelessness and housing (SHS), peer support, healing centres/Indigenous services, children's services, sexual assault services and men's referral service. Mainstream or universal services include, but are not limited to, education, healthcare, mental health services, drug and alcohol services, legal services, family services, disability services. Refer to the Common Risk Assessment and Risk Management Framework for more detail.

However, it is critical that CRAF is reviewed to remain current and relevant to emerging trends and changing environments. DV Vic frequently hears that content gaps and lack of up-to-date evidence risk CRAF's relevance and currency. We therefore support calls for a comprehensive review of the CRAF, with focus on both content gaps and implementation across the state. This needs to start with mapping its implementation – to establish which sectors and agencies are using CRAF; the extent to which CRAF has been embedded into those areas; and to consider whether the CRAF's three levels of risk assessment are appropriately pitched at different professional groups.

Further, DV Vic supports the recommendations of Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria (DVRCV) for the development of family violence risk assessment benchmarks and core competencies across relevant sectors and professional groups. By building these measures into accreditation systems it will over time ensure greater quality, consistency and accountability for all professionals engaged in family violence service delivery.

Recommendation 14.

That the Victorian Government undertakes a comprehensive review of the Family Violence Risk Assessment and Risk Management Framework (CRAF) to include: mapping current use; addressing content gaps and providing additional guidance; establishment of an effective authorising environment to support consistent implementation.

Recommendation 15.

That the Family Violence Risk Assessment and Risk Management Framework is reviewed regularly to ensure currency and its use mandated for all core services in the family violence service system.

2.7 Data Collection and Sharing

Data collection and sharing is a key issue for governance of the family violence system. The capabilities of the present data collection and data sharing arrangements across the family violence field in Victoria are extremely limited. This is widely recognized as a significant shortcoming in the state's response to family violence and requires urgent attention. It is difficult to achieve a comprehensive picture, or cross-sectoral view of family violence in Victoria, both at a systemic level and for individual clients.

At a systems level, the current approach means that there is lack of access to real time, meaningful and comparable data about how the integrated family violence system is working, where the bottlenecks, gaps and greatest needs are, and how this compares across regions.

Different sectors utilise different data collection systems and reporting mechanisms; for example, specialist family violence services are required to use the SHIP, a homelessness platform, which fails to capture critical information about family violence risk. There are compatibility issues between the system's respective databases where data cannot be shared across Police, Courts, and DHHS funded services. This results in silos of isolated data that are not able to be shared easily, if at all, for the purpose of protecting women and children's safety and monitoring perpetrators.

The Victorian Family Violence Database Trend Analyses undertaken by the Department of Justice attempts to broach these data divides and it has been a very welcome resources in the absence of a unified data collection system. However the deficits in the current system have restricted its scope as well. Victoria's Minister for the Prevention of Family Violence has also sought to tackle this issue by commissioning work on the development of a Family Violence Index, which aims to bring together existing data sources to establish a cohesive picture of family violence. DV Vic commends the intention of the Family Violence Index, however, the mechanisms for the collection of data by services at a local level and how this data will inform the Index and vice versa, will need to be examined.

While it is critically important to investigate mechanisms to make existing data system compatible, the development of a universal data system that has information about family violence risk as its operational centre and can be utilized by all parts of the family violence system, would be a ground breaking. The Royal Commission provides an excellent opportunity to drive the development of such a family violence data system.

Recommendation 16.

That the Royal Commission analyses the current data challenges for the integrated family violence system in Victoria – including gaps in information – and provides solutions.

Recommendation 17.

That the Royal Commission provides solutions to better integrate existing data sources used by different parts of the family violence system

Recommendation 18.

Consider the creation of new data collection platforms that capture relevant information for family violence.

Recommendation 19.

That any new measures required to evaluate the effectiveness of the family violence system are developed in consultation with the sector to ensure they are appropriately targeted with matching data systems capability.

Attachment A – DHS Regional Family Violence Integration
Governance Model

Attachment B – ANZSOG Case Study

Regional Family Violence Integration Governance Model

Introduction

Family Violence Regional Integration Committees provide regional leadership on service integration and planning.

This governance model is intended to improve clarity about the roles and responsibilities of Family Violence Integration Committees, committee members (including chairs), Regional Integration Coordinators and auspice agencies.

The governance model aims to describe the key elements of each of the roles and responsibilities in sufficient detail so that these functions can be carried out in a consistent way across the integrated family violence system. Seeking the right balance between consistency overall and maintaining sufficient flexibility to accommodate different circumstances, such as those of rural and metropolitan regions, has been a key consideration in the development of the governance model.

Family Violence Regional Integration Committees will identify their preferred approach to regional coordination. In some areas this role will be coordinated through sub-regional partnerships. Each Family Violence Regional Integration Committee has an identified auspice agency to employ the Family Violence Regional Integration Coordinator (RIC) and act as fund holder for the Family Violence Regional Integration Committee.

Regional Integration Committees identify and prioritise local and regional family violence issues within the state-wide policy reform framework and focus on regional work to achieve improved integration of family violence services and coordination with other key sector services.

Key elements of the regional governance model are as follows:

1. Provisions to be included within the Memorandum of Understanding.
2. Provisions to be included within terms of reference for Family Violence Regional Integration Committees.
3. Role statements for the positions of Family Violence Regional Integration Coordinator and Family Violence Regional Integration Committee Chair.
4. Role statements for committee members, auspice agencies and DHS regions.
5. A communications matrix.
6. Provisions to be included in the terms of reference for Family Violence Regional Integration Leadership meetings.
7. Family Violence Regional Integration Leadership meetings.

1. Provisions to be included within the Memorandum of Understanding

It is expected that all Regional Integration Committees will have a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in place that has been agreed and signed by member agencies of the Regional Integration Committee. The MOU should act as the key partnership document for the Committee, outlining how the regional partnership (and committee) will function and the responsibilities of signatory agencies.

At a minimum, the MOU should include the following:-

- Background to the MOU.
- Purpose and scope of the MOU. This should include a statement regarding the overarching values, objectives and principles agreed by the signatory agencies.
- Definitions.
- Membership of the committee.
- Responsibilities of partner agencies. This should include the following provisions:-
 - Commitment of agencies to the development, implementation and review of the regional strategic plan.
 - Commitment of the agencies to attendance at the Regional Integration Committee. This should include a commitment to ensuring that agency representatives on the Committee are of sufficient seniority to make decisions on behalf of the agency.
 - Information-sharing (e.g. in relation to the provision of anonymised agency data to support the strategic planning process) and communication between signatory agencies.
 - Reporting and linkage responsibilities that individual agencies have adopted in relation to other key sector networks, forums in partnerships (e.g. Child and Family Alliances). These roles may be included as an addendum to the MOU.
- Structure, function and purpose of the Regional Integration Committee. This should include the following provisions:-
 - Communication processes between the regional committee and any sub-regional or working groups that form part of the committee structure
 - Role of the Chair, the process for selecting the Chair, the period of tenure and the induction process for new Chairs
 - Role of the RIC
 - Outline of the meeting structure (as outlined in Section 2 below)
- Education and sustaining the MOU. This should include a process for communicating the provision of the MOU to relevant staff within signatory agencies and the inclusion of the MOU in the induction pack for new Regional Integration Committee members.
- Dispute resolution process. This should include the following provisions:-
 - Process for resolving conflicts of interest involving the Chair of the Regional Committee and committee members (both conflicts of interest self-identified and those identified by other committee members)
 - The role of the Deputy Chair of the Regional Committee if the conflict of interest relates to the Chair also representing the Auspice agency

- Terms of understanding (e.g. duration of the MOU, process for termination)
- Annual review and performance monitoring process, in relation to the functioning of the MOU. This should outline the indicators for the successful implementation of the MOU.
- Annual review of the functioning of the Committee, utilising a partnerships analysis tool (e.g. partnerships matrix developed by the SAFER partnership)

2. Provisions to be included in the terms of reference for Family Violence Regional Integration Committees

Purpose of the Committees

Victoria's Action Plan to Address Violence Against Women and Children – Everyone has a responsibility to act provides the policy context and *Guiding Integrated Family Violence Service Reform 2006-2009* the guidelines for state-wide family violence reform priorities.

The purpose of Regional Integration Committees is to identify and prioritise local regional issues within the state-wide reform framework and develop an agreed Strategic Plan and Action Plan (as defined in *Guiding Integrated Family Violence Service Reform 2006-2009*) focusing on and leading regional work to achieve its priorities to drive greater integration of family violence services.

Structure of Regional Integration Committees

Structures should reflect the right balance between DHS funded service representatives and other key service and sector representatives. Regional Integration Committees should adopt meeting processes that gain commitment and meaningful contribution from all agency representatives.

Structures should also have the capacity to focus on specific components of committee business, including strategic planning, identifying and addressing operational service system issues, and supporting and promoting coordinated practice.

Accordingly, executive, sub-regional groups and working groups should have a clearly defined purpose, a description of the scope of decision making for each group, and a clearly described process for the intersection and communication between these groups within its structure.

Structures should be reviewed as part of the broader annual review of the Memorandum of Understanding to ensure they facilitate the purpose of Regional Integration Committees.

Membership

Regional Integration Committees should ensure strategic planning is grounded in practice reality through an appropriate balance in committee membership (i.e. the representation of all funded family violence service providers and other key service and sector representation).

Members must have sufficient seniority and capacity to represent their agency position, to make commitments to partnership arrangements and to drive Regional Integration Committee priorities within their organisation.

Selection of the Chair

A process for selecting a Chair and Deputy Chair should reflect the decision-making mechanism agreed upon by the Committee members and should be outlined in the MOU. The parameters for who can be selected as Chair are further detailed in section 4 below.

Core members

Core members should include the following:-

- Women and children's and men's family violence services
- DHS – Local Connections Unit Manager (or delegate) and Child Protection representative
- RICs (executive member in a non-voting advisory capacity).
- The RIC auspice/employer agency representative
- Child FIRST and Integrated Family Services (Child and Family Alliance)
- Victoria Police

- Court representatives (Magistrates, Children's and Family)
- Indigenous Family Violence Regional Action Group representative (this could be the Chair, the Regional Coordinator for the Regional Indigenous Family Violence Strategy or a nominated representative from the Group)

Key sector representatives

Key sector representatives should include, but not be limited to the following organisations:-

- CASA
- Disability service providers
- Community Legal Centres
- Housing information and referral providers
- Other services – housing services, schools, CALD services, community and acute health services representatives

Supporting effective representation and contribution

In seeking the ongoing commitment of all members, it is critical to consider how best to support the participation and contribution of other sector representatives. It is important that the right people are at the table for specific planning and decision making relating to their particular sector. A strategic approach is required, particularly in rural areas where managers may sit on several similar coordination bodies.

The challenge is to make membership meaningful in terms of opportunity to contribute and method of participation. Some options for Regional Integration Committees to consider, in addition to conventional representation of committee members, are:

- Inviting nominated members representing other key sectors to meetings where the agenda concerns strategic matters directly related to that sector (i.e. having formal membership status as a sector representative but attending important and relevant meetings by specific invitation). This approach assumes pro-active, timely and strategic use of agenda planning.
- Convening joint sessions with other coordination/integration bodies such as Child and Family Services Alliances etc., as determined by strategic priorities. These sessions may have a strategic, operational or practice focus.
- Giving a portfolio responsibility to Regional Integration Committee members who sit on other key groups/bodies. These members should then provide a linkage with that group and report to and from each group/committee. Where this approach is employed, the portfolio role should be clearly documented as an addendum to the MOU, with the portfolio roles updated as part of the annual MOU review. A standing agenda item at all Regional Integration Committee meetings should then be established to enable members with key portfolios to report back to the Committee regarding meetings they have attended and to seek input into future meetings.

Role of committee members

The role of a committee member is to provide leadership within their organisation (and sector) on the priorities identified within the Regional Integration Committee's Strategic Plan. The role of the representative of the auspice agency is no different to other committee members and has no more or less influence on Regional Integration Committee decisions than any other member.

Individual Committee members have a responsibility to:

- Contribute knowledge and expertise about their service/service sector and any specific issues experienced by that sector
- Provide relevant organisational data in support of the Committee's strategic planning process (and in line with the Memorandum of Understanding)

- Inform approaches to improving service system responses
- Advise on practice and operational issues impacting on services
- Identify opportunities for addressing emerging issues and trends
- Implement relevant actions in the strategic plan

Members should be active participants in the work of the Regional Committee, with member agencies committed to maintaining consistency in representation.

Representing the Regional Integration Committee at cross sectoral and other forums and events will be shared across committee members. Members should be nominated as representatives so as to capitalise on their specialist knowledge and expertise.

Communication

Details of communication processes between groups (e.g. sub-regional groups) that form part of Regional Integration Committee structures should be documented in the MOU.

Schedule of meetings

The scheduling of meetings should align, wherever possible, with state-wide Family Violence Regional Integration Leadership meetings so as to inform the RIC's and Chair's input into these meetings and to enable the RIC and the Chair to inform committee members of state-wide developments.

An annual schedule of meetings should be distributed prior to the commencement of each year.

Standing items

Standing items should include the following:-

- Report from State-wide RICs and Joint RICs and Chairs Meeting
- Key sector portfolio reports
- Other standing items as identified by the Regional Integration Committee

3. Role statements for the role of Regional Integration Coordinator and Chair of the Regional Integration Committee

3.1 Role statement - Family Violence Regional Integration Coordinator

Leadership

The role of the Regional Integration Coordinator (RIC) is one of strategic leadership in steering integration initiatives and activities that support the achievement of the Regional Integration Committee priorities as set out in the Strategic Plan and the Action Plan. As such, all RIC work is directed by the Regional Integration Committee's Strategic Plan. As a minimum, the role of the RIC's is:

- To facilitate the development of relationships that support key agreements and protocols between regional family violence services (women, children and men's services) and other key sectors and services, such as Child FIRST/Family Services, child protection, mental health services, homelessness services, housing services, Courts, Police and the Indigenous Family Violence Regional Action Group.
- To forge and maintain effective formal links with other regional service system coordinators, forums and networks.

The overall objective of these functions is to move cross-system coordination beyond representation on sector groups and networking, taking collaboration to the next level of driving operational and practice coordination. This should then result in demonstrable outcomes and products, such as joint training sessions and reflective practice sessions based on shared sector issues and identified challenges on integrated service delivery.

Governance and committee operations

Communicate and drive the development and maintenance of the structures, processes and relationships that promote the achievement of regional strategic priorities, inclusive of:

- Convening meetings
- Organising joint activities and training
- Informing the Regional Integration Committee of state-wide policy and principles, so that regional strategic outcomes are consistent with state-wide priorities
- Working collaboratively and in association with other key sectors to create shared ownership of joint initiatives around Strategic Plan priorities
- Coordinating and maintaining partnership agreements and work
- Documenting key arrangements on behalf of the Regional Integration Committee
- Providing advice to the Regional Integration Committee to ensure agreements are feasible and remain dynamic
- Acting as a delegate for the Chair or committee, when required by the Regional Integration Committee

Strategic Planning

The development phase of the strategic planning process is supported by the RIC, with the Regional Integration Committee then deciding on regional strategic priorities and actions that align with state-wide priorities and regionally identified needs. Some Regional Integration Committees also have associated sub-regional action plans. Specific tasks within these will form the documented RICs work plan for the twelve month Action Plan period. This work may be represented as a subset of the strategic plan.

It is understood that the RIC is not solely responsible for achieving the whole of the strategic plan. Some priorities are likely to encompass work that partnership organisations are undertaking, either individually or collaboratively, as part of the Strategic Plan. The RIC should:

- Collate regional data that identifies emerging themes and trends across family violence and related key sectors, support of the strategic planning process. This aggregated data should be presented to the Regional Integration Committee in an accessible format.
- Support the annual formal review of the Strategic Plan.
- Support the development and subsequent annual reviews of the Regional Integration Committee MOU and ToR.
- Provide an induction kit comprised of an up-to-date MOU, ToR, position descriptions and other relevant documents to all new Regional Integration Committee members.

Reporting and accountabilities

These include:

- Collating for the Regional Integration Committee the material and evidence for state government required reporting and associated templates.
- Coordinating the report to the Regional Integration Committee on the progress of the Strategic Plan and Action Plan.
- Reporting to the Regional Integration Committee on the progress of key tasks in RIC work plan.

Communications and representation

The RIC plays a key role in promoting a shared understanding and context across key sectors in relation to family violence and in coordinating an integrated system response to family violence. This involves identifying (in association with the Regional Integration Committee) training and development gaps and methods of addressing these. The RIC also serves as a regional coordination point for relevant state-wide initiatives.

The provision and delivery of training by the RIC will depend on relative strategic work plan priorities as defined by the Regional Integration Committee through its Strategic Plan. Generally, the RIC will be instrumental in the coordination of training and development rather than its delivery.

The RIC will:

- Act as a conduit for communication and information flow within the regional/sub-regional partnerships, as well as with other key service sectors.
- Represent the Regional Integration Committee at forums and with other key sectors as nominated by the Regional Integration Committee.

3.2 Role statement - Chair, Family Violence Regional Integration Committee

Introduction

There is variation in the ways that the role of Chair can be carried out and these differences can have benefits for the Regional Integration Committee and its work. The approach taken will be determined by the needs and circumstances of the Committee, as well as by the local conditions it is operating in.

A number of approaches can be used to selecting a Chair, including the following:

- selecting a Chair who also represents the auspice agency of the RIC,
- selecting an 'independent' Chair not representative of any of the partner organisations, or,
- selecting a Chair who is drawn from any member organisation excepting the auspice agency.

It is desirable that representatives of DHS do not take on the role of Chair, except as part of a transition arrangement. The Chair, as a representative of the Committee, is accountable to DHS for the activities of the Committee, and therefore it is seen as a blurring of this line of accountability.

Whilst the principle of flexibility is understood to be important in selecting a Chair, it should not be prioritised above principles associated with good governance and accountability (including the safeguards described below).

The Chair should have a sound knowledge of the family violence service system, as well as strong facilitation and leadership skills that will enable them to undertake the key responsibilities of the role (as outlined below). Alternatively a specific induction process will be designed to address any areas requiring development. The Regional Integration Committee MOU should set out the process for selecting the chair, the period of tenure and the induction process for new Chairs.

In taking on the role of Chair, it is expected that the Chair will have sufficient time allocated by their agency to undertaking the tasks required of them, including meeting preparation, strategic planning and attendance at meetings with DHS and the auspice agency.

The key responsibilities of the Chair are:

Leadership

- To provide regional leadership on state-wide family violence priorities, identifying and prioritising regional strategic goals and focusing the work of the Committee on achieving these goals regional work to achieve these identified priorities.
- To harness the leadership strengths and knowledge of committee members, drawing on their knowledge of regional systems, relationships and processes.
- To plan and chair the Regional Committee meetings. This includes preparing an agenda, supported by the RIC, that focuses on progressing the achievement of strategic priorities as identified in the Regional Integration Committee Strategic Plan and Action Plan.

Strategic planning

- To lead the Regional Integration Committee in identifying the most significant regional issues to be addressed and the ways an integrated partnership approach can have the greatest impact.
- To ensure the Regional Integration Committee is developing and implementing its regional strategic plan in line with and informed by state-wide priorities and reform objectives.
- To ensure regular review of progress made against the Regional Integration Committee Strategic Plan and Action Plan (at a minimum every six months) and oversee any required adjustment (in collaboration with the Auspice agency and the RIC) to the RIC's work plan if regional priorities change.

Accountabilities and oversight

- To ensure the Regional Integration Committee's accountabilities are met through reporting on the progress of the Regional Integration Committee Strategic Plan and Action Plan at regional and state-wide levels.
- To maintain strategic oversight of the alignment of the RIC's work plan with the Regional Integration Committee Strategic Plan and the key tasks set out in the Action Plan. This includes high level discussion with the auspice agency and the RIC about the focus of work to be undertaken by the RIC within the twelve month timeframe of the Action Plan. This process should ensure there is consideration given to the capacity of the RIC (i.e. workload, experience and skill sets) when identifying key pieces of work.

Governance and committee operations

- To ensure that there is a regular review of the Regional Integration Committee MOU and Terms of Reference (ToR). This should occur, at a minimum, on annual basis. The aim of the review process is to ensure committee structures and arrangements are adapted to meet changing conditions.
- To ensure that incoming Chairs are provided with a standard induction kit (inclusive of the Regional Integration Committee MOU, ToR and other relevant governance material), as part of the transition process. This information should also be provided by the Chair to new committee members, inclusive of government representatives and new RICs.

Communication and representation

- To represent, in all internal and external committee communications, the collective view and position of the Regional Integration Committee rather than his or her individual perspective or that of the agency he or she is representing.
- To represent the Regional Integration Committee's view on strategic and policy matters to state-wide bodies and key groups and report back to the Committee. There may be circumstances where this responsibility is delegated to a suitable committee member, making use of the specialist skills and knowledge of individual committee members.

Attendance at meetings

- To attend quarterly meetings with the RIC and the Auspice agency line manager (as documented in the MOU). The purpose of this meeting is to collectively review the RIC work plan (within the context of Regional Integration Committee's Strategic Plan and Action Plan) and to provide a forum to address and resolve any potential issues impacting upon the work of the RIC (e.g. government policy developments that may impact on RIC work plan).
- To attend bi-annual meetings with the Auspice agency, the RIC and the DHS Local Connections Unit Manager (or their delegate).

4. Statements describing responsibilities of auspice agency and DHS local areas

4.1 RIC auspice/employer agency

Introduction

The auspice agency manages a range of important functions associated with the employment of the RIC on behalf of the Regional Integration Committee.

Supervision and staff management

The line management and supervision of the RIC is undertaken by the auspice agency as a means of facilitating the implementation of the Regional Committee's strategic priorities. The work of the RIC will be managed through a work plan that is endorsed by the Regional Integration Committee, and implemented by the RIC under the supervision of the RIC's line manager within the auspice agency. The priorities and tasks should be directly derived from the Regional Integration Committee Strategic Plan.

Staff management is undertaken by the auspice agency and, at a minimum, should be inclusive of occupational health and safety management, training and professional development.

The auspice agency is financially accountability to DHS through its service agreement that incorporates funding for the RIC position and related project funds.

Coordination between the Regional Integration Committee and auspice agency

A scheduled meeting should be held every three months between the RIC, the auspice agency line manager and the Chair. The purpose of this meeting is to ensure alignment between the strategic direction of the Regional Integration Committee and the supervision provided by the auspice agency to the RIC. At this meeting, the progress made by the RIC in relation to their work plan should be reviewed and any issues arising for the RIC (e.g. competing priorities impacting on the RIC's workload capacity and any areas of conflict) should be addressed. In circumstances where the Chair is also the line manager of the RIC, then the Deputy Chair or a delegate of the Regional Integration Committee should also attend this meeting.

Recruitment of the RIC

The auspice agency will manage the recruitment process and include the Chair of the Regional Integration Committee on the selection panel. Where deemed appropriate, sub-regional Chairs may also be included on the selection panel. Where the auspice agency representative and Chair are the same person, then the Deputy Chair should represent the Regional Integration Committee.

4.2 Role of DHS local areas

Facilitating local system integration

DHS Area offices work across a number of service systems and reform agendas. Local area leadership and facilitation of these agendas is viewed as an important function in promoting integration between systems. Local area processes may be already in place, the intention is to consolidate area coordination efforts rather than duplicate these.

DHS areas could facilitate local forums to bring together the area coordinators whose role is to promote and facilitate service coordination across service systems such as RIC, Child & Family Services Alliance Coordinator, Indigenous Family Violence Regional Action Group Coordinator, Early Years Coordinator, FaPMI Coordinator, and Homeless Services Coordinator. Some of these coordinators may already meet; the aim is to promote a systemic regional approach. The purpose of forums/meetings is to provide an understanding of other

systems work as well identify areas of common interest, potential joint initiatives and minimise duplication of effort.

The key aspects of the DHS local area role are in relation to:

Supporting strategic planning

The key strategic planning functions of the DHS area are to:-

- Contribute to the development of strategic planning through the provision of divisional and area service system knowledge and planning data.
- Provide aggregated service provider data at divisional and area level from the DHS IRIS system, as well as Victoria Police and other available data.
- Ensure Regional Integration Committee strategic planning is consistent with state-wide policy priorities and objectives.
- Guide a more comprehensive understanding of and consistency of approach around capacity and demand issues of local family violence services
- Draw on regional family violence service system themes from the One DHS Standards review process and provide these for the consideration of the Regional Integration Committee.

Coordination

The DHS local area will to convene six monthly meetings between the Local Connections Unit Manager (or their delegate), the Chair, the RIC and the auspice agency representative to review the progress of the Strategic Plan and related system issues. The purpose of these meetings is to focus on local system issues and the progress of the Regional Integrated Family Violence Strategic Plan, and Action Plan. These meetings can also include any matters relating to funding for projects allocated to the Regional Integration Committees. These meetings are intended to promote greater accountability and clarity of the respective roles and relationships of the agencies. This is not a duplication of or to be confused with service agreement meetings held between DHS areas and individual DHS funded service providers.

Communication

In order to ensure the timely communication of state-wide information to local areas, the DHS Local Connections Unit is responsible for the maintenance of an up-to-date email list for the RICs, Chairs and auspice agencies, senior responsible manager. The Across-Systems Responses Unit (at DHS central office) should be alerted to any changes so that an up-to-date, state-wide list for the Family Violence Regional Integration Committees can be maintained.

5. Communications matrix for the Regional Integrated Family Violence Governance Model

Communication Between	Mechanism	Purpose
State Government - and - Family Violence Regional Integration Committees	Violence Against Women and Children Forum - two RICS and two Chairs nominated by Combined RICS and Chairs Leadership meeting Representation by RICS, Chairs or Committee delegates on specific state-wide project and advisory groups	To represent the collective position of regional integration committees on family violence issues at a state- wide level
DHS and other Government departments - and – Family Violence Regional Integration Committees	Leadership meetings:- <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RICS meetings • Combined RICS and Chairs meetings 	To provide a forum for consultation between RICS, Chairs and government representatives To inform (through DHS representatives) the Violence Against Women and Children Forum agenda of regional themes To enable RICS and Chairs to present local perspective to government representatives, thereby building a state-wide leadership perspective
Chair - and – Auspice agency	Quarterly coordination meeting between the Chair, RIC and auspice agency	To ensure alignment of the RIC work plan with the Regional Strategic Plan and resolve any issues arising for the RIC in undertaking their work
DHS local area - and – Family Violence Regional Integration Committee	Chair, RIC and DHS local area representative meet on bi-annual basis.	To focus on local system issues and progress of Regional Strategic Plan and Action Plan
Family Violence Regional Integration Committee - and Cross sector stakeholders	Round table forums	To develop integrated practice approaches and facilitate problem solving across service systems

6. Family Violence Regional Integration Leadership meetings

6.1 Regional Integration Coordinator (RICs) meetings and Combined RIC and Regional Integration Chair meetings

Purpose of the meetings

The overall purpose of the meetings is to bring together in a state-wide forum each region's RIC and Chair in order to share information on the development and implementation of integrated family violence responses and identify common state-wide themes to better inform integration across regions and the state-wide family violence system.

Format for the meetings

In order to support RICs in carrying out their regional role and to consolidate the alignment between RICs and Chairs, the following separate but interlinked meetings should be held:

- RICs meeting
- Combined Chairs and RICs meeting

Facilitation of the meetings

The CEO of DV Vic will facilitate and chair the meetings, conditional upon their capacity to do so. It is an expectation that RICs are individual members of DV Vic, acting as a representative of their Regional Integration Committee at these meetings, rather than of their auspice/employing agency.

Administration of meetings

The final agenda for the meetings will be distributed via email by DVVic. Action notes detailing key decisions and actions to be taken will be recorded and distributed via email by RICs, on a revolving basis. The action notes will inform each RIC's and Chair's report back to their respective Regional Integration Committee.

6.2 RICs Meetings

Purpose

The RICs meeting will provide a forum for RICs to:

- Utilise a joint problem solving approach to addressing specific regional challenges
- Share information regarding regional integration activities, processes, approaches and resources
- Participate in professional development activities
- Provide peer support and mentoring of new RICs by experienced RICs

Membership

All Regional Integration Coordinators are required to attend RICs meetings to better inform integration within their regions and the broader state-wide family violence system.

Schedule of meetings

Meetings should be held on a quarterly basis, with one of the quarterly meetings held over a two day period to allow for identified professional development sessions and extended presentations on regional approaches. An annual schedule of meetings will be distributed prior to the commencement of the year.

Agenda setting

Items for the agenda should be identified at the previous meeting. Agenda items identified after the meeting by individual members should be agreed via email consultation between the RICs and the DV Vic facilitator.

6.3 Combined Chairs and RICs Meetings

Purpose

The combined Chairs and RICs meeting will:

- Identify common themes and practice issues that are impacting on service delivery and enable the communication of a shared view to government, where these issues have implications for family violence policy, programs and system response.
- Provide a forum for initial consultation and information sharing with Regional Integration Committees by government representatives and other key stakeholders regarding specific policy or practice initiatives. This does not substitute for regional consultation, where appropriate. The meeting provides an opportunity for consultation and feedback from an integrated regional leadership perspective, at both strategic and operational levels.
- Strengthen the voice of regional integration committees in arriving at a state-wide perspective on key issues.
- Identify common issues and agreed items to inform the agenda of the Violence Against Women and Children Forum.

Membership

Attendance is by the RICs and Regional Integration Committee Chairs. The Chairs attend on behalf of their Committee and will have delegation to speak on its behalf. RICs may be specifically delegated by their Committee to take on this role in the absence of their Chair. This delegated authority should be declared at the start of the meeting.

Frequency of meetings

The combined RICs and Chairs meeting will be held bi-annually following on from two of four of the scheduled RICs meetings.

Scheduling of meetings

These meetings will be scheduled to occur prior to Violence Against Women and Children Forum meetings so as to enable the group to input into the agenda of the Forum.

Agenda setting

Items for the agenda should be identified at the previous meeting or by email request to the meeting facilitator.

Standing item for the meeting

Update by representatives to the Violence Against Women and Children Forum.

6.4 Link with Violence Against Women and Children Forum

At any one time, two RIC representatives and two Chair representations will be members of the Violence Against Women and Children Forum.

Nominations and responsibilities of representatives to the Forum

Two RIC representatives and two Chair representatives will be nominated at the Combined RICs and Chairs meetings. The representatives are to be drawn from different regions and with equal representation between metropolitan and rural regions.

As a principle, the tenure of representatives should not all conclude at the same time but be staggered to maintain consistency, continuity and quality of representation to the Violence Against Women and Children Forum.

The responsibilities of nominated representatives are:

- To canvass their constituency (RICs and Chairs) at the leadership meetings to identify important collective issues and emerging themes relevant to the state-wide agenda.
- To represent the collective responses of their constituency at Violence Against Women and Children Forum meetings.
- To report back to the Leadership meetings the key issues and agenda items discussed at the Forum.



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2015-168.1

Victoria's integrated family violence system: from stalling to renewal

“It was a reforming time”

Nine years after the roll-out of Victoria's integrated approach to family violence Rachael Green, Manager Policy and Strategy at the Department of Human Services' (DHS) Office of Women's Affairs, reflected on the 'extraordinary' conditions that led to the \$35.1 million service integration reforms. Strong and committed leadership from the Chief Commissioner, the courts and public servants, a reformist Attorney General, and effective advocacy from the service sector all played a part in the genesis and implementation of a family violence response system that was seen as 'a model' for other states.

But in 2014, family violence was back on the state (and national) agenda as never before. Incident reporting had skyrocketed, services and courts had become overwhelmed, and despite the best efforts of a dedicated service sector, people were still slipping through the cracks. VicHealth research released in September of that year showed that the prevalence and causes of family violence were still poorly understood by much of the Australian public, and there were in fact some “concerning negative findings”.¹

A state election loomed in November, and family violence for the first time gained a top spot in campaign platforms on both major sides of politics. Victorian Opposition Leader Daniel Andrews had promised a Royal Commission into Family Violence,² and Premier Denis Napthine had launched a \$150 million package to tackle family violence on a number of levels, including prevention campaigns, increased crisis accommodation, and men's behaviour change programs.³

So why, nine years after such significant reforms, were there still such marked problems in the family violence response system? How had the issue come back so prominently on the public agenda? What new leadership challenges had arisen by late 2014, and how could

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¹ Several items measuring support for gender equality and understanding of family violence had actually declined since the previous iteration of the VicHealth survey in 2009. For example, only 71% of people understood that family violence is mainly perpetrated by men, down from 74% in 2009 and 86% in 2005. See <https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/media-and-resources/publications/2013-national-community-attitudes-towards-violence-against-women-survey>.

² <https://www.viclabor.com.au/media-releases/labor-to-establish-royal-commission-into-family-violence/>

³ http://www.marywooldridge.com/Media_Detail.asp?ID=628

sector veterans Rachael Green and colleagues make sure the unique opportunity to reboot the family violence response system would not be squandered?

The end of the Statewide Steering Committee

In 2006, shortly after its report had led to a successful bid for reform funding, the Statewide Steering Committee to Reduce Family Violence⁴ became the Statewide Family Violence Advisory Committee, and met much less frequently. Policy development entered a new phase; the CEOs stepped back: it was now seen as a matter for consistent implementation in the trenches. Former Steering Committee member Magistrate Anne Goldsbrough observed:

The ‘flavour’ of the committee changed around this time. It could be said the Committee became more bureaucratic in many ways. There was noticeably less of a ‘problem solving’ environment and more of a government executives ‘reporting back’ to members approach.⁵

The eclipse of the Committee robbed the sector of a platform where shared understandings were forged between leaders of very different organisations. Turnover of key staff and the loss of casual discussions surrounding Steering Committee meetings had led to a falling off of these painstakingly built relationships and understandings. While many of the relationships endured outside the committee, the momentum was interrupted.⁶

But on the other hand, said Green:

...there needed to be a stepping back. Meeting three hours a month for CEOs was such an enormous investment, and it couldn’t have been maintained. Already people were dropping off. It was an enormous amount of work for people.

According to Rodney Vlasis, Acting CEO of male family violence prevention organisation No To Violence, the Steering Committee arrangement did need to evolve, but there was much more to talk about that never got addressed:

Some of it was about shared meanings and understandings, some of it was around accountability to children’s needs and experiences and exposure of children to family violence... And some was also about the very long implementation time required to turn a principle into a practice.

Vlasis also felt the possibility of putting women’s organisations at the ‘hub’ of a coordinated approach, awarding them most of the community services money, and deciding collectively with clear leadership from government about how to spend it, was an important issue that was never discussed:

Around 2006-07, what we really needed was not only for government and non-government opportunities to thrash out some of these issues to continue, but spaces for NGOs to come together and make some decisions around these things.

Political buffeting also came in for its share of criticism, as regular meetings at the ministerial level petered out after the Coalition was voted in at the 2010 Victorian election:

One of the things about the integrated reforms that was seen as quite innovative was that we had multi-ministerial leadership under [the previous Labor government] – the women’s portfolio, community services, child protection, Attorney-General’s and the Police Minister

⁴ For full Steering Committee membership, see p. 62 of *Reforming Family Violence in Victoria*, available at http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0020/643124/reforming_family_violence.pdf.

⁵ Magistrate Anne Goldsbrough, personal communication.

⁶ Ibid.

were all involved... They came together quarterly for joint oversight and ownership, and it was quite effective. That unravelled under the last government.⁷

Vlais concurred, adding “There's no doubt about it, there was a lot of inertia. Things stalled.”

Implementation and consolidation

For Green, people around the Steering Committee table “got to a real depth of shared understanding. But the rest of the state ...hadn't been on that journey.” Goldsbrough felt that while the Committee had been a key driver in the planning and design of the reforms, the format of the Committee had changed before it could apply the same rigour to implementation.

From July 2006, 20 purpose-built Family Violence Regional Partnerships in DHS local areas had begun to implement aspects of the integrated approach. They were overseen by Regional Integrated Family Violence Committees whose purpose was to drive service integration at a local level.⁸ Unfortunately, according to Vlais, the governance structures to support implementation of the Partnerships were lacking:

That governance level really broke down, the reason being that [Regional Integration Coordinators or RICs] really had no power or authority. The role of governance ideally is for the Regional Integration Coordinator to actually have some power to network enough to bring departmental managers of correction, or child protection, or police, together to nut out how the reforms are going to occur in that particular region.

The RICs, often employed by women's services who weren't at the hub of family violence systems, didn't have “enough teeth” to make the many disparate service providers (including but not limited to police, child protection, corrections, men's services, alcohol and other drugs) sit in a room together and develop coordinated practices and MOUs, talk about shadowing each other, or collect and share data. “They were hampered”, remembered Domestic Violence Victoria (DV Vic) CEO Fiona McCormack:

We had ongoing turnover of women of great calibre in those positions because [roles and responsibilities] weren't clear. And it was difficult then embedding consistency across the state because there was such variation from region to region depending on personalities.

“It's like the government dipped its toes into a regional governance model but didn't really give it what was needed,” commented Vlais.

Green concurred that more could have been invested in making partnerships work at a local level. The funding model was changing dramatically, and the sector was wary – DHS was working to consolidate the ‘buckets’ of funding (for example counselling, outreach and men's behaviour change programs) through regional partnerships. Large partnerships (upward of seven organisations) were now bidding to run family violence services in regions of 60,000-400,000 people, and there was “a lot of push-back” from organisations within the sector worried about loss of specialisation, and about not being able to compete with larger agencies.

Decentralisation, while driving innovation and locally-tailored solutions, also drove sizeable inconsistencies in practice between different regions. This was exacerbated by a funding

⁷ Alison Macdonald, Policy and Program Manager, Domestic Violence Victoria. Quoted in Donaldson, D. (2015) “How Victoria is taking some responsibility for family violence”. *The Mandarin*, 28 January. Available at <http://www.themandarin.com.au/18713-family-violence-victoria-must-keep-reforming-say-advocates/>.

⁸ DHS (2010) *Preventing and responding to violence against women: Milestones in Victoria*. Available at http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0015/643101/Range_of_reforms_resize7.pdf.

model that directed funding through partnership agreements, each in a different local area. Inevitably, silos formed.

Said Vlasis:

You'd have a Magistrate's Court over here that works really well in protecting women, and terribly over there. You'd have child protection practitioners who were doing these good initiatives over here, but nowhere else in the state... the inconsistencies were horrific. And still are.

Not all the news was bad. Some aspects of the reforms worked well and were effectively embedded. Green singled out the Family Violence Risk Assessment and Risk Management Framework (the 'CRAF') as a success story. The CRAF was developed for use by a range of professionals, including specialist family violence service providers, and the courts.⁹

According to Victoria Police Senior Policy Officer Ross Porter, the CRAF is also designed to spread out to allied non-core family violence services, and is "simple enough that it sets up key risk indicators that any social worker can flick through and go 'OK there's a number of red flags here that I may not have been able to identify otherwise'". It builds a common understanding of evidence based risk factors, and is supported by various DHS-funded tailored training packages. Victoria Police, who had already begun using a risk assessment framework in their 2004 Code of Practice for the Investigation of Family Violence, use a streamlined version of the CRAF as part of their reporting requirements for each family violence incident.

Continuing justice reform

In Victoria Police, reforms begun in the mid-2000s continued apace. Since the introduction of the Code of Practice for the Investigation of Family Violence in 2004, a watershed moment for family violence response within the force, Victoria Police's policies had undergone constant evolution. Rod Jouning, Detective Superintendent in charge of Sexual and Family Violence, acknowledged that although police members had taken some time to fully embrace the Code of Practice, there had since been a "really large cultural shift". Members had begun

...using the tools that the legislation provided around intervention orders, safety notices. They actually started to hold the perpetrators to account far more. And had a lot more interest for the victims. That has resulted in our reporting rate progressively increasing over that period of time.

Dedicated family violence services were also being developed and launched in the courts. They had already developed extensive internal protocols for the processing, listing and hearing of family violence applications, under the stewardship of Supervising Magistrate Anne Goldsbrough. Then in June 2005, the Family Violence Court Division of the Magistrates' Court commenced operation in two pilot locations of Ballarat and Heidelberg. It comprised specially assigned Magistrates, trained applicant and respondent support workers, family violence outreach workers, additional legal services from Victoria Legal Aid and Community Legal Centres, dedicated prosecutors, and additional security officers. Through this Division, magistrates could order perpetrators to attend behavioural change programs, sentence on family violence related crimes and make some family law orders for the one family (termed the one magistrate one family model). Similar but reduced services were soon operating in four additional courts.

⁹ Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria (nd) "CRAF". Available at <http://www.dvrcv.org.au/training/family-violence-risk-assessment-craf>

In 2006, legislative changes (Holding Powers) gave police the power to remove offenders from the scene of family violence incidents where their behaviour was considered to be family violence but didn't meet the criminal standards for arrest. This was a civil law tool complementing police's often more unwieldy criminal law powers. According to Claire Waterman (Policy and Projects Manager in Victoria Police's Sexual and Family Violence team):

It was one of those gaps in legislation where the poor woman would think that police could take him, and they actually couldn't. So we got the power to do that while we applied for an Intervention Order... it was great for police because it meant that they also saw that gaps they'd identified were translating on a state-wide level to the actual tools they needed in legislation.

This was a prelude to far greater legislative reforms. In 2008 the Family Violence Protection Act made sweeping changes to police powers, and even to the definition of family violence in civil and criminal law. Four of the biggest changes were that family violence was now broadened to include emotional and psychological abuse, as well as economic abuse; the exposure of children to family violence was now considered a family violence offence; the definition of 'family members' was broadened; and police were now able to serve on-the-spot Family Violence Safety Notices (FVSNs).¹⁰

These could be issued by police members of sergeant or higher rank outside of court hours, and also served as applications for Family Violence Intervention Orders (FVIOs). Effectively, they also allowed police to remove offenders from the scene of an incident for at least 72 hours, against the wishes of the affected family member/s if necessary, until an FVIO could be issued by a court (to which the FVSN acted as a summons). FVSNs were a civil option, but contravening them constituted a criminal offence. Achieving and then implementing these changes was a "huge undertaking", said Waterman, because

...it wasn't necessarily popular with the courts in some regards, and the services and NGOs too. We had to fight for it. There was a concern that we were giving police additional powers they might misuse, but they also wanted to make sure that people being affected and the respondents had time to get legal advice.

Sensitive to these fears, in 2009 Victoria Police commissioned an evaluation of Family Violence Safety Notices. It found overall that FVSNs had contributed to an improved after hours response, and gone some way to improving victim safety. Importantly, it concluded that although members were now more confident in their ability to act for victim safety out of hours, they were also applying FVSNs with "appropriate discretion".¹¹ Victoria Police accompanied the roll-out of these changes with a full day of force-wide training, which in the context of only two days of training per year helped to reinforce the message that police leadership took the family violence response very seriously.

Concerns about FVSNs remained, however, as they left much 'critical information gathering' in the hands of police, some of whom had relatively little family violence training compared to court staff who had previously assisted with the applications. According to Goldsbrough:

The quality of the information contained in the FV application through a FVSN was and still can be highly variable. Whilst this is steadily improving ...if the information – the evidence – is not correct or is incomplete, for example children are not included, no information about other court orders or firearms licences, or the history of violence ...then there can be

¹⁰ Magistrate Anne Goldsbrough notes that in practice, the majority of FVSNs are served at the police station after members have used holding powers to remove the offender from the scene.

¹¹ Thomson Goodall (2010) *Final Report to Victoria Police FVSN Evaluation Committee*, p. 89.

challenges to obtaining a protection order, especially at a contested hearing. Some of these are mandatory considerations for a magistrate to make an order.

Subsequent policy changes included a major 2010 re-write of the Code of Practice to bring it in line with the Family Violence Protection Act,¹² and an Enhanced Family Violence Service Delivery Model in 2011 that had “a focus on looking at our repeat victims and recidivist offenders. It was shifting from that initial response to proactively starting to work with some of these families that we’re going to regularly.”¹³ The Service Delivery Model was supported by an increase of specialist family violence teams across the state, from the original seven in 2011 to 32 by November 2014.¹⁴

Victims of their own success?

The efforts of government, the sector, courts and police soon had begun to pay an ambiguous dividend: from 2004-2014, family violence reporting more than doubled (see Exhibit 1). As community awareness grew, victims became aware of the support services available to them, and felt more comfortable coming forward. Police were generally more diligent in responding to and following up family violence incidents. As the figures continued to rise, police began to realise that reporting would not plateau in 2015, the year when the level of reporting had been expected to match the level of offending.¹⁵

The mandatory action required by the Victoria Police Code of Practice meant that both civil referrals and criminal prosecutions dramatically increased: “pre-Code [2004] to now”, said Waterman, “we’re talking about 800 percent increases in criminal charges”. The courts were struggling, and services only had time to engage with clients who were quick to respond. As Jouning explained:

[Services have] so many of these referrals that they just can’t cope. So what tends to happen, particularly around perpetrators, is they don’t engage. If they do, they don’t do it well, there’s no follow-up and no accountability around that.

Added Waterman: “It’s a prioritisation thing. If [services] don’t get an immediate response or engagement by [the client], they move to the next one. We’re victims of our own success, in a way.”

In the courts, Goldsbrough and her colleagues on the Family Violence and Family Law Portfolio Committee sought ideas and changed practices to try and deal with the demand and unpredictability of their caseload:

Lists of intervention order cases of 60-70-80+ are not unheard of and in fact have become the norm. These numbers – most of them extremely urgent – meant clients were receiving often brief legal advice and support, stretching legal and support services to the limit. Many are adjourned to another day, creating a ‘churn’. The court has created additional family violence lists days at most courts, yet the numbers keep on increasing.

Added to the service fragmentation described earlier, this often presented a less than welcoming service landscape for victims, who could wind up underserved by an increasingly stretched system.

¹² It subsequently underwent several more minor updates; see Exhibit 1 for the 2014 Code of Practice.

¹³ Claire Waterman interview.

¹⁴ Claire Waterman interview.

¹⁵ Bucci, N. (2013) “Police chief warns on rising cases”. *The Age*, 22 April. Available at <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/police-chief-warns-on-rising-cases-20130421-2i8f8.html>

Jouning reflected that there had probably been “over-compliance” by police members in making referrals to services, but he and his team were now thinking about how to adjust the system in light of these developments:

...there is a better opportunity to triage through a three-tiered risk assessment process. ...We reckon what'll happen there is that all this really low risk stuff will be treated as low risk, it won't necessarily result in referrals. So that's going to take a lot of pressure off support services. A lot of the stuff won't go before the courts, and take the pressure off the courts.

Another piece of work being undertaken by the Sexual Assault and Family Violence team was ensuring that family violence was represented in the police tasking and coordination process, traditionally focused on how to place resources to deal with ‘volume crime’ such as burglaries and car theft. Key to this, explained Waterman, was a fundamental reconfiguration of crime statistics, to disaggregate somewhat hidden family violence-related offences from their individual crime themes:

So what we did was shift our crime reporting last year so that in the crime stats release it identifies of all the major crime themes, what proportion of that is family violence. It didn't used to be separated...[Now] we're actually providing that information to the public, saying “this many of our assaults directly arose from family violence incidents, this many sexual assaults, this many children were present. In abductions and kidnaps, this is how many of them were in a family violence context”. It's putting that major crime lens on.

At 42 percent of all crimes against the person, 34 percent of all rape offences, 42 percent of abduction/kidnap offences, 16 percent of property damage offences, and 47 percent of harassment offences,¹⁶ the data clearly indicated that family violence warranted a place around the tasking and coordination table along with burglaries and car theft. It also proved a useful communication tool for police, who were able to demonstrate that although the official crime rate was increasing, this was almost entirely due to family violence-related offences. But the data also raised other questions. Did this reflect an increase in reporting only? Or was it somehow an indicator of an underlying increase in the incidence of family violence?

Why this, why now?

In September 2014, Victoria Police Chief Commissioner Ken Lay was hopeful about retaining public momentum in the fight against family violence: “For the first time ever, we're approaching the state election and both sides are talking about family violence reform”.¹⁷ Melbourne newspaper *The Herald Sun* was running a sustained campaign “to confront the scourge of family violence in our community”.¹⁸ And in the Sexual and Family Violence team at Victoria Police, Rod Jouning and Claire Waterman were finding their job easier because they could talk about the gendered nature of family violence without being accused of bias against men: “I don't have to spend my day worrying about that and dealing with fallout from that language choice, but I did have to five years ago.”

For Victoria's family violence leaders, a combination of leadership, hard work and tragedy had catapulted family violence to the top of the political and public agenda. According to Vlasis, many advocates from the service sector had spent a lot of time working with the media

¹⁶ Victoria Police (2014) *Crime Statistics 2013/2014*. Available at http://www.police.vic.gov.au/content.asp?a=internetBridgingPage&Media_ID=72176.

¹⁷ Ferrier, S. (2014) “One in five Australians believe drunk women ‘partly responsible’ for rape: survey”. *ABC News*, 18 September. Available at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-09-17/one-in-five-believe-drunk-women-partly-responsible-for-rape/5749088>

¹⁸ Herald Sun editorial (2013) “Family violence must end”. *Herald Sun*, 22 July. Available at <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/opinion/family-violence-must-end/story-fni0ffsx-1226682797077>

to lift their standard of practice when it came to reporting family violence. His organisation No to Violence had partnered with peak body DV Vic and others to deliver a media awards event known as the EVAs. For DV Vic CEO Fiona McCormack, the key had been to realise that they needed proactive and not punitive strategies to work with the media: “our approach before had been bashing... and it never works”. Instead, “you bring people along. You acknowledge their good work... honestly the EVA media nights are the best fun”. More than six years on from the first EVAs, reporting had improved both in quality and quantity, and competition for the awards was stiff (see *Exhibit 3* for an award-winning article with the judge’s comments).

A series of shocking, high profile family violence cases had also gripped the state.¹⁹ The most well-publicised of these cases, the 2014 murder of 11-year-old Luke Batty by his father, raised his articulate, dignified and passionately motivated mother Rosie to a national stage; she became an advocate of increasing prominence, culminating in her being named the 2015 Australian of the Year. The impact of her advocacy was felt not just in Victoria but across Australia, where other states had been facing similarly challenging conditions. “She’s an incredible person”, said McCormack, who reflected that Batty had challenged family violence myths “right from the get go”:

It’s very commonly believed that women use the courts to separate their children or punish the father. With Rosie coming out and saying “nobody loved Luke more than his dad”, and saying those things about the man who had just murdered her son, I think she’s captured people’s attention because she’s challenging that myth. ...And the other thing is people trust her, so she can say things that people think “yeah that’s sound”, so having her, particularly coupled with Ken [Lay], coming out and giving family violence a profile at a national level... That’s what she’s done.

What next?

For DHS Policy and Strategy Manager Rachael Green, the lack of community understanding highlighted by the VicHealth research was a sign that the root causes of violence against women needed to be better tackled through prevention strategies:

...we need to make sure all of our training and resourcing includes understanding of family violence dynamics, all of that sort of stuff. And have as its core some of those causal and contributing factors. I think that’s a question about training and continuing to embed.

Access to data was the other big gap identified by Jouning and his team at Victoria Police:

We need systems that talk to each other, IT systems. We just operate entirely in isolation in many senses. ...Particularly between us, DHS, Department of Health, we really don’t play at all. And the Courts, including Family Court. ...they operate very much in isolation from the Magistrate’s Court. We don’t have visibility of them, and it’s such a risk factor to us.

With data connections, fairly static point-in-time risk assessments could be seen in context, providing a bank of information that could escalate or de-escalate risk for front-line services. Courts too could benefit from data sharing, as a respondent “can have an intervention order application go before the court, and at the same time, that respondent may have other relevant criminal matters operating through the system”²⁰ that the court doesn’t know about.

For Vlasis, data sharing could also help police and prosecutors bring perpetrators to justice,

¹⁹ Robert Farquharson murdered his three sons by driving them into a dam in 2005; Darcey Freeman was thrown off the West Gate Bridge by her father in 2009. The 2012 street murder of ABC employee Jill Meagher, while not family violence-related, also contributed to the public discussion of violence against women as well as the capacity of the justice system to make effective use of data sharing.

²⁰ Rod Jouning interview.

because often the best body of evidence around a man's use of violence is from the women's service who've interviewed her, yet women's services have never been connected into perpetrator accountability systems. Of course there's a whole lot of issues to work through in terms of being able to work closely with police prosecutors etc ...but it's bread and butter in strong coordinated community responses in the US.

November 2014 brought a decisive victory for the Labor party, and with it a Royal Commission into Family Violence. Its Terms of Reference promised a wide-ranging inquiry into prevention, early intervention, victim support, and perpetrator accountability.²¹ Rachael Green and the women's portfolio were moved from the Department of Human Services to the Department of Premier and Cabinet after the election, and Premier Daniel Andrews appointed Victoria's (and indeed Australia's) first ever Minister for Family Violence. Soon after, Assistant Commissioner Dean McWhirter was appointed leader of the first Family Violence Command in an Australian police jurisdiction. The signal was unambiguous: the political masters of the day were ready to match strong rhetoric with strong action on family violence in Victoria.

The issue's extraordinary public prominence also brought new challenges. One was to sustain professionalism and coherence in the face of a myriad of new initiatives. As DV Vic CEO McCormack observed:

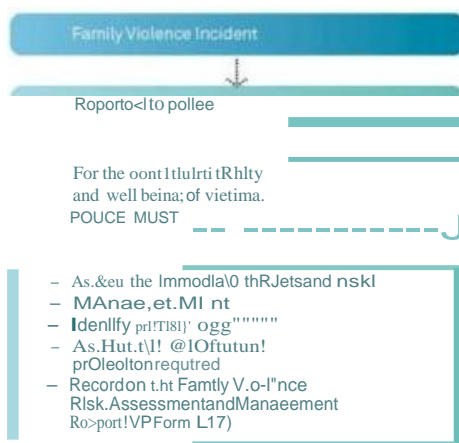
What we've got now, family violence is like the flavour of the day, and we get every man and his dog claiming "oh yes we do prevention, we do prevention". We get civic groups saying: "We're starting a website, we're doing this for women, or we're doing this for men". People who have absolutely no qualifications, expertise, they're people in the community. If we're going to prevent violence against women we actually need the community, but without a policy framework that says "in Victoria this is what informs our approach, and this is where we're heading", it's very difficult to hold those organisations to account, or even bring them in under the umbrella, in the fold, which is what is needed.

Victoria's family violence sector was now faced with a unique opportunity to take advantage of strong election commitments, and to conduct a public self-examination and agenda-setting exercise. In this new strategic environment, how could it institutionalise and capitalise on the newfound momentum? What leadership was necessary, and how was it going to be provided?

²¹ *Victoria Government Gazette*, No. S 31, 22 February 2015. Available at <http://www.gazette.vic.gov.au/gazette/Gazettes2015/GG2015S031.pdf>.

Exhibit 1. Code of Practice for the Investigation of Family Violence, June 2014

VICTORIA POLICE OPTIONS MODEL



Police must take the most appropriate course of action for one or more of the following options

CRIMINAL

- Charge and remand
- Charge and bail
- Charge and summons
- Intent to summons
- Following brief submission, no further police action

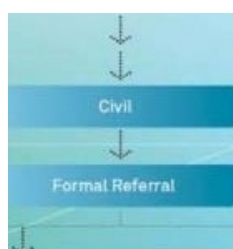
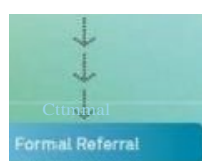
CIVIL

- Family Violence Safety Notice issued
- Application & Warrant
- Application & Summons
- Family Violence Interim intervention order
- Existing order (variation)

REFERRAL

- Formal - AFM & Perpetrator
- Informal - AFM & Perpetrator
- Children - Child Protection AFM Service Child FIRST

Police must follow one of the available option paths.



ACCOUNTABILITIES

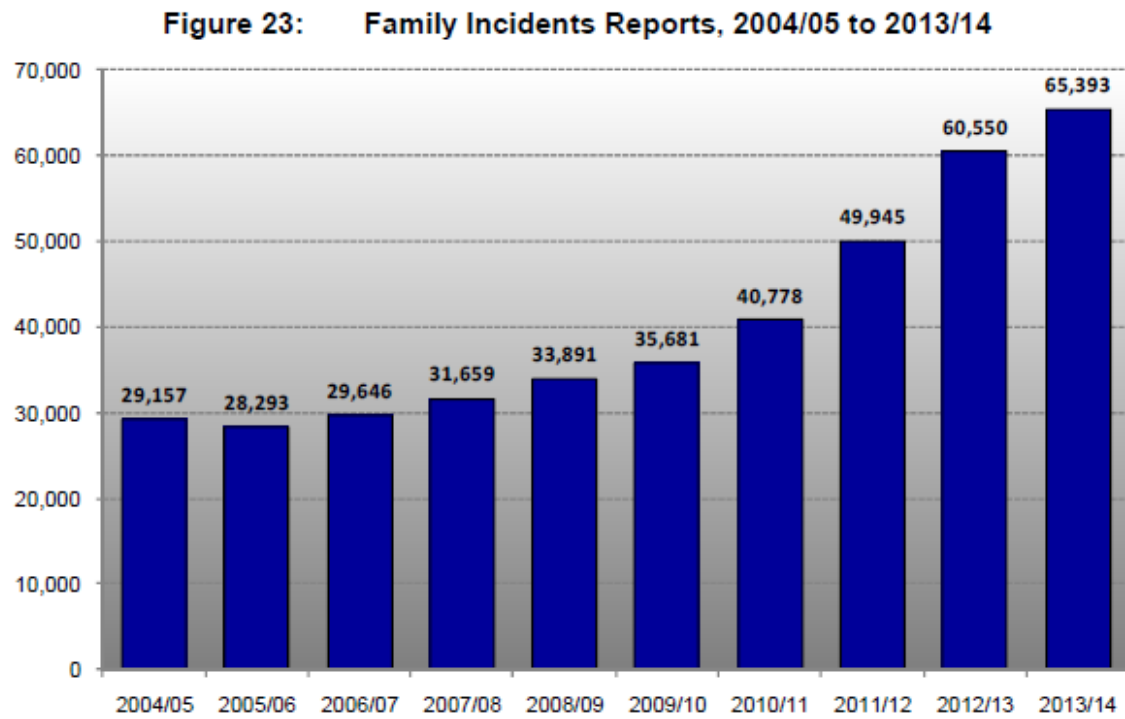
Supervisors must monitor and approve action taken. In particular they must determine whether:

- The appropriate course of action was taken
- The most appropriate course of action was taken for the accused person
- The appropriate course of action was followed

OUTCOMES

- Safety of the AFM and others
- Investigation and protection where appropriate
- Appropriate referral and being made for all parties
- Disruption to the cycle of family violence

Exhibit 2. Family violence police reports



Source: Victoria Police (2014) *Crime Statistics 2013/2014*. Available at http://www.police.vic.gov.au/content.asp?a=internetBridgingPage&Media_ID=72176.

Exhibit 3. EVA winner for Best Suburban Report in Print

08 NEWS NEWS 3-16 WHAT'S ON 17-18 LIFESTYLE 19-20 CLASSIFIEDS 21-27 SPORT 28-30 REAL ESTATE Liftout

MORELAND

Stop the violence

FAMILY VIOLENCE REPORTS HAVE GONE UP BY 36 PER CENT IN THE PAST FIVE YEARS IN MORELAND. IN RESPONSE, A LEGAL CLINIC FOR MUSLIM WOMEN IS OPENING. TESSA HOFFMAN REPORTS

SAFIYA never imagined marriage would come with so many bruises. Her husband began beating her as soon as the newlyweds arrived in Moreland from Pakistan and for close to a decade she endured almost daily abuse until he filed for divorce.

Safiya, whose name has been changed to protect her identity, has now sought help from Moreland Community Legal Centre to secure sole custody and child support payments and an intervention order against her husband.

Speaking through an interpreter, she said she would not have sought help had her husband not initiated divorce.

Family violence reports to police have gone up 36 per cent to 1118 incidents in 2011-12 across Moreland in the past five years.

The epidemic crosses all cultural and social demographics and there are many barriers preventing victims seeking help.

For newly arrived migrants, those barriers are so numerous they can be almost insurmountable, according to a 2010 paper by the Australian Domestic and Family

WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

- Women's Domestic Violence Crisis Service (24 hours) 1800 015 188
- Men's Referral Service 1800 065 973 (Mon-Fri, 9am-9pm) anonymous confidential telephone service for men who want to stop abusing
- Kids' Helpline 1800 551 800, national 24-hr helpline for children and young people (Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm)
- Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights: 9481 3000 (Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm)
- InTouch Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence 1800 755 988 (Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm)
- Berry Street Victoria northern region 9450 4700 (Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm)
- Immigrant Women's Domestic Violence Service 1800 755 988 (Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm)
- Mary Anderson Family Violence Service 9353 1013

Violence Clearing House. These include language barriers, illiteracy, financial dependence, unemployment, cultural differences, lack of legal knowledge and mistrust of government agencies.

There are scant resources set up to target this problem, according to the Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights.

Moreland Community Legal Centre is hoping to help fill the gap by establishing a legal clinic exclusively for Muslim women who are victims of family violence.

The project, believed to be a first in Victoria, is spearheaded by solicitor and Muslim Mehernaz Sadafi.

Ms Sadafi said the project would respond to the growing number of women coming through their doors who have no money, no English and little or no social support. She said it was incredibly hard for these women to speak out against their aggressors and "it helps coming into our office speaking to a Muslim female who can appreciate their history, their culture, their religion".

Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights executive director Joumanah El-Matrah welcomed the move.

She said more Muslim women were now reporting domestic violence, but a diminishing number of smaller service providers left them fewer places to seek help.

"An Anglo-Saxon woman has a multitude of options available to her, whereas if you're an immigrant woman, you don't have that choice," Ms El-Matrah said.

"Often you're just lucky if you can find someone who understands your language."

When it came to barriers to seeking help, religion was a "key difference" for Muslim women.

"It's much easier to explain to a Muslim woman why you can't leave the relationship because of what you perceive to be your religious obligation than it is to try to explain it to someone who doesn't come from that tradition," Ms El-Matrah said.

"That is knowledge mainstream providers just don't have, and can't acquire, because it's religious information."

Safiya said she endured her husband's abuse in order to give her children a "proper family" and always hoped one day it would stop.

But looking back "if I would know after eight long years I would get nothing but a divorce, I would (have left)".

She encouraged women in the same situation to seek help.

"I have tolerated so many things. Up to the last stage I was believing in myself and keep trying to make things normal, but now he has given me the divorce and everything has been history, but I am still under that trauma," Safiya said. "If I would take one of these steps, when things started, then things definitely would have changed."



Judge's remarks

Tessa Hoffman's article highlights the importance of cultural and religious understanding in the provision of family violence services. Tessa gives voice to women's experiences of family violence compounded by cultural misunderstanding in Australia. Safiya's comments of her experiences are frank and give insight into why women don't and can't leave violent situations. The piece importantly includes broader suburban statistics and makes it apparent that this is an extensive community problem. The 'Where to go for help' box is excellent in both content and placement.

Source: <http://www.evas.org.au/index.php/evas-winners/2013>