



## Royal Commission into Family Violence

### WITNESS STATEMENT OF RHONDA LEA CUMBERLAND

I, Rhonda Lea Cumberland, Chief Executive Officer, of 53 Abbotsford Street, Abbotsford, in the State of Victoria, say as follows:

1. I am authorised by Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand (**Good Shepherd**) to make this statement on its behalf.
2. I make this statement on the basis of my own knowledge, save where otherwise stated. Where I make statements based on information provided by others, I believe such information to be true.
3. Good Shepherd made a submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence in May 2015. I refer to and adopt this submission. Attached to this statement and marked **RC-1** is a copy of Good Shepherd's submission dated May 2015.

#### Current role

4. I am currently employed as the Chief Executive Officer of Good Shepherd. I commenced with Good Shepherd in 2009.
5. In this role I am responsible for continuing the Good Shepherd mission in the face of declining numbers and capacity of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd. I am responsible for the provision of direct service delivery in Victoria and New South Wales, with a focus on family services and domestic violence. My role also carries responsibility for the Good Shepherd Strategic Plan, the annual budget and all operations.

#### Background and qualifications

6. I have the following qualifications:
  - 6.1. Bachelor of Arts;
  - 6.2. Diploma of Education;
  - 6.3. Master of Arts in Women's Studies; and

- 6.4. Doctor of Philosophy in Women's Leadership.
7. I was a Melbourne City Councillor from 1988 to 1993.
  8. Between 1993 and 2000 I worked part time for the Centre Against Sexual Assault at the Royal Women's Hospital and for local government while I focussed on my Master of Arts and my Doctor of Philosophy.
  9. From 2000 to 2006 I was the Executive Director of the Women's Domestic Violence Crisis Service Victoria (**WDVCS**). The WDVCS was the after-hours first contact point for women who were experiencing family violence. Our work involved organising medical attention, crisis accommodation, counselling and support for women who were fleeing violent relationships. We were the 24/7 crisis response and in those days the majority of referrals were from women themselves. As Executive Director, I was responsible to the board. My role was to implement the strategic plan, oversee all operations, manage the finances of the crisis response service, manage staff (who were mainly casual then) and provide immediate safety and referrals for women and their children escaping violence.
  10. In 2003 the State-Wide Steering Committee was established, instigated by Christine Nixon. I became a member of the Committee from the beginning. I was appointed to the committee by virtue of my role at WDVCS.
  11. After the WDVCS, I entered the public service and worked on family violence reform initiatives. This included working with a number of others to develop the current framework used to identify and respond to risk, the Common Risk Assessment Framework. The State-Wide Steering Committee had been in existence for two years and had developed new directions for family violence services and initiated the new integrated model of service delivery. A ministerial group was formed to oversee the reforms and to introduce the new era of coordinated, whole of government, domestic violence services in Victoria.
  12. In 2007 and 2008 I was the Director of the Women's Policy Unit in the Department of Victorian Communities (**Department**). This position had become vacant while I was working on the family violence reform initiatives. While family violence reform was at the centre of women's policy, women's policy was wider than family violence. The Women's Policy Unit focussed on four areas: women's education, leadership, health and safety. As director, I reported to the Deputy Secretary of the Department. A restructure occurred during that time, such that the Women's Policy Unit came to include Family Violence Reform, the Rural Women's Network and the general women's policy areas. The Women's Policy Unit and Victoria Police

coordinated the two state-wide steering committees, one on sexual assault and the other on family violence. The Women's Policy Unit managed the register of women for board appointments and coordinated international women's day events. 2008 was the centenary anniversary of women's suffrage in Victoria and this was a significant project at that time.

13. In 2009 I commenced in my role as CEO of Good Shepherd.

### **Good Shepherd**

14. Good Shepherd is an organisation of approximately 130 employees, established by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, a religious order originating in eighteenth century France. The Good Shepherd Sisters first settled in Australia more than 150 years ago. The creation of Good Shepherd reflects that the number of Sisters has dramatically declined in recent times, but the demand for the original mission, to provide for women and girls on the margins, is increasing.
15. Good Shepherd's mission is to disrupt the intergenerational cycle of disadvantage for women and girls. Its vision is to create an emotionally, economically and physically safe world for women. In attempting to carry out its mission and vision, Good Shepherd's focus is on the financial inclusion, safety, and education and training of women and girls.
16. Good Shepherd's functions include identifying and funding research, advocating for change and providing services.
17. While Good Shepherd works with both women and men, Good Shepherd's specialist expertise is the area of marginalised women and girls, a commitment first made by St Mary Euphrasia who founded the Good Shepherd Sisters in France in 1835. Good Shepherd recognises the link between public and private inequality of women. When women turn to the public sphere for just responses regarding family violence, they are met by institutions that do not strive for or promote gender equality. As a consequence, women are disproportionately affected by violence, homelessness, poverty, isolation and other hardships. The institutional pillars of society, government departments, police, courts, and religious hierarchies need to reform themselves in order to make headway against gender inequality.
18. Good Shepherd operates a number of programs aimed to support women struggling to overcome hardship, whether that is family violence, poverty or isolation. In addition, the Women's Research and Practice Centre conducts

extensive research into the root causes of these hardships, identifying gaps in service provision for women and proposing models to meet their critical needs.

19. Good Shepherd also wholly owns Good Shepherd Microfinance and the Trading Circle, an international income generation project for women. In Western Australia, Good Shepherd operates a secondary school for marginalised indigenous girls. All of these organisations are a part of the unified Good Shepherd mission in Australia and New Zealand
20. Good Shepherd recently restructured its programs to develop a clearer focus on inequality and to be better able to measure the impact of our services on women's social and economic mobility. We support the emerging vision of women in today's world, one that leaves behind the old view that women are home centred and only seeking employment to 'help out' with family finances. We look back and see that intergenerational poverty and violence against women are largely embedded in this limited and limiting view.
21. Good Shepherd's service model will, over time, integrate financial security, safety and education and training pathways. The model is underpinned by a framework that adopts coaching, mentoring, and brain science to work with women who are socially and economically excluded. This service model has been informed by Crittenden Women's Union, a service focussed on women's economic independence operating in the United States. Our services will coach and mentor women, rather than refer or case manage them. Services will operate with an understanding of systemic causes of inequality, rather than repeat individualistic assessments and provide short term remedies. Services will have a full regard for women's goals and aspirations as well as support them in their roles as mothers and carers.
22. Today, many women enter the social support service system because of family violence and stay within the system for decades. To measurably improve outcomes for women, the full potential of every life should be the foundation on which support is provided.
23. At Good Shepherd, training and employment will be emphasised with all women, even those with small children. Safety, especially assessing family violence, will be elevated as an essential quality in every woman's life. But safety will not be assessed in isolation. The welfare approach today that only regards women as the carers and mothers responsible for home duties and family matters, is not adequate. This approach needs to change if family violence services are to be

effectively reformed. Once women are seen as capable of being independent, of having personal goals and wanting to use their skills, the benefits to women and their children will start to flow and a life outside of the social services system will become more possible.

## **Funding**

24. Good Shepherd is funded by the state government, through the Department of Health and Human Services.
25. Funding for family violence services has been one of the reasons why many people have come to the conclusion that the family violence system is broken. In my role as a senior bureaucrat, when I held the position of Director of Women's Policy in 2007 and 2008, I experienced first-hand the system of state budgets and budget reviews. Money spent on family violence services was filtered through the major department budgets and was always appraised against mainstream priorities. While all budget processes are about setting priorities, good process can also ensure that budget allocations keep up with social reality. Family violence surged in severity, prevalence and in community concern while the budget for family violence asked for more services with as little funding as possible. Family violence over the past ten years has not had a budget advocate, someone who championed family violence funding and nothing else.

## **The dark days – how far we've come**

26. When I first began working in the sector in 2000, it was a frightening place. It was before the days of Christine Nixon, before the State-Wide Steering Committee and before the systematic changes Ms Nixon was instrumental in introducing. There were no systems or structures in place to deal with family violence. Each reported case was assessed on an individual basis. What each case had in common was largely overlooked.
27. During my time at the WDVCS we saw women murdered, beaten and de-humanised. I can remember a conversation with Victoria Police after a woman was murdered. I suggested that domestic violence and homicide were linked and that our organisations should work together to reflect this understanding. The response was that family violence or "domestics" were separate to crime. This was a mindset issue, not necessarily a dismissive response. The initial police response to incidents was lacklustre. Dealing with family violence was not regarded as a core part of policing. There were no operational links between women's crisis support organisations and police.

28. As workers, it was frightening to know the risks women faced and to know at the same time how little was available to assist them. We did not have the knowledge, the systems, the tools, and the skills to respond effectively. We made many mistakes. We removed women not just from their homes but from their communities. The system required that women leave their jobs. We took children out of school for long periods of time and often required them to change schools. We did not know then how to assess women's risk. At times we asked women if they could stay with a friend or family member, because we had no funds to accommodate them. We referred women to homeless services only to have them sent back because they were deemed victims of family violence. Each weekend, a limit was placed on the number of women who could be provided with accommodation. The WDVCS Board went to the then Minister of the Department of Human Services to appeal for extra funds. The request was refused. We felt like we were fighting a war in our own community.
29. I refer to the pre 2003/2004 days as 'the dark days'. There has been a lot of change, and significant advances made, since those times. The most significant change is a greater awareness of family violence. Very high profile cases of family violence, usually domestic murder, have received sustained media attention. This has shifted public opinion, political interest and women's views of themselves.
30. In 2000, there was no response for about one third of the women who called for help. The only real response type that was offered, if her call was answered, was a refuge or motel bed. After the first response, anything could happen. Certainly, women were being attended to by police. Certainly, legal services were representing women in courts. However, the services pathway was an either/or option. Police had their response. Legal services had theirs. The women's services were separate in culture and service type. It was as if victim survivors had to choose one approach and take their chances.
31. The mindset now has changed. Today, a response worker knows what will have an impact against family violence and from this knowledge a set of interventions is offered. The service mindset today has the knowledge, skills, policies and procedures to bring together the enforcement response, a legal response and a women-centred service. New legislation has been introduced recognising the broad definition of family violence. The Victoria Police Code of Practice for the Investigation of Family Violence is in place. Systems have been developed, risk assessment frameworks are in place, police and health care providers are being trained and educated about family violence and can provide a first identification and response point.

32. There is no comparison between the response today and that of 2000. We can point to the failures today - and there are many. However, the failures of the system should not be confused with a lack of progress. We have come a long way from women self-referring, women not reporting to police, from police not drawing the dots between family violence and crime and domestic murder. I acknowledge how far we have come since those dark days. The days of an isolated women's service response are gone.

### **Economic abuse**

33. In 2014, Good Shepherd, in conjunction with the Wyndham Legal Service, released a report titled 'Restoring financial safety: legal responses to economic abuse'. Attached to this statement and marked **RC-2** is a copy of this report.
34. As the report articulates, economic abuse is a serious form of abuse. I refer to and adopt the case studies and findings referred to in the report.

### **Ensuring a woman is safe is not sufficient – the full participation of women**

35. When the State-Wide Steering Committee was first convened, we agreed that our first priority was the safety of women. It was a breakthrough then to reach agreement on one common goal. Now, ten years later, and as a result of our understanding of the financial and other challenges faced by women, Good Shepherd's view is that ensuring that a woman is physically safe is not sufficient. The sector has become better at responding to a woman's immediate needs in a crisis situation; when she is hurt, frightened and has escaped from home. However, the problem is not solved once the immediate crisis has been dealt with. Every woman has a life to live. This should be the goal we strive to achieve for all victim survivors.
36. Family violence is a significant de-capitaliser of women. Family violence (and other systematic disadvantages faced by women) are significant factors in limiting women's achievements, removing their wealth and forcing them to start again with each significant episode of violence. While there is little research on family violence and women's economic decline, this should be further explored.
37. Some of our ideas about family violence and its impact on women come before the research; before the studies and before the evidence. Front line services working with numbers of women are often the ones to identify emerging issues before a broader understanding of the trend or common experience is described or articulated. We think women's de capitalising is one of these issues. We know of

repeated cases where homes are damaged, property stolen or destroyed, rent is not paid, debt is left in the woman's name. Identity theft contributes to credit card debt. Utility bills and kids' schooling fees all fall behind. However, these issues are not widely known or discussed, as the issue of the de-capitalisation of women has not yet been the subject of substantial research.

38. It can be seen how economic abuse negatively impacts on a woman's wealth. There are many examples of how this might occur in the Good Shepherd / Wyndham Legal Service report. For example, she might incur significant debt as a result of agreeing to put the car loan and credit card in her name, to which her partner subsequently refuses to contribute.
39. Women can be decapitalised through all kinds of family violence, not just by economic abuse. It is difficult, for example, for a woman to maintain full time and consistent work and focus on career progression if she is being subjected to physical or emotional abuse. She might have to take days off work when she moves herself and her children into a women's refuge. The woman might have to use her savings to fund legal representation. Once a woman becomes decapitalised, unless she is supported by a wealthy family or is well-educated, it is difficult for her to re-capitalise. As a direct consequence of family violence, a woman becomes entrenched in a poverty cycle from which it is very difficult to escape.
40. As a consequence, our ultimate aim cannot be solely women's safety. Ensuring that a woman is physically and emotionally safe is essential but not an end in itself. Instead, we are aiming for women's full participation in society. Once we have established a woman's safety, we want to put a system behind her that allows her to leave the system altogether. We want her to know that not only is she *allowed* to be in control of her own money but that she *has* to be. Her independence depends on this. Only with this level of self-control will intergenerational exclusion and disempowerment be reduced.
41. If women were supported to gain skills and qualifications, maintain a full time or part time job, accumulate some savings and have secure housing, they would be better protected against family violence. The economic benefit this would have on the state economy would be significant. Women who earn incomes pay tax. Women who earn an income can rent homes in areas they choose nearer to family and support. Women who work are better able to support their children. The economic outcomes gained via women's participation and equality could significantly impact on the state's economic growth. I think the idea of assisting women to 'graduate'



from the family violence support system is compelling both in terms of ethical and just measures, and in terms of overall economic benefit.

42. It is also important to have the support of state and federal government and the corporate world. For example, one way in which government may be able to contribute to women's economic participation is through creating specific microfinance products for women escaping family violence. In addition to support services, the government could provide loans to women who have experienced family violence to enable them to, for example, fund a course or buy a car to enable her to get to work and drop her children off at childcare. There could be loans at low interest that help women start up small businesses or social enterprises. In terms of corporate involvement, one great example is the micro-financing scheme that Good Shepherd Microfinance runs in conjunction with the National Australia Bank. As I stated above, Good Shepherd Microfinance is a wholly owned subsidiary of Good Shepherd. This program provides affordable financial services to people on low incomes. It aims to move low income earners from financial crisis to resilience and inclusion. It also works with utilities companies when women are experiencing hardship.
43. Helping a woman to 'graduate' from the system involves challenging women, as well as supporting them. I am a firm believer that we must encourage self-belief in women. Women will ultimately be safer if they are financially independent.
44. There are at least three benefits of focusing family violence reform on economic abuse.
  - 44.1. First, women who are financially independent and in control of their money are likely to recognise a lack of control in other parts of their lives. It stands to reason that some form of independence and control is better than none.
  - 44.2. Second, family violence is full of shame and embarrassment. Many women do not report sexual assault, humiliation and degradation. Perhaps financial abuse is not as hard to report as other more intimate and degrading experiences. Economic abuse should be a central focus of a revised risk assessment tool and should be considered when fear and humiliation are overwhelming victims.
  - 44.3. Third, economic abuse could be the centre piece to drive innovation and change in the sector. It is an ideal new area to build further training and capacity. The sector has not received adequate or focused training over

many years. A new service design would help transform and open up a sector that has been long neglected.

### **Moving forward – men’s voices and the economic participation of women**

45. The current generation of advocates in the family violence sector have done a remarkable job of putting family violence on the public agenda. It is no longer a marginal, private matter. The advocates who have gone before have asked the public and the policy makers to listen, and to understand the devastating prevalence and impacts of family violence.
46. I think, as a whole, we are now listening and understanding. We understand, to a much greater extent than ever before, that family violence exists, its prevalence and impacts are devastating and shame us all, and that family violence affects individuals, the community and ultimately, our nation. The challenge is to move forward, from this point, into a time of making changes and finding solutions.
47. In my view, we are in the middle of a paradigm shift. To take us forward, we need to hear from voices with ideas for change and with ideas for solutions. These might be different voices from those that have gone before. I think the new voices will, and must, include the voices of men to a much greater extent than we’ve experienced before.
48. Family violence is a mainstream issue and we need to have mainstream politicians, agencies and leaders on board. While I am firmly of the view that men need to speak with, not for, women, I think the next generation of men’s voices will be transformative. I believe that men who deeply believe in equality are going to be a next wave of change.
49. In my view, the two biggest changes in this sector in future will be men’s voices and women’s full participation in society. I am hopeful that these two factors, coming from the hard won change that has already occurred, will result in significant and permanent improvements to the family violence system. This in turn will advance equality and our society.



Rhonda Lea Cumberland

Dated: 8 July 2015