



## Royal Commission into Family Violence

### WITNESS STATEMENT OF GABRIEL ALEKSANDRS

I, Gabriel Aleksandrs, Social Worker, of Melbourne, in the State of Victoria, say as follows:

1. 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.

#### Background

2. I hold a Masters of Social Work from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology.
3. I have over twelve years' experience working in the homelessness, disability and aged care, not for profit and family violence sectors.
4. I currently work in the homelessness and aged care sector at the Brotherhood of St Laurence. Many of the clients I work with have a background of family violence. In some instances the violence is still occurring and includes carer and kinship family violence. In other instances, I work with people who have a history of experiencing violence in prior marriages and relationships.
5. One of my prior roles was working in a family violence service for over three years. In this role, I supported family violence workers, a Regional Family Violence Prevention Networker and also provided practical support (staffing a resource/information centre) to victims, assisting them to access health services, housing services/websites, and employment websites. During this time I first recognised that the services available to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer (**LGBTIQ**) people experiencing family/intimate partner violence needed attention.

#### Submissions

6. On 19 June 2015 Safe Steps and No To Violence made a joint submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence (**Submission**). The Submission was prepared by Tania Phillips and me. We were commissioned by Safe Steps and No

To Violence to prepare the Submission as we both have backgrounds in community organisations and advocacy in the LGBTIQ communities. I refer to and adopt that submission. Attached to this statement and marked "GA1" is a copy of the submission.

7. The Submission is made up of two parts:
  - 7.1. Part 1 summarises some current research in the LGBTIQ family violence area.
  - 7.2. Part 2 outlines our findings, based on consultations we undertook with six mainstream family violence organisations, and nine LGBTIQ organisations. We set out at section 1.2 our key findings as a result of these consults.
8. The key findings arising out of our consultation included the following.
  - 8.1. There is minimal mainstream service delivery targeted at or inclusive of LGBTIQ communities. Nearly all mainstream services are based on a binary-gendered, heterosexual analysis of family violence and no systematic referral pathways are in place for LGBTIQ victims.
  - 8.2. There are numerous barriers to people from LGBTIQ communities reporting family and intimate partner violence to police and accessing support services. These include homophobia/ transphobia within services, fear of discrimination and a lack of awareness by mainstream services staff.
  - 8.3. There are very limited publically available resources in Victoria on LGBTIQ family/intimate partner violence. This may make victims feel invisible in seeking support or information in the family violence sector. Certainly there are no resources aimed at LGBTIQ populations about referral pathways specific to Victoria.
  - 8.4. Whilst participants recognised the need for targeted quality training in this area, there is in fact no training available on LGBTIQ family/intimate partner violence that covers the complexity of the issues as faced by LGBTIQ communities specific to family violence services.
  - 8.5. Most LGBTIQ and mainstream organisations do not have specific internal policies and procedures to deal with/respond to LGBTIQ domestic violence and the unique contexts of LGBTIQ communities.

- 8.6. Current data collection on LGBTIQ family/ intimate partner violence is almost non-existent. This results in these communities being effectively invisible to services, funders and the Government.
9. In the Submission we make recommendations to address some of the gaps in the service delivery identified above. A summary of our recommendations is on pages 4 to 8 of the Submission.

### **My work experience - areas for improvement**

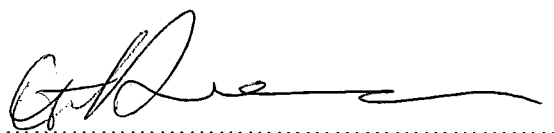
10. The key findings arising out of the consultations we undertook to prepare the Submission are consistent with my own work experiences as a social worker, what I have been told by people in LGBTIQ communities and what I have been told by others working in the family violence and community services sector.
11. In my experience, and based on my discussions with other people working in these sectors:
- 11.1. LGBTIQ people can be reluctant to seek support from mainstream family violence services, either because the services won't accept them or they perceive this to be the case.
- 11.2. There is a lack of awareness in the community that LGBTIQ people can experience intimate partner/family violence. There is also a lack of understanding amongst the community and service providers about legal obligations regarding discrimination against these persons. The community engagement around this issue adopts the heterosexual frame of a male perpetrator and female victim so many people don't know how to recognise violence in, for example, a gay relationship or where a partner is transgender or an intersex person.
- 11.3. It can be difficult for people in LGBTIQ communities to identify when family or intimate partner violence is occurring because there are extremely limited family or intimate partner violence awareness campaigns mirroring the unique experiences that they have.
- 11.4. For young LGBTIQ people, their experiences of family violence can be misunderstood as their parents having a difficult time dealing with the young

person's sexuality/gender identity or intersex status when in fact they may be experiencing great threat or physical abuse in the home and be in genuine danger.

- 11.5. Transgender and intersex victims of family/intimate partner violence have said to me that they would be hesitant to go, or would not go to a family violence service at all. This is because whether or not they have access to one is dependent on how staff perceive them (i.e. as male or female) rather than how that person experiences their gender. Some people have shared with me incidences where people's gender and physical characteristics became the focus of police and court staff's inquiry, rather than violence that was occurring. It is not uncommon for LGBTIQ people to have estranged family relationships, making it even more difficult for them because they may have limited family support systems. Some LGBTIQ victims may rely on family of choice or kinships. These family and kin can also be impacted by the violence or threats the victim is experiencing, making the victim hesitant to reach out to them.
- 11.6. Elderly LGBTIQ people who have had experiences with criminalisation of their sexuality in the past (for example, charges due to homosexual behaviour) may be reluctant to seek support when experiencing domestic violence.
12. Unfortunately, there are no tailored programs around family violence or intimate partner violence for LGBTIQ people. Where there have been initiatives, they have not been consistently run, there has been next to no data collected and there is not an understanding of all communities under the 'LGBTIQ' banner.
13. Whilst technically some people could turn to homelessness services, these services are gender specific spaces which, in my experience, make LGBTIQ people hesitant to access them due to their fear of experiencing homophobia/transphobia/discrimination in such a setting.
14. The housing services available for men are not specific to the experience of family violence. By contrast, there are specific housing services to respond to homelessness as a result of family violence against women. This situation makes it difficult when, for example, a victim of intimate partner violence is gay, and in

immediate danger and needs to seek crisis accommodation. Gay, bisexual, intersex and transgender men may be fearful of discrimination or further abuse from either the service staff, as well as from other residents within crisis accommodation.

15. Due to various homelessness and welfare services also being run by religious organisations many LGBTIQ people have said to me they would be very hesitant to approach them.
16. There are no data collection systems for LGBTIQ communities. For example, almost none of the service intake forms I have seen in mainstream domestic violence services include a question as to whether a person is LGBTIQ, nor is there a usually a question during intake processes as to whether a person is in an LGBQ relationship – they have to volunteer this information. Computerised data collection rarely has categories to specify to LGBQ relationships and people of transgender or intersex experience that disclose. Any information that is collected is not done systematically, and there is no disaggregated data giving us a better picture, particularly of marginalised groups such as intersex, trans and bisexual people. This makes it difficult to highlight the issue of domestic violence within LGBTIQ communities and limits the ability to obtain funding and support.
17. The development of any programs to address the current gaps in family violence services for LGBTIQ people would need to be in consultation with these communities.



Gabriel Aleksandrs

Dated: 5 August 2015