



Royal Commission into Family Violence

Connections UnitingCare

May 2015

Preamble

Connections UnitingCare (Connections) has a long and proud history of working with children and families within the Southern and Eastern Divisions of Melbourne. In April 2015 Connections Strategic Plan titled 'Making Lives Better' was launched. Through our vision, purpose and aspiration we aim to provide a service response that sees:

- Children and young people living in safe and strong families within socially inclusive communities.
- Create opportunities that builds resilience to break the cycle of disadvantage and vulnerability through collaboration.
- Connections is a leader in community services and sustainable growth for thriving. (Connections Strategic Plan 2015-2019).

Connections is committed to the continuing development of programs that are child focused that embeds the Best Interests Framework particularly around issues that impact on parenting including family violence, mental health, drug and alcohol and disabilities. For the purpose of this submission this paper will focus primarily on current Connections programs and its relation to family violence and how these programs can be expanded on into the future.

The terms of reference set by the Royal Commission focuses on the following goals:

- foster a violence free society
- reduce and aims to eliminate family violence
- prevent the occurrence and escalation of family violence
- build respectful family relationships
- increase awareness of the extent and effects of family violence
- reinforce community rejection of the use of family violence
- ensure the safety of people who are or maybe affected by family violence, by:
 - facilitating early intervention before violence occurs
 - providing fast effective responses to those who report family violence
 - providing effective protections to adults and children who have been affected by family violence in the past and remain at risk of family violence.
- support adults and children who have been affected by family violence
- hold those who have been affected by family violence for their actions
- help people who use or may use family violence to change their behaviour
- develop and improve the means by which solutions to family violence are implemented and assess.

Are there other goals the Royal Commission should consider?

Connections believes that to support families who are affected by family violence the following considerations be included in the above goals:

- ensuring that agencies are adequately funded to respond to families affected by family violence.
- greater linkages occur between support services and Victoria Police
- indigenous families are responded to in a culturally sensitive manner

- CALD families are responded to keeping in mind language and cultural factors.
- improved legal responses by the court system including family court to assist women and children make positive changes in their lives.

The Royal Commission wants to hear about the extent to which recent reforms and developments have improved responses to family violence, and where they need to be expanded or altered.

Over the past 10 years there has been a significant shift in service delivery and reform that has informed Connection's response to family violence. As an agency Connections has committed resources to improve responses to families experiencing violence through involvement on three levels:

1. Partnership approach
2. Agency response
3. Client/child impact

Partnership approach

As a lead agency within the Child and Family Sector Connections works from a partnership approach to service delivery. Connections has executive membership on four Child FIRST/Family Services Alliances and is the lead agency in Inner East Region and the South East Family Services Alliance (which is the largest Child FIRST in the state).

Connections is also part of the newly formed Bayside Peninsula Child FIRST and auspices the Family Violence Regional Integration Coordinator within the Bayside Peninsula catchment. Connections is also co-lead with YSAS in the Southern Melbourne Services Connect Partnership, this partnership has 13 members agencies across Casey, Cardinia and Greater Dandenong with an additional 39 agencies in the broader partnership.

Through these partnerships there have been a number of pilot programs that have been established in response to the growing need of families experiencing family violence:

- Connections has been funded by DHHS to provide a specialist family violence family worker within the SEFS Alliance who is available for consultation about family violence, this includes safety planning, referrals to housing, intervention orders, joint visits to families as required and other related matters.
- Child FIRST teams in both Eastern and Southern divisions participate in the processing of L17's in response to police call-outs.
- Project Alexis is a new program that Connections supports as part of the Bayside Peninsula Family Violence Partnership. The program provides a key worker who works with families as an early interventions model.
- Support Against Family Abuse (SAFA) - Connections Family Worker is co-located at Pakenham Police Station two days per week, the worker attends the family home with police at the follow up visit. This is to encourage the victim to engage with supports and where possible a referral is made to Child FIRST. This project within its first seven months saw 184 adults and 325 children. The project is currently being evaluated and early information suggests that women have responded well to this new initiative,
- Connections has also re-aligned.5EFT for a Family Violence Practitioner through Services Connect who is available for consultation to the wider partnership.
- Connections is a member of the Eastern Regional Family Violence Partnership Executive.

System Gaps

- Lack of resources particularly in Melbourne's Outer South Growth Corridor of Casey, Cardinia and Dandenong which sees long waiting lists for counselling programs.
- Additional funding is required to expand the SAFA project to other police stations in the Inner and Outer South where there are significantly high numbers of family violence incidence. (E.g. Cranbourne, Prahran and Dandenong)

Agency Response

Connections has dedicated resources within the agency to support families affected by family violence. Family violence is a key priority within the Strategic Plan, and staff at all levels of the organization are receiving professional development to ensure that they respond effectively to this complex issue.

The key highlights are as follows:

- The Foundations of Best Practice is a program that educates and orientates new workers to Connections on all aspects of working with families. Family Violence is a key module in this training and Connections is in the process of developing an advanced program.
- Connections is currently developing a common assessment tool to be used to identify family violence in conjunction with our Common Assessment and Family Action Plans.
- Establishment of innovative Family Violence group work programs for clients (Men, Women and Children including:
 - Art Therapy Group (Women)
 - New beginnings (Women)
 - Making Changes (Women)
 - Fun Buddies (mothers with children under 3 years)
 - The Incredibles (Primary aged children)
 - Pit Stop (men)
 - Who's in Charge (Parents)
- Windsor Family Services is currently undertaking a needs analysis in response to a growing need at the South Yarra Public Housing High Rise Estate, particularly around children and family violence. Early discussions are occurring with Prahran Police in establishing a response to women and children affected by family violence.
- Connections is funded to provide women and children family violence counselling with the Inner Middle Catchment and a children's family violence counselling program in the Outer South.
- Within our family services program there is an increasing number of families affected by family violence. It is estimated that around 75% of families serviced by Family Services identified family violence as an issue either present or historically. There is also an increase in the number of young people who present with violent behaviors.
- There is an increasing number of families affected by violence perpetrated by adolescents aged 12 to 18 years. Over the past twelve months 62 families participated in the Who's in Charge Group, this group assisted families by

providing strategies to deal with violent behaviour of their children. Up to 60% of young people referred to our Reconnect and Finding solutions were perpetrators of violence, of this cohort many young people are at risk of homelessness or entering the legal system. There is also a high likelihood that without intervention adolescents who use violence will go on to become adults who use violence.

Gaps

Increased funding to be made available to provide a timely response to families where family violence is present to avoid long waiting lists particularly in the LGA's of Casey, Cardinia and Greater Dandenong)

To increase funding in the outer south to expand the Family Violence Children's Counselling Program to include women as well as children.

Lack of services for perpetrators who are adolescents, an injection of funds in this area is paramount. Taking an early intervention approach to family violence begins at the first sign of violence during adolescents and in some cases childhood.

Men's behaviour change programs to address violent behaviours, there is currently very long wait list for men to attend these programs. It is vital for men who are contemplating change have access to immediate services.

Financial assistance to be made available to women to support them to leave violent relationships, many women remain in the relationship for financial reasons.

Client/child impact

In our work with women and children the impact of family violence is continually at the forefront of any intervention. Studies show that the effects of children who have experienced family violence are more likely to experience learning difficulties due to the trauma. When children are under threat their minds and bodies will respond in an adaptive fashion making changes in their sense of arousal, and the way the body thinks. While the children are in a state of trauma learning becomes more difficult resulting in the child's cognitive and adaptive behavior is often in a regressed state. (Bruce Perry Principles of Working with Traumatized Children- 2006)

Research shows that the effects of trauma commences at birth. The effects of family violence can be long-lasting, children affected by trauma can have delayed development and attachment issues. (Revised Trauma Guide DHHS 2012)

Many families referred to Connections have experienced family violence. Working with these families is highly complex especially where children are exposed to continual violence. The presenting issues faced include:

- Behavioral issues at school and home
- School refusal
- Children becoming violent and becoming perpetrators
- Learning difficulties at times being misdiagnosed

From a practice perspective great care needs to be taken when responding to families who are experiencing family violence, to ensure that children and women are not put in further danger. The introduction in the past ten years of the role of Community Based Child Protection Worker has been pivotal to this cohort of families. Finding creative ways to work with these families will assist in families making changes.

Gaps

Further understanding by schools (teachers and welfare staff) of the impact upon children's learning when affected by the trauma of family violence.

Continued discussion with Maternal and Child Health Nurses in relation to working with families experiencing family violence.

Which reforms to the family violence system introduced in the last ten years do you consider most effective

The greatest strength of the new reforms is that agencies, police, child protection and the community are in conversation with one another resulting in clear systems being established. This collaboration is paramount in addressing service gaps within the Community Services Sector.

With the introduction of the L17's from Victoria Police there has been an increase in the number of referrals to Child FIRST. This additional referral base has an impact on the capacity of Child FIRST to respond to other referral sources.

The quality of L17's are not always appropriate and are more suitable for Child Protection or the referrals have limited information which makes it difficult to respond.

The introduction of Safety notices and the change of legislation has assisted in more women applying for intervention orders that includes children.

If you or your organisation have been involved in programs, campaigns or initiatives about family violence for the general community, tell us what these involved and how they have been evaluated.

Connections has been involved in a number of projects/programs as stated earlier in question 2. In addition to these there have been a number of programs/projects including:

- Mother Safe /Child Safe- this program was funded federally from 2003 to 2015. Unfortunately this funding has ceased however some of the components (New Beginnings) is still being facilitated through family services/family violence counselling team. The Art Group has been evaluated and a book has been internally published showing the work of women effected by violence.
- The SAFA Project (see question1) is currently being evaluated and each client is given the opportunity to provide feedback. Connections is seeking funding from local government to expand the project.
- The Family Violence Counselling Program for women and children initially at Windsor servicing LGA's of Stonington, Glen Eira and Port Phillip, was expanded in 2013 to provide children's family violence counselling in the LGA's of Cardinia, Casey and Greater Dandenong. The funding does not match demand for the service with a waiting list of around 3-4 months.
- The Small Courts Pilot Project- Through funding from the Legal Services Board, the Inner Middle FV partnership received funding for this project that ran from 2011- 2014 located at the Moorabbin Court. This project involved the development of a court support program for women and men attending court. Connections employed a court support project worker during this period. This program has been formally evaluated showing that the project was a success, the Department Of Justice now employs a full time Court Support Worker.
- The NewPin program assists women and their children to make positive changes in their life. Most of the women attending this program have been affected by family violence. A therapeutic approach is taken to ensure child safety and well-being.

If you or your organisation have been involved in observing or assessing programs, campaigns or initiatives of this kind, we are interested in your conclusions about their effectiveness in reducing and preventing family violence.

Connections has been instrumental in the development and support of the White Ribbon Campaign, and is committed to promoting this event in supporting staff to attend.

Connections also promotes through its website, Facebook page and other media any events that relates to Family Violence.

What circumstances, conditions, situations or events, within relationships, families, institutions and whole communities, are associated with the occurrence or persistence of family violence?

Through the establishment of local networks such as the Cardinia Family Violence Network a collaborative approach has been developed to address the issue of family violence in a semi-rural fast growing area. The impact of mortgage stress, new arrivals including refugees, family isolation and other issues has led to local service providers establishing a network that focusses on Community Education. Through events such as White Ribbon Day, The Family Violence Forum and the Clothes Line Project the local community is increasingly aware of Family Violence within the Community. Participation by the community increases each year.

Tell us about any gaps or deficiencies in current responses to family violence, including legal responses. Tell us about what improvements you would make to overcome these gaps and deficiencies, or otherwise improve current responses.

Whilst there has been great improvement within the service system the main gaps/improvements required are:

- Magistrates to be educated in family violence matters to improve outcomes for families including children.
- The trend by Family Law Court to recognise the risk to women and children where parenting plans order access visits to be conducted in the family home supervised in some cases by the mother where there has been family violence present.
- Support mechanisms to be improved for women wanting to leave relationships including housing, counselling and family support.

A major gap within the system is the long waiting list for Contact Services. Connections has been funded within the Southern Division to provide contact services to children currently in Out of Home Care. The Enhanced Therapeutic Contact Service (ETCS) provides a therapeutic response where supervised contact is required between a parent and the child/ren. This model could be extended to provide a therapeutically safe space for children where there is a violent parent if adequate funding can be provided.

Does insufficient integration and co-ordination between the various bodies who come into contact with people affected by family violence hinder the assessment of risk, or the effectiveness of (early intervention, crisis and ongoing) support provided, to people affected by family violence? If so, please provide examples.

The Case Practice Document "Assessing children and young people experiencing family violence" (DHHS 2013) was published and an extensive training package was rolled out in the Child FIRST/Family Services and Family Violence Sectors. This document is used by staff in the assessment of Family Violence and provides an excellent practice approach in providing a joint response to family violence.

The CRAF assessment needs to be updated to include the safety of children.

Due to resource issues children and their families are at times placed in accommodation that is not suitable for example; rooming houses, motels and unsafe housing. Refuge places are limited so many women choose to remain in the family home with their partners.

The main area of challenge appears to be with the legal system where family workers experienced:

- Inconsistent responses from Police and Magistrates.
- Repeated breaches of Intervention Order without consequence
- Perpetrator (respondent) and victim (claimant) sit in the same waiting area at the court.
- Contested cases take all day, and are last to be heard.
- Lack of affordable legal services/ housing options for people escaping family violence.
- Women seeking help not being believed, and sometimes blamed for the violence
- All responsibility for change is often placed on victim
- Victims being expected to go to mediation with perpetrator prior to family court, making this difficult for the victim.

What practical changes might improve integration and co-ordination? What barriers to integration and co-ordination exist?

A services system that is well resourced that will assist clients/families affected by family violence to make choices that will be long lasting. A combined Child FIRST Family Services Family Violence intake model that has a centralized point of referral that identifies and supports families as their needs are identified

Further funding is required for counselling due to the long waiting lists particularly for children.

Are there specific cultural, social, economic, geographical or other factors in particular groups and communities in Victoria which tend to make family violence more likely to occur, or to exacerbate its effects? If so, what are they?

The City of Casey has the highest incidence of family violence in the state, Casey is also a fast growing municipality that has mortgage stress and is identified having the most foreclosure of mortgages in the state.

The City of Dandenong has one of the highest CALD populations in Victoria, and also has high rates of family violence within the Community, services have difficulties in keeping up with its demands.

Summary

Family Violence affects clients in all our programs and service delivery. Our Vision, Purpose and Values are shaped by who we are and guide our work. Our work is underpinned by a deep belief in addressing the impact of disadvantage on those whom we work. (Connections Strategic Plan 2015 to 2019). Connections will continue to seek out innovative programs that assist with creative strategies to address the complex issue of family violence.