

## **Introduction**

I have been the elected Member for the State seat of Monbulk since December 2002. The Monbulk Electoral District is located approximately 30 kilometres east of Melbourne and covers an area of 223 square kilometres. The Monbulk Electorate includes the Local Government areas of Shire of Yarra Ranges and Knox City Council. The Shire of Yarra Ranges is nominated as an 'Interface Council' that is, there is a substantial urban community and a substantial agricultural and horticultural region. Interface councils note the tension between meeting the needs of both their suburban and rural communities fairly. This is certainly the case in the provision of many services including community services, legal services, and public transport as well as physical and social infrastructure.

The Monbulk Electorate includes the towns of Belgrave, Belgrave Heights, Belgrave South, Ferny Creek, Emerald, Kallista, Kalorama, Kilsyth, Kilsyth South, Lilydale, Lysterfield, Macclesfield, Menzies Creek, Mooroolbark, Monbulk, Montrose, Mount Dandenong, Mount Evelyn, Narre Warren East, Olinda, Sassafras, Sherbrooke, Tecoma, The Patch, Tremont, Selby, Seville, Silvan, Upper Ferntree Gully, Upwey, Wandin East and Yellingbo. Many of these towns are less than 50km from the CBD and within the Melbourne Metropolitan Boundary or on the fringe of the Metropolitan Boundary.

The area is unique in that it includes the environmentally significant Dandenong Ranges National Park, large rural areas as well as highly populated suburban areas as seen on the fringe of any major city. The electorate extends to the multiple tourist attractions of the Dandenong Ranges National Park, Yellingbo State Nature Reserve, Olinda State Forest and Silvan Reservoir and includes the iconic Mt Dandenong lookout area and Puffing Billy Tourist Railway. There are sparsely populated agricultural areas throughout the electorate which accommodate flourishing floriculture and horticultural industries.

As well as covering a vast area the Monbulk electorate is socially and economically diverse. There are 41,273 electors on the roll residing in 19,415 households. Of course many of these households have children and there are many residents in this area not eligible to be on the Electoral Roll. My EO (EO) is currently located in the township of Belgrave and was previously located in Dorset Rd Boronia.

## **Background**

A regular function of the EO is to provide support, communication and advice to local residents and constituents. I and my EO staff often hear the personal stories of many constituents who attend our office with a variety of problems that they are seeking resolution to. Many of the concerns and issues relate to social services, housing and legal issues. Over the years it has become apparent that often the problems we are asked to address have other underlying or related issues.

The EO does not have a specific role as a Family Violence Service and would not necessarily be the first 'port of call' for victims of family or domestic violence. What we do have is a secondary relationship with many organisations that support victims of family violence and inadvertently we would deal with victims who present to our office with other related issues. It is in this role that we seek to offer some commentary to the The Royal Commission into Family Violence.

In the Shire Yarra Ranges (SYR), *Yarra Ranges Community Safety Background Paper- 2013 - 2018 Community Feedback* records the reduction of family violence incidence as its fourth highest priority in Community Safety Plan and Action Plan. SYR define Family Violence as 'The physical, emotional, sexual, financial and social abuse of family members by another family member. This may result in physical injury or death. Women, children and elders are most likely to be the recipients of family violence'.

It is acknowledged that, Yarra Ranges has the second highest rate of family violence incidents in the Eastern Metropolitan Region, and the number of incidents is rising more rapidly than the Victorian average.<sup>i</sup> In the SYR Family violence recorded offences increased in 2011-2012 with Mooroolbark, Lilydale and Kilsyth/Kilsyth South accounting for the highest rates, followed by Montrose, Healesville, Mt Evelyn, Upwey and Chirnside Park. The number of incidents with children present has remained relatively<sup>ii</sup>

This situation has been reinforced by Leading Senior Constable Linda Hancock in April 2013 Linda who works with families in the Yarra Ranges who said family violence made up a huge proportion of the incidents police attend. "The latest Victoria Police crime statistics reveal 1790 family violence incident reports in Maroondah and Yarra Ranges in 2011/2012, up from 598 in 2010/2011 - a 199 per cent increase. Most of those assaults occurred against women, in the home and by a current or previous intimate partner"<sup>iii</sup>.

The Dandenong Ranges Emergency Relief Service (DRERS) is a not-for-profit organisation that assists those in the south west region of the Dandenong Ranges facing difficulties, hardship and crisis. DRERS has only recently started keeping specific records in regard to family violence, this follows substantial anecdotal and casual evidence that many of their clients presenting with a variety of social and economic issues are likely to be the victims of family violence. The majority of clients that may have a family violence or related issue are women and young people. DRERS notes that they receive some direct referrals of family violence victims they are also hearing many stories that lead them to believe that family violence is an underlying or related issue for many clients that seek their assistance. DRERS have noted an increase in the numbers of children and young people seeking support as they are living out of home possibly due to direct abuse or because of violence within their home. It also seems that more families are reporting violence of children to other family members including parents. It would seem that these circumstances often relate to mental health or substance abuse. Of particular concern is apparent abuse of violence by older children, who may live in the family home, to older frail parents DRERS suggest that substance abuse often leads to financial abuse. DRERS believe that some women in difficult circumstances are unable to remove themselves due to lack of alternative housing DRERS report what they believe to be family violence cover a wide breadth of scenarios that may have family violence as a primary or underlying issue. In our EO we note similar anecdotal evidence.

## Issues

Housing; financial; mental health; alcohol other substance abuse are amongst the most common underlying family violence issues. A most significant related issue is the inadequacy of legal services to assist those in family violence situations.

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**Housing**

Many requests for assistance with public housing to the EO are usually for or by women who have an underlying issue such as family violence again anecdotal evidence suggests that women are unable to remove themselves from violent situations due to a lack of alternative accommodation the catch 22 being they are unable to get on a priority housing list while they are still in existing accommodation, on the other hand they don't wish to forecast their intention to their partner or leave before they have guaranteed accommodation. Often the request for assistance to the EO will be by a third concerned party; unfortunately we are unable to action these concerns without the authority of the person concerned.

DRERS report housing is an issue for a number of their clients; they particularly note the lack of housing options for young people who leave the family home because of violence or other abuse issues. This can be a contributing issue to young peoples' homelessness.

**Financial**

Much of the support sought from DRERS is for food and basic essentials, DRERS believe that financial issues and denial of financial support are frequently linked to family violence and SYR include this in their definition of family violence. From the EO position we have been requested to provide financial support on a number of occasions, we are unable to do this. Interestingly the EO is in close proximity to the Centrelink office and often those seeking support indicate they have been referred to our office by Centrelink. Free or affordable financial advice services are limited; where they exist, constituents tell us that there are long waiting lists for appointments and advice. This situation compounds the existing financial distress. Again lack of sufficient financial support and advice makes it difficult for those in violent situations to leave.

**Mental Health**

In the EO we have been confronted with scenarios that involve mental health issues leading to family violence. One example of this was a family of five whose teenage daughter had severe mental health issues ultimately burning down the family home. The EO together with a number of community organisations and schools worked together to help address this family's needs including alternative housing, accessing better mental health services, counselling for other family members and even unravelling the legalese of insurance companies so that family did not end up in more dire financial circumstances. The ramifications of this action on the parents and two siblings highlighted to us the need for broader services to support whole families through these processes.

We also receive requests for help from grandparents concerned about the outcomes for the grand-children relating to the mental health and potential violence of the parents of the children. We have little option but to refer these families to DHS. Again there are few agencies able to provide assistance and support for those wishing to support others in violent situations.

**Alcohol other Substance Abuse**

For DRERS this seems to be one of the most common underlying or core issues associated with family violence. They believe that alcohol and substance abuse may well be both a

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causative factor and outcome of family violence. In recent times DRERS have noticed an increase in clients who have indicated violence from adult children, with substance abuse problems, who reside in the family home. In these situations it may well be that older sometimes frail parents are suffering abuse financial and maybe physical from children who are trying to access substances.

Again in the EO increasingly receives requests from families for assistance in dealing with substance abuse. Most constituents report limited services available to provide support and counselling to either the family or abuser. We can do little more than refer these constituents on to existing overloaded agencies. EO staff have noted a sense of despair from many parents as they try to negotiate support and counselling for their children. This despair is exacerbated when the children concerned are over 18 years, as these young people are seen as adults and unless they request and seek the help themselves there is little their families can do.

In the Yarra Ranges Community Safety Background Paper, it was noted that: "The high number of alcohol outlets per 10,000 population aged 15 years and over impacts on the likelihood and frequency of alcohol-related violence and other associated issues such as family violence and drink driving.<sup>iv</sup> This is not just a matter of abuse rather it reflects the issue of easy access for those who may be affected by alcohol abuse.

## Legal

One of the most distressing circumstances that we observe in the EO is the inability of constituents to access adequate legal services. Eastern Community Legal Centre (ECLC) have been raising this concern for a number of years seeking to improve access to the justice system for the 148,000 residents living in the Yarra Ranges, spread over a vast 2,500km<sup>2</sup> area. Research conducted by the ECLC found that the number of Intervention Orders sought by Victoria Police in response to family violence was higher in the Yarra Ranges than any other municipality in the Eastern region. The research also found that 86% of community agency staff indicated tenancy issues were a major concern. ECLC welcomed the announcement by Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus QC of Commonwealth funding (\$350,000 over four years) to open a Community Legal Centre based in the Yarra Ranges. The new Yarra Ranges CLC, to be based in Healesville, would have a focus on responding to family violence and housing issues in the large and diverse The ECLC said "We are delighted that the Australian Government has supported the legal needs of people in the Yarra Ranges communities. All people need access to quality legal help and geography should not be a barrier to accessing legal assistance."<sup>v</sup> Unfortunately the enthusiasm that this announcement was received with was short-lived. In November 2014 the then Federal Attorney General' Department announced that funding to the centre would be cut.<sup>vi</sup>

In expressing his dismay at the proposed funding cut, ECLC CEO Michael Smith said, "the devastating figures coming from the police echo our own numbers with the vast majority of the legal matters we are dealing with at Yarra Ranges CLC being family violence related." "The office caters to the 140,000 people living in the municipality that would otherwise have to travel for hours to access this vital legal advice." Mr Smith also said, "Many victims of family violence struggle to get legal assistance and other relevant services primarily due to geographical and transport barriers."<sup>vii</sup> At this time the funding has been restored for two years however there is no guarantee that the funding will continue after 2017.

## Solutions

There are many highly respected, competent organisations working directly with clients and using evidence based research that are more than able to provide directions and advice to the Royal Commission on how to deal with these matters. From my position and that of my EO, using our mostly anecdotal information, we would like to respectfully suggest some possible areas for the Commission's consideration.

Firstly there is a clear need for additional services that provide direct support, counselling and legal advice. These organisations should be adequately resourced so that they are able to provide their services as early as possible to prevent violence rather than after the violence has occurred. It is the belief of most of those to whom we speak that early intervention is one of the most effective ways of dealing with these issues.

It is also our view that there needs to be an improvement and extension of mental health and drug and alcohol services again allowing for early intervention so as to prevent these circumstances resulting in family violence.

The most critical issue of adequate legal services must be addressed. There should be sufficient funding for legal services to assist their clients through their court appearances. Legal services also need to address the myriad of problems that may be the precursors of these violent situations; two areas of particular concern are for tenancy services and financial counselling.

## In Conclusion

The Royal Commission Issues paper posed the question 'what are the most promising and successful ways of supporting the ongoing safety and wellbeing of people affected by violence?' I cannot think of a better point of reference for the Commission to follow up on, than a highly successful project conducted here in my Electorate of Monbulk.

*Monbulk Respect*<sup>viii</sup> is a family violence prevention project aiming to create and deliver a family violence prevention message with the community of Monbulk using the mediums of film and song. Following a forum, the Dandenong Ranges Music Council initiated the Monbulk Respect campaign to continue the community conversation and raise awareness of the impacts of family violence within Monbulk.

The project was in response to a rise in reports of family violence in the Yarra Ranges. The film stars some of Monbulk's most respected and recognisable community 'champions' such as Monbulk Police Sergeant Mark Knight, who also led the White Ribbon Oath, Monbulk Country Fire Authority Captain Simon Schroder, Monbulk Ranges Soccer Club President, Lisa Doolan, and Monbulk Football Club player, Sean Lucas and Monbulk College principal Margaret Uren.

An important element of the Monbulk Respect project was for the community and project artists to engage with family violence survivors to gain an appreciation of their personal experiences. This also meant the prevention message that was delivered in the film and song reflected not only community feelings but also family violence survivor sentiments.

*This Town* is a song wonderfully crafted by Carolyn Oates for the *Monbulk Respect* project to communicate the family violence prevention message.

Please go to the site <http://monbulkrespect.weebly.com/><sup>ix</sup> to see what Monbulk is doing to support those affected by family violence and to improve the understanding of the community

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<sup>i</sup> Yarra Ranges Community Safety Background Paper 2013-2018 Community Feedback, Shire Yarra Ranges, 2013

<sup>ii</sup> Yarra Ranges Community Safety Background Paper 2013-2018 Community Feedback, Shire Yarra Ranges, 2013, pg 33

<sup>iii</sup> Mountain View Mail 18<sup>th</sup> April 2013

<sup>iv</sup> Yarra Ranges Community Safety Background Paper 2013-2018 Community Feedback, Shire Yarra Ranges, 2013

<sup>v</sup> Eastern Community Legal Centre Media Release *Federal Govt Funding August 2013*

<sup>vi</sup> Eastern Community Legal Centre Media Release *FAMILY VIOLENCE FIGURES IN YARRA RANGES SOAR AS LEGAL CENTRE FUNDING IS CUT* Nov 2014

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>viii</sup> Dandenong Ranges Music Council Inc Monbulk Respect You Tube Nov 2014

<sup>ix</sup> <http://monbulkrespect.weebly.com/>