

## **Submission from Macedon Ranges Shire Council's Positive Ageing Advisory Committee to the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence**

**May 2015**

The Positive Ageing Advisory Committee (PAAC) is a voluntary committee advocating for the issues, needs and expectations of older people to the Macedon Ranges Shire Council.

PAAC commends Paragraph 6 of the Terms of Reference for the Royal Commission into Family Violence (RCFV), which states that the Commission should consider the needs and experiences of seniors, people with disabilities and complex needs, and regional and rural communities. We urge the Commission to give these groups more than nominal attention. Family violence occurs in all age groups and sectors of society, including older people.

People in rural and regional areas may well experience higher levels of family violence (as reported in *The Age* 4 March 2015) and the violence is possibly more hidden than elsewhere. Isolation, the “pub culture” of small towns and collusion among men as to what can be discussed openly contribute to a culture of silence and to “putting up with things”. Ageist as well as sexist attitudes contribute to family violence in older cohorts.

Older people may have internalised and accepted or “normalised” ideas of gender inequality and male dominance/female inferiority. A generation or more of older women have tolerated violence from husbands damaged from war or the pressures of the Great Depression. Many older people may not recognise “family violence” or “elder abuse” for what it is. The abuse is not necessarily carried out by a life partner – it could be a child (or children) or other relative. The violence or abuse may be physical, verbal, psychological, or financial. It may be neglect. It will usually involve coercive or controlling behaviour by the perpetrator, and can continue after a person moves into residential care. In contrast to younger cohorts, older men are more likely (than younger men) to experience family violence, particularly from their children. Some older people also endure the (unintended) violence of a partner who suffers from dementia.

A major barrier in combating family violence is fear of repercussions when the older person is dependent on the continuing care or support of the perpetrator. Such dependence makes it extremely difficult for an older person to leave and they are often also fearful of damaging family relationships and losing contact with children or grandchildren.

Ageism is so entrenched that society, including older people themselves, see some abusive behaviour as a “normal” part of ageing or a cause for shame. Older people are expected to become less visible and their gradual withdrawal from social networks is perhaps less questioned than might be the case for younger victims. Yet the impact of the resulting isolation on self-esteem and confidence is just as damaging and can lay the foundations for other forms of abuse (e.g. physical or financial) or indeed be symptomatic of such abuse.

So how do we as a society prevent and deal with family violence and elder abuse?

Awareness and education campaigns must be inclusive of older people in their messages and imagery to enable the abuse to be recognised for what it is, rather than “normal”. They should encourage people experiencing abuse or violence to seek help and explain where appropriate support is available. Campaigns should also more generally aim to educate the broader community about elder abuse as a form of family violence. Educational “respect” campaigns should begin in primary schools.

Education programs should also target those with day-to-day involvement with older people (e.g. carers, council and community workers and volunteers, health professionals, police, lawyers) to enable them to recognise risk factors and signs of abuse and to know what to do when they suspect it.

Clearly, there must be accessible avenues for reporting (e.g. to police, to the employer of a paid carer etc.), but reports should be made only with the consent of the affected person. If the person does not have the capacity to consent, a report should be made only in their best interests, taking into account all possible consequences (including retaliation). If retaliation is a possibility, then protective measures must be put in place.

Obviously “help” for victims of family violence and elder abuse, and for those advocating for victims, must be easily available when needed.

There is a desperate need for more refuges in rural and regional areas, including those for older people (men as well as women, though the sexes should be segregated). The existence (but, until needed by a victim, not the precise location) of these refuges should be widely known in the community.

Police must be educated, trained and resourced to recognise and respond effectively. Intervention orders (if made) should be strengthened and monitored more effectively. Sanctions for breach may need to be strengthened. The issue of intervention orders will likely be central to other submissions from groups and individuals with the relevant expertise so will not comment further.

There is a need for more specialist Family Violence Courts (as divisions of the Magistrates’ Courts) with additional powers (such as the ability to order attendance at Behaviour Change Programs). We are aware of only one in regional Victoria (in Ballarat). We understand a Specialist Family Violence Service, providing specific staff and resources, operates at the Melbourne Magistrates’ Court and in some suburban Magistrates’ Courts. Such services should be available in rural and regional areas.

Consideration should also be given to trialling programs that aim to change the behaviours of the perpetrators of elder abuse or family violence against older people (in a similar way to the more general men’s programs).

A presumption that parents’ assets will ultimately belong to their children, and therefore should be available to children now, often seems to be at the centre of financial elder abuse. Education programs for older people about money management, their legal rights and how to assert them are required. Appropriate publications have been produced by Seniors Rights Victoria but funding is needed to support review, reprinting and dissemination and to conduct education sessions across the state through local community organisations.

Specialist services advocating for and supporting older people (e.g. Council on the Ageing, Seniors Rights Victoria) should be appropriately funded to drive awareness raising efforts and deal more effectively with elder abuse and family violence.