

**Submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence**  
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**Introduction:**

Family violence impacts all Victorians.

And while not all communities are affected equally, we must recognise that it is our job to protect the vulnerable.

We, as a socially progressive community, must share the burden of this significant problem. We must act to minimise the harm.

We must go further than just saving people from a violent situation. We must reduce the likelihood of it occurring in the first place.

Every week (often several times a week), there is a media story of a significant family violence incident in Victoria. Yet with every highlighted story there are dozens more that either don't attract attention or are unreported.

We are all intimately aware of this issue, but because much of it is behind closed doors, we don't quite have a grasp on how big the problem is.

I preface this submission by stating that although I have no direct experience with family violence, I am acutely aware of numerous examples of violence within my community.

These experiences have been related to me both during my short time as a Member of Parliament but also more broadly through my time as a Councillor at the City of Monash.

Over many years I have spent significant time with local police, women's and children's groups, shelters and support services.

I would like to note that while the vast majority of family violence incidents occur against women, I do hope that incidents against children in particular, as well as at times, men, are given serious consideration by this Royal Commission.

Further, the long term psychological effect on other family members, specifically children, who witness or are victims of violent incidents, should be given significant weight.

While much attention is rightly given to physical abuse, other matters which cannot be ignored by this Royal Commission include emotional and psychological abuse, economic abuse and social abuse.

My submission will primarily address issues, in point form, which I believe should be investigated and considered by the Royal Commission.

I was pleased to have the opportunity a couple of months ago to meet a group of female staff working at Southern Cross Care in my electorate. They had raised the issue of family violence in a forum on women's health. This group convened again last week specifically

to discuss family violence with a view to providing me with their thoughts which would better inform my short submission to the Commission. While the language and the structure of this submission is my own, I have incorporated many of the views that came out of the discussion so generously entered into by the group from Southern Cross Care.

I am pleased to offer the following submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence.

### **Submission:**

1. **What leads to family violence?** Understanding this key question is perhaps the first step in developing a long term plan to tackle the problem. This is not an exhaustive list, however issues that I believe need to be seriously considered are: mental health, abused offenders, economic hardship including unemployment, marginalised individuals or communities, relationship breakdown, sexual abuse, alcohol abuse and drug abuse.
2. **Recognising the signs of family violence.** Is there enough community information available regarding violence issues so family, friends and co-workers are able to identify, understand and take action on the signs? This applies equally to both the victim and the offender. Signs of violence or the propensity to commit violent acts are not always obvious. How do we, in government and through community organisations disseminate information to the wider public and how do we make it okay and safe for victims and survivors of family violence to take action and seek the help of authorities.
3. **Education.** While society as a whole understands that family violence is unacceptable, I believe that we do need to change attitudes, particularly in relation to gender. This must start at a young age, potentially with programs to be adopted at the primary and junior secondary school level. It must start at home and in our institutions including sporting clubs and our media. It must also start in our language and the language we teach young people, particularly to young boys to enable them to understand that some previously held notions of gender do not apply. For example 'throwing the ball like a girl' or any use of the term 'girl' or 'woman' which carries with it the connotation that girls or women are weak.

Boys and men need to be supported in creating an alternative and positive identity for themselves and one that does not necessarily cast them as the 'stronger', 'bigger' and 'dominant' one in the context of any of their relationships with women whether they be family members or friends, colleagues or partners. We need to support girls and women to continue to feel empowered – to ensure that their decisions are their own.

4. **Mental Health.** The vast majority of people with a mental health condition are not violent. However, there is little doubt that some individuals are affected by a mental health condition which may sometimes lead to violence. This can often be exacerbated by alcohol and drug use. In many cases, violent tendencies can be managed, so long as support services are readily available. Medical professionals must be encouraged and be adequately resourced to help address this issue. And

professional counselling must be available to those at risk, both victims and offenders.

- 5. Availability and promotion of alcohol.** It has been reported that as many as 50% of family violence incidents are related directly to alcohol and drugs. Further that between 40 and 50% of intimate partner homicides are also alcohol related.

I believe there are two issues that are major contributors to alcohol abuse, which can lead to a higher incidence of family violence as well as other significant levels of criminal, anti-social and dangerous behaviour.

The first is the wide availability of low cost alcohol. A 4 litre cask of wine can be purchased for as little as \$9. 6 bottles of wine can be purchased for \$12. And a case of full strength beer sells for as low as \$26. While enjoying an alcoholic beverage in moderation is perfectly normal, we need to consider if low alcohol prices contribute in some way to greater family violence. If we recognise that alcohol causes social harm, is the tax mix appropriate and uniform across all beverage forms?

The second issue is the widespread advertising promotion of alcohol, particularly at sporting events. Governments in Australia long ago recognised the social harm of tobacco. Some 40 years ago the advertising of such products was banned on television and radio, followed by a ban in print publications over 20 years ago and a restriction on sports sponsorship. Governments have since gone further, removing tobacco from sight at the place of sale and adopting plain packaging.

Alcohol abuse is also recognised as a significant social harm and we have seen recent national initiatives to promote responsible consumption of alcohol, specifically in a family environment. However, it is contradictory to encourage responsible behaviour whilst simultaneously staying silent on the mass advertising of alcoholic products. This advertising is notable at events and during broadcasts where children are significantly represented as spectators. It is therefore specifically an issue with respect to young people – who should not be exposed to gratuitous advertising of a potentially harmful product.

- 6. Drug abuse.** What has been the effect of new forms of serious mind altering drugs like ICE? Are specific illegal drugs causing a greater incidence of family violence? Has policing been effective in reducing the availability of illegal drugs? And are there enough affordable and geographically accessible support structures such as rehabilitation?
- 7. Economic hardship and unemployment.** Pressures on the family budget have long been recognised as a major contributing factor to relationship breakdown. The high cost of living and the limited funds available on government assistance such as Newstart mean that some families live in severe poverty. Are appropriate measures in place to individually identify the negative impacts on the family of ongoing economic hardship or unemployment? Through agencies, governments are often in regular contact with low income or unemployed households. Are these agencies able to adapt processes to recognise at risk families?

- 8. Gambling.** While many Australians have an occasional flutter, there is a section of the community who have a major gambling addiction. Many gaming venues have a liquor licence opening the potential for two addictions to overlap. Does the addiction lead to frustration and relationship problems? Have we considered whether there are enough support services to deal with gambling addiction, specifically taking into account the impact on the family?
- 9. Limited mobility - where to go?** Making the decision to leave a violent situation is an important step to combat the abuse. Finding a new residence may not always be the final solution, but it may have a beneficial effect. Yet the ability for an individual or family unit to achieve this is often limited. Rental properties in Victoria are out of reach for many individuals, particularly for those on low incomes or in receipt of government assistance. What can we do as a government to provide more assistance for at risk people, either through provision of housing or rental subsidy?
- 10. Housing – emergency and short term.** There are times when emergency accommodation is the only option for people fleeing a violent situation. Without it, somebody fleeing an abuser may be left homeless. Is there enough government funding for appropriate emergency and short term accommodation for individuals seeking respite from a violent situation, either with a view to seeking a more permanent solution, or whilst an offender pursues counselling or treatment?
- 11. Assistance to marginalised communities.** Whilst Australia is an inclusive society, there are times when certain sections of the community become marginalised. Although not exclusively the case, this occurs in many migrant communities, particularly those who have recently arrived in Australia. Language barriers, employment difficulties and lack of familiarity with Australian society are all issues that migrants must deal with. In addition, different cultures can at times have diverse and unique gender roles. Support and funding to community organisations like migrant resource centres is imperative to enable them to initiate change and education on these issues among those individuals and families and give them the chance to adapt and understand Australian culture, social mores and laws.
- 12. Protection for victims.** One common concern in the community is the propensity for some offenders to continue abusing a family member or former partner, despite being physically disconnected. I believe more resources should be committed to helping to protect vulnerable people from further abuse. This is more than just offering emergency accommodation. Victims must be provided the resources and tools to create a new life, with new support structures, completely separate from an offender. If victims do not have real confidence that they will have lasting and tangible protection, this would surely work against their confidence to report the abuse.
- 13. Policing.** The Victorian Police service should be commended for their work in responding to and dealing with family violence issues in a professional manner. However, with the increased reporting of family violence issues, the ability for police to monitor and protect vulnerable people is limited. Police and other emergency services can often be the first to identify a family violence issue. They therefore must have the resources available not only to do their job effectively, but also to provide credible support options for victims.

- 14. Sentencing.** One of the main community concerns regarding offenders is the view that sentences do not adequately reflect the nature of the crime. There are two aspects to these views. The first is punishment and rehabilitation. The second and more important consideration is protection of the community, specifically the victims of abuse. Laws must reflect this second consideration and courts must be willing to act to protect victims from further abuse.
- 15. Community Understanding.** We need to educate the broader community of the impacts on victims and dispel the myths and perceptions that seem to pervade this issue including that in any way the abuse is the victim's fault. The community should be aware that family violence issues are rarely simple and we need to build a culture of greater understanding and transparency and in doing so, create the confidence for victims to report the abuse.