

Submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence

The electorate of Narre Warren South is located within the City of Casey which has the highest number of reported family violence incidents in Victoria. These horrifying figures continue to see significant growth each and every year. The latest figures show that in 2013-14 there were 3752 reported incidents of family violence within the municipality alone, and sadly Police estimate that this is a highly under-reported crime.

The growing local community is incredibly diverse with residents coming from more than 150 different nations and faiths. Many are new citizens or have young families and often are struggling to meet the rising cost of living. I am regularly contacted by those in the greatest need, including those facing the horrors of family violence.

Alcohol, drugs, gambling, financial stresses, relationship breakdowns and gender inequality are all major contributors to the vicious cycle of family violence. At the core of the problem lies the denial or lack of responsibility of the abuser towards their victim.

Challenges faced by victims

The lack of resources is a major issue for many women who are considering taking action to leave an abusive relationship. Drawing on the experiences of those who have contacted our office these include but are not limited to:

- Lack of shelters for victims and their children
 - In some cases, church groups are providing shelters for victims of family violence, but this does not provide a long-term solution.
 - Based on our experiences safe homes and shelters must be under the guardianship of a government organisation to monitor the safety and protection of the victims and to be responsible for their long-term transition into the wider community.
- Access to financial resources
 - When a woman decides to leave an abusive relationship and makes the bold decision to walk out of her 'home', one of the first difficulties she faces is often a lack of money or access to bank accounts. This makes it increasingly difficult for anyone to leave as they are unable to provide for themselves or their children.
 - The facts are Women workers have a greater reliance on award earnings, and are more likely to depend on minimum wages, casual work and penalty rates. Australian Bureau of Statistics data shows the gender pay gap across all industries was 18 per cent in 2014, with women earning 82 per cent of male average weekly earnings. Pay inequity persists at

management level and below, with pay gaps favouring men in every non-manager occupation.

- Homelessness
 - Some women have found that after leaving abusive relationships they are unable to secure adequate or affordable accommodation. It is extremely discouraging to see that victims of family violence who are going through or recovering from the emotional and psychological trauma of the abuse also have the additional stress of becoming homeless.
 - In some cases, women who have left abusive relationships have found themselves unable to retain their own homes, even if they have contributed towards the mortgage over a long period of time. This may be because their partners either did not include them in the legal documents as co-owners, or took out the mortgage in the name of their partner, leaving them with the financial burden of paying off the house at the end of the relationship.
- Lack of affordable rental accommodation
 - Ever increasing rental prices often make it very difficult for split families to resettle in their local area. Many seek to ensure their children can remain at their current school, with friends and near family, yet this is often extremely difficult causing further stress, uncertainty and social exclusion.
- Lack of public housing
 - There continues to be a significant lack of available public housing for those who are in desperate need of accommodation, especially those seeking refuge from abusive relationships. Emergency accommodation may be available for short periods, however it is often shared by a large number of people and unsuitable for children.
- Access to legal aid
 - In some instances victims of family violence have found that they are ineligible to access free legal assistance. On many occasions, they do not have the funds to secure the legal advice or assistance they need. The legal system that does provide assistance to victims of family violence is in our experience over-burdened, under-staffed and under-resourced which creates obstacles not only for the victims who may find themselves facing delayed settlements but also for the dedicated legal providers.
 - Legal aid frequently does not have the expertise or training to deal with cases where cultural, religious or other sensitivities are required.
 - Immigration issues are also sometimes part of the bigger picture for victims of family violence.

- Victims of family violence who seek expensive legal services have made complaints alleging lawyers are not interested in their cases and often claim that they are not financially lucrative. This puts an increasing pressure on out-of-pocket expenses for the victims, often placing them in a vicious cycle of ever-growing debts.
- Centrelink payments
 - It has come to our attention that some partners, often men have Centrelink payments transferred to their own bank accounts, and women are not given access to these payments, even when it involves providing for the needs of their children.
 - There can be a wait of up to 8 weeks or more to get Centrelink payment transfers in the case of a family split. It is usually the woman who endures a financial setback in such circumstances.
- Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities (CALD)
 - Breaking down barriers between the many different peoples of our CALD communities continues to present itself as a significant challenge.
 - Understanding the cultural and religious backgrounds as well as the difficulties of a language barrier often pushes women from CALD background into the dark and forgotten space of social isolation.
 - CALD women often do not have the means or the support to voice their concerns about their domestic situations and may fall victim to depression or other mental health problems.
 - We have heard women from CALD communities who say that they often have little or no understanding of their rights in Australia, particularly when it comes to their legal status.
 - The stigma attached to family violence in CALD communities often prevents victims from speaking up and asking for help. Instead they may endure, staying in a violent relationship for the sake of their family's honour and standing within the community. This is a very complex and sensitive issue and requires specialist investigation.

Current Practices at our Electorate Office:

- As a general practice, our electorate office refers family violence calls from constituents to support agencies, such as Casey North Community Information Support Services, where a program "Keeping it Together" has been operating for several years and based on feedback plays an important role in the prevention of family violence.
- Support agencies need access to quickly available funds and other resources to help these women who are often taking a bold step by contacting these agencies.

We have all been grateful for the provision of Emergency funds. Any cuts to this service would have diabolical consequences for our needy constituents.

- Others may be referred to legal aid organisations. These agencies are often under a great deal of stress from internal and external referrals, walk-ins and there ever growing caseloads.
- **Ideally, it would be a more satisfying experience and provide for more comprehensive outcomes to refer victims of family violence to one support agency, where the information would be handed down to women in a package, and could be assigned a case worker. The case worker would then work with the individual or family to ensure they are provided with the appropriate multi-disciplinary care and multi-sectoral support.**

General Recommendations

- A peak body or a supervising regulatory body for Family Violence could be formed at the state level with a particular focus on the needs of women and their families living in the outer suburban interface areas to address the following:
 - To improve accessibility and quality of service provision by local service providers
 - To streamline the registration process for service providers working in the family violence area
 - To monitor the performance and behaviour of service providers
 - To provide an opportunity for service providers to network with one another and link agencies that can help each other. This will make access to services more efficient and easier for victims
 - To duplicate tried and tested models from one geographical area to another.
 - To publish the efforts of successful outcomes
 - To be the one stop shop for all matters related to family violence
- The campaign against family violence needs to be expanded with a holistic approach within faith and interfaith groups communities, cultural groups and networks, Educational Institutes, ethnic group, particularly women's groups.
- Mentoring schemes have been shown to be highly effective means by which to change attitudes and create improved behaviours and expectations resulting in better outcomes for those involved.
- Good role models and mentors from within the community, associated with sport and in the media could be given the responsibility of becoming mentors and voices of reason on this important issue. For example, women's football is the

fastest growing sport in Australia and could be an impressive and powerful vehicle.

- At the same time, we need to condemn media personalities that are associated with acts of family violence, rather than celebrate their achievements.
- First-step kits: A kit that includes the essentials and some cash at the time of need would provide instant relief to the victim(s). The kit could include items such as personal hygiene items, clothing, mobile phone and vouchers for food, transport or pet provisions.
- Work in conjunction with federal services such as Centrelink to streamline the process and make it easier for eligible victims of family violence to access payments.
- Holding men accountable: It is regularly reported that men who abandon their family are not always held responsible for the financial assistance their family is entitled to. This aspect of family break-up needs to be closely monitored to ensure accountability.
- Access to legal assistance: The eligibility criteria to access affordable/free legal assistance should be re-assessed and perhaps, based on a case-by-case evaluation. Legal assistance providers to victims of family violence need greater resources, funds and training to help the victims get the support they need.
- Funding to outreach programs by community networks and organisations needs to be further explored. Many organisations are already working and raising awareness about family violence but have limited resources at their disposal. The networks that have a larger potential are thus restricted in the work that they can do in their circles of influence. This causes restrictions and limitations on the effect of their work. Schools are often the first institution established in a growing community and need support and advice to deal with the issue of family violence.
- CALD Communities: Further education and greater awareness of the needs of those within these communities is needed to highlight and deal with the issue of family violence.
 - We have encountered situations where women from CALD backgrounds were ‘married’ within their faith traditions but never registered their marriage. The women did not know that this was a requirement. Later on, when they were abandoned by their ‘husband’, they had no way to prove they had been married
 - The message that it is not ok to suffer at the hands of an abusive partner in a relationship and remain quiet needs to be spread at a much larger scale to CALD communities with the backing of the government or other support agencies. As mentioned earlier this is a complex and sensitive issue.

- The fact that abuse comes in different forms: physical, emotional, psychological, financial and through threats. This message needs to be better explained and communicated to those within CALD communities
 - The wider community must work together to eliminate the stigma surrounding family violence
 - We should encourage anyone who witnesses or is aware that acts of violence are occurring to speak up and report it to the appropriate authorities. An emphasis on empowerment is an essential component of any family violence campaign or strategy.
- Use of modern technology: Helplines, educational apps, social media are all part of the larger solution and need to be readily available and prolific in their outreach, if people are not readily accessing these services.
 - SMS notifications can be sent as reminders to all mobile-users, with weekly/bi-weekly/monthly messages of what constitutes domestic violence, what are the legal repercussions for perpetrators and other relevant information.
 - Apps that are available to victims of family violence must also have a feature to make them “invisible” on the phone so that the perpetrator is unable to find out while monitoring the victim’s phone
 - Landline or mobile phone calls made to helplines should also be made non-traceable to perpetrators for the safety of the victims, and to give the victims the confidence to make that phone call and not risk being found out.

Recommendations for Narre Warren South:

- Educational and awareness campaigns are needed within Narre Warren South and the wider community. A lead agency could be appointed to be the voice in the community against family violence. The local council would be an obvious choice but disappointingly our local council is not nearly as proactive or public as is necessary on this important issue.
 - One of the objectives of this lead agency could be to regularly organise awareness and educational campaigns against family violence.
- Working with our young people
 - The electorate of Narre Warren South has a significant youth population aged between 15-24. There are approximately 8500 within my electorate. These young people will enter meaningful relationships and establish households within the next few years. If this age group can be targeted and educated, we may be able to stop the growth of family violence.

- Continuous support for projects such as 'Say No to Family Violence':
 - My office is running a year-long campaign which will aim to provide a voice for victims of this family violence and allow the community to stand together against family violence.
 - Community organisations will be given the opportunity to prepare a banner with a unique message and impressions of their handprints. The banners will then be displayed outside for all in our community to see.
 - The campaign is intended to end with a vigil in early 2016 in commemoration for the victims who have lost their lives, and those who continue to face such adversity each and every day.

It is incredibly disappointing and heartbreaking to know that despite our best efforts so far two women are murdered every week in Australia. Countless others suffer unimaginable pain and loss, often in silence.

There is so much that we need to do as a community to not only support the victims of family violence but also to ensure that these acts become a thing of the past. It is my sincerest hope to see that the Royal Commission into Family Violence find real solutions and pave the way for a brighter future for all those who have suffered for far too long. May Victoria become the beacon of hope for the rest of Australia.

Acknowledgment

I would like to acknowledge Naureen Choudhry and Nichole Hayes from my office for their outstanding work on this submission. They are both tireless advocates for constituents within my electorate, especially the victims of family violence.

*Suzith A. Galea
MP*

*On behalf of the people of
Name Women South electorate
who dearly want a better and
safer community for everyone.*