

# Christine Couzens MP

## STATE MEMBER FOR GEELONG



25<sup>th</sup> May 2015

### Family Violence Submission from Christine Couzens MP Member for Geelong

As the local Member of Parliament for Geelong and having lived and worked in Geelong most of my life I am very much aware of the issues of family violence. My submission is based on my own experience with a general perspective.

For many years I worked in a youth refuge with young people aged between 15 and 21, and I saw firsthand the life changing affects that family violence has on children and their families.

It was interesting and concerning to observe, particularly young males who came from a home that experienced family violence, that their attitude to women and violent/aggressive behaviours was normal to them. For them this learnt violent behaviour, they saw as acceptable, if they were not happy with another person or situation.

The other side to this is that some young males were easily bullied or intimidated and required a lot of support.

It was disturbing to watch some young women accept this disrespectful and violent behaviour, and at times justify it. Having come from an environment where family violence occurred, they also saw it as acceptable behaviour. Even though for some of them they grew up around family violence, they went into violent relationships themselves and continued in these relationships for a long period of time. In some cases they moved into one violent relationship to another.

Family violence in Geelong is a growing problem. I have met with many women who have experienced family violence, both those who are still experiencing family violence and those who have left, and listened to the many issues they have raised.

I am very much aware that a key issue for women and their children is finding long term accommodation that is safe and secure for themselves, their children and other family members. We have a serious shortage of affordable housing in Geelong which plays a significant role in the decisions that women make in relation to leaving the family home.



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I am no expert on Family violence and make this submission on the basis of what I have experienced and observed personally, however I do want to submit a few case studies from my recent experience as a Member of Parliament working with the constituents of Geelong. I have many family violence stories that have been told to me by constituents. Each one has been dealt with to the best of my ability and as requested by the constituent.

*Ms A contacted me recently out of desperation. She has been living in public housing and has separated from her violent partner. She remained in the house with her children and tried to get her ex-partner to take his name off the lease as per Office of Housing (OoH) policy, he refused. Her ex-partner regularly returned to the house vandalising the property, including smashing windows. On each occasion she contacted police and a report was done. She has also applied for a transfer out of the area in an attempt to avoid any further contact with the ex-partner.*

*The OoH continued to charge her the higher rent because the ex-partner was still on the lease, he continually refused to take his name off the lease and this became a great stress for Ms A. Ms A was advised that she would continue to be charged the higher rent until the ex took himself off the lease, which he refused to do. Ms A struggled to pay the full rent that she could not afford.*

*Ms A was denied a transfer because she was deemed to have a debt to the OoH because to many windows had been smashed and replaced, so the OoH was charging her for the replacement of the glass. Due to the high rental she was paying she could not afford to pay this debt, therefore remained living in the house in fear and desperation. With a growing debt and no ability to transfer to another area she could see no way out of this unacceptable situation.*

This is certainly not meant to be a reflection on our hard working public servants, far from it. It is more a reflection on a system that does not work well.

A young woman emailed me just after the election telling me that she hoped that the Royal Commission would help women like her. This is a modified version of her story to ensure protection of her identity.

*“I live in your area and I want to tell you about my situation. I heard about the Royal Commission and I am hopeful that it will help women who are abused in the home like me. I live with someone who is violent a lot of the time. I am too scared to do anything because he threatens me a lot. I have a baby now and I think at some time he might hurt her also. I do want to leave but I don't know what to do or where to go. If I do go I think he will come after me then what. I am not asking you to do anything I just want to tell someone.*

Mental health is an area that requires work in relation to family violence. This case study is not an isolated case. I have heard many similar stories from other families. I am concerned that we are missing a large group in our community, and that is individuals who are experiencing mental health issues and the impact on their families due to life changing events.

There has been a great deal of talk about mental health and family violence particularly related to the unemployment situation in Geelong. However, the strong focus on the retrenchment of workers from the bigger employers i.e. Alcoa and Ford, has given a perception that other unemployed people don't matter, that there is no focus on others who have experienced the same by other small/medium employers.

*A woman contacted me to tell me how concerned she was about the unemployment situation in Geelong. She told me of her concern regarding her husband's mental health after being made redundant. She felt that his ability to cope after having been made redundant 13 months ago was an ongoing worry to her and their family.*

*He has been unable to find employment and has become depressed, angry and at times aggressive to the point that the woman and her children are frightened of him and what he will do. She believes that he should have been given support at the time of losing his job and that someone should have been working with him to help prevent the demise of his mental health. Now, 13 months later he sees no point in seeing anyone, as in his view, they can do nothing for him unless they can give him a job. When she suggests that he sees someone he now becomes angry and at times violent.*

*She believes that men like her husband have been abandoned because he was not made redundant from one of the big employers who have been getting all of the attention.*

These case studies are a very small reflection of what is happening in our community right now. There are many similar stories and many different family violence situations occurring around Geelong.

The Geelong police and local organisations have developed a response to family violence for which they should be commended. The three days, three weeks and three month follow up approach is a local initiative that has great merit. I am sure that the Geelong Police and local organisations have already provided detail to the Commission.

I do believe that our local police and community agencies are under resourced for the critical role that they play in dealing with family violence. These dedicated people are working together, they have a cooperative approach that does play a vital role and they must have the resources to not only carry out this work but to also have the ability to build on new approaches into the future. They have the skills and expertise and are at the coal face, therefore they have a greater ability to identify what approach works, what needs to change and what can be planned for the future.

Education and awareness across the entire community is essential to highlight this issue and to educate others about the impacts on women and children.

Schools can and should play an education role and can be a significant influence in cultural change. When children are growing up believing that it is ok to behave in a violent manner within their family, we have a serious social problem.

Cultural change should be a focus of the Royal Commission, to investigate and consult with experts on education, children and relevant others on how this might be implemented.

Clearly, support to women and children are critical. The services provided within the Geelong community are exceptional, but the resources don't go far enough. If we are serious about addressing family violence and protecting women and children then the demand on services must be met.

Our services should not have to run 'cake stalls' to prop up the growing demand on their limited resources. These services know far better than me what they need, therefore there should be extensive consultation on how they meet the demands on their service and what resources are required.

Housing plays a vital role in supporting and protecting women and children. In some cases it can be the deciding factor as to when and how women deal with their family violence situation. Having to deal with significant barriers on housing relocation or access does have a significant impact. Of course a major increase in affordable housing stock is necessary if any real change is to be achieved.

There must be mandatory training and ongoing staff development within all areas of human services, such as public servants, police, local government and community services to name a few.

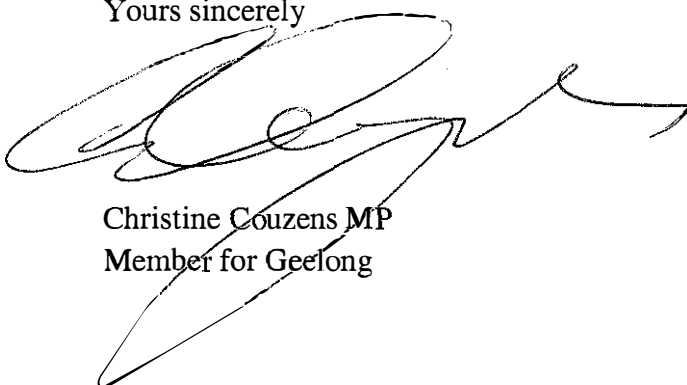
We know that it is women and children who are most affected by family violence, we also know that so far this year two women have been murdered by a family member. These statistics are frightening. This represents about 46 women's lives so far this year.

To begin to address these many issues around family violence we need many areas to be tried and tested. We need to continue to actively focus until we start seeing that we are getting it right. We need to work on that cultural change, that it is not right to grow up thinking that its ok to be violent to anyone.

I strongly believe we all have a responsibility to address family violence and to be a part of finding solutions for our women, children and community.

I will be holding a family violence forum in Geelong on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June. Although submissions will have closed by then, I do believe that as the Member for Geelong I have a responsibility to keep the issue of family violence on everyone's agenda and to do whatever I can to address family violence.

Yours sincerely

A large, stylized handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Christine Couzens', is written over the typed name and title.

Christine Couzens MP  
Member for Geelong