

## Submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence 2015

### Summary of key points

- Travellers Aid Australia has been providing travel-related Emergency Relief for nearly 100 years, including to women and children escaping family violence.
- Mainstream services like Travellers Aid's Emergency Relief program support the specialist service system in providing better outcomes for the women and children who experience family violence.
- Reduction of essential funding for mainstream services impacts negatively on the capacity of the whole sector to respond adequately to family violence.
- Funding cuts to mainstream services ultimately lead to adverse outcomes for women and children experiencing family violence.

Travellers Aid Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide input. Although not a specialist family violence service, Travellers Aid has a long-standing history of assisting women and children, including those who experience family violence.

Travellers Aid Australia is a not-for-profit organisation that provides a range of travel related support services. This submission outlines the unique role that Travellers Aid Australia played for nearly 100 years providing a travel related emergency relief program that provided practical, efficient and immediate support for some sufferers of domestic violence, amongst others. This included advice to help people in crisis situations to make them feel safe and empowered, through subsidised travel tickets as well as information and referrals onto crisis accommodation and other supports.

For those suffering domestic violence, providing them with these travel solutions enabled them to leave potentially life threatening situations, not only creating safety and distance between them and their perpetrator but also to have access to better support frameworks, including family and social networks.

Whilst some clients came to use directly, around 80% of clients of this service came as a result of referrals from a number of other community services organisation across Australia. This is an example of a best practice program that can help in the protection and support of victims via a program that integrates with other community service organisations.

Until February 2015, the program was funded by the Commonwealth Department of Social Services but this funding has now ceased. Lacking alternative funding for this service, Travellers Aid has had to limit the service offering to travel within metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria, affecting both clients and referring organisations.

## **Background to Travellers Aid Australia**

Travellers Aid Australia is a not-for-profit organisation with a 99-year old history of assisting people with transport-related Emergency Relief. Initially founded to help women and children who travelled from war-torn Europe or country Victoria to Melbourne in pursuit of better opportunities, the organisation and its services have evolved. Emergency Relief has always been an integral part of our service offerings to individuals and families as well as to other community service organisations and government services.

During the 2013-2014 financial year, Travellers Aid received referrals from around 200 agencies across Australia and assisted more than 5,000 of the most vulnerable Australians with transport related Emergency Relief in form of subsidised travel tickets. The reasons why people access our service include family violence, homelessness, mental and physical health issues, family crises and accessing other services including employment services, education, court, health services and others.

In order to provide a timely and professional response to people in crisis situations and the referring services, Travellers Aid has implemented processes that allow for real-time bookings made through an online travel agency. This is a unique service offering within Australia, and services from all across the country refer their clients to Travellers Aid when they are in need for travel-related Emergency Relief.

### **Our contribution to supporting victims of family violence**

Although Travellers Aid is not a family violence specific service, a high proportion of the women and children we support with transport-related Emergency Relief experience family violence or are at risk of family violence. For the women and children we assist, our service is part of the sector's overall response to their immediate crisis situation. Travellers Aid by the nature of its service provides practical short term solutions to the family violence situation while longer term solutions can be managed by the affected persons and specialist services.

Travellers Aid can support and improve the response to family violence through greater awareness of our service and much needed funds to deliver this service. Our service, integrated with other agencies provides the opportunity for people affected by family violence with particular regard to women and children from minority groups and groups who experience higher levels of disadvantage for example due to disability, complex needs or financial disadvantage.

Travellers Aid receives referrals from more than 200 services across Australia including Anglicare, The Salvation Army, Centrelink Safe Steps, St Vincent de Paul Society and a number of Aboriginal Cooperatives.

Travellers Aid provides a coordinated response with government departments, courts, police, correctional services, legal services, housing, child protection and family services, schools, health and community organisations. The need for our service is ever increasing with the increase of family violence over the last few years as victims seek to flee violence and intolerable situations. Travellers Aid volunteers and employees are trained and supported in responding to all situations of distress.

While there are situations when those experiencing family violence choose to stay close with their local communities, there are also situations when victims of family violence prefer to move temporarily or permanently to a different location. This could be for reasons of increased safety and security as well as having access to better support including social networks and family.

Travellers Aid can and do help victims of family violence take a powerful step to leave violent situations through being accessible and organised, working swiftly with the relevant agencies or directly with the victim. Providing travel solutions and removing people from potentially life threatening situations creates safety and distance between the perpetrator and the victim.

### **The impact of lack of funding on the sector's response to victims of family violence**

Until February 2015, the Emergency Relief program was funded by the Commonwealth Department of Social Services with an annual grant of \$77,000. Travellers Aid Australia's application for a grant under the Families and Communities – Financial Wellbeing and Capability Program was unsuccessful. As a result of the discontinuation of funding from the Commonwealth and lacking alternative funding options, Travellers Aid had to limit the service offering to travel within metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria.

This impacted on those affected by family violence we assist as well as the community service organisations that refer them to us.

### **Impact on women and children**

With financial abuse often being part of the abusive behaviours women and children experience from their perpetrators, many women and their children feel like they cannot leave the family violence situation and the perpetrator for lack of financial means to get to a place of support. Some have family and friends elsewhere in Australia where they could go to in order to make a fresh start or to at least have a respite for some time while they contemplate their next step. Not being able to afford the travel fares to a safe place or a place of support, often makes these women stay with a violent partner. The potential impacts of this on women and children include:

- Increased risk of exposure to violence and abuse
- Lack of access to social support networks and safety aggravates the experience of trauma and helplessness and reduces the potential for hope and resilience
- Alternative option of crisis accommodation bears the potential of greater vulnerability of the women and children in particular, when no suitable crisis accommodation can be found. It also leads to an unsettling experience of loss of connection to familiar surroundings and social supports.
- Long term effects of trauma including mental and physical health of the women and children, reduced capacity to rebuild emotionally, physically, financially and socially

### **Impact on community services sector**

- For decades Travellers Aid Australia has provided its services to service users and clients of other services across Australia. Of the many referrals received from the sector, not all were from specific family violence services. Often, mainstream services in the areas of health, housing, employment and education as well as

Centrelink and the police are the first point of call for victims of family violence. The option to refer any travel-related issues to the expertise of Travellers Aid has many benefits for the services within the sector:

- Services can focus on their core business without having to redirect human and financial resources trying to source travel options for the women and children they are looking after.
- Significant cost savings for services as a travel fare is usually much less expensive than crisis accommodation.
- Significant long-term cost savings for the broader sector as the self-help capacity of the women and children gets activated a lot earlier with the help of social supports which reduces the need for more long-term and ongoing support from the sector in the areas of mental and physical health, accommodation, financial security, job security, education and other areas.

### **Victim Support - Real Life Situations**

Our goal is to make our service more accessible to those victims of violence who need it most. These are just a snapshot of stories from our clients impacted by family violence.

#### **██████'s Story**

██████ had been living in ██████ with her abusive and controlling partner for ██████ years. When she started to speak up and object his constant abuse, her partner decided that they both move to ██████, away from her family and social support network. ██████ felt that she had no choice but to give in and moved to ██████ with her partner. Here he became increasingly abusive. A health professional referred ██████ to a family violence service after she presented there with symptoms of a mental breakdown.

The family violence service helped ██████ explore options and ██████ decided that she wanted to move back to ██████ to get away from her partner and have the support of her family and friends.

██████'s salary had been paid into her partner's account which ██████ did not have access to. She did not have any funds to get away from her abusive partner. The family violence service made contact with Travellers Aid, and together both services were able to fund and arrange ██████'s fare to ██████ where she was safe and supported.

#### **██████'s Story**

██████ and her ██████ young children left their family home in a hurry after her partner threatened to hit ██████. The relationship had been rocky for a while, and although ██████ loved her partner and wanted things to work out between them, she came to the realisation that she also needed to protect herself and particularly her children.

After talking to Women's Domestic Violence Crisis Service a number of times, she came up with a safety plan should her partner would lash out at her. When things got to that point and her partner was about to hit ██████, she was not able to grab her handbag with all her documents and her wallet. ██████ took her ██████ children and left. She jumped on the next tram and got off at ██████.

█████ went to the █████ ticket office and tried to get a ticket to █████ where she had a friend. Because she did not have any money on her, █████ was referred to Travellers Aid. She was very distressed when she presented there. She was desperate to get to safety, and now everything just seemed too hard.

All it took was \$7.20 to get her and her █████ children to █████ where █████ could stay for a while to sort things out and find a longer-term solution.

### █████'s Story

█████ was a young mother of █████ toddlers. When she presented at Travellers Aid, █████ was distressed and in tears. She had moved to █████ with her partner a few months prior and had since experienced emotional and physical abuse from her partner. The night before, █████'s partner had a particularly violent attack and █████ left the home with her █████ children, spending the night in the car.

█████ wanted to return to █████, where she had family and support. Our Emergency Relief Officer provided initial debriefing and encouraged █████ to get in touch with a family violence service as well as Centrelink to apply for a crisis payment, so she had funds for food and nappies. In the meantime the Emergency Relief Officer obtained quotes for █████ to travel back to █████ and with █████'s consent made phone calls to other services to secure contributions towards the fare.

█████ and her █████ children spent the afternoon in one of our bedrooms at █████ Station, where they were sheltered and safe. When the ticket was finally booked and █████ was able to make her way to █████ to go on the ferry to █████, she was very relieved and grateful. She knew that there was still a lot ahead of her that she had to deal with, but knowing that she was returning to a safe place and the support of her family and friends helped her greatly.

### █████'s Story

A community service contacted Travellers Aid Emergency Relief regarding a young woman, █████, from █████. The young woman had a relationship with a █████ year old Australian man. As a result of this relationship, they had a baby together. When the baby was █████ months old, the young man and his mother took the baby back to Australia. They promised █████ that they would purchase her an airfare to follow them to Australia once they arrived home. This promise did not eventuate. █████ managed to borrow funds to come to Australia to be with her baby. An Australian family that she had befriended in █████ accommodated █████ in their home in █████. With the help of a community legal service █████ had been trying to have access to her baby who was still living with her ex-partner and his mother.

The family court granted █████ access to her baby three times per week. Every time █████ had to travel from █████ to █████ to pick up her baby, take him to █████ for the night and then return him to his father the next day.

█████ is not entitled to any Centrelink benefits, does not have a concession card for travel, nor does she have work rights in Australia. A final court hearing is scheduled for █████?

Until that time [REDACTED] has to rely on the good-will of her Australian friends and on community agencies to provide her with food and help her with day to day expenses. The travel costs to [REDACTED] and back are a significant financial burden.

Travellers Aid assisted [REDACTED] with a number of [REDACTED] vouchers. However, we were and are not able to provide ongoing assistance due to financial constraints.

### **Our recommendation**

Victims of domestic violence can take a powerful step through leaving violent situations just by accessing the service Travellers Aid provides. We can and do improve the response to family violence, by playing a small but vital part in getting victims to safety.

#### **1. Maintain and expand funding for mainstream services**

We would like to highlight the role that mainstream services play in regard to an integrated response to family violence. Any reduction of funding for the broader sector is short-sighted and has an impact on the capacity of family violence services to respond adequately to women and children experiencing family violence. A lack of funding for mainstream services such as emergency relief services ultimately impacts on the ability of the specialist services to respond adequately to women and children experiencing family violence as an even greater burden is placed on them with the reduced availability of referral options to other services. This jeopardises efforts made to improve the capacity of family violence services to respond adequately. Ultimately it reduces the capacity for resilience in women and children to escape the perpetrators, recover from the traumatic experiences and to rebuild their lives.

#### **2. Reinstate funding for Travellers Aid's Emergency Relief program**

Travellers Aid strongly advocates for the reinstatement of emergency relief funding to enable family violence services to focus on their core services while the travel-related issues are taken care of by experts in the sector.

**We offer the opportunity for those participating into the Royal Commission to visit our centres at Southern Cross and Flinders Street to tour our facilities and meet our staff and volunteers.**

### **Travellers Aid Australia – Board**

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