

City of Greater Bendigo submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence.

Introduction

The City of Greater Bendigo (**CoGB**) acknowledges that:

- under the *Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities (Charter)*, Local Government Authorities (**LGA**) are obliged to consider the rights enshrined in the Charter when they create laws, develop policies and deliver their services;
- family violence breaches these rights and is contrary to the values of freedom, respect, equality and dignity which underpin them.

CoGB understands that:

- family violence is prevalent and has profound impacts at both individual and whole of community levels;
- family violence is a complex issue and occurs across all community sectors;
- whilst men, women, children, young people and older people can all be victims of family violence, overwhelmingly family violence is perpetrated by men against women, and there is a growing body of evidence that indicates women and children are most vulnerable to family violence related health and wellbeing impacts;
- the underlying determinants of violence against women in general, and family violence in particular, are the unequal distribution of power and resources between men and women, and the adherence to rigidly defined gender roles.

CoGB has been committed to preventing family violence at both governance and operational levels for some time. This commitment is reflected through the:

- Violence Prevention Plan¹ (**VPP**);
- adoption of the “Achieving respect and gender equality in Greater Bendigo”² Position Statement by Council on 14 November 2012;
- introduction of the family violence clause in the most recent Enterprise Agreement;

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[https://www.bendigo.vic.gov.au/About the City/Publications/Documents listing/Violence Prevention Plan#.VU 5ILd-9wg](https://www.bendigo.vic.gov.au/About%20the%20City/Publications/Documents%20listing/Violence%20Prevention%20Plan#.VU5ILd-9wg)

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[https://www.bendigo.vic.gov.au/About the City/The Council/Council meeting agendas and minutes](https://www.bendigo.vic.gov.au/About%20the%20City/The%20Council/Council%20meeting%20agendas%20and%20minutes)

- principles incorporated into the Domestic Animal Management Plan³;
- support of the Central Victorian Prevention of Violence Against Women Cluster Pilot Project.

CoGB considers that:

- the local government sector has an important role to play in creating and maintaining environments that promote both individual and community health and wellbeing;
- creating and maintaining such environments is an ongoing and shared responsibility;
- greater cross-sector collaboration and cooperation is required if family violence prevention and response strategies are to be more effective.

CoGB believes that this submission to the Commission presents:

- a key opportunity to discuss the learnings of recent bodies of work CoGB has undertaken or supported;
- an opportunity to potentially influence future policy frameworks and resource allocations within an evidence based approach.

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[https://www.bendigo.vic.gov.au/About the City/Publications/Documents Listing/Domestic Animal Management Plan#.VU 8Nrd-9wg](https://www.bendigo.vic.gov.au/About%20the%20City/Publications/Documents/Listing/Domestic%20Animal%20Management%20Plan#.VU%208Nrd-9wg)

Responses to relevant Commission framing questions

Question Four

If you or your organization have been involved in programs, campaigns or initiatives about family violence for the general community, tell us what these involved and how they have been evaluated.

1. Central Victorian Prevention of Violence Against Women Cluster Pilot Project (PVAW Project).

The PVAW Project was funded by the Victorian Government and administered through the Office for Women's Affairs for a three year period (2011 – 2014). The PVAW Project's goal was to "prevent violence against women by building communities and organisations that are non-violent and gender equitable and support respectful and equal relationships and non-violent norms between men and women".

As part of its commitment to violence prevention, CoGB led a partnership with Macedon Ranges Shire Council and Mount Alexander Shire Council to apply for PVAW Project funding. The Central Victorian cluster was the only regional / rural cluster: the other two clusters were metropolitan based.

The Australian Institute of Criminology was engaged by the Office of Women's Affairs to:

- undertake a meta-evaluation of the PVAW Project effectiveness;
- to support PVAW Project program design and evaluation;
- to develop a transferrable model for a whole of community response to prevent violence against women.

PVAW Project objectives

Objective 1: Increase awareness and understanding in local governments and their communities of the underlying causes of violence against women.

Objective 2: Drive and embed cultural change in local governments to mainstream gender equity and promote non-violent norms across policy, planning, services, leadership and practice.

Objective 3: Build skills in local governments and their communities to promote respectful relationships, gender equity and non-violent norms.

Objective 4: Contribute to the knowledge and evidence-base for the primary prevention of violence against women in local government and community settings.

PVAW Project activities

A wide range of activities across a diverse range of settings were undertaken as part of the PVAW Project. The activity settings included both participant and other neighbouring LGAs and community organisations.

Prevention of violence against women activities already being progressed by CoGB were given greater focus through the strategic lens of the PVAW Project. For example, CoGB had been involved in the coordination of local White Ribbon Day (**WRD**) activities for a number of years. One PVAW Project action was to encourage more men to take a leadership role in local WRD activity coordination, and to devolve greater responsibility for local WRD activity coordination to the broader community to increase community ownership and impact.

Evaluation

The formal meta-evaluation of the PVAW Project by the Australian Institute of Criminology was completed in February 2015 but has not been released either publically or to any of the participating LGAs. The Commission may wish to request access to the meta-evaluation report.

Throughout the PVAW Project the Central Victorian cluster undertook ongoing process and output evaluation, and also held a number of key stakeholder meetings to reflect on the local PVAW Project learnings. The following observations are based on those evaluations / consultations:

Defined gender equity / prevention of violence against women positions are critical

The PVAW Project demonstrated the value of defined positions within LGAs in providing expertise and leadership in gender equity / prevention of violence against women activities, and in supporting and resourcing broader community action. The PVAW Project position needed both internal support (e.g. champions, Council Plan alignment) and external support (e.g. PVAW Project Communities of Practice at regional and statewide levels, training) to be most effective.

CoGB notes that while some metropolitan LGAs have been able to establish and sustain dedicated positions in this area, in the absence of external resources many regional / rural LGAs have not been able to. Some scope may exist to incorporate responsibilities in this area within broader Position Description responsibilities. The PVAW Project demonstrated that regional / rural communities have great potential for improvements in gender equity / prevention of violence against women. CoGB considers any policy frameworks and resourcing models should take into consideration the fiscal capacity of LGAs and the potential impact of investment in their communities.

Multiple strategies leverage change

The PVAW Project also demonstrated the value of using multiple strategies across a range of settings to create capacity and momentum for change.

LGAs are particularly well placed to design and implement multiple strategies to shift the underlying determinants of violence against women because they work across key settings for cultural change, including the arts, early years (Maternal and Child Health Services), emergency management, sport and recreation and youth.

LGAs are well placed to influence communities

As an arm of government, LGAs have a recognised leadership and advocacy role within their communities. This leadership can be manifested in a number of ways.

In regional / rural areas in particular, LGAs are generally one of the major employers with a diverse workforce. By increasing understanding of the underlying determinants of family violence within the LGA workforce, and training employees to have the knowledge and skills to challenge those determinants, LGAs can directly empower a significant number of community members who can then be champions within other community contexts.

Additionally, LGAs have roles to play as “model employers” with regard to gender equity policies and practices, and employment policies that acknowledge the prevalence of family violence. During the PVAW Project timeframe CoGB negotiated family violence leave provisions within the Enterprise Agreement, consistent with one of the VPP objectives.

LGAs also have important roles as communicators of health and wellbeing messages within their communities. This capacity to communicate through a variety of media and forums was an important part of the PVAW Project’s success. Across the Central Victorian cluster, LGAs used a variety of mechanisms to communicate, including newsletters, media (newspapers, radio, social media), speeches, banners, signage on Council vehicles, arts projects (including projection onto Council buildings). It is also in a good position to support communication of gender equity / prevention of violence against women messages by other organisations and grass roots community responses through strategic and policy and procedure platforms.

CoGB notes that the smaller populations of regional / rural areas means the relationships between community leaders are often more personalised and interlinked. The PVAW Project identified that it is important to have key influencers active across a variety of spheres (e.g. business, emergency services, schools and sporting clubs) to give awareness raising and attitudinal change work the greatest potential for impact because of the strong geographically based sense of community.

Collaboration is key

LGAs engage directly with diverse community groups and populations as part of their everyday work, as well as facilitating collaboration between groups. This way of working is very well suited to primary prevention of violence. Collaboration, influence and support are fundamental to collective impact.

Whilst having only one PVAW Project worker spread across the three Central Victorian cluster LGAs presented a range of logistical and relationship challenges, the arrangement did enhance collaboration between the three LGAs in terms of sharing knowledge, experience and resources. CoGB considers this collaboration within the local government sector to be fundamental to accelerating the impact of gender equity / prevention of violence against women initiatives and leveraging available resources. This collaboration needs support and resourcing on a regional or cluster basis, as well as at a statewide level. CoGB considers the ongoing funding of a defined role within the Municipal Association of Victoria to be very important in facilitating this collaboration.

CoGB also sees great value in expanding this collaborative approach between contiguous LGAs to a more strategic approach of targeted support for regional / rural LGAs who generally currently have a lesser capacity to initiate primary prevention of violence work – whether that be due to knowledge, experience and / or resources. CoGB is currently developing a regional forum on promoting gender equity and prevention of violence against women, with a particular focus on the role of the local government sector.

Sustainability

One PVAW Project component was to adopt a “gender equity lens” in planning processes and system development to create an effective platform for sustainable change. A number of CoGB strategies and policies aim to embed gender equity and violence prevention in ongoing work, creating the framework for incremental shifts to translate into long-term change.

Evaluation and monitoring is required and critical

Change is incremental and the impacts of work towards ending family violence are challenging to measure.

The PVAW Project demonstrated the value of working at a geographical community level (at least in a regional / rural context), but whole of population surveys (for example the National Community Attitudes to Violence Against Women Survey) do not report on an LGA, regional or state levels, so it is currently not possible for indicators of the impact of geographically based interventions to be meaningfully measured.

At a sectorial level, the intent was to undertake a gender equity audit for all nine participating LGAs across the three clusters, but this was abandoned due to difficulties in collecting the data. Unlike other large employers (over 100 employees), LGAs are not currently required to measure and report on indicators of gender equity to the Workplace Gender and Equality Agency. This makes it difficult to motivate LGAs to take action, and hard for those who want to do it to easily collect meaningful data. A legislative requirement for LGAs to collect and report this data would create both a motivation for change and data for measuring change.

2. White Ribbon Day (WRD)

WRD has been an important focus for the Greater Bendigo community in raising awareness of family violence and generating commitment for change.

CoGB has taken a leading role in organising WRD activities, but in recent years has also worked hard to build greater community ownership and capacity in activity planning, coordination and delivery.

The WRD activities have built from a WRD Ambassador breakfast in 2007 to a full program of events involving 19 organisations and over 500 community members participating in a community walk through the main streets of Bendigo in 2014.

The activity focus has moved from the more symbolic statement of saying no to violence against women to activities which deepen community understanding of the issue and also begin to provide avenues for personal action. Evidence of this include the Students Against Family Abuse group (SAFE) at LaTrobe University organising an evening of guest speakers combined with a bystander training session conducted by the 'Take a Stand' facilitators. Another eighteen groups (including service agencies, schools, private companies and emergency services) created key message banners (supported by the CoGB) to carry in community walks.

To deepen community understanding of the issue of family violence and mechanisms for personal action, in 2014 two guest speakers preceeded the community walk. Inspector Ron Gardiner from Victoria Police told of his personal experiences of family violence as a child and how it is has influenced Victoria Police activities, and Angela Barker who told of her experience of being brutally bashed to near death at age 16 by her ex-boyfriend, leaving her with severe brain and physical injuries. Both speakers shared with community members how the respective perpetrators had each gradually exerted more and more control over aspects of their lives, and perpetrated violence across both emotional and physical realms.

Following the community walk participants congregated in a central park to enjoy entertainment from Hiphoppportunities for Youth Inc. and a barbecue from Kalianna Developmental School Bendigo.

The evaluation of the event highlighted three themes:

- the importance of encouraging more men to participate;

- the value of hearing first person accounts of the experience of family violence;
- and the growing awareness that the prevention of violence against women is everybody's business.

Question Five

If you or your organization has been involved in observing or assessing programs, campaigns or initiatives of this kind, we are interested in your conclusions about their effectiveness in reducing and preventing family violence.

1. Take A Stand Program (TAS Program)

The TAS Program is an initiative of Women's Health Victoria that aims to "help prevent violence against women before it occurs by working with businesses to change attitudes and behaviours that support violence against women"⁴. Women's Health Loddon Mallee (**WHLM**) is facilitating the TAS Program across the Loddon Mallee region.

The TAS Program offers externally facilitated workplace training that builds awareness of the attitudes and behaviours that underpin violence against women and also builds individuals' capacity to challenge and change them, both in the workplace and beyond. CoGB understands that the TAS Program is being formally evaluated, but our comments here relate to our organisation's direct experience of the TAS Program.

CoGB is part way through the TAS Program as a participant workplace and considers the TAS Program is effective in building awareness of the prevalence and causes of family violence, as well as increasing the capacity and willingness of individuals to intervene with everyday instances of sexism and gender inequity.

2. 'Prevention of Violence Against Women – it's everybody's business' Conference (Conference)

This Conference was held in October 2014 and was organised by WHLM.⁵

The Conference aimed to be a catalyst for action to eliminate violence against women, and to raise awareness of violence prevention approaches.

CoGB participated in the Conference Reference Group and a number of CoGB staff attended the Conference. All attendees found it provided them with new knowledge, insights and motivation to undertake and continue primary prevention of violence work.

⁴ whv.org.au

⁵ <https://www.eiseverywhere.com/ehome/78304>

The Conference was an excellent example of how to combine personal accounts of violence, evidence based theory, and specific examples of relevant projects to provide a compelling and optimistic case for action. In particular it offered a valuable knowledge development opportunity for people outside the family violence sector about the underlying determinants of violence against women, and cross-sectoral examples of strategies to address them.

Another strength of the Conference was its location in a regional centre. This allowed a greater number of people to attend from across the region (as opposed to a Melbourne-based event) and also created local media content, providing opportunities to highlight the issues and various opportunities within the local community.

Question Six

What circumstances, conditions, situations or events, within relationships, families, institutions and whole communities, are associated with the occurrence or persistence of family violence?

1. Emergency management

Initial research shows clear links between emergencies and spikes in family violence, along with a greater 'excusing' of family violence due to stresses of natural disaster⁶. There is a need for further investment in research to inform emergency response, relief, and recovery systems and personnel training.

2. Birth of a child

Service responses to family violence

A significant number of women report that their first experience of violence from their partner occurred when they were pregnant⁷, and existing family violence is often exacerbated during pregnancy and the transition to early parenting. In this context it is vital for professionals working with expecting and new mothers to be trained in how to identify and respond to family violence. While this training is available, many Maternal and Child Health Nurses (**Nurses**) report they are still not confident in undertaking this work⁸.

⁶ Parkinson, The Way He Tells It: Relationships after Black Saturday.

⁷ VicHealth Preventing Violence Before It Occurs: a framework and background paper to guide the primary prevention of violence against women in Victoria, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Carlton, 2007.

⁸ Internal consultation, CoGB 2015.

Primary prevention

The rationale and evidence base for using new parents groups as a setting for primary prevention work is well articulated in the Baby Makes Three Program (**BM3 Program**) report⁹.

As the provider of the Universal Maternal and Child Health Service in our municipality, CoGB agrees that the BM3 Program setting provides a significant opportunity to address the rigid gender norms that form part of the underlying determinants of violence against women. Noting the success of this program, CoGB is investigating the trial of a BM3 Program course in our municipality. However, in order to have significant population-wide influence, CoGB believes a program such as this needs to be a standard, ongoing part of the work of Universal Maternal and Child Health services, with additional and ongoing resourcing.

Question Eleven

What are some of the most promising and successful ways of supporting the ongoing safety and wellbeing of people affected by violence? Are there gaps or deficiencies in our approach to supporting ongoing safety and wellbeing? How could measures to reduce the impact of family violence be improved?

As noted above, one important setting for supporting women is the Universal Maternal Child Health Service where Nurses are trained to identify and support women impacted by family violence. CoGB has identified, however, that for many Nurses it remains a difficult subject to raise with women¹⁰. A reason for this can be that there is not readily accessible support for a Nurse to support the woman disclosing – such as a Nurse being able to get on the phone straight away and make a referral to a specialist service to assist the woman to set up a plan for her situation. To have an effective whole of community response to support women and children, services need to be easily accessible for victims as well as for secondary consultation.

⁹ Flynn, David, Baby Makes 3 Project Report, Whitehorse Community Health Service, 2011, p.13

¹⁰ Internal consultation, CoGB, 2015

Question Seventeen

Are there specific cultural, social, economic, geographical or other factors in particular groups and communities in Victoria which tend to make family violence more likely to occur, or to exacerbate its effects? If so, what are they?

1. Geographical – regional and rural areas

As a regional / rural municipality, CoGB understands the exacerbating effect of geographic location can have on accessing health and wellbeing services in general, and the experience of family violence in particular.

The recent report from Deakin University, provides a detailed account of the specific effects of geography in women’s experience of family violence¹¹. CoGB’s experience in working in a regional / rural community corresponds with the report’s executive summary:

“Women who experience family violence face many barriers to obtaining assistance and access to justice. Those in regional and, even more so, rural locations encounter further challenges, including but not limited to geographic and social isolation, limited private finances, greater opportunities for the surveillance of survivors, challenges with maintaining anonymity and privacy, expensive private and limited public transport networks, limited crisis accommodation, less access to support and health services than is available in metropolitan areas, and limited access to legal services. They also face a greater likelihood of encountering conflict of interest issues when seeking legal assistance, the ‘digital divide’ when accessing information and assistance and perpetrator gun ownership. Services and support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (hereafter, ATSI) survivors, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) survivors and survivors with disabilities are also more limited than those in metropolitan area “

CoGB considers these exacerbating factors in regional / rural areas need to be reflected in any policy framework for addressing family violence, with flexibility to adapt strategies to the local community context. This is because regional / rural communities – like metropolitan communities - are not homogenous and prevention and response strategies need to be adaptive and responsive to specific local conditions.

Regional / rural communities may present very different opportunities and barriers in the prevention of and response to family violence. These communities have great potential for whole of community prevention / response approaches because of

¹¹ Landscapes of Violence: Women Surviving Family Violence in Rural and Regional Victoria, 2014, part 3

levels of inter-connectivity. Conversely, this factor can also create a barrier to prevention/response approaches (and reporting) because of 'privacy' / perceived 'interference' concerns.

Another limiting factor for LGAs in regional / rural areas are the many competing resource demands, often combined with a small population rate base. Legislation that influences future planning processes, policies and systems may be one way to promulgate awareness of and commitment to the underlying determinants of family violence.