

Commissioner the Hon. Marcia Neave, AO
PO Box 535,
Flinders Lane VIC 8009

Dear Commissioner,

Submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence

I am writing as the state member of parliament representing the Thomastown electorate. The electorate of Thomastown includes the suburbs of Lalor, Thomastown, and Epping. It is an area with very high numbers of reports of family violence but very few services within the locality.

Whittlesea Community Connections (WCC) is one agency that provides supporting to, in the main, women and children experiencing family violence and I understand that WWC has provided a submission to the Royal Commission. Their most recent Family Violence Monitor states that in their last reporting quarter, on average, two people per day were presenting to them seeking assistance. In 100% of these cases in the last quarter, the victim was a woman and, sadly, a majority of self-referrals had experienced multiple instances of family violence.

The last quarter's reporting saw the highest number of family violence clients since Whittlesea Community Connections began their reporting.

I do not intend to provide all the terrible and tragic statistics around family violence in the area and its horrendous affects as agencies are better placed to do so. I concur with them, however, that there is a woeful lack of services to support families who are subjected to family violence in this area.

I am not an expert on the issue of domestic violence and from the submissions I have seen most of the big issues are fully addressed. Therefore I provide some individual stories of women and children in the area and some suggestions on some smaller targeted issues based on what I have been told.

WWC supports a limited legal service however WCC may be in a good position to auspice a community legal centre.

Under the State Liberal Government the Preston office of Legal Aid was closed. Some money was then redistributed to Broadmeadows and WCC however this has not been satisfactory

I will now provide some stories of women who lives in the electorate. One woman was sexually and physically assaulted over many years by her husband, which extended to the abuse of their young child. She reported that her husband would limit her contact with friends and family and emotionally blackmailed her into silence. Her case remains ongoing with police, after taking the courageous step to report him to the authorities – as well as seeking the services of WCC. This case raises the problems associated with legislation regarding the crime of not reporting abuse of children.

Family violence takes many forms – indeed, another story from my community tells of a woman who lives with her daughter and her daughter’s partner, who assaults her and psychologically abuses her. I’m told he becomes controlling over finances and the way the house is run and now her daughter is becoming abusive towards her also. This woman stays in this environment because she wants to look after her young grandchild and to ensure that her daughter is safe – as any mother would.

Drug abuse, particularly the use of methamphetamines (ice), can lead to or exacerbate instances of family violence. Another woman in our community has reported that her husband became abusive after becoming addicted to ice – abuse which continued after he was jailed for crimes not related to family violence.. She has said that he has maintained contact with her, threatening her with violence if she chooses to leave him. She continues to fear for her and their child’s safety when her husband is released. She does not have confidence in the legal system or the police to protect her and her child.

A local activist in my community, involved in an organisation that helps women struggling with family violence, has encountered four different women needing assistance within the last twelve months. She says that while these women have some support from family and friends, they have struggled to locate services within our local community. She says that she “dreads to think” that there are women suffering in silence in situations of domestic violence because of the lack of services available in our area.

Community services such as WCC play a vital role in helping prevent family violence and assisting those afflicted by it. However, WCC is not a dedicated women’s refuge or legal service – indeed, they act as a referral service, and offer close to a dozen diverse services, to a range of community members. As helpful and supportive as WCC is, staff time and resources simply limit the amount of time that can be spent assisting victims of family violence.

A dedicated, accessible and well-advertised legal aid service does not exist in Thomastown or the north, in particular the Northern suburbs east of the Hume Freeway. This is badly needed to ensure women have the access – after hours services are a must – they need in taking a stand against family violence. a stand-alone legal centre must be provided for an area growing in population.

The Preston Office of legal aid was closed under the State Liberal Government and there has never been a standalone community legal service in the area.

Further, a dedicated women’s refuge that is easily accessible, is a necessity for immediate assistance for women seeking to escape an abusive situation. Women deserve to feel safe and secure in their surroundings – having a women’s refuge in our growing area will do a lot to aid in this goal. It is important that refuges are close to where families live so they can continue with local schooling and familiar services rather than further increase upheaval by having to relocate to another area.

I believe that we must stop abusive partners using the legal system to harass women and offer this example: _

A woman in our community had a husband that became abusive towards her and she took the step of seeking an Interim Intervention Order to be placed upon him. She then tells me that, despite this intervention order being placed upon him and her leaving her house, he then filed numerous vexatious affidavits against her. He filed for a property order in the Federal Circuit Court, which saw her having to face him close to half a dozen times in court proceedings. He would represent himself at court and she could not afford a lawyer so also attended. Sadly, she began to think whether she

had made her life more difficult by seeking an intervention order on her husband, having to relive pain and suffering time and time again when she was forced to face her husband in court.

His legal action was for matters such as claiming half of the prices of her car as his property, claiming small gifts given to her student daughter. In addition to facing him in court and VCAT it also meant time off work without pay to attend and harassment of her daughter.

She has told me that not understanding the procedures, or where to go was a big problem for her, and it's not difficult to understand her when she says that "many men use the court system to continue contact and intimidation."

This story highlights just one case where a women must endure an abusive former partner dragging out minor legal disputes created by him through various courts and tribunals for weeks, months and years through endless appeals, ensuring individuals are not able to sever all connection and get on with their lives.

Yours faithfully,

Bronwyn Halfpenny
Member of Parliament for Thomastown