



## **TITLE Family Violence Royal Commission Submission**

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### **Summary/Purpose:**

This document is written to provide input onto the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence. The Central Goldfields Shire Council (Council) would like to thank the Commission for the opportunity to express views and ideas for changes that would improve outcomes for women and children experiencing or at risk of family violence.

### **The Central Goldfields Context**

Within the Central Goldfields Council Plan 2013-2017 Council has named Family Violence as an area requiring a strategic response across the shire. Consequently in 2013 Council endorsed the Central Goldfields Shire wide Family Violence Strategy. This has arisen from data indicating the significant Family Violence issue in our communities. This document will not quote the data as we are aware of the Commission's understanding of this data.

### **Background Information**

The Central Goldfields Family Violence Strategy has four key areas, all incorporating building on strength and addressing issues, these being:

- Prevention
- Early Intervention/Detection
- Tertiary Response
- Capacity Building

The intention was to develop a strategy that was both practicable and a 'stretch' for organisations and the community. Subsequently Council have identified significant systemic issues that are impacting negatively on our ability to implement this strategy to achieve a violence free life for women and children in our community. Council would like to highlight these issues to the Commission as well as to offer potential solutions to assist in addressing them.

### **Family Violence Systemic Issues**

*Women and Children's needs at the Centre of Service Response*

**Issue:**

Currently there is a significant lack of access to integrated, timely, specialist and skilled service response to victims of family violence. Currently within our shire we have a visiting service once a week from the Centre for Non-Violence and as required additional to that. On days that are not able to be covered by the visiting service, a phone based service can be available. We have learned that the best outcomes are when there can be a timely, positive relationship formed between the women and children and a key person in the service system. A remote service does not fulfill this requirement.

Within the Central Goldfields Shire there is a very limited access to 'generalist' service providers with the skills or experience to manage the complexity of issues relating to family violence. With the re-commissioning of Mental Health and Alcohol and other Drug Services we have lost the access to local specialist services in these areas. Consequently the generalist system is not in a position to fill this gap created by a lack of specialist Family Violence Services.

If a woman is at risk she will most likely not see anyone face-to-face unless she is considered to be in immediate danger. This frequently means that potential situations are not defused and women and children can remain and be exposed to violence that could have been prevented or minimised.

Many issues happen after business hours and on weekends. This limits the availability of a response and reduces the timeliness beyond the police.

Access to Counselling and face-to-face support for victims progressing their issues to the Courts is very limited beyond the police Family Violence Liaison Officer or the Court Liaison Officer. Consequently women may not appear at Court at the required time.

Currently we have a reported 53% of Family Violence incidence having a child or youth present. This is believed to be an under-report. There is limited access to specialist children's counselling and support services who are aware of the impact of exposure to violence on children's emotional, intellectual and social development. Those services available are only available regionally and only cater to the extreme cases such as child sexual abuse.

**Solutions:**

We have examples where we have worked locally to reallocate resources to ensure we are delivering improved service responses. Our options to do this for Family Violence is very limited. The solution we offer is an immediate and ongoing injection of funding for specialist family violence workers to be located not only in regional but in rural settings. We believe such positions need to be managed by appropriately skilled specialist services but staff need to be locally based in the rural settings. A full-time presence of specialist services will also work to ensure integration and co-ordination across all system settings.

After hours and weekend access to a face-to-face response also needs to be enhanced. To some extent this can be done with existing services working together. For example if a woman and her children need to be relocated out of hours this cannot be done by a sole practitioner on call. We need to ensure that two staff can be present for such work. This could be, for example a specialist family violence response worker and member of Vic Police. Funding for after hours responses locally, regionally and across the state are clearly inadequate with an over reliance on a stretched statewide telephone response system.

Support needs to be offered to women taking their issues to Court prior to and in preparing for the Court appearance. The Vic Police Family Violence Liaison Officer position could work in

partnership with a Family Violence Counsellor to ensure both emotional, logistical and legal preparation for the Court appearance.

Children's specialist services need to be expanded to ensure timely access to support for children and young people exposed to or who are victims of family violence. It may be best not to provide this in a rural setting due to issues of confidentiality and anonymity. If this is provided regionally however there would need to be resourcing for transport support because frequently there may not be independent access to a vehicle in the home or public transport may be too infrequent to access the regional centre via these means.

In addition, capacity to respond to men who use violence towards family members and who are subjected to exclusion orders also needs to be increased, with current options limited to arranging motel accommodation for men after hours. This capacity would also require an injection of funds to men's behavior change providers and men's case management services to ensure after hours response and follow up (longer term interventions) can be provided.

### *Focus on building Capabilities*

#### **Issue:**

Members of our community frequently report evidencing family violence or inappropriate conversations about or treatment of women and children but feel at a loss with what to do. Bystander training in its current format and funding structures does not allow for general community education that is not associated with a club or organisation.

Funding for Bystander training appears to be short-term, formulaic and project based so that an organisation or a sporting club in a community expressing a readiness for this will struggle to get timely access to the information and training. Due to these issues Bystander training has proved to be limited in its scope at starting or supporting a community conversation about family violence and intervention or primary prevention.

Frequently Family Violence is tackled at a sole Government department or program level. For example, the Department of Education and Training is currently implementing Respectful relationship development into the local P-12 school in isolation from other work in the shire. If this was done holistically and through our Go Goldfields initiative we could have supported this work in the community. For example we have three major employers in the community who could incorporate uniform messaging in the workplace. We are also running parenting education and doing significant work with early years service providers. All of these settings provide opportunities to support the work in the school.

#### **Solution:**

For the community to tackle family violence there needs to be access to Bystander-type training for services, community groups and schools simultaneously. This needs to be embedded in policy so that it is sustainable beyond a funding round.

All human service providers need to be aware of the issues contributing to and causing family violence. All generalist service providers need to be skilled and required to identify and be able to deal with disclosure if and when it happens. Organisations will need to be resourced to do this and required to deliver against funding and service agreements.

Building capabilities in a system takes time. There needs to be a longer-term policy platform to support this. One off funding will deal with the issue in the short-term. Empowering and skilling staff to identify and respond to family violence needs to be seen as 'the way we do things around here will require constant and consistent reinforcement.

In addition, any cultural change at a community and societal level takes time and must be approached with a strong commitment to being in it for the long haul. Once-off or short term

investments do not work. Long-term funding and projects are necessary to change community norms and attitudes that contribute to not only family violence, but broader issues of violence against women and gender inequality.

*Responsive place based approaches are supported.*

**Issue:**

Family Violence is a complex issue. There are aspects of identification, response and messaging about primary prevention that can be transferred between communities. There are however, aspects of individual community's culture that need to be understood and incorporated into any response.

Not all communities are at the same level of readiness for change. Policy makers and programs can, therefore be difficult to 'fit' into rural communities that may be more traditional or conservative in their values and beliefs.

Effective place-base approaches depend on access to timely and relevant data. Currently it is difficult to access detailed police, specialist women's service and child protection data. Access to such data frequently depends on a concerned practitioner or service manager or leader sharing the data with the caveat that it can be used but not quoted or reported publically. This makes it challenging to share meaningful measurement of change indicators across the system.

**Solution:**

Place-based approaches encourage the understanding of issues from a local perspective. They provide platforms to understand and work from where the community, service system and decision makers' understanding and readiness is on an issue. This encourages local solutions to complex issues that have not been impacted by other methods.

Place-based approaches are not silver bullets. The success of these approaches are when there is room to try and support emergent practice. There needs to be room to support change and learn. Resourcing needs to be given, therefore to measure and demonstrate change and outcomes

During this work there needs to be additional support put into the response for family violence in a community because by the nature of changing and challenging the community in this issue women and children can become less safe as perpetrators become threatened, and as women take steps to deal with or confront the violence they are experiencing.

Data needs to be available across the service system for partnerships to be able to understand the issue as comprehensively as possible to make informed decisions and to be able to know that what is being done is working or not. This needs to be in as 'real-time' as possible to support the work being done.

*Courts are modern, respectful and safe*

The local Court Facilities in the Central Goldfields, as is the case with other rural settings are buildings for a previous era. There is no waiting area in the building meaning that on Court days perpetrators and victims stand in the Court grounds waiting for the case to be heard. Not only is this potentially intimidating for the victim but it also lacks privacy. This can deter women from attending court.

Our understanding is that there are only two Courts in Victoria with the authority to mandate Men's Behavioural Change programs. One of these is Ballarat. Although Maryborough is equidistant from Ballarat and Bendigo and the public transport to Ballarat is more frequent and convenient, our courts are serviced by Bendigo due to the state government departmental boundaries. Access to mandated Men's Behavioural change should not depend on such allocations.

There are no child friendly spaces at or near the court. Attending court can be a scary and intimidating experience for a child. Both Maryborough and Bendigo Courts lack adequate facilities for children.

Failure of the victim to appear at court within our region means the charges are dropped or hearing the case is delayed. In the Ballarat/Grampians region a court order is put in place, such as a restraining order, until the case can be heard. We believe that the safety of the women and children should be the overriding consideration and courts need to display consistency in assuming the need to protect the woman and child until other evidence is heard.

Women also require access to timely and supportive court support and legal advice. Access to both these elements mean an increased likelihood of the victim proceeding with legal matters, and, for a just outcome.

**Solution:**

As has been the case with other public facilities such as hospitals, police stations and schools, there needs to be a significant capital works injection to build new courts or to allow courts to sit in existing community facilities that can provide a modern, respectful and safe environment.

Childcare facilities and child play areas need to be available so that childcare issues do not become a barrier to Court attendance and further trauma on children is minimized.

Courts need to take the safest option for the women and children when making decisions. This needs to include hearings for orders being placed on a perpetrator. Consequently women not attending a hearing should not prevent an interim order being placed on the perpetrator.

Funding for specialist court support workers and community legal centre staff should also be a key platform of any improvements.

*Primary prevention is a core part of addressing family violence*

**Issue:**

Prevention of family violence at a societal level is well researched and is reportedly based in achieving gender equity, cultural respect and a culture of non-violence. This is frequently poorly understood with the messaging being driven by women's health or community based groups.

Contributing factors to family violence in our community includes mental health and abuse of alcohol and other drugs. These are known but poorly managed systemically.

There is limited focus on the prevention of Family Violence at a societal level in rural settings.

Alcohol and other drugs and Mental health re-commissioning has undermined the ability for the service system to respond in an integrated way to family violence

**Solution:**

Primary prevention needs to be owned and driven at a government policy level with a requirement that funded agencies embed relevant policies within organisations.

Contributing factors and casual factors for family violence need to be addressed holistically. Primary prevention is important but if approached in isolation from the interface with mental health and alcohol and other drugs impacts will be limited and generational.

There needs to be systemic requirements for Specialist Family violence practitioners to work collaboratively with mental health and alcohol and other drugs services to ensure primary prevention messages are embedded in all of the work and contributing factors are identified and managed in a coordinated way.

### **Summary**

Central Goldfields Shire Council is pleased to offer the above information to the Victorian Royal Commission. We wish the Commission well in its deliberations and look forward to the recommendations arising from this work.

Cr Wendy MC Ivor (Mayor)