

Submission: Royal Commission into Family Violence

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1. Introduction

The landmark decision of the Andrews Labor Government to establish Australia's first Royal Commission into Family Violence is a welcome announcement for all Victorians, and particularly encouraging for my electorate of Dandenong.

In recent times, as the profile of this issue has grown, we have been reminded regularly in mainstream conversation that one woman is murdered every week by her current or former partner. We also know that family violence is the leading contributor to death and disability in Australian women under 45, and 75 per cent of all assaults against women happen at home. These are just some of the many statistics that highlight the scale of the problem our society faces.

Sadly, these statistics are replicated at a local level, and in some cases are even more severe than the national statistics. As local representatives, we often see evidence of family violence in local demand for health and social services and within local police and homelessness statistics. Both victims and perpetrators are our constituents, irrespective of the demography of our electorates. Family violence does not discriminate – it occurs in areas of disadvantage and of affluence; it occurs across cultures and ethnicities; it occurs in regions and cities.

The purpose of this submission is to shine some light on the issue as it exists in the state electorate of Dandenong, and outline the challenges that my community face in the hope this may inform our policy response and ensure our policy decisions extend into and have impact in all communities.

2. Dandenong Profile

The Dandenong electorate sits about 30km from the CBD in Melbourne's South East. It covers all or part of the following suburbs:

- Dandenong
- Dandenong North
- Dandenong South
- Noble Park
- Noble Park North
- Doveton
- Eumemmering
- Endeavour Hills

The electorate straddles two Local Government Areas (LGAs), including the City of Greater Dandenong and the City of Casey. Greater Dandenong is the second most disadvantaged LGA in Victoria according to the SEIFA index (2011). It is the most disadvantaged area in all of urban Australia.

Dandenong is also the most multi-cultural electorate in Victoria with over 60% of residents born overseas. Our community originates from over 150 different countries, with 55% from non-English speaking backgrounds. We have a significant refugee population from broad-ranging backgrounds.

3. Family Violence in the Dandenong electorate

Victoria Police data for the Dandenong area shows an almost 50% growth in the reports of family violence incidents in the past 5 years to 2013/14. That presents a stark rise to 1,454 Family Incidents reported in Dandenong per 100,000 people. While experiencing a lower rate of increase, the number of family violence incidents in the Casey area is similarly concerning. In 2009/10 there were 917 incidents reported for every 100,000 people. In 2013/14 this had grown to 1364 incidents. Despite the recent rise in reporting, the problem has been and continues to be widely underreported. We have not yet uncovered the full extent of the social problem we face.

Research tells us that family violence is a significant cause of homelessness. Sadly, data gathered as part of the 2011 Census, shows the electorate of Dandenong experienced a 94 per cent increase in homelessness between 2006-2011. As such, there appears to be a correlation between the rise in reported incidents of family violence and an increase in homelessness that, while not conclusive, may be indicative of a connection between the two.

Local community agencies like Hanover have informed me that 60% of their clients indicate an experience of family violence in their lifetime. Of this group 66% attributed their homelessness directly to Family Violence. Hanover also informed me that only one in three had had contact with family violence services and a slightly higher number had contacted police. Most had not taken out an intervention order in the previous two years, while 9% had been subject to an intervention order against them. These figures highlight the number of families who are experiencing family violence but are diverted away from family violence services into homelessness services.

Anecdotally, local service providers have informed me that Methamphetamine use among their client base has been growing significantly in recent years. While Methamphetamine use is often linked to an increase in aggressive behaviours, Hanover inform me that there is so far no evidence available from their data to draw a correlation between increased use of the drug and increased family violence. The influence of substance abuse on incidents of family violence should be investigated further.

4. Challenges

Dandenong's diversity is one of our greatest strengths, resulting in a unique melting pot of cultural and religious traditions, cuisine and celebrations that are enjoyed by the community as a whole.

Our diversity can also lead to challenges and sensitivities in how we deal with social problems that invariably take place in the confines of the family home, behind closed doors. In this context, the experience of family violence in Dandenong emphasises the need for a multi-faceted response involving all parts of the community.

When considering the issue it is vital that we make an effort to understand and navigate different cultural attitudes so that we can ensure any policy solution resonates with and is accessible to all parts of the community. While the policy objective must be uniform across all communities (that is, an end to family violence), the pathway to achieving that objective may vary across cultural groupings. Family violence is not to be tolerated under any circumstances, irrespective of cultural tradition or social norms, but a one-size-fits-all policy response may prove ineffective. We must also ensure our communication strategy reflects these cultural differences to ensure greatest impact across all communities.

5. Local initiatives

Awareness of the issue in Dandenong has been growing thanks to concerted campaigns to unite the community in opposition to family violence, and address the needs of victims.

Local Councils and service providers have recognised the prevalence of family violence in the area and its impact on our community and both Greater Dandenong and Casey have engaged in a number of awareness raising programs and activities.

The City of Greater Dandenong and the City of Casey form part of the Challenge Family Violence Project, a 3 year partnership project that involves community strengthening activities including the recruitment of community leaders to address the underlying causes of family violence, such as gender stereotypes and unequal power relationships between males and females within our society.

In 2013, the City of Greater Dandenong established the Greater Dandenong Family and Domestic Violence Working Group to develop and guide initiatives to prevent violence against women across the community. One task of the Working Group is to organise activities to recognise White Ribbon Day.

One such activity is the Walk Against Family Violence where people march through the centre of Dandenong. Last year 700 people attended the march, a substantial increase on the previous year. This initiative and others like it should be commended, as they provide a platform for discussion across the community and remind silent victims of family violence that they are not alone.

In 2014 the City of Casey Local Laws team was awarded the LGPro Service Delivery Award for their family violence intervention initiative which involved training Local Laws Officers to become more aware of potential family violence incidents when undertaking work in the community.

This is in addition to the many programs and services run by local agencies to deal with the practical implications of family violence. For example, Hanover Dandenong provide an accommodation program targeting men who perpetrate family violence and are removed from or who agree to leave, the family home following an incident of family violence. The intention of this program is to increase the safety of women and children, and facilitate their stay in the family home pending an intervention order hearing. This ensures minimal disruption to family life, particularly for dependent children. While the number of men accommodated by this program in 2015 is consistent with the same period last year, the average number of nights the man is accommodated between the incident and the court date has increased.

6. Next steps

It has become all too clear in recent times that Family Violence is a serious stain on our community, and a wholesale review into the issue will arm us with a better understanding of how to deal with this problem. There have been substantial efforts across Dandenong to raise awareness about family violence, but through this Royal Commission we must be focused on moving beyond this to embracing policies that can achieve real and lasting change. We must seek genuine impact including a notable decline in the numbers of deaths and injuries caused by family violence. This is the true measure of success.

To this end, I am encouraged to see that the focus of the Royal Commission will be on prevention of family violence, and increasing early intervention. I thank the Commission for taking the time to consider this submission.