

Mount Alexander: Responding to Family Violence

The emotional, physical and economical effects of family violence in the short and long term are indisputable. In 2010-2011 Mount Alexander shire, compared to Victoria, had a higher proportion of reported family incidents where charges were laid. This is increasing dramatically with the rate nearly doubled from the previous year. Yet for many of the women and children living in Mount Alexander shire, access to support services is at best limited and for some unreachable.

Women experiencing family violence in the small, rural communities in the Mount Alexander shire face additional barriers to accessing the assistance they require. These include geographic and social isolation; challenges with maintaining anonymity and privacy in a small community; continued close proximity to their abusers and constantly visible to and monitored by their abusers; no medium to long term crisis accommodation; and less access to support services than is available in metropolitan areas.

The Mount Alexander Shire has pockets of entrenched social, economic and transport disadvantage. Mount Alexander has a socio-economic index score lower than the Victoria and Regional Victoria average, indicating a higher level of relative socio-economic disadvantage. In 2011, persons living in Mount Alexander experienced higher transport limitations, compared to Regional Victoria and the Victorian State average. This results in limited private resources for women to travel long distances to access services or to remove themselves and their children from existing social networks and to re-establish themselves in another location. Access to services is further compounded with limited public transport and expensive private transport options.

Prevention

As stated in the *National plan to reduce violence against women and their children*, positive and respectful community attitudes are critical to Australian women and their children living free from violence in safe communities. Research shows that some of the strongest predictors for holding violence-supportive attitudes at the individual level are low levels of support for gender equality and following traditional gender stereotypes. More work and resources are needed locally to promote gender equality and respectful relationships using social marketing and school-based programs.

Women's Health Loddon Mallee offers and facilitates the *Take A Stand* training, which uses workplaces as a site for intervention and a universal approach that targets all male and female employees of the participating workplaces. It raises community awareness by supporting attitudinal and behavioural change in organisations and therefore communities through workforce-focused initiatives, resources and tools. Women's Health Loddon Mallee has also been working to develop a Loddon Mallee Region Action Plan to prevent violence against women, to support collaboration approach and uptake of best practice interventions.

Within Mount Alexander shire, volunteers have started a local community initiative, The Shire Project, for women and men who live in Castlemaine, to raise awareness of violence against women, gender inequality and street harassment. The Shire Project, which currently has a Facebook page with over 150 male and female followers (www.facebook.com/theshireproject) aims to deliver:

- regular, positive online content for women and men with a feminist analysis
- community forums to hear the voices of local women
- creative arts projects: 2 locally made info graphic video clips and artwork addressing violence against women and street harassment by promoting safety and equality.

The first community forum is taking place on the 30th May and is being supported by the Mount Alexander Shire, Victoria Police Loddon Mallee Region, Centre for Non Violence, Women's Health Loddon Mallee and Central Victorian Primary Care Partnership. More resources are needed to support local initiatives that are developed and driven by the local community.

Service Response

The Centre for Non-Violence (CNV), based in Bendigo, is the only family violence specialist agency that covers our region. Except for a CNV family violence worker, who provides support at the magistrates court on court day, there is no other outreach service for the shire. Castlemaine District Health Services provides general counselling to women experiencing family violence.

Most referrals received by CNV are mandated referrals from the police. Despite general practice having contact with 84%¹ of the community, there are minimal referrals to CNV from this sector. There are also a very low number of formal referrals from other health and social services. This suggests that local services are not identifying women and children at risk or are not aware of available services and referral pathways.

Castlemaine District Community Health (CDCH) service screens for family violence through their central intake service and support victims to contact CNV. CDCH has a policy to use secure electronic messaging to refer and share information to external services, to ensure the privacy of their clients and professional confidentiality. Establishing formal referral process with CNV remains difficult until CNV have a secure electronic messaging service in place.

There is a substantial amount of work and resources needed to provide the response required for victims of family violence in the Mount Alexander shire, starting with better communication with the community directly about the services available. CNV website does not appear when searching on-line for local family/domestic violence services nor does not appear in commonly used electronic directory services eg National Service Directory, Victorian Human Services Directory and Connecting Care. We are currently working with CNV to promote their service online, through national and local service directories and mobile applications (including the recently released 1800RESPECT Daisy app, which does not include CNV).

There is a lack of counselling and services in the Shire for perpetrators of Family Violence. If CDCH is providing services to the woman and / or her children, we are unable to see the perpetrator in the same facility. There is a lack of affordable services for men to access and the Centre for Non-Violence does not have capacity to provide Men's Behaviour Change programs within the shire.

It is evident that our local service providers require confidence, training and organisational support (policy and processes in place) to identify family violence. A secure electronic referral service needs to be established between CNV and health and social services, with clear referral pathways to facilitate referrals to specialist services. An interagency

¹ ABS, 2012a. Australian Health Survey: Health Service Usage and Health Related Actions, 2011-12. <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/F758234080C6F33BCA257B39000F296E> [Accessed 6.8.14].

data/information sharing agreement has been reached with CNV to inform and target local family violence strategies and measure the effectiveness of the initiatives.

Prevent Violence Against Women (PVAW)

The Prevention of Violence against Women in Our Community Project was a three year pilot initiative funded by the Office of Women's Policy (2011 – 2014). The project aimed to develop a whole-of-community model for prevention of violence against women. The Central Victorian cluster was a partnership between Mount Alexander Shire Council, City of Greater Bendigo and Macedon Ranges Shire Council and was the only regional / rural cluster.

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 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.

The formal meta-evaluation was completed in February 2015 but has not been released. We recommend that the Royal Commission request the release of the evaluation and include the findings in their deliberations.

Castlemaine Courthouse – developing a safe space for women

The Castlemaine Magistrates court plays an important local role in the community, hearing many different types of cases, including family law and family violence matters. As with many rural magistrates courts, the buildings are not purpose built and do not provide a safe environment for victims of family violence. There are currently no private spaces for women to meet with their legal representatives or family violence support worker, and are often forced to do so under the intimidating surveillance of the perpetrator.

Recommendations

The community leaders of Mount Alexander Shire recommend that the State Government:

1. Support local safety committees to develop local solutions to preventing violence against women
2. That primary prevention of violence models need to include the objective of cultural change and a model which is an integrated combination of community engagements across diverse community settings.
3. That regional planning and collective impact approaches to engaging regions in violence prevention work be funded to realise potential of regional plans, enhance regional capability and provide leadership.
4. Support locally developed community initiatives eg *The Shire Project* to drive culture change and challenge community norms to prevent family violence.
5. Publically release the Australian Institute of Criminology report on the Meta-evaluation of the Preventing Violence Against Women in our Community Pilot
6. Adequately fund family violence specialist agencies to:

- a. Provide adequate services within their catchment. This needs to include out-reach services particularly in rural areas where there is high disadvantage and poor availability of public transport.
 - b. Provide easily accessible information to women in rural areas
 - c. Offer training, based on the Common Risk Assessment Framework, to generalist primary/community service staff to increase the identification and early intervention of family violence
 - d. Develop clear referral pathways and promote their services via the web, electronic national and local service directories and mobile applications
 - Our partners are currently advocating the inclusion of family violence services in the National Health Services Directory and have contacted 1800Respect to include CNV in the Daisy app.
 - e. Set up secure electronic referral systems. Connecting Care/Argus is the secure messaging service used in primary health within Mount Alexander and regionally. Our partners are currently supporting CNV to adopt this secure messaging service. The Police have an e-referral system with CNV that will remain in place.
 - f. Systematically collect and share data to support evidence based practice and measure the effectiveness of local family violence strategies.
7. Prioritise upgrading rural court infrastructure to keep victims of family violence safer.

Thank you for considering this submission on behalf of the health and community service sector of Mount Alexander Shire.

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