

Date: 25th May, 2015

The Honourable Marcia Neave AO
Commissioner
Royal Commission into Family Violence
PO Box 535
Flinders Lane VIC 8009

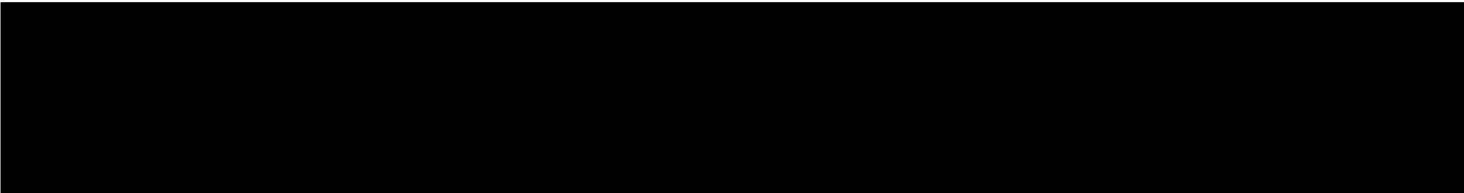
Copy: The Honourable Martin Foley, Minister for Housing, Disability and Ageing
The Honourable Fiona Richardson, Minister for the Prevention of Family Violence
The honourable martin Pakula, Attorney-General

Dear Commissioner Neave,

Having represented myself in a focus group at the Royal Commission on [REDACTED] in Melbourne as a victim/worker, I am following up with this submission to highlight the areas I would like included in this Royal Commission. Taking into account the many opinions that will be given and assuming much of what I would like to say will be covered by others, I am only submitting these few ideas that I feel might not be discussed by anyone else. I am making submission [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] in my capacity as a survivor of family violence.

I was a victim of family violence with my ex-husband for many years and I can't actually say it has stopped now, although he has quietened down somewhat since a serious [REDACTED] accident [REDACTED] years ago. He has been disempowered through injuries. We divorced [REDACTED] years ago. I am now a manager of a community support agency and have worked for many years as a volunteer and a professional with women healing from Family Violence.

I consider myself to be quite well educated on this subject and I know I am able to reach women because of my own experience and healing journey. Just last week a woman sat in front of me, face full of bruises, black eyes and swelling and she said "Look at you, you absolutely shine." The truth is, I don't feel like I'm shining, I feel overworked and most of the time I am worrying about the state of the world and how I am going to fix it. Along with all of that, I am raising my [REDACTED] as a sole parent. But, I suppose I must look a hell of a lot better than I once did.....when I was lost.



██████████ while I was walking a client to her car, her partner spotted us together in the main street. He immediately did a U-turn and the two of us had to run for our lives. Luckily we were near the office of ██████████ where I have previously worked, so we dived in the door and lay on the ground just as he drove past searching for her. This is a day in the life of a community worker. This was a high risk situation but we came through unscathed and she left town (with police escort) safely. It is an honour to ensure the safety of a woman and a relief to know one woman is safer because you were there to help.

I would like to respond to the questions put by the Royal Commission as follows:

Question Four – If you or your organisation 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.

'Keeping Safe, Feeling Supported' Brokerage Fund

In 2010, [REDACTED] allocated money to Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service [REDACTED]. This money was made available to help women experiencing family violence. Good Shepherd allocated some of these funds to the three Community Support Agencies (emergency relief) [REDACTED].

These funds were utilised by our agencies to complement our work in emergency relief, whereby we provide a range of material and other supports to families and individuals experiencing financial and personal crisis. Known as 'brokerage' funds, our workers and volunteers were able to access additional financial support for women who experience some form of family violence.

Good Shepherd has since released a report “Keeping Safe, Feeling Supported” Tanya Corrie, June 2013. According to this report, women are more likely to return to a violent partner if they can’t afford to stay away. The three Community Information & Support Centre Managers [REDACTED] [REDACTED] were interviewed and consulted for this report regarding the importance of brokerage to women in crisis.

'Opening a 'can of worms

For the short period of time that we had this brokerage money (2010-2013), our organisation was able to help many women with varying needs. Up until this time, as a mainly volunteer run organisation, we (the volunteer interviewers) hadn't been active in asking women about their safety at home. Once we started to ask these questions (because if it was a FV situation we needed to identify it for the funds/accounting) we started to see a new way of doing things. For example; a woman asking for assistance to buy formula for her baby was asked if she was experiencing FV at home and it was revealed she was experiencing Financial Abuse. This 'can of worms' was opened by

us asking more questions. This is not unlike the macro level of our society now, once the situation is opened up for discussion, a lot more is revealed. So then (in 2010), we had funds to help women with the expense of children changing schools (relocating expenses), crisis accommodation, car repairs, change locks, pay rent arrears etc. It was identified that once we started to ask the questions, we were able to help more women to not only escape the violence, but to refer them to services and to help them stay away (not return due to financial pressures).

Case Story

■■■■■, a mother of a teenage son, had her partner charged after he once again bashed her. She came to our service in financial distress soon after. As she had not been working and her partner had had a full-time job, she now had to apply to Centrelink for a single-parent pension. She was also facing the reality of not being able to afford to pay the rent or her son's school expenses. Unfortunately, on a Centrelink income, her rent was unaffordable. ■■■■■ did not want to move house as they had lived there for a few years and she felt her son needed the stability of staying put. About a month after her partner was ordered to leave the house by the police, ■■■■■ stated to me that she thought it might be so much easier to allow him to come back than to have to continue to struggle financially. The fear of not being able to financially cope was forcing her to return to a dangerous situation. Because of the ■■■■■ funding, I was able to pay a month's rent-in-advance for her which gave us time to discuss alternative ways of staying independent. Within a month ■■■■■ had cleaned out the bungalow she had on her land and was able to rent it out. Our funding also paid for school books for her son and paid the school fees for the year. This financial support gave ■■■■■ the freedom to continue to live independently.

The most amazing aspect to funding an Emergency Relief centre is that we are mainly volunteer run (although suitably trained, Certificate IV Community Services) and therefore, all funding received is directly passed on to our clients.

Also, it is important to note that not all women are engaged with a family violence service. Asking the question, or knowing how to 'open the can of worms' in a sensitive and respectful way, is critical to uncovering women's experience of family violence. Our team of trained volunteers and generalist casework work closely to ensure that women and children in our community don't fall through the gaps and continue to live in fear and at risk to their health and safety.

Plugging the gap

The most concerning gap in our network ■■■■■ is a difficulty in making contact with a Good Shepherd Family Violence worker. Workers are not always available immediately so advice can't always be sought. It is difficult, when a client is in your office, to know whether it is worth their while waiting for a call back that may never come.

Good Shepherd does an Intake over the phone and women are allocated a worker after a waiting period. I have found that referring a woman to a local DV service is not always what she needs. If she isn't in immediate danger, then she may not even be eligible for this service. For this reason, a woman might continue on without counselling or professional advice. I have completed most training that is made available so that I can fill these gaps successfully and safely for all involved.

Lifeline offers a good Risk Assessment training which I and my case worker completed last year. It is often the case that the client is completely assisted by Mornington Community Information and Support Centre and doesn't even have contact with a DV service. There are gaps in the system and Community Information and Support Centres (CIC's) are known to be the place to go where those falling through the gaps are safely caught.

There is also an area of support these centres give to men who are perpetrators of family violence. Very often a man will come into our centre after he has been served with legal papers and we are able to refer him to legal advice or assist him to find a place to live. I always say that the more help we can give a man at this time, the more likely he is to stay away from the family. We also have the capacity to refer men to programs.

Recommendation

My recommendation to the Royal Commission is for:

- (1) Funds be made available to Community Information and Support Centres (CIC's) to assist women financially. As these centres have all had a huge reduction in funds from the Federal Government this year (██████████ is down \$50,000 which includes the defunding of our paid case manager), then our capacity to help women has been drastically reduced.
- (2) Programs like 'Keeping Safe, Keeping Supported' continue to be funded and scaled up across Victoria; working with community based support services such as CIC's, to continue to plug the gaps in service delivery;
- (3) Training and support be provided to community based support services to raise awareness and equip volunteers and workers with skills to start the conversation; either through brokerage funding, appropriate referrals or address immediate material needs to women experiencing or at risk of family violence.

Gaps in the Child Support system

A gap in the Child Support system that relates to Family Violence was identified by myself after a dangerous personal experience earlier this year. My ██████████ had chosen to live with ██████████ Dad in the second half of last year, ██████████. For this reason I was paying him Child Support. After a few months of living with him, ██████████ called me in distress to say ██████████ had to flee the house because of his controlling behaviour. I then had to drive the forty minutes to pick ██████████ up from the street outside the local shopping centre. ██████████ was highly distressed and stated to me that ██████████ didn't want to run away from him, ██████████ wanted to make it work. It was heart-breaking to see ██████████ in this state, ██████████ was traumatised and in shock. However, it had been ██████████ choice to return to him and ██████████ was now able to understand our own history better due to experiencing first-hand his power and control tactics. I immediately took ██████████ to stay with a friend so that ██████████ was safe as I knew he would come to my house looking for her, which he did, in an extremely abusive and dangerous state and I had to call the police on him. This put me in a state of trauma as I hadn't been abused like this for quite a few years and it came as such a shock to me, just as it had to ██████████. I called Child Support soon after to advise that ██████████ wasn't living with him anymore and so I wished to stop my Child Support payments. I knew he was leaving the country in a month so I wanted this sorted out before he left. I had arranged for ██████████ to now live in peace and safety with ██████████ so she could continue to attend school in the area. So now I needed to alter payment arrangements so I could give support to ██████████. When I spoke to Child Support I explained the history of Family Violence and the

sequence of events which included me having to rescue [REDACTED] from the street and having to call the police on him when he came looking for [REDACTED] at my home. I asked them not to call him to confirm this change in living arrangements as [REDACTED] had left all of [REDACTED] belongings in his house and I knew he would be expecting [REDACTED] to come home. I knew if Child Support called him to ask if [REDACTED] had moved out, he would realise he had lost control of [REDACTED] and that his reaction could be very unsafe for all concerned. Child Support told me they wouldn't call him but would proceed with the paperwork if I could get written statements to confirm the situation. I asked [REDACTED] school for a statement and they confirmed they would give a verbal account of the situation if Child Support called them. [REDACTED] gave a written statement.

A few days later he called me furious saying Child Support had called him. He then began making false claims to the police that I had kidnapped [REDACTED] and that [REDACTED] was a missing person. This was because I still had [REDACTED] staying with a friend in a safe location. I had also advised [REDACTED] to call the police if he came near [REDACTED] at school or at this friend's house. It was a scary time as history shows these are the times when a perpetrator can really do the most harm, when they have lost control.

I called Child Support to ask them why they had called him when I had made such a point of the danger of this and I was told that if I didn't want them to contact him I shouldn't have applied for Child Support. There is a law that says something like "if a man is proved to be an abuser, he can be exempt of Child Support payments due to the dangers involved in retrieving the payments." I advised my worker that she obviously wasn't aware of my case as I wasn't the one asking for Child Support, I was the one paying it. I asked to speak to her Supervisor but this didn't happen. I asked her what the Policies and Procedures were around Child Support and Family Violence because as a professional, I was extremely upset for other women who are less empowered than me having their lives put at risk due to this gap in the system. Also, I had gone to such great lengths to arrange alternative proof so that they didn't need to call him, and I had sent this proof to them.

A few weeks later I again called them and this time the worker I spoke to was much more understanding and helped me to arrange for payments to be stopped without further consultation with him. He told me there really wasn't any way around the system, they had to call him if they were to change the arrangement. This breach of trust put us in a very dangerous situation and I have no faith that the procedures are in place today to protect women who are contacting Child Support and who are requesting a dangerous man not receive a phone call.

Question 20 – Are there any other suggestions you would like to make to improve policies, programs and services which currently seek to carry out the goals set out above?

- (1) Assist women who have left the home and are attempting to hide within the community or who are afraid to be identified in the community by the perpetrator.
- (2) Vic Roads to have a subsidised or free program that changes number plates on cars so that a woman may have some chance of obscuring her identity while driving around or when her car is parked in a public space. Also, it would be helpful to be able to de-identify a car in other ways, such as stickers or advertising (removed or added) change colour etc.

Question 5 – If you or your organisation 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.

Women and children's groups

I have been involved in many women's groups, I have facilitated and I have been a participant. My children and I have also attended women and children's groups and I have facilitated and co-operated in the writing of programs. One program that I believe is still running is 'Beyond the Violence' an Anglicare funded program.

Women's groups are an inexpensive and powerful healing tool for women. I have not only healed myself, I have been on a long journey of healing with [REDACTED] who experienced trauma in their younger years. This trauma manifests in many ways with children, as for [REDACTED] has dyslexia and [REDACTED] has had many troubled teenage years. For [REDACTED] I have accessed many different types of services, art therapy, counselling, kinesiology/brain gym, spiritual healing, [REDACTED] healing groups etc. I have been on a long journey with [REDACTED] to heal them and to find the best techniques for healing. I have learnt a great deal. I am very happy with the mental health of [REDACTED] now but the path has taught me a great deal about trauma and brain patterns and I have spent a lot of time helping them and myself to re-pattern.

My own journey of empowerment has been through women's groups and circles. Breaking the cycle of violence takes education for all involved. I have participated in and facilitated many women's groups over the years and the most powerful aspect is being around women who understand you and who are compassionate towards you. Sharing your journey with other women who understand and have experienced the same trauma is probably the most empowering debriefing tool available. Information and strategies are vital in helping to undo the brainwashing that is so common with men who use power and control. So, I wish to highlight the necessity of making money available to community centres to offer women's groups so they can be offered free of charge to women healing from family violence.

Yours sincerely,

[REDACTED]