

Life Without Barriers

Submission

Victorian Royal Commission into
Family Violence

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Championing opportunity for all



Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence

Life Without Barriers appreciates the opportunity to provide a submission to the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence. As a pervasive issue that creates significant social harm, Life Without Barriers strongly supports the Royal Commission's goal to deliver recommendations that will set Victoria on the path to reducing and ultimately eliminating family violence.

Background

Life Without Barriers is one of the largest not-for-profit organisations in Australia, delivering services in over 260 communities across Australia. We offer a range of programs and services to support over 5,500 clients, many with high and complex needs. Our services include family support and out of home care, disability services, community-based aged care, and support to refugees and asylum seekers. We also work in the areas of mental health, homelessness and youth justice.

Life Without Barriers is committed to the sensitive delivery of services reflecting our clients' previous life experiences, abilities, age, gender and cultural background. Relationships come first at Life Without Barriers. We are imaginative in our thinking and courageous in our convictions. We are respectful and caring in our dealings, and we are responsive to needs. These values place a fundamental emphasis on challenging systemic disadvantage and the protection of rights for the people we support and their wider communities.

Life Without Barriers' services are underpinned by key research and evaluation mechanisms to ensure we deliver a best practice approach.

In Victoria, Life Without Barriers has been delivering services for over five years and has a workforce in the state of over 300 staff. We deliver services in several metropolitan and rural areas. Our services include:

- out of home care
- host family care
- host family respite
- weekend and school holiday programs to children and young people
- case management and residential support to refugee and asylum seeker minors and to vulnerable families who are awaiting the outcome of a visa application on behalf of the Department of Immigration and Border Protection across Melbourne
- supported accommodation for older adolescents and adults who have a disability throughout Victoria
- individual support services to people with a disability
- home care support to veteran soldiers and their spouses
- home care packages to older people
- sub-acute short term residential support for people experiencing mental health distress
- Outreach based Individual Client Support Packages to people with mental health experiences

There is a strong intersection between Life Without Barriers' services in areas such as out of home care and issues associated with family violence. The following commentary reflects this relationship and the organisation's experience and observations across a number of related areas.

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Response to the Royal Commission's Terms of Reference

Community education

Life Without Barriers proposes that community education must be a key pillar of any comprehensive strategy for reducing the incidence of family violence. Any successful approach must educate and engage all strata of the Victorian community to foster a dominant culture that unequivocally rejects family violence in all its forms. To achieve this end, Life Without Barriers suggests the following messages must permeate the Victorian community:

- what constitutes abuse and its warning signs, both subtle and overt
- that victims/survivors are not responsible for abuse and that seeking help is the right thing to do
- that the safety of victims/survivors of abuse will be foremost when reporting abuse and/or seeking assistance
- that safe communities support respectful relationships, practice positive attitudes and behaviours, and promote a culture of non-violence
- that seeking help is the right thing for perpetrators of violence to do and is not a sign of weakness, but rather the opposite
- where victims/survivors and perpetrators can go to get the support they need
- the risks for children who are exposed to family violence, in particular the risk to children's brain development, emotional regulation and incidence of mental health issues as they mature

Trauma and intergenerational patterns

Any effort to reduce the incidence of family violence needs to recognise and address the lifelong trauma and intergenerational patterns that can be associated with this form of violence. As raised in the Royal Commission's Issues Paper, family violence is a gendered issue that disproportionately affects women. This should not however distract from understanding and addressing the significance of learned behaviour.

Children who witness or are the victims of violence may learn to believe that violence is a reasonable way to resolve conflict between people. Men, who as children experience family/community environments where women are not valued or respected and/or who see violence directed against women are more likely to abuse women when they grow up. Similarly, women who witness family violence as children are more likely to be victimised by their own partners.

Whilst holding perpetrators to account is important - and a strong message needs to be sent to the broader community that violence is unacceptable – alongside accountability there needs to be a therapeutic response. Without appearing to be sympathetic to, or condoning of family violence, a middle road needs to be found where men who have histories of trauma receive appropriate supports to prevent the repetition of violent behaviour.

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Housing

It is widely recognised that the critical shortfall of affordable housing in Victoria has significant adverse impacts for victims/survivors of family violence, resulting in women and their children remaining in unsafe households or facing homelessness. Life Without Barriers unequivocally supports initiatives that address this issue including mechanisms to increase the availability of short-medium term emergency housing and the stock of affordable private rental accommodation.

The risk of homelessness is a significant barrier to victims/survivors seeking to escape family violence. Life Without Barriers supports a greater emphasis on and investment in programs that support victims/survivors to stay in their homes whilst perpetrators are moved out. The Staying Home Leaving Violence program in NSW is one example of how women and children escaping family violence can be supported to remain safely in their homes. Services funded under the program work with the police and courts to remove the violent family member so that if chosen, the victim and children can stay in the home. Clients receive support services ranging from practical assistance such as installing security measures in their homes and help with financial, legal and personal problems. There are eighteen Staying Home Leaving Violence services throughout NSW.

The Staying Home Leaving Violence program was developed in response to evidence that domestic violence is the major reason why women and children become homeless. Being forced to leave home because of family violence can result in children being forced to change schools, and families losing social support networks. This puts families at increased risk of homelessness, stress, depression and poverty. Research on the Staying Home Leaving Violence program has shown that it can help avoid these outcomes by assisting women and their children to maintain safe, stable accommodation, and by assisting women to stay in employment. The program recognises that victims of family violence have the right to choose to stay safely in their home, and removal of the offender from the home holds the abusive person responsible for the violence. http://www.community.nsw.gov.au/docs_menu/for_agencies_that_work_with_us/our_funding_programs/shlv.html

Child protection and family violence

The dynamics of family violence are complex and powerful. Non-violent parents may suffer mental health effects, including loss of self-esteem and eroded decision-making ability, self-harm, depression, anxiety, and other disorders. Mothers experiencing family violence can have difficulty empathising with their child and establishing a safe environment for the child. There may be increased risk of neglect or abuse from a mother who is emotionally unavailable to her child due to family violence. The mother may also unknowingly transmit her fear to her children, affecting attachment between mother and child and the child's sense of security.

Family violence can have very serious implications for children. Witnessing family violence causes trauma for children, and has negative physical, emotional and social consequences. The work of Dr Fraser Mustard and Dr Bruce Perry, for instance, has found that the experiences of very young children can affect their brain development, potentially impacting speech and learning, temperament, behaviour and health, as well as their later vulnerability to addiction and mental illness.

Domestic violence, along with parental substance abuse and parental mental health problems is consistently identified as a key risk factor associated with families who come into contact with child protection services (AIFS, 2010: <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/sites/default/files/publication-documents/issues33.pdf>). Given the strong association between domestic violence and child

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protection concerns, Life Without Barriers strongly supports a greater emphasis on early intervention strategies to identify and work with individuals and communities at greater risk of violence.

Life Without Barriers believes that a systems approach is needed to address the multidimensional and complex issues experienced by many children who live in families with family violence. It is vital that family violence services operate as part of a broader service system so that children and their families receive the practical and therapeutic support they need in an effort to avoid children entering or re-entering the child protection system.

An effective, coordinated and integrated response to family violence has the potential to reduce the number of children entering the child protection system and reduce the social and economic cost of child protection interventions. Having an integrated service system with complementary relevant services and processes will enable earlier intervention and provide the mechanism for multiple issues to be addressed in a coordinated way, ensuring the right service is provided at the right time.

Early risk identification is required to limit the effect of family violence on children from birth. Routine screening is one mechanism that can reach patients in the absence of presenting symptoms, with evidence suggesting that women tend not to disclose an experience of family violence unless specifically asked about it (NSW Health, 2011). Moreover, those whose initial disclosure of family violence is met with a positive response are more likely to seek further help to address the issue (NSW Health, 2011).

In NSW, Local Health Districts (and former Area Health Services) have undertaken routine screening of female clients for domestic violence since 2001. This screening has been undertaken to increase awareness of domestic violence, identify women experiencing or at risk of violence in a relationship, and provide information to assist both victims and perpetrators of violence.

This strategy is formalised in policy (*NSW Health Policy and Procedures for Identifying and Responding to Domestic Violence*):

<http://www.kidsfamilies.health.nsw.gov.au/media/177259/Snapshot-report-9.pdf>) requiring screening for domestic violence be undertaken in four target areas of health services: antenatal, early childhood health, mental health and alcohol and other drugs. This approach to encouraging disclosure can also be seen in recommendations made by the Australian Legal Reform Committee (ALRC) in 2011 (see: <http://www.alrc.gov.au/publications/4-disclosure-and-issues-management/promoting-disclosure-family-violence>), with the ALRC recommending that agencies such as Centrelink and the Child Support Agency, “proactively promote the disclosure of family violence with appropriate privacy safeguards.”

Life Without Barriers recognises the importance of skills and expertise that enable staff to work with both the victim (usually the mother) and the perpetrator. As this requires specialised skills, Life Without Barriers supports specific focus being given to developing workforce sector capacity to work with male perpetrators around the impact of their violent behaviour on children.

Integrated approach to service delivery

To achieve a long-term vision where all Victorians can live free from violence from a partner or family member - and where children do not have to see or experience family violence - a state-wide focus on strategies to develop holistic, coordinated and timely responses to domestic and family violence is needed. A more joined-up approach to supporting victims of family violence and their families

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would ensure that complex and interdependent issues are not addressed in isolation, enhancing the likelihood of sustainable long-term outcomes for families and communities.

Complex issues such as family violence requires a level of service integration that enables multiple service responses to be activated at the same time. Currently services have their own thresholds for activation; mental health has a clinical threshold, child protection has a child at risk threshold, and police have a breach of law threshold. Life Without Barriers supports the development of a mechanism – bounded by privacy provisions - that allows each agency to activate when a family with family violence or complex problems hits one threshold but requires the support of other agencies before their thresholds are reached.

Law and order responses

Building community confidence in the reporting and investigation of domestic and family violence is a core element of any effective response to family violence.

Law and order responses, including the actions of police, prosecutors and courts are a key element in the efficacy of the service system response to family violence. These processes send a strong message to the community, influencing the actions and attitudes of both perpetrators and victims/survivors of family violence.

Life Without Barriers believes that while justice responses must send a strong message that family violence will not be tolerated by the community, reducing the incidence of family violence ultimately requires lasting behavioural change in perpetrators. Behaviour change programs are a complex, yet essential component in this process. Before therapeutic interventions are considered, perpetrators must first admit to being violent, accept their behaviour is wrong and take ownership for their behaviour.

While the need to develop effective strategies to changing perpetrator behaviour is clearly critical, the evidence of the effectiveness of perpetrator programs is weak. Work is needed to examine and assess the effectiveness of existing programs both in Australia and world-wide with a view to funding the most appropriate and effective evidenced-based programs.

For further information on matters raised within this submission, please contact Teresa McClelland, Operations Manager, [REDACTED]