



Submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence by Australian Greek Welfare Society

Australian Greek Welfare Society (AGWS) welcomes the opportunity to submit to the Royal Commission into Family Violence. In particular we will be highlighting issues relating to family violence and the Australian Greek community. AGWS will respond to areas in which the organization has expertise and experience based on our work with the community and broader networks.

The Greece –born community in Melbourne is one of the largest outside Greece. The 2011 Census recorded 99,939 Greece born people in Australia, with Victoria recording the largest number at 49,992. The median age for the Greece-born was 67 years compared to 45 years for all overseas born and 37 years for the total Australian population. The Greek language was ranked second behind Italian as the language spoken at home with 116,802 people in Victoria speaking Greek at home, and 161,783 people indicated Greek ancestry. A low level of English proficiency, coupled with low levels of literacy is a major barrier for accessing resources and services.

Australian Greek Welfare Society (AGWS) is an ethno-specific community service organization involved in the delivery of a range of culturally and linguistically appropriate in home, community-based and advocacy services on behalf of the Greek Australian community since 1972. Direct service provision is a fundamental role of the organization, and whilst AGWS does not receive formal funding to deliver services, unfunded casework services has always been the point of entry for many victims of violence (women, children and families) to seek assistance. Casework services provide crisis intervention, practical assistance, counselling and support, information and referral to victims of family violence. Clients present in relation to family and domestic violence and on the increase is the issue of elder abuse, mainly reported by elderly women who are abused by partners or adult children.

AGWS data clearly indicates that family violence continues to be a prevalent issue within the Australian Greek community, and more recently new cases are reported by newly arrived Greek migrants, affecting young mothers and their children. Approximately 30% of the casework and counselling client contacts relate to family conflict issues, including cases of family and domestic violence. Over the many years of service, it has been observed that when domestic violence projects and other community activities are organised addressing family violence there is an increase in number of reports made by women.

In the past AGWS delivered funded programs that focused on domestic violence within the Greek community and at the time provided counselling, group work and community education. The work

undertaken generated a demand in the services highlighting the need within the community. Below are some of the data recorded.

In 1994 -95, six hundred and sixty two contacts (662) of the one thousand seven hundred and eighty three (1783) client contacts related to family conflict including domestic violence;

- In 1996 – 97, of the eight hundred and six client contacts (806), four hundred and fifty six (456) related to family matters with one hundred and fifty six (156) specifically reporting domestic violence;
- The average age of women reporting was 45 years of age Greek women with children
- The Men’s and Family Relationship Counselling service (2000 – 2010) on average received 120 client contact per year of which 70% of couples reported domestic violence as the main issue affecting their relationship;
- In most instances the violence was evident for 15 years or more and was in the form of emotional and psychological, verbal and physical abuse.
- Between 2002 and 2004 casework services recorded one hundred and forty (140) cases of domestic violence and the family counselling service recorded a further one hundred and thirty three (133) client contacts relating to family, spousal and parent child conflict, including violence;

In more recent years, AGWS statistical data indicates family violence continues to be an ongoing problem within the Greek community, affecting the first and second generation Greek women and children, including newly arrived Greek migrants. There has also been an increase in the number of elder abuse reports affecting both women and men. This information is captured in the AGWS casework and counselling services data shown below.

- In 2012 – 2013 financial year, there were ninety three (93) cases of family conflict, twenty six (26) cases of domestic violence and twenty five (25) cases of elder abuse reported;
- In 2013 - 2014 financial year, there were eighty two (82) cases of family conflict, thirty five domestic violence (35) and seventeen (17) cases of elder abuse;
- From July 2014 there have already been one hundred and forty four (144) family conflict cases reported, a further twenty nine (29) domestic violence and 14 elder abuse cases;
- The Family Relationship Counselling service has recorded a further eighty five (85) case of family / domestic violence affecting mainly women and their children.

It is reasonable to suggest that there is limited data regarding the incidence of family violence within specific culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Cultural differences and practices can make migrant women and children more vulnerable and create to additional risks of violence. The work of organizations such as AGWS who do not have funded programs largely remains unreported and therefore is not reflected in the research and government data reports and therefore does not capture the full extent of the problem within the Greek community and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities more broadly. AGWS recently undertook a project “Empowering Women to Reach their Full Potential” focusing on domestic violence in the Greek community which that family violence is a pertinent issue and there are gaps in services to CALD communities. More information about the project and the outcomes will be provided further into the report.

The next part of the AGWS report will focus specifically on answering questions that relate to the organizations work, identified issues for the Greek community and recommendations that can be considered in family violence service reforms.

Question 1

Are there other goals the Royal Commission should consider?

AGWS supports the goals identified by the Royal commission and would like to recommend the following goals be considered by the Royal Commission:

- Reduce victim blaming by creating laws and practices that protect victims of family violence within community and the legal and court systems.
- Create affordable and accessible legal services and representation to support decision making options for victims of family violence.
- Improve access to family violence services to the culturally and linguistically diverse communities.
- Invest in prevention and early intervention programs for younger people through targeted programs within the mainstream, private school sector, including Victorian language schools, fostering respectful relationships.

Question 2

The Royal Commission wants to hear about the extent to which recent reforms and developments have improved responses to family violence, and where they need to be expanded and altered.

Recent reforms have had impact in a number of areas improving responses to family violence. In particular these improvements have been noticeable in education and other significant campaigns within the community challenging community attitudes and advocating zero tolerance of violence. Other more significant improvements relate to police responses to incidents of family violence and the integration of services across all levels of government and non-government sectors improving responses to people affected by family violence.

In our work with clients, there have been noticeable improvements in police responses to reports of family violence, in the handling of incidents and response to victims' needs. Police have a greater understanding of the issue of family violence and look upon the issue more seriously which is encouraging for victims, enabling them to take action in relation to their situation. The powers given to police to take action and charge people who have been violent is a positive step in supporting people who are affected by the violence, particularly in serious cases where victims' were fearful of taking action. In other instances, police responding to family violence situation have made instant referrals to services such as Berry Street for follow up support and to link to relevant services. The current reforms are a step in the right direction and should continue to focus on supporting the

rights of the people affected by the violence particularly in relation to intervention orders, the protection of women and children and addressing the accommodation issue by removing the perpetrator. The law and police reforms should focus on strengthening powers in relation to breaches of intervention orders and protecting the safety of women and children who remain in the home.

Improvements have also been made in the integration of services to respond to the immediate needs of victims of violence, the sharing of information and resources to meet client needs, such as financial assistance and practical assistance, legal support, emergency housing and so on.

More needs to be done to include ethno-specific and multicultural organizations in service provision as many of these services are the first point of contact for their community responding to critical issues relating to family violence. Funding considerations for organizations for capacity building and workforce development to improve responses to family violence cases, improve networking and integration of services to address CALD community needs and contribute to data collection to build the evidence base for CALD communities to inform future reforms. More effort is needed to engage organizations and include them in local and regional networks to further develop the integrated approach to addressing family violence, as outlined in the Victorian Government's Women's Safety Strategy 2002 -2007.

Prevention and early intervention strategies in the long term reduce violence against women and children and encourage and foster healthy relationships. Whilst there are many educational campaigns against violence and other community information strategies delivered in the broader community, many of these do not cater to the CALD community groups.

Campaigns must be further developed to be inclusive of CALD communities and to develop culturally and linguistically appropriate educational strategies that will increase awareness of family violence and improve access to services for those affected by violence. Improvements can be made by using ethnic media and having language resources for community groups.

Ethno-specific and multicultural organization possess expertise and knowledge in working and engaging their communities and are well placed to deliver on educational activities and in particular leveraging on the strong relationships developed with community leaders. In the National Survey on Community Attitudes to Violence against Women, one third of women and one-third of men in the general community did not know where to go for outside help to support someone with domestic violence.

This was a similar finding in a recent AGWS project, Empower Women to Reach their Full Potential" where Greek community leaders, women and men had no knowledge of services.

These findings strongly suggest the ongoing need for community education and information provision to improve the capacity of community to support someone affected by domestic violence.

Men's behaviour change programs exist to support men to address their violent behaviour there are obvious gaps in services to CALD communities. Unless a man is legally mandated to attend a program or a referral made by a service provider there is no knowledge of this service.

Importantly, on a few occasions where Greek men were informed of such programs and agreed to attend the low level of English language skills prohibited the person from attending the program. Men's behaviour change programs need to be further developed to meet the needs of non-English speaking men and improve their ability to manage their behaviour and relationships.

Question 3

Which of the reforms to the family violence system introduced in the last ten years do you consider most effective? Why? How could they be improved?

The areas of reform considered most effective include the following:

Improved response of the police in intervening and responding to domestic violence as police take family violence matters more seriously and therefore making a difference to the immediate safety of victims. This area of work can be strengthened by further enhancing laws that relate to protection of women and children when responding to incidents of family violence and improved referral pathways to services.

The legal system is responding to needs of people affected by family violence by offering protection through intervention orders which is meeting the immediate safety need of those affected by the violence. However the orders are not always enforced strictly enough which impacts decision making to take out intervention order or to appear in court.

Many women and children live in fear particularly as they are required to provide evidence of breaches which disadvantages the person affected by the violence.

Stricter enforcement of intervention orders is needed by increasing police powers to respond.

There are gaps in support services in the court systems particularly for CALD community groups who are further disadvantaged due to language barriers and cultural differences.

Volunteer services within the court network should work closely with CALD communities to further develop support services. Interpreter services are important in engaging clients and supporting them during their appearance in court and should be affordable to clients.

Question 4

If you or your organization 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.

AGWS does not, at this time, receive any funding to support its work with victims of family violence. However AGWS has expertise and knowledge on this issue due to past successful projects and organizational responses to identified needs within the community. Present responses by AGWS involves the delivery of direct casework services (unfunded) to victims, counselling services via the family and relationship program and other community activities such as information session, forums

and group work. All the activities are evaluated through direct participant / client feedback directly or through surveys upon completion of activity.

Community education is in the form of media work where the broader community is the target audience. The most effective ways of delivering educational activities is via the ethnic (Greek) media and both in radio and print all in the Greek language. AGWS operates a weekly radio program on 3xy Radio Hellas, and other Greek radio programs, to introduce various health and welfare topics impacting community, and contributes regular articles in the Greek papers, Neos Kosmos and Ta Nea. With each activity, including family violence, AGWS on average receives 5 -10 new contacts from people who are affected by this issue.

AGWS received minor project funding from the Inner North West Primary Care Partnership Grant Funding for Member Projects 2014 to deliver the “Empower Women to Reach Their Full Potential” project. The project aim was to improve access to information and support services, develop and implement culturally and linguistically appropriate education programs to increase community awareness of domestic violence and challenge perceptions held by broader Greek community. The development of Greek language resources and information kits strengthened the education strategy. AGWS engaged key organization to participate in the education sessions, such as Victoria Police, Berry Street, InTouch Multicultural Services Against Domestic Violence. A total of 613 Greek seniors participated in the project activities of which 413 were women and 200 men. Thirty six (36) community leaders were resourced with Greek language domestic violence information kits for their community groups. The project findings clearly indicated that family violence is a major concern within the Greek community and further education and services are needed to respond to needs of victims and families. The project was evaluated against the project goals and via participant feedback upon completion of project activities.

Following the presentations the outcomes were: 150 women privately disclosed had been or currently are victims of abuse and domestic violence; 10 women were directly referred to legal services; 25 women disclosed their concern for their children and/or grand children’s safety due to parental conflict or domestic violence in the home; approximately 60 women indicated interest in participating in further organised activities and support programs to assist them to deal with family violence and 120 kits were distributed to project participants. Another finding for the project was that men felt male victims lack the appropriate support services.

AGWS has undertaken extensive work in the area of elder abuse in response to community need and increasing number of clients contacting the agency for assistance. AGWS identified the problem of elder abuse in the Greek community approximately 8 years ago through generalist casework and counselling service. The abuse related to physical, verbal, psychological and financial abuse and in most instances the adult children were the perpetrators. AGWS has organized community forums with over 100 participants in attendance, and has worked in partnership with the Ethnic Community Council of Victoria (ECCV) and Senior Rights Victoria to deliver education to the community and collaborate on projects to improve access to information in CALD communities, including involvement in Greek language version of elder abuse DVD ‘Within My Walls’, the development of the Greek language elder abuse pamphlet and training of AGWS Greek community educators who actively continue education in the community. The educational activities have up to now reached more than 1000 Greek elderly.

The projects were evaluated by the project partners by seeking feedback from the project participants, consulting with Greek community on the development of language materials and through discussions with individuals. The project was also measured against the project objectives and identified outcomes.

Question 9

Does insufficient integration and coordination between the various bodies who come into contact with people affected by family violence hinder the assessment of risk, or the effectiveness of (early intervention, crisis and ongoing) support provided, to people affected by family violence? If so, please provide examples.

The risks relate to how well these services respond to the needs of the CALD communities, how culturally and linguistically responsive services are and how they respond to language barriers, the level of cultural competency of staff in dealing with family violence in different cultures.

In relation to health professionals improvements are needed in improving screening and reporting of family violence by general practitioners. Doctors are a primary contact for all people and patients confide in them and are in the best position to inform, support and refer to services. The role of the GP should be reviewed and some guidelines developed in improving risk assessments and response to family violence cases. All GP's should undertake formal training in family violence, including working with CALD communities.

Government and other funding bodies should, at a minimum, make funding available to community organizations, ethno-specific and multicultural organization to train and develop staff to improve responses to clients presenting with issues relating to family violence. Many services, for established and new and emerging communities, are the first and sometimes the only contact a person may make on this serious issue. The way the issue is understood and handled by a worker can make the difference as the actions and decision made by the person affected by the violence, and can be detrimental in how they enter the legal and other systems.

Question 17

Are there specific cultural, social, economic, geographical, or other factors in particular groups and communities in Victoria which tend to make family violence more likely to occur, or to exacerbate its effects? If so, what are they?

Yes there are factors and these are as follows:

Some of the presenting factors for family violence as reported by AGWS clients and members of the community include alcohol and illicit drug use by partner or adult child, poor mental health of the person who is violent, ongoing and sustained relationship and marital conflict, compulsive gambling and financial debts and intergenerational conflict.

Cultural attitudes toward violence entrenched in the social and cultural foundations of the community. Attitudes, such as gender roles and social norms, may need further consideration as to how they impact relationships and create inequalities and to be challenged to support the development of respectful relationships.

Isolation and lack of social connections can isolate people affected by family violence making it difficult for them to seek support and care for themselves. Sometimes the isolation is created by the violent person, distancing the women and children from family and community and other times the woman is afraid to be seen or because of the stigma chooses to keep it private. In some instances, extended family chose to stay away rather than confront the issues and support the person affected by the violence.

According to VicHealth (2007) Men's unemployment is a predictor of the perpetration of violence and it is one of the stresses placed on families. Particularly in the case of the newly arrived there is enormous strain on men to find work and support their families it is straining relationships and in some cases resulting in family violence.

New migrants to Australia have limited knowledge of the immigration and legal systems and are unaware of their rights and services in relation to family violence situations. The newly arrived women on partner visa or other visa's dependency issues without residency are concerned that they may have to leave if they make a report and live with the violence.

Relationship conflict, separation and divorce are generally conceptualised as situational 'triggers' for violence (VicHealth 2007). Victims often report increased risk of violence after separation and fear for their children's safety.

Language barriers and low literacy levels of non-English speaking people limits their access to services, information and understanding of the family law system.

There are practical issues that affect the actions and decisions of people affected by violence, such as accessing housing and financial support. These issues are further magnified when the safety and wellbeing of children are involved.

Elder abuse is an increasing concern in the Greek community and as the onus is on the older person to make a notification many elderly are living in fear and violent situations. The law has to improve its responses to the elderly, increase powers for action by police and relevant government and non-government services to act on behalf of elderly in violent situations. The penalties for violence against elderly must be considered and action taken against adult children who are victimizing their parents.

Question 18

What barriers prevent people in particular groups and communities in Victoria from engaging with or benefiting from family violence services? How can the family violence service system be improved to reflect the diversity of people's experiences?

As mentioned in other parts of the submission, some of the major issues that affect the Greek community in accessing family violence services relate to language barrier, cultural attitudes within the community, gaps in availability of culturally and linguistically appropriate services and limited knowledge of the legal and family law systems.

- Improvements can be made by implementing the following:
- Developing and implementing culturally and linguistically appropriate education campaigns, in particular using the ethnic media
- Improved networking and collaboration between ethno-specific, generic and specialised family violence services to address needs of the Greek community
- Develop the cultural competency of the family violence workers
- Improve interpreting and language services by educating interpreters to understand the issues relating to family violence and to remain neutral to the issue and perform the duties without prejudice
- Specialist service providers to review their governance processes and include people of CALD background on the Boards and senior management
- Service providers to employ and train bilingual and culturally sensitive staff
- Service providers to review their models of operation and engage CALD communities and their representatives

