

## Submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence:

This submission has been prepared and submitted in my capacity as the State Member of Parliament representing Wendouree, as Parliamentary Secretary for Human Services, and as someone who has worked in the field of sexual assault and crisis services for about 20 years. I make this submission from a regional perspective, and also from a rural perspective.

I genuinely welcome the Andrews Government's commitment to preventing family violence, and its establishment of a royal commission into family violence. I have not seen the statistics, such as we know them, change for 30 years and believe that it is more than timely that this law and order issue be the subject of a royal commission.

Family violence is our biggest law and order challenge. It affects many people, overwhelmingly women and children, and it does not discriminate. I acknowledge that men can be victims of family violence, but I will refer to women and children as victims throughout this submission.

It is difficult to know the actual rate of family violence due to both under-reporting and the lack of identification of the full scale and characteristics of family violence. There is still a lack of acknowledgement in our community that family violence encompasses a range of behaviours, including, but not exclusively, financial abuse, emotional abuse, intimidatory behaviour, threats of abuse and abuse of pets. This lack of acknowledgement by both the community, and victims of family violence, often causes those victims to remain in abusive relationships.

Recommendation: That a range of educational products be developed to inform the community on what constitutes family violence in its broadest sense.

Recommendation: That legislation and law clearly reflects the range of behaviours particular to family violence.

Regional Victoria faces many challenges in the prevention of family violence and the support of its victims that is not present in metropolitan Melbourne. Victims who reside in regional Victoria face additional barriers, which will be discussed below.

Geographical isolation is a barrier, and is compounded by a lack of public transport. It is more difficult for rural and regional Victorians to access services or to leave an abusive environment. Public transport is not as frequent and doesn't always cover all geographical areas. Women can often be isolated by their abuser through withholding car keys, for example, or disabling cars. Without public transport there is not the means to escape a violent situation, or attend counselling appointments.

Social isolation is a serious issue for country women, particularly those in rural and remote areas. Rural communities don't have large networks of people around them, and this translates to fewer people to call upon when seeking help. This is particularly true for those who are new to rural communities where they may not know nor have any close neighbours.

Social isolation can also be about knowing the community too well. If your abuser is seen as an upstanding or outstanding member of the community, it may be difficult to report them to the local authorities. There is a lack of confidentiality in rural and regional centres. These are communities where networks overlap and it is common that victims are afraid to seek help for fear the person who is abusing them may find out. It is also not uncommon for a victim or a perpetrator to have strong relationships and connections to police and counsellors.

Recommendation: That the government recognise the unique challenges facing victims and service providers in regional Victoria and develop policies and resources accordingly.

Recommendation: That a review of public transport options for rural and regional Victoria be implemented.

Recommendation: That regional agencies be supported and resourced to provide mobile or on-line visits to those areas that have limited access to public transport or who may have to travel long distances for support.

Recommendation: That the possibility of working with farm field days, women's health visits – those places where women congregate - be explored in terms of providing women with the opportunity to disclose their abuse and be referred to appropriate agencies, where they may not be identified as a victim by their community.

Recommendation: That local services which are frequented, such as hairdressers or bar staff, be trained to identify the signs of family violence and are then able to refer to appropriate agencies.

Recommendation: That the use of social media be explored as a way of women discretely finding out information about what constitutes abuse, and what services are available.

Access to services is often insufficient to meet demand. Local service providers have waiting lists for those wishing to access counselling, housing, and financial services, to name just a few. A large number of Ballarat's family violence services not only have to meet the local demand, they also need to service the entire Grampians catchment.

Recommendation: That regional and rural agencies be assessed in terms of their catchment area, and the resources that they have to cover those areas.

The incidence of family violence is firmly embedded within the position that women hold within our society. One such example of this is the representation of women on Boards and in our judiciary. I welcome the Andrews government commitment to 50% representation of women on Government boards and in our judiciary. This sends a clear message the women's representation is imperative, important and a non-negotiable. This is one small step in valuing women as equal and valued members of our community. The participation of women in sport, in trades – in fact in all facets of social, recreational and economic activity tells a story of equality. How

women are portrayed in the media and in advertising is also an indicator of women's perceived value.

I want to mention an initiative that *Women's Health Grampians* championed called Act@Work. Act@Work is an organisation-wide program challenging sexism, discrimination and violence against women. The program addresses workplace leadership, policies and procedures and promotes partnerships and links to the community. Many local organisations got on board with the program, including the local paper, *The Courier*. The program really highlighted locally the issue of inequality. More information on this program can be found at <http://whg.org.au/priorities-programs/prevention-of-violence-against-women/actatwork>.

Recommendation: That programs such as Act@Work be recognised as important tools to promote equality of women and girls.

Recommendation: That research into all aspects of family violence, including therapeutic support, causes and solutions, be encouraged and resourced, and recognised as important and valuable.

I would like to conclude this submission by emphasising the importance of supporting the workforce that supports those who are living in or leaving a situation of family violence. This workforce are professional, dedicated and hard working. They hear horrific stories of abuse, day in, day out, and often putting themselves in harm's way to help out victims of family violence. They certainly don't do this work for the money. They do this work because it's important and necessary and humane. They do this work because they are committed to working toward the elimination of family violence and to communities that are free of violence.

I thank them for their work.