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# ROYAL COMMISSION INTO FAMIL VIOLENCE

Darebin City Council Submission

May 2015

## OFFICE OF THE MAYOR AND COUNCILLORS

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26 May 2015

Royal Commission into Family Violence  
 PO Box 535  
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To the Royal Commission,

**Re: Submission to the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence**

Darebin City Council welcomes the opportunity to address the Royal Commission into Family Violence and commends the commitment and leadership demonstrated by the current State Government to prevent violence against women.

Family violence remains a pervasive issue for the Darebin community, with 1,685 reported incidences in 2013/2014. Darebin Council recognises that family violence and violence against women are gendered in nature and require responses that understand the underlying causes of violence against women, internationally recognised as:

- Unequal power relations between men and women
- Adherence to rigid gender stereotypes
- Broader cultures of violence

Local government is the closest level of government to the community and can influence many of the determinants of violence against women through our social and strategic planning, environmental management, economic development, urban design and community service provision. Local government is now identified as one of the critical settings for preventing violence against women.

Since 2008 Darebin City Council has been a leader in the delivery of innovative projects that aim to prevent violence against women and strengthen the service system to better support women at risk of or/experiencing family violence. Darebin is the only Council in Australia to have funded a dedicated, full-time Preventing Violence Against Women position.

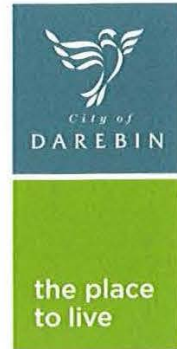
We welcome the recommendations of the Royal Commission and look forward to outcomes across the continuum of primary prevention, early intervention and crisis response, which take a long term and appropriately resourced approach to end violence against women.

Our response to the issues paper is attached.

Yours sincerely



**Cr. Steven J. Tsitas**  
 Mayor



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## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

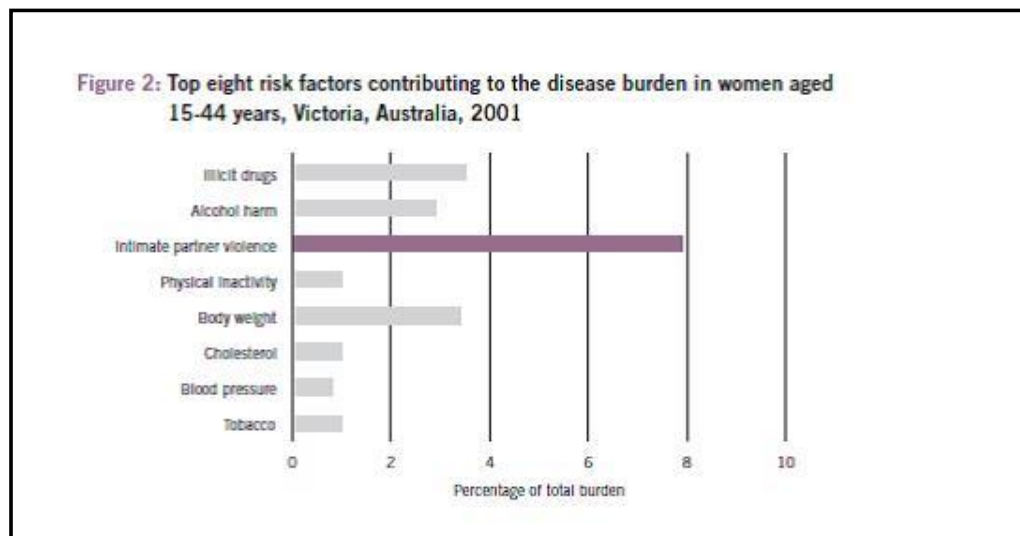
1. The Royal Commission goals include the following revisions:
  - Foster a **gender equitable** and violence-free society
  - Build respectful **and equal** relationships **between men and women**
  - Increased awareness of the **causes, types of**, extent and effects of family violence
2. Fund *Regional Prevention of Violence Before it Occurs Integration Coordinators* to coordinate regional primary prevention activities.
3. Provide dedicated funding to the primary prevention sector, including local government, to deliver prevention activities that are underpinned by the link between gender inequity and violence against women.
4. Develop and commit to long-term policy to prevent men's violence against women before it occurs.
5. Provide dedicated and ongoing funding for the establishment of a Victorian Peak Body for the prevention of violence, including research, advocacy and program evaluation.
6. Fund and establish a local risk assessment management structure that identifies and addresses high-risk family violence.
7. Provide adequate funding to services that work within and alongside the family violence service system, including family violence response, housing and homelessness, and legal services.
8. Consider the findings and nine recommendations of the 2015 Senate report on Domestic Violence in Australia.



## INTRODUCTION

Violence against women has been referred to as ‘the most pervasive yet least recognised human rights abuse in the world’ by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2008). Violence against women has significant consequences on the health and wellbeing of women and children, with severe and persistent effects on physical and mental health and enormous costs in terms of premature death and disability.

In Australia, one in three women experience physical violence and one in four women experience sexual violence (ABS, 2005). One woman is killed every week as a result of intimate partner violence (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2007). It is responsible for more preventable ill-health and premature deaths in Victorian women under the age of 45 than any other of the well-known risk factors, including high blood pressure, obesity and smoking (VicHealth, 2004).



**Figure 1 VicHealth, 2004 Top eight risk factors contributing to the disease burden in women aged 15-44 years**

The City of Darebin is located in the northern suburbs of Melbourne, between 5 and 15 kilometres north of the Melbourne CBD and is home to 148,728 residents. Darebin is a richly diverse community, 29% of Darebin's residents born in non-English speaking countries and have come to Australia from over 140 countries. Darebin also has one of the largest proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents in metropolitan Melbourne, making up 0.8 per cent of the total population

Darebin rates as the sixth most disadvantaged metropolitan municipality in Victoria and the 39th most disadvantaged municipality in Victoria, however a large disparity remains between suburbs, with several suburbs in the municipality ranked amongst the most disadvantaged in Victoria.

Women in Darebin experience a range of barriers to equal and full participation including language barriers, access to culturally appropriate services, accessing education and employment opportunities and experiences of discrimination, racism and sexism. These factors compound the experience and severity for those who also experience family violence. In 2013/14 there were 1,685 reported incidences of family violence in Darebin, four incidents each day. This is a 12% increase from 2012 – 2013, and a 89% increase from the 890 incidents in 2009/2010. This increase is consistent with trends across the North West region and is likely to be shaped by



improvements to the reporting system, confidence in reporting incidents to the police and work undertaken across all sectors to increase community awareness of family violence. The data also illustrates that family violence remains a pervasive issue for the Darebin community and overwhelmingly, the most significant crime against the person in the municipality.

Local government is the closest level of government to the community and as such has the capacity to influence many of the determinants of violence against women through its social and strategic planning, environmental management, economic development, urban design and community service provision. Local government is now identified as being one of the critical settings for preventing violence against women.

Since 2008 Darebin City Council has been a leader in the delivery of innovative projects that aim to prevent violence against women and strengthen the service system to better support women at risk of or/experiencing family violence. Darebin is the only Council in Australia to have funded a dedicated, full-time Preventing Violence Against Women position and Council's approach to preventing family violence against women is grounded in its understanding of the underlying causes of violence against women, internationally accepted as;

- Unequal power relations between women and men
- Adherence to rigid gender stereotypes
- Broader cultures of violence (VicHealth, 2007)

This understanding is articulated through Council's *Preventing Violence Against Women Action Plan 2012-15* which supports a whole-of-organisation, primary prevention approach, implementing mutually reinforcing initiatives that work to promote gender, respect and equity and seek to prevent the underlying causes of violence against women. A primary prevention approach recognises that violence against women occurs and is perpetuated across all levels of society:

- Institutional and systemic level
- Organisational and community level
- Individual, family and peer group level (VicHealth, 2007).

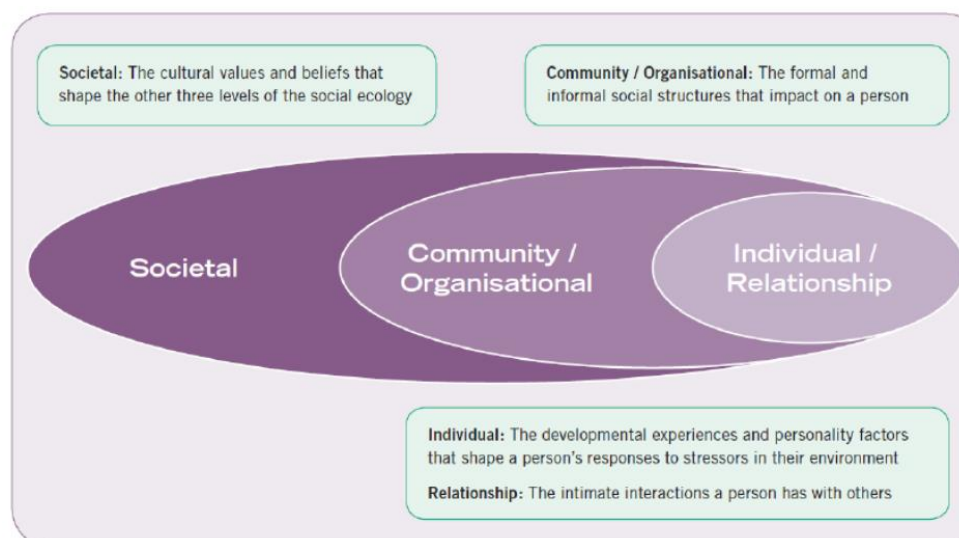


Figure 2 VicHealth (2007) An Ecological Approach to Understanding Violence



Primary prevention recognises that influencing change at the societal level will complement actions to drive cultural change at the community/organisational level and in turn affect change at the individual / relationship level.

There is significant evidence illustrating that in countries where a higher level of gender equity has been achieved, the level of violence against women is lower. The Global Gender Gap Report identifies Iceland as the most gender equitable country in the world and its rate of violence against women is 19% over a lifetime. In comparison, Australia's estimated rate of violence against women is 33 per cent and ranks 25 of 135 countries listed (World Economic Forum, 2013).

This is further evidenced by the *Australians' attitudes to violence against women: Findings from the 2013 National Community Attitudes towards Violence Against Women Survey*, which illustrates a consistent relationship between various measures of gender equality and both the prevalence of violence, and attitudes toward both equality and violence. With this evidence, primary prevention efforts to reduce inequalities and strengthen respect between men and women remain vital to reducing violence against women. It is this framework that has informed Council's submission to the Royal Commission on family violence.

Victoria is internationally recognised for developing innovative policy and practice to prevent violence against women (Victorian Government, 2010), demonstrated through mutually reinforcing strategies and cross sector partnerships. The current State Government's leadership and commitment to prevent violence against women is further demonstrated through the appointment of Victoria's first Minister for the prevention of violence against women and Victoria Police's appointment of an Assistant Commissioner for Family Violence.

This leadership, along with the establishment of the Royal Commission provides a significant opportunity for Victoria to reduce the overwhelming impact that family violence continues to have on our community. This can be achieved by improving the service system that responds to violence, but also by improving our capacity to prevent violence before it occurs through coordinated, long term, evidence based resourcing across the prevention spectrum . Lastly, the adequate resourcing of primary prevention should never be at the cost of early intervention and crisis response family violence services.



### **Are there other goals the Royal Commission should consider?**

The Royal Commission into Family Violence and the goals outlined in the Issues Paper must include an understanding of the gendered nature of violence against women, the key causes of family violence and violence against women, and the importance of preventing violence before it occurs. Council recommends that the Royal Commission makes the following changes to enhance the goals included in the Issues Paper:

#### **Foster a violence-free society**

The Royal Commission needs to include an acknowledgement of the gendered nature of violence against women and the requirement of *gender equity* in achieving a violence-free society. Well established research into the causes of violence against women identifies the link between gender inequity and the high prevalence of violence against women (VicHealth, 2007); therefore gender equity is paramount for creating a violence-free society.

#### **Build respectful family relationships**

Research identifies that unequal power between men and women is a key determinant of violence against women (VicHealth, 2007). Due to the gendered nature of family violence and violence against women, the Royal Commission must respond to relationships *between men and women* more broadly than just familial.

This also highlights the importance of primary prevention and preventing violence before it occurs as part of the spectrum of strategies well placed to build respectful and equal relationships between men and women. Primary prevention strategies can be delivered to the whole of population or to targeted populations at greater risk of experiencing violence, which focus on changing behaviours, knowledge and attitudes that perpetuate violence in structural, cultural and social contexts.

#### **Increase awareness of the extent and effects of family violence**

As noted in the Issues Paper, the Victorian Family Violence Protection Act 2008 identifies that violence can take many forms, including physical, sexual, financial, emotional, spiritual and psychological (Family Violence Protection Act, 2008). The Royal Commission must enhance their commitment to increasing awareness of family violence by acknowledging the complex nature of the *causes and types of* family violence. As family violence is a gendered crime, the causes are also. Paramount to a nuanced understanding of the causes of violence against women is the context of power and control, and patriarchy.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

1. The Royal Commission goals include the following revisions:
  - Foster a ***gender equitable*** and violence-free society
  - Build respectful ***and equal*** relationships ***between men and women***
  - Increased awareness of the ***causes, types of,*** extent and effects of family violence





**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 or altered.**

**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?**

Victoria has been a leader in evidence-based practice in responding to family violence and preventing violence before it occurs. There have been valuable changes to components of the system; however the reforms have not been holistic. Rather Victoria has attempted to retro-fit a fundamentally flawed system with piecemeal changes. To genuinely improve our response the State needs a comprehensive model for building a service system that can adequately respond to family violence. Within the current context the following changes to the system have been effective and are building blocks to improve our response:

#### **Establishing an Integrated Family Violence Service (IFVS) System in Victoria**

There has been significant improvement and development of an integrated service system in which specialist domestic and family violence services work together with other services, including Victoria Police and the Victorian Magistrates Courts, to improve the safety of women and children experiencing violence. In Victoria, this work has been supported by the development of local level by Family Violence Regional Integration Committees. This needs to be expanded to address *all* systems that intersect with family violence as it is not possible to effectively address current systemic issues without considering our systems more broadly.

The establishment of Regional Integration Coordinators (RICs) across Victoria has been successful in creating a regional conduit between the local Family Violence Regional Integration Committees and regional and state-wide committees who monitor and work to improve the system responses across Victoria.

A key factor that has underpinned the IFVS is the Common Risk Assessment Framework (CRAF). The delivery of CRAF training to a wide range of services that work with the family violence service system has significantly improved and mainstreamed how practitioners and professionals identify and respond appropriately to risk factors associated with family violence. The CRAF must be implemented more broadly to state government agencies and services to ensure their risk assessments to include family violence.

The *2008 Family Violence Protection Act* has contributed to a broader understanding of the complexities, causes and types of violence and improved how services work with women and children that experience family violence. As part of the *new Act*, Victoria Police were given jurisdiction to issue family violence safety notices (FVSN) outside court hours to provide similar, short-term protection until a Family Violence Intervention order (FVIO) can be obtained. This shift in practice and authority meant that Police members could provide a FVSN upon attending a family violence incident and provide short-term safety for women and children.

Collectively, reforms to the family violence system in Victoria have strengthened integrated approaches and responses to women and children experiencing family violence. However, these are ad hoc responses to deep and complex system issues. We have a system that is overworked and does not have the capacity to respond to the increase in demand and therefore reform efforts are diminished.

#### **Development of a Victorian Primary Prevention Framework**

Victoria is a leader in the primary prevention of violence against women.. In 2007, VicHealth released *Preventing Violence Before It Occurs – A Framework and Background Paper to Guide the Primary Prevention of Violence against Women in Victoria*. The Framework was a result of an extensive review of the evidence on existing prevention programs, and found that the key underpinning causes of violence against women are





unequal power relations between women and men, adherence to rigid gender stereotypes and broader cultures of violence.

The Framework also identified priority settings for action which included a broad range of spaces and groups well placed for primary prevention to occur. The development of the Framework was a catalyst for the establishment of a prevention sector in Victoria. As a first of its kind, it systematically documented and presented settings and initiatives that are evidence-based and ideal for the primary prevention of violence against women.

Following the release of the Framework, the State Government delivered on one of the key recommendations and released *A Right to Respect: Victoria's Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women 2010 – 2020*, the plan was based on the findings of the VicHealth research (VicHealth, 2007). Regrettably, Victoria no longer has a plan that addresses the primary prevention of violence against women. Without leadership, a state policy commitment and plan to implement primary prevention actions, our efforts are greatly diminished.

It is too early to measure the impact of these strategies, but we are confident that by applying evidence-based research to our practice, we are contributing to change the culture that allows violence to occur. This work needs to occur over decades, and without dedicated funding and long-term, bipartisan policy commitment, our work to prevent violence against women is weakened.

To lead this work Victoria needs state funded *Regional Prevention of Violence Before it Occurs Integration Coordinators* (similar to RICs, funded by state government), who would act as conduit between the state government, peak bodies and local committees, while providing coordination for prevention initiatives and sector development. Regional Management Forums (RMF) are one of the best placed structures to support the embedding and delivery of prevention initiatives across the agencies that participate in this forum.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

2. Fund *Regional Prevention of Violence Before it Occurs Integration Coordinators* to coordinate regional primary prevention activities



**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.**

Local government has a unique opportunity to provide leadership and to influence community attitudes, infrastructure, programs and services that increase women's safety and prevent violence against women. Councils provide a range of services and programs to all aspects of the community, including roads, parks and bushland, waste, local laws, urban planning, city planning, transport, libraries, health and wellbeing, youth services, early years, home care and aged services, and leisure and recreation. Councils are therefore well placed to promote whole-of-community approaches to address the key determinants of violence against women.

Local government has the capacity is to build a safe, respectful community and reduce the negative impact on crime. Through a whole of organisation approach that seeks to address the built, social and economic environments that contribute to safety and prevent crime. Community perceptions of safety do not recognise family violence as a community safety concern, despite the overwhelming dominance it has in Victoria Police data.

While we can influence women's safety in the community and contribute to planning and design that is safe and accessible, overwhelming violence against women occurs in the home and is perpetrated by men known to them. Therefore responses to this type of violence must recognise the key causes of men's violence against women. Further to this, when we understand that improving community safety involves reducing the negative impact of crime, responses must recognise family violence as a community safety issue that has profound impacts on all aspects of the community.

#### **Darebin City Council's programs and initiatives to Prevent Violence Against Women**

Darebin City Council has a history of working to prevent violence against women before it occurs and has based its initiatives on the Victorian *Preventing Violence Against Women: A Framework for Action* (VicHealth, 2007). Council's leadership and work to prevent violence against women is demonstrated through a range of programs and outcomes, key achievements include:

In 2007 Council led the Northern Region Family Violence Help Cards project, which saw the development of a pocket-sized family violence resource with local support services for women experiencing family violence. The Help Cards were also created for men who use violence and listed relevant services, including Men's Behaviour Change. In 2009, this project was expanded to develop family violence cards in 12 community languages other than English and an Aboriginal Family Violence Help Card. The successful resources have been replicated in other regions across Victoria and have continued to be a vital resource for women to access information about family violence services.

In 2008, building on Council's already established relationships with interfaith communities; VicHealth funded Council to lead a primary prevention project to explore opportunities to prevent violence against women in a faith setting, to increase the capacity of faith leaders, organisations and communities to undertake prevention work. The outcomes of this project were significant and saw the development of a Peer Mentoring Program, a Respectful Relationships Manual and Tool Kit and the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne Strategic Policy for the Prevention of Violence Against Women.

Recognising the specific skill-set required to coordinate initiatives that prevent violence before it occurs; in 2009 Council funded a *Preventing Violence Against Women Officer* position. In 2013, Council committed to this with a permanent, full-time position. Darebin is the only Council in Australia to have a Preventing Violence Against Women Officer position that is internally funded to guide local government prevention activities. The role



coordinates the implementation of the Action Plan and works closely with all departments to embed prevention into Council's services and programs.

In 2010, Council endorsed a workplace *Family Violence Policy* to support staff experiencing family violence. The Policy recognises the profound impact of family violence on people's lives and acts to provide support for staff to access leave arrangements, develop workplace safety planning, make changes to workplace practices to ensure safety – including changing email and phone numbers, location and hours etc, and access to the Employee Assistance Program (EAP). As part of the implementation of the Policy, key staff including managers undertook training to build their skills and knowledge to support staff. Since the development of this training, Council offers *Identifying and Responding to Family Violence Training* twice yearly to approximately 50 staff. In 2013, the Policy was strengthened by the inclusion of a family violence clause as part of Darebin's Enterprise Bargaining Agreement.

#### **Darebin's Preventing Violence Against women Action Plan 2012 - 2015**

In 2012, Council endorsed a Women's Equity Strategy 2012 -2015, which includes a whole-of-Council *Preventing Violence Against Women Action Plan 2012 - 2015* as part of its commitment to gender equity and equal participation for women in all aspects of community. The Darebin Women's Equity Strategy provides a framework for delivery of Council's policy and actions aimed at improving gender equity and reducing violence against women within the Darebin workforce, our community and through Council services and programs.

The Action Plan has developed a whole-of-organisation approach to preventing violence against women before it occurs. The Plan includes actions and responsibilities for all areas of Council and provides a framework to embed primary prevention in Council programs and services to the community. It outlines a range of settings to address violence against women across a spectrum of prevention and early intervention strategies. The Plan is in its final year of implementation and has supported the implementation of a range of settings based prevention initiatives that are examples of promising practice including:

#### **The Early Years**

While the early years can be characterised by rigid gender roles and where ideas of gender can start to be shaped, it also provides opportunities for positive influence on children's and families' understanding of gender norms. There are many opportunities for educators, policy makers and children's program developers to have a positive influence of gender, through children's play, language, toys and storytelling. The early years are also a time when women and children can be at a heightened risk of experiencing family violence and thus Council have worked to strengthen both primary prevention and early intervention strategies in the early years.

Key achievements:

- Development of targeted training for the Early Years sector, in Partnership with Women's Health in The North. The *Promoting Positive Gender Norms to Prevent Violence Against Women* training has been delivered in two settings, to Early Years educators that work with children in child care centres and kindergartens, and 55 Council staff who either work with children and families or are responsible for planning for early years, developing policy or delivering programs and services that reach children and families.
- Development of a place-based family violence prevention program at Reservoir Neighbourhood House, including the delivery of a playgroup for women experiencing or at risk of experiencing family violence, with funding from Department of Health and Human Services. The program includes a family worker located at the house one day a week to work with families experiencing family violence and connecting families with the broader Darebin family violence service system. The model includes opportunities for staff and



volunteers at the house to undertake Identifying and Responding to Family Violence training to further build the capacity of the House to support disclosures of family violence.

### **Schools and Youth Setting**

Respectful relationships education to prevent violence against women is recognised as a vital piece of primary prevention work. Through Council's Youth Services team and our work with schools we have an opportunity to deliver respectful relationship education and send mutually reinforcing messages of respect and equity through the services provided to young people.

Key achievements:

- Partnership with Thornbury High to pilot a school based program to embed respectful relationship education into curriculum and embed gender equity into school policies and practices. Darebin has provided expertise and support to build the capacity of teachers to embed a program that is sustainable for the school. The program has been delivered to four year nine classes and is currently in a phase of building the capacity of teachers across the school to participate in professional development. Council plans to take this model to schools across the municipality to support their work to strengthen respectful relationships in schools.
- Development of a best-practice guided respectful relationships education program to be delivered by teachers in the classroom. The program focuses on gender, the causes and types of family violence and against women, myths and beliefs about gender, consent and the law, and healthy vs unhealthy relationships. Activities include media analysis of the value and representation of women and girls, development of bystander approaches to preventing violence and dispelling the myths of gender roles and stereotypes.
- Strengthened practices through Youth Services that promote gender equity, respect and non-violence. This has included up-skilling staff to identify opportunities to embed primary prevention, conversations about respect and equity within programs and services with young people, and knowledge of support services for young people experiencing family violence.
- Activities that recognise and celebrate campaigns to end violence against women with young people that attend drop-in programs at the Northland Youth Centre, including Week Without Violence (third week in October), 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-based Violence (25 November – 10 December) and International Women's Day (8 March). Programs have included conversations and activities that address the causes of violence against women and provide the young people with information about support services for family violence.

### **The Workplace**

Workplaces are a critical setting for creating culture change and in 2013 Council introduced a workplace program, *Darebin Says NO to Family Violence: A Whole-of-Organisation Approach to Preventing Violence Against Women*. The program builds on the workplace Family Violence Policy as a platform to strengthen our workplace practices and supports to prevent violence against women. Workplaces are directly impacted by instances of domestic violence and play a key role in influencing the behaviour of individuals and groups. They can reinforce or challenge normative beliefs and can also model equitable and respectful gender relations, and therefore represent a site in which non-violent norms can be promoted.



The program is in its second year and has created a framework to progress our workplace as a setting to prevent violence against women. The Program works across the organisation and is supported by key departments of influence, including People and Development, Communications, the Chief Executive and Management.

**Key achievements:**

- Bi-annual staff survey about our attitudes towards women and violence against women. This information is collected to help us measure the change in attitudes by addressing the workplace culture and practices to prevent violence against women.
- Development of the Darebin Family Violence Policy Video, which highlights the key objectives and supports of the policy for staff experiencing family violence. These include leave arrangements to deal with matters arising from family violence, workplace safety planning, changes to workplace practices to ensure safety, access to Council's Family Violence Support Officer and access to the Employee Assistance Program (EAP).
- Comprehensive staff induction process that informs new staff of Council's commitment to support staff that experience family violence and preventing violence against women. Each staff member receives a new employee preventing violence against women email that highlights opportunities for staff to contribute to prevention work, the family violence policy and policy video.
- Identifying and responding to family violence training packages developed and delivered to key areas of council, including local laws, contact officers (staff that support colleagues with employee relation policies, including the family violence policy) and customer service.
- Development of a workplace training program that up-skills staff to embed prevention into their work, through exploring the role of workplaces to prevent violence against women, bystander approaches to prevent men's violence against women, challenging sexism in workplaces and diversifying prevention skills across our organisation to non-traditional prevention areas. The training is being delivered in partnership with No to Violence Men's Referral Service.

Local Government is evidently a critical setting to prevent violence against women. While Councils have an opportunity to work closely with a range of settings and well placed to support this work, they require adequate funding to do so. Most of the above examples of promising practice that Darebin have delivered as part of their commitment to preventing violence against women have occurred without funding from external agencies or governments and highlights the breadth of work that could be progressed across Victoria with adequate funding and resources. An investment in local government is also an investment in education, housing, health and wellbeing, transport and safety. Local government must play a vital role in keeping women and children out of the family violence system, by addressing the above determinants of health that intersect with family violence.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

3. Provide dedicated funding to the primary prevention sector, including local government, to deliver prevention activities that are underpinned by the link between gender inequity and violence against women.



**If you or your organisation have 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.**

All tiers of government must develop policy that has a nuanced understanding of the distinctions between primary prevention, early intervention and tertiary response, and is informed by evidence-based frameworks that address the causes of violence against women. Public policy must take a whole-of-government approach and long-term investment in working across all sectors to influence systemic and practice change. While it is still early in our understanding of the influence of preventing violence against women initiatives, our collective practice wisdom needs to guide the development of this policy.

The model of a regional partnership to lead the delivery of a collaborative primary prevention strategy is one of promising practice, as demonstrated by *Building a Respectful Community – Preventing Violence against Women – A Strategy for the Northern Metropolitan Region of Melbourne 2011-2016* (Women’s Health in the North, 2011). Such regional approaches to prevention activities must be provided with adequate funding.

Local family violence networks are integral to the ongoing improvement and integration of the family violence service system. The Darebin Domestic Violence Network has been an active network for 20 years and demonstrates how local partnerships can respond to local issues and support local service system integration. Council’s active role in the network provides an important link to the context of our advocacy and prevention initiatives.

In order to maintain Victoria’s position as a leader in this work, a funded peak body is required to coordinate primary prevention, research, advocacy and program evaluation. A funded peak body needs to provide a coordinated link between all stakeholders that play a role on prevention, and bring together local, regional and state primary prevention. A peak body can be a conduit between state and regional partnerships and national organisations such as OurWatch and Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

4. Develop and commit to long-term policy to prevent men’s violence against women before it occurs
5. Provide dedicated and ongoing funding for the establishment of a Victorian Peak Body for the prevention of violence, including research, advocacy and program evaluation.



**What circumstances, conditions, situations or events, within relationships, families, institutions and whole communities, are associated with the occurrence or persistence of family violence?**

**What circumstances and conditions are associated with the reduced occurrence of family violence?**

Gender inequity is perpetuated by the unequal power between men and women. When we address gender inequity to prevent violence against women and improve women's equal participation, we improve outcomes for the entire community. To shift cultures, attitudes and systems that are steeped in male privilege and patriarchy in order to see a reduction of family violence will require long term investment.

We do not yet have the evidence or the data to benchmark against and nor do we have evidence of a reduction in family violence. Currently, we only have access to the number of family violence incidents reported to Police, which are extremely conservative figures.

National research into the attitudes that exist towards women and violence against women are vital to provide the context for the influence of broad community cultures and attitudes on violence. In 2014, Vic Health released Findings from the *2013 National Community Attitudes towards Violence Against Women Survey (NCAS)*, this is the third report of its kind since 1995. It is vital that research into the attitudes towards violence against women continue as it tells us how far we have come in challenging a culture that allows violence against women to occur, but it also provides context to guide efforts to tackle violence against women and monitor future progress.





**What are some of the most promising and successful ways of supporting the ongoing safety and wellbeing of people affected by violence? Are there gaps or deficiencies in our approach to supporting ongoing safety and wellbeing? How could measures to reduce the impact of family violence be improved?**

As a crime, family violence has a profound effect on the health and wellbeing of women and children and the wider community. Family violence compounds the effect of the determinants which underpin our wellbeing, reducing the capacity to access safe housing, economic participation and opportunities to experience meaningful and supportive social connections.

In the most recent Municipal Health and Wellbeing Planning cycle, local governments and other funded agencies were asked to consider access to safe, affordable housing as a key determinant to health and wellbeing. When this determinant is considered in the context of family violence, access to safe and affordable housing is not only a determinant to wellbeing, but a vital to ensure safety in crisis situations, and post violence. Given the significant demand that family violence has on housing sector, as a crime family violence reduces the whole community's capacity to access safe and affordable housing, as a determinant to health, and as a basic human right.

To support the safety and wellbeing of women and children affected by violence and reduce the impact of this crime on the community we must strengthen the integration of safety and wellbeing planning throughout all tiers of government. The Regional Management Forum brings together key stakeholders from across the health, justice and local government sectors and provides significant opportunity to both prevent and respond to family violence through an integrated planning framework that understands and responds to the intersections between safety and wellbeing.

The introduction of dedicated Victoria Police Family Violence Response Units has provided a strengthened approach to the safety and wellbeing of women and children experiencing family violence. Local and dedicated response units provide coordinated and improved responses to family violence incidents.

The Darebin Community Legal Centre provides the *Darebin Intervention Order Service (DIOS)*, a free court support service primarily for applicants seeking an Intervention Order (IVO) at Heidelberg Magistrates' Court. This service is vital to ensure that women and children are provided with safe and equitable access to legal and court support. . The Service is a successful example of providing women with safety and wellbeing in a time of crisis, but is currently weakened by the complex capacity issues that our system faces.

Victoria needs a comprehensive approach to identify and address high risk family violence among local services and government agencies. The impact of this current gap is regrettably at the cost of the lives of women and children. Dedicated funding must be provided to establish local risk assessment management structures for high risk family violence that work across *all* systems and can adequately respond to the increasingly high levels of violence against women and children.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

6. Fund and establish a local risk assessment management structure that identifies and addresses high-risk family violence.
7. Provide adequate funding to services that work within and alongside the family violence service system, including family violence response, housing and homelessness, and legal services.



**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?**

**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 system be improved to reflect the diversity of people's experiences?**

**How can responses to family violence in these groups and communities be improved? What approaches have been shown to be most effective?**

Violence against women is a pervasive issue that occurs among all cultural, religious, and socio-economic groups. However, as gender relations are intersected by factors such as age, culture, ethnicity, ability, sexual identity and visa status, women who are marginalised by these factors may be more vulnerable to violence and experience additional barriers to seeking support.

In Australia, women that experience higher rates of violence include Aboriginal women, women with disabilities and women from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds – including newly arrived immigrant and refugee women. The complexities that surround these experiences can have a detrimental effect on access to family violence services and the service system more broadly. We acknowledge that our local, regional and state partners that have expertise working with groups that experience compounding vulnerabilities and additional barriers to accessing family violence support will provide submissions into the Royal Commission. We support their submissions and recognise their expertise at addressing the Royal Commission about these issues.

For services that respond to women and children experiencing family violence, it is paramount that they provide an equitable and accessible service. While there are relevant peak specialist services that work with women experiencing compounding vulnerabilities, such as Aboriginal women, women with disabilities and CALD women, it is important that generalist services can also provide services to *all* groups within our community. Mainstreaming equity within generalist and specialist family violence services is vital in ensuring that women have choice in service access. Furthermore, it is integral that generalist services that work with women and children experiencing family violence, undertake the Common Risk Assessment Framework (CRAF) as a means of assessing the risk to safety and wellbeing.

While primary prevention strategies are often targeted at whole-of-community and population, it is understood that groups that are at higher risk of experiencing violence or experience compounding vulnerabilities may require targeted and specific prevention strategies. This approach identifies the need for equity across the continuum of strategies that address violence against women in our community, from primary prevention, secondary prevention and tertiary response.



**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?**

**The Royal Commission will be considering both short term and longer term responses to family violence. Tell us about the changes which you think could produce the greatest impact in the short and longer term.**

The Royal Commission should consider the finding of the recent Commonwealth Government Senate Inquiry into Domestic Violence in Australia. The Senate Report on Domestic Violence in Australia identifies nine key recommendations for the Commonwealth Government and found that in order *to address domestic and family violence in Australia, there needs to be long-term and coordinated efforts by all levels of government in partnership with non-governmental organisations, service providers and the community* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2015). The inquiry acknowledges the importance of a multi-level response to family violence that recognizes the continuum of intervention, including prevention, early intervention and crisis support.

We support the Senate findings and acknowledgement of the continuum of responses required to address family violence and importantly, the need for investment in primary prevention to not come at the cost of investment in early intervention and crisis support. In order to achieve long term results and a reduction in family violence and violence against women, it is clear that investment needs to be made in primary prevention as a means to tackle the issue before violence occurs. This will in time see greatest impact and reduction in the current devastatingly high rates of family violence.

We congratulate the Victorian Government for the announcement and commitment of the first Minister for Family Violence Prevention, this portfolio highlights the current state of emergency that is family violence and violence against women. We recognise this opportunity to develop State policy and long-term commitment to prevent men's violence against women before it occurs. The development of State policy and action plans must take an evidence-based, action research approach, which brings together sectors and tiers of government, and builds on existing frameworks for primary prevention, including the 2007 VicHealth *Preventing violence against women: A framework for action*.

Ultimately, in order to see both short and long term responses to family violence, including a commitment to building a prevention sector, there is a need for bipartisan support and long-term investment in primary prevention.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

8. Consider the findings and nine recommendations of the 2015 Senate report on Domestic Violence in Australia.



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