

29 May 2015

Royal Commission in Family Violence Submission
Sonya Kilkenny
State Member for Carrum

I welcome the opportunity to make a contribution to Australia's first Royal Commission into Family Violence. A comprehensive review of this nature will shed much needed light on the types of measures needed to support victims of family violence and the types of measures needed to reduce and prevent family violence in our communities.

It is important to acknowledge that family violence is an epidemic. It is a crisis in our communities. Statistics paint a very grim picture. One woman is killed in Australia almost every week by a partner or ex-partner. (AIC, 2007/2008). More than one in three Australian women (34%) who have had an intimate partner has experienced violence from a partner or ex-partner. (Mouzos&Makkai, 2004). In Victoria, the number of family incident reports submitted by police rose from 50,382 to 60,829 in 2012/13 (Victoria Police 2012/13). Women and girls make up 77 percent of reported family violence in Victoria.

In the electorate of Carrum, that I represent, there has also been a steady increase in family violence. The electorate of Carrum covers the Frankston City Council and Kingston City Council areas, as well as a small part of Dandenong City Council.

Incidents recorded by Victoria Police in the City of Kingston increased from 770 in 2010 to 1,313 in 2014. In the City of Frankston recorded incidents almost doubled from 1,488 in 2010 to 2,483 in 2014. These are only some of the statistics that highlight the scale of the problem in my local community alone.

Frankston Council is one of only two Melbourne councils with a family violence rate higher than 1500 incidents per 100,000.

Earlier this year I attended a domestic violence forum in Frankston. It attracted sponsorship from the local Council who provided the venue free of charge. There were numerous speakers including Rosie Batty, senior police from Frankston, the Community Legal Centre as well as women's organisations and the Minister for Women and Minister for the Prevention of Family Violence, Fiona Richardson.

It was very well attended, with more than 2000 people, and provided valuable insights into an issue which for too long has been hidden from public discussion. Speakers collectively recognised that public awareness is critical but must be followed with action.

Subsequently, I met with one of the forum organisers – Melinda. Melinda is a mother of a young child and a volunteer in the local community. She has no clinical or professional training. Nor has she been a victim of domestic violence herself. But Melinda and her friend (and forum co-organiser) could not sit back and watch any longer. Melinda and her friend, two local mums, wanted to do something and they did. They ran this forum with the hope that it would shine a light on this issue.

But Melinda has said to me: “Why was it up to two volunteer mums to set up this forum in Frankston? Why didn’t the Council show this initiative; or government? Or any of the other numerous community organisations or agencies who are involved in this area?”

After the forum I spoke with local women; women who have been victims of family violence.

Their feedback was along the following lines:

- The forum was useful in raising awareness about the issue and in educating people about the various services available for women seeking support and/or fleeing from family violence - for example, women’s crisis accommodation, family violence police units, legal support, counselling etc.
- However, for victims of family violence, it is generally not that they lack any knowledge about the types of services on offer. The problem is that those services are under-resourced and unable to cope with demand.
- Police and courts are also stretched. And sometimes, police and courts are not always in step with the specific needs of victims, again given resourcing constraints.

I have also met with women in my community who have experienced or are experiencing family violence. A number of common themes come up time and time again.

I set out below some of the feedback I have received from women who have experienced family violence:

- Why do the women have to leave the home?
- Homelessness.
- There is a lack of practical support for women and children when they do leave the home.
- For example, when violence erupts (particularly during the night) the options for women (and their children) are very limited. For most, it means a trip to the emergency department or local police station. Neither of these is ideal.
- Even when women manage to secure emergency accommodation there is a need to provide for their immediate practical needs, i.e. simple things like food, toiletries, toys for children and spare clothes. Women and children often leave the house with only their clothes and minimal personal resources and often without any money.
- There is no community network – for example, safe houses network.
- For children it is important to try to keep some routine and particularly to continue their schooling. This is obviously challenging but nevertheless important.
- Schools might have a role to play.
- Police are often their first point of call. But a police station is not a great place for children.

- Focus should also be on preventing family violence. Education is important – teaching young boys and girls about healthy relationships.
- There is a gender pay gap which means women often don't have the financial capacity to leave. Women either don't have independent financial means or typically earn less than men or therefore can't afford to leave the relationship.
- Women can't get time off work making it difficult to attend court and legal proceedings.
- Many women self-represent in court and come face to face with their abuser.
- When women obtain intervention orders the ex-partner may also take out an intervention order. Courts become battlegrounds and adversarial arenas where proceedings are often drawn out.
- Some perpetrators shop around from one local community legal centre to another. These centres are conflicted and therefore unable to act for the women.

The role of Victoria Police in protecting victims of family violence is obviously critical. They are often the first to respond to family violence incidents.

The work being done by Victoria police to respond to and support victims of family violence is commendable. Similarly, the work being done at local courts is also commendable.

It is important that victims of family violence are treated with respect and that responding departments and agencies are empathetic and knowledgeable in appropriate referrals to partner agencies and support networks.

Conclusion

Violence against women is a significant health issue for women. The health and economic costs are considerable.

It is a highly complex issue. Not least because within the Australian culture there are influences that encourage a tolerance of violence towards women as well as influences that encourage stigmatisation, discrimination and even vilification of women in our communities.

I am very pleased that the Andrews Labor Government has established Australia's first Royal Commission into Family Violence. This is a significant step towards addressing this crisis in our communities.

I look forward to the Commission's report and recommendations.

If I can be of any assistance please do not hesitate to contact me.