

BENALLA
RURAL CITY COUNCIL

SUBMISSION TO THE ROYAL COMMISSION INTO FAMILY VIOLENCE

APRIL 2015

Submitted by Benalla Rural City Council

INTRODUCTION

The Benalla Rural City Council congratulates the State Government on its establishment of the Royal Commission into Family Violence and wishes it every success in its investigation into this despicable crime.

A key strategic objective of the Council is:

“Our community is safe, inclusive and accessible, and individuals, families and communities can move about and enjoy their lives in comfort and safety. Our physical and social environments are carefully managed to reduce risk with a specific focus on reducing family violence.”

To achieve this objective the Council is a member of the Benalla Family Violence Prevention Network; a collection of community members and 20 agencies that provide health, welfare and community services across the Benalla Rural City.

The BFVPN has undertaken a range of initiatives in which the Council has actively participated, including the:

- annual White Ribbon Day – Benalla March Against Violence
- Benalla White Ribbon Day Supporters program
- “Take a Stand” anti-family violence campaign.

As a community leader, the Council brings to the Royal Commissions attention three key issues that could make a real difference locally to combating family violence.

BACKGROUND

Population	13,597 (2015)
Area	235,225 hectares
Townships	Benalla, Baddaginnie, Devenish, Goorambat, Swanpool, Thoona, Tatong, Winton
Location	193 kms north east of Melbourne (an easy 2 hour drive)

- Benalla Rural City’s net population has remained virtually static over the decade from 2002, in contrast to the average for the rest of regional Victoria, which had an average decline in population of 0.5%pa.
- Our population is ageing with a greater proportion of older people (45% aged 50 and over) than for regional Victoria (38%).

BACKGROUND (CONT.)

- We have a lower percentage of families with children than for the rest of Victoria.
- Our workforce of 6,331 persons in 2011 was just marginally higher than in 2006 (6,227).
- Benalla has reasonably large unemployment figures amongst its younger residents with 12.8% of people aged 15-19 years unemployed and 8.3% of people aged 20-24 years unemployed.
- In 2013/14, Benalla Rural City had 2,208.6 family incidents per 100k of population. Across the 79 Victorian Local Government Authorities, Benalla Rural City is ranked number nine for family violence incidence (fourth in 2012/13).

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

The Council has identified three key issues that if addressed would make a significant difference in addressing family violence in our community.

Bsafe Program For Rural Women

Bsafe is a personal alarm system for women who have left a family violence situation, have an Intervention Order and are in fear of violence by an ex-partner.

Personal alarm systems have been in use for decades to enable elderly people to remain safe and independent in their own homes, and are increasingly used by service staff in potentially threatening workplaces.

Bsafe uses the same technology to allow women and children to remain living in their homes, knowing that help is only a button push away. Bsafe uses a Global Positioning System (GPS) tracking unit that notifies the response centre of the user's location.

Bsafe:

- Reduces the incidence of homicide, assault, sexualised assault and recidivism relating to family violence by providing an additional level of support and service to victims of family violence so that they can safely stay in their own homes and communities.
- Deters perpetrators from breaching Intervention Orders.
- Strengthens the relationship between the police, family violence, and health and community sectors and the community.

Despite three comprehensive evaluations and assistance given to over 250 women and their children, Women's Health Goulburn North East has been unsuccessful in securing government funding for Bsafe.

The Council fully supports WHGNE in its campaign to have the Victorian Government adopt, fund and administer this vital program across rural Victoria.

Funding of Family Liaison Workers

Under the Victorian Government's Advancing Country Towns Program, in 2013 Benalla Rural City received \$810,000 in funding to initiate a range of programs to create new opportunities and improve the quality of life for local people experiencing disadvantage.

A key initiative of the project was the employment of two Family Liaison Workers to provide:

- a link between isolated, vulnerable families and appropriate services in Benalla
- navigation and support to families in improving their capacity to self-manage their education, health and wellbeing requirements and enhance the learning opportunities of their children
- up-to-date and relevant information about services available in Benalla and in how to access those services
- services with feedback in relation to efficiency of delivery.

To do this the workers:

- visit and build relationships with vulnerable families in their own environments
- provide non-threatening forums for discussion of issues
- support clients in developing strategies plans for actions to address their issues
- provide support and introductions to appropriate services across all levels of government and non-government agencies
- provide and encourage connections for families into the wider community
- observe confidentiality and provide a positive role-model for families
- maintain relationships with Benalla service providers.

State Government funding for these positions expired in the 2013/14 financial year, however, in recognition of the invaluable contribution these roles made in tackling disadvantage, including family violence, the Council has funded these positions from its own budget.

Funding of these positions is extremely difficult for a small rural municipality and the Council seeks ongoing State Government funding of these positions that have had a positive impact on the lives of many of our families who lack life skills, money and community connection.

Lack of locally based family violence support services

Despite it having a high level of family violence, Benalla does not have a family violence support service based in the town.

Outreach and counselling services are provided from the larger centres of Wangaratta and Shepparton.

Not having local services makes it difficult for service providers and families alike. There is confusion around who can provide much needed assistance such as crisis care and recovery support.

The Council fully supports the establishment of a tertiary family violence support service in Benalla.



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