



The Honourable Marcia Neave AO
Commissioner
Royal Commission into Family Violence
PO Box 535
Flinders Lane
VIC 8009

29.05.15

Dear Commissioner Neave

Submission on behalf of Fitted for Work

Set out below is a submission on behalf of Fitted for Work to the Royal Commission into Family Violence. The submission responds to selected questions from the Issue Paper that relate to our work with women.

About us

Fitted for Work is a not-for-profit organisation and the first of its kind in Australia. Our vision is financial independence for women and our mission is to help women experiencing disadvantage get work and keep it. We do this by developing each woman's confidence and self-esteem as well as her skills and knowledge to obtain work. Our free services include interview training, mentoring, work experience, personal outfitting and a range of transition to work and staying employed programs. We have 250 volunteers and 11 staff across Sydney and Melbourne. Since 2005, we have helped over 20,000 women step out of disadvantage and into work.

Who we help

The women we assist are referred to us by over 300 community referral partners and are aged 16-65. At the time of accessing our service, they are experiencing disadvantage. Although we do not directly ask our clients to disclose whether they have been a victim of family violence, anecdotally we know that family violence has

impacted many of the women who access our services. For these women, work provides a way out. Women disclose the toll that family violence has had on them, their children and their extended families. They also tell us how family violence has negatively impacted their career and employment opportunities as well as their financial status.

Through our daily work with women, we see how financial abuse often goes hand in hand with family violence. Women tell us how their male partners control and limit their access to, and use of, money. They tell us how they are regularly denied access to bank accounts, information and decision making rights regarding family finances; kept totally financially dependent; denied enough money to pay bills or buy food, clothes and sanitary products; coerced into servicing their partner's debts or subsidising their entertainment regardless of the overall assets a family may hold.

Issues and challenges

If a woman discloses to us that she is suffering family violence, we refer her to a variety of services including housing, mental health or legal services. The agencies that refer women to us for assistance with job searching (e.g. JSA, DES) often don't have specialist expertise family violence so we unable to refer the women back to that agency.

Typically, victims of family violence require a range of services. It can be difficult and frustrating for victims to navigate 'the system' on their own. The women we see are often very vulnerable and may also be experiencing mental health issues as a result of the violence they have suffered. Extreme stress and desperation is often experienced.

We are not case managers but we try to advocate on behalf of our clients in liaising with the various family violence support services where necessary. However, specifically because we are not case managers, the support services typically want to talk to the victim directly which is often problematic and can cause her more distress. She is often incapable of articulating her needs.

When we do refer women on to other support services, we often find that the services ultimately cannot help and turn the woman away. For many women it seems their story is not sufficiently "serious" or "critical". This rejection serves to compound the emotional distress for the victim as it seems to her than no one can and will help her. Often the woman then comes back to us again because we have created a relationship of trust with her and an environment in which she feels safe.

Our staff and volunteers also feel frustration when this occurs. We want to help but without the assistance of third party support services we simply don't have the resources and expert knowledge to give a woman the specialist support she deserves and so desperately needs.

The following case study illustrates the challenges for Fitted for Work and similar organisations as well as the individuals themselves.

Case study

Mandy* a [REDACTED] year old migrant (white South African) woman, was referred by one of our community referral partners to Fitted for Work and then attended our 6-month Transition to Work Program. This program includes life skills training, work experience and one-on-one volunteer mentoring. Through the program Mandy felt listened to and comfortable with different members of staff and volunteers who had varying interactions with her.

Mandy is a victim of family violence. She openly and often desperately, shared parts of her story with us. She was living in a [REDACTED] in the backyard of the house where her ex-husband and his [REDACTED] lived. She referred to him consistently as the ex-husband, stating clearly that the relationship was over. She stated that he frequently came to her [REDACTED] and berated her about all manner of things including her activities, decision making and her friends.

She told us on a number of occasions that she was desperate to find work in order to secure independent accommodation for herself and her cat. Mandy did not disclose the extent of her financial situation but expressed that she was living with limited financial resources and that her ex-husband currently pays her phone bill. She reported to us on more than one occasion that he regularly threatened to cut off her phone, which would have left her without means of communication. This further distressed her and added to her anxiety because the phone is crucial for her jobhunting and search for alternative accommodation.

Fitted for Work staff made a number of recommendations to Mandy about family violence support services that would be better placed to support her, such as WIRE, Women's Housing and a referral to a family lawyer who provides a point of contact for family law advice to Fitted for Work clients. Mandy did meet with a Family Lawyer and has been offered some pro bono legal advice as a result of this referral. Not long after her speaking with the lawyer, Mandy arrived at Fitted for Work in a very distressed state, fearing again that her accommodation was at risk and her phone would be cut off because of threats made by her ex-husband. Mandy was

visibly upset, anxious and dishevelled by comparison to her appearance on previous occasions.

Fitted for Work allowed Mandy to use the internet and make phone calls to other family violence support services because she had limited access to the internet and limited knowledge of possible services that could help her. She made phone contact with a family violence service seeking support and options for housing but was told she did not meet the requirements of their program. This added further to her suffering. It also added to our distress given we felt a duty of care to her, but felt ill-equipped to manage the complex issues she was dealing with. In a state of desperation and in tears, Mandy broke down, stating that she felt she needed to actually be on the street before she would get any help.

Mandy left her accommodation a few days later, accepting an offer to stay on a short-term basis with a [REDACTED] she knows.

In the meantime, she went to a housing service and was told they could help her and that she should return to their service in a couple of days' time when she would be allocated a case manager.

She then rang a service that will care for pets in crisis, but was told she needed to have a case manager in order to be eligible to have her cat cared for by them. Again this added to her distress as she was not yet registered as a client of the housing service and the pet care agency would not accept a referral from Fitted for Work because we did not meet their requirements of the 'client' having a case manager.

Mandy has now secured further temporary accommodation through a contact of the [REDACTED]. She was advised by the [REDACTED]'s contact against accepting the options offered by the housing agency because they deemed it an unsafe and inappropriate environment. Mandy felt unsure about declining the options from the housing agency but also fearful of accepting rooming house accommodation. Currently Mandy is still in temporary accommodation with the [REDACTED]'s contact. She is living in a sparse but clean environment within a [REDACTED].

*Name changed.

Recommendations

We understand that resources are limited. However, a woman needs to have access to support before she finds herself homeless and her situation becomes an “emergency case”. We recommend that:

- **Greater advocacy rights are given to organisations like Fitted for Work.** Although we are not caseworkers, it is important that organisations like ours can engage directly with family violence support agencies, particularly where the victim is incapable of advocating on her own behalf.
- **A centralised online directory is set up as a resource for domestic violence agencies.** We would like to see a user friendly central portal (as opposed to a directory of services) where accredited agencies can directly access assistance for direct service users.
- **Organisations like Fitted for Work are encouraged to collaborate.** We would welcome more integration of agencies and collaboration to better support victims of family violence.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission. Further evidence can be provided if required.

Yours faithfully



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