

Submission to the Royal Commission on Family Violence

Natalie Hutchins MP, Member for Sydenham

Family violence is perceived as a personal problem. The public consciousness needs to change. Family Violence needs to be treated as a shared responsibility.

In 2011, I commissioned a report titled "Stopping the Cycle of Family Violence", which detailed the levels of Family Violence in the Keilor electorate. At that time, it was estimated that there were 740 incidents of family violence per 100,000 population that were reported to the police. There are many more incidents that do not get reported, so this figure is not truly representative of the reality.

In the western region the judiciary is similarly overwhelmed. At the time of writing the report, the Sunshine Magistrates Court has a specialised Family Violence unit and was hearing up to 50 family violence cases a day.

In 2014, police attended a Family Violence incident every eight minutes, showing that Family Violence is the biggest law and order issue facing Victoria. Statistically, family related incidents were up 8.2% in 2014 to 68,134 reported incidents. Four years later in 2015, there is a marked increase in these figures.

As a society we need to address this national crisis, with a broad approach from prevention to reaction, incorporating: education, prevention, response, support and assistance. Practical and tangible support is essential – financial assistance must be easily accessible to provide victims with the means to leave their abusers. Coupled with financial assistance is the urgent and essential need for emergency housing so that victims can escape their abusers.

The 2011 report I commissioned, combined with engagement with local stakeholders in the Family Violence sector and feedback from representatives from both Brimbank and Melton Council, SACHS Housing Agency, community groups such as the Zonta Club of Melton and Autism Angels, and the anecdotal experiences brought to my office, have demonstrated that the following areas need to be urgently addressed.

- Services in the West need more funding: service providers such as Women's Health West and the Western Centre Against Sexual Assault need increased funding to adequately deliver services such as case management and educational programs. The projected growth in population of the Western region will place additional pressure on their abilities to adequately meet this demand.
- Reduction of social isolation and improvement to community contact points, particularly in growth areas: there is a need to establish more centres (eg: "drop-in" centres) offering health services and social events locally for both men and women. These centres should offer culturally diverse and appropriate activities to encourage participation for the many migrants who reside in the West.
- Implementation and delivery of Family Violence awareness training: as a matter of priority appropriate training should be delivered to staff in various council and government

organisations so that employees who have regular contact with the community are equipped to identify victims of Family Violence and refer them to local support services.

- New programs needed for families in high risk situations: it is essential that there are strong programs in place to support families experiencing Family Violence, with the aim of reducing further Family Violence.
- Increased resources for local police: ensuring that police are adequately trained to identify Family Violence and respond appropriately, to the perpetrator and the victims. Ensuring that police are also trained to be aware of cultural differences and that there are adequate numbers of interpreters to assist police officers when interviewing victims and perpetrators.
- Additional court resources in the West: both Sunshine and Werribee court services need additional resources to meet the growing demand on court services resultant from population growth.
- Rehabilitative services for perpetrators: there need to be programs in place that actively encourage perpetrator participation, and these programs should address issues such as behavioural change and the short and long term impacts of Family Violence. There is also a severe shortage of emergency accommodation in the West; this is an issue for perpetrators that have been removed from the family home by police.
- Focus on proactive programs: often approaches to Family Violence are reactive. It is essential that there is a focus on proactive programs across all age levels. The introduction of programs into the school curriculum (such as the RESPECT program and Girls Talk/Guys Talk) is necessary. Councils putting in place of the “Strengthening Risk Management Demonstration Project” such as the City of Hume, is necessary; it is essential to break the Family Violence culture. It is also essential there is widespread support for White Ribbon Day events.

As a Member of Parliament a lot of people raise tough issues with me. Some are heartbreaking – Family Violence is one of the toughest issues to come my way. I have highlighted below the experiences of two women who came to me for help.

Case Study 1:

“Jane” is a young mother who emailed me to emphasise the desperate need for a refuge for women fleeing family violence in the western suburbs. After a series of abusive incidents at the hands of her partner, she found herself one night running from her home, barefoot and in her pyjamas, holding her baby, and nothing else. She wrote of hiding from her partner in the neighbour’s bushes, having to place her hand over her baby’s mouth so he wouldn’t hear the baby’s cries, and having to find water to feed her baby as she had fled without even food or milk for her child.

Jane eventually returned home to her partner, feeling she would endanger her own parents if she stayed with them, and finding there was no emergency accommodation to house and assist her and her baby, let alone short to medium term accommodation where she could reside until she worked out what she needed to do next to best protect herself and her child. So she went back, with the aim of “playing nice” and “walking on eggshells” in fear of antagonising him or being subjected to further

violence. She beseeched me to advocate for women like her, and those she felt who “had it worse”. To ensure there were resources in place so that women could access emergency funds and be housed in desperate situations. I suggested she call my electorate office so my staff could help her link in with local support services – I didn’t hear back from her.

Case Study 2:

“Fatima” contacted my office desperate for accommodation of any kind for herself and her 12 year old daughter. She had left her abusive husband and moved into a rental property with her sister. Her sister had left the house abruptly, leaving her to cover the full rental cost as well as bills and expenses. In receipt of Centrelink benefits and with no income from employment, she was very soon unable to cope financially and was served with an eviction notice. She was taken to VCAT by her landlord, and feeling she could not agree to come to any financial arrangement that would allow her to continue renting the property, the order to evict her was enforced.

She relayed that at the time she was sure that she would be able to access assistance and be housed, that “in a country like Australia” surely she wouldn’t be turned away from agencies and told there was nothing that could be done to help her. But that is exactly what happened: after one local agency paid for a weekend in a hotel for her and her daughter, she presented there after the weekend and was told the most they could do to help her was to pay half the cost of the hotel for another two nights, and she would have to meet the other half. Without another option, she took this offer, and after those two nights again found herself without anywhere to go.

After ringing numerous agencies and organisations, we were told over and over there was nothing that could be done to help her and her child – there simply weren’t enough places in the available refuges and nothing more could be done to assist her then and there. Her and her daughter ended up sleeping in the car in the backyard of an acquaintance’s house. All the bedrooms in the house were full as was the living room, with an entire family who were also without housing. The car in the backyard was the most that could be offered to her. She was so demoralised and sounded so defeated by this stage. My electorate office staff contacted multiple agencies to try and secure safer accommodation to no avail. Unfortunately, after two weeks, we lost contact with her.

Conclusion:

Not until we address the issues touched on here, and overhaul the way we define, view and deal with Family Violence, will we stop the cycle of Family Violence and hope to remove this scourge from our community. The cost of Family Violence is enormous and while there are aspects that can be measured in statistics and dollars, the human cost cannot be so easily measured.

On an individual level there can be psychological, emotional and physical damage; detrimental social and economic impacts that can be life changing and sometimes irreparable. An unfortunate by-product is that the behaviours witnessed can become ingrained and inherited by the next generation of a family.

There is widespread acknowledgement that one off projects and the sometimes fragmented approaches used to deal with Family Violence in the past did not work. New pathways are being explored to deal to address the issue; bringing together service providers, police, courts,

governments and individuals – so that there is accountability for those that are delivering services and providing support, and that victims are properly assisted and supported.

Governments must take the lead by establishing enquiries such as this Royal Commission into Family Violence, but this is not just an issue for government. This is an issue for all of us. To stand by and not act or turn away altogether is to condone Family Violence. As challenging as it might be we must ask ourselves the hard questions and ask ourselves what we can do as individuals, as families, as workplaces and organisations, as a community to bring an end to Family Violence.

There are needs that are unique to the population of the Western Region that need to be incorporated into a targeted action plan to combat Family Violence. We need strong and well-resourced services and agencies to assist, support and advocate for victims. We need funding in place for victims to access in emergencies; we need emergency accommodation so victims can have options and perpetrators can be removed from the family home. It is my hope that the next report I commission will document the triumphs and successes of such a plan, that the men in our society are educated and the women empowered, and that we will be well on our way to combatting Family Violence.