

DANNY PEARSON MP

STATE MEMBER FOR ESSENDON

29 May 2015

The Honourable Marcia Neave AO
Commissioner
Royal Commission into Family Violence
PO Box 535
FLINDERS LANE, VIC, 8009

Dear Commissioner Neave,

Re Family Violence in the Essendon Electorate

Through my role as the State Member for Essendon, I have become aware that family violence does not discriminate. Family violence is being played out in the homes of the most disadvantaged in my electorate as well as homes where there is education and wealth.

The Moonee Valley Legal Service and the Flemington-Kensington Legal Service have developed the *Safe from Harm* project, providing family violence support and education to the residents of the housing estates in Ascot Vale and Flemington. The *Safe from Harm* project includes proactive outreach into the local schools giving victims of family violence the opportunity to seek advice and assistance under the guise of their ordinary school drop-offs and pick-ups. I commend the work of these two Community Legal Centres.

I also commend the work of Women's Health West, the McAuley Community Services for Women, Caroline Chisholm Society and WIRE. These agencies have been proactive in ensuring I am familiar with their services and I am grateful for their guidance and assistance when my office has sought their expertise on behalf of my constituents.

Police crime statistics for the postcodes in my electorate make for sobering reading. During the period dating January 2013 to December 2014, almost a third of all recorded offences classified as crimes against the person were related to family incidents. All homicides recorded in my electorate during this period were related to family incidents and over 38% of assaults had this link. In addition, the data shows that 43% of stalking, harassment and threatening behaviour offences were related to family incidents.



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Other forms of family violence are more subtle and rarely reported. This has been the experience of two constituents that have approached my office. My constituents are tertiary educated, part-time workers whose partners are respected in their industries. These women have no bruising; they do not live in immediate fear for their lives. Instead, they have been subjected to daily belittling: being told they are useless, they are selfish, that they are at fault when plans go wrong and if they dare to argue back and question their husband's behaviour they are verbally abused. Physical displays of anger are directed towards walls or furniture.

The absence of physical violence allows the constituent to dismiss the 'family violence' label as not applicable to their family because they have not been hurt. These are families where the outward appearance is of suburban bliss. On the surface there appears to be no crisis. There is no imminent danger. Except for the slow, mental torture which causes the constituent to believe that she really is useless and perhaps her husband is right, and that she is insane. The psychological abuse has been so oppressive that it has triggered suicidal ideation in one constituent.

As there is no physical threat, my constituents have not associated the psychological abuse and bullying they experience as family violence. Without the label of 'family violence' my constituents suggest it is not easy to know where to go for help. A Google search for 'relationship help Essendon' will render advice about marriage counselling. Unless the women are well informed and search for 'family violence Essendon' or are connected to a community centre, or government agency, they may have difficulty identifying and finding the agencies that can assist them.

We need to assist women by providing them with the resources they need including information, housing and financial support.

There is great work being done in the areas of respectful relationships education in schools and it is important to begin at this level if we want to make an impact for future generations.

In the case of my constituents, they are missing access to information about what constitutes family violence and what services are available to assist them to map out a plan. The information is not readily available or at least highly visible to them in the places where they congregate: schools, libraries, coffee shops, sporting clubs, social media.

It is important to provide education to professionals providing services to women so that they can identify women at risk. Perhaps we need to encourage professionals to ask more direct questions when there is suspicion of family violence rather than vaguely ask 'is everything alright at home?' Further, we need to encourage workplaces to train their employees to recognise family violence, to respond to it and to refer their workers to the appropriate support networks. This is the Triple R approach advocated by the *Engage to Change* program which aims to educate businesses about



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family violence. This is an important initiative by the McAuley Community Services for Women as it drives home the message that family violence really is everybody's business.

The experience of my constituents has also exposed the way in which the gender wealth gap places women in a vulnerable position. A stay at home mum or a part-time worker does not have the economic power of her male partner who works full time. Unless there is an urgent need to leave, a woman experiencing psychological abuse may hesitate and therefore remain in the toxic environment concluding that psychological trauma is more bearable than homelessness.

I commend the work of the agencies servicing my electorate that are working to provide women in family violence situations with economic empowerment. Private Rental Brokerage programs which are accessible through services such as Women's Health West assist women to remain in their local area in private rental accommodation. *McAuley Works* provides women with the skills they need to become job ready including interview training and work experience placements. Whilst Good Shepherd Microfinance provides people on low or limited incomes with financial services which would otherwise not be available to them. I would be interested in exploring what options exist to facilitate microsavings for women who are aiming to remove themselves from family violence. Perhaps fee-free savings accounts could assist women to build up their own independent savings?

As for my constituents, I thank them for bringing to my office's attention the psychological distress that women in our community are experiencing but which is not always apparent. I am confident that with access to the information they require they will be empowered to take the steps they need to create an emotionally and financially secure future for their families.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission on behalf of my constituents.

Yours Sincerely,



Danny Pearson MP
Member for Essendon

