

Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Limited



**Submission to the Royal Commission on
Family Violence**

Victoria 2015

Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Limited

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Executive summary

Family Violence is not a part of Aboriginal culture and is unacceptable within the Aboriginal community. Safety and security for victims of violence is our number one priority. The prevalence of Family Violence within Victorian Aboriginal communities can be directly related to the loss of land, culture, identity, self-respect, self-worth and the breakdown of traditional roles within communities.

Systemic racism has been a significant factor in ensuring Aboriginal communities remain fragmented and disjointed and has supported the dependant relationships many Aboriginal communities face with government departments.

"A person can change if they get the support to do so. Cultural well-being starts with yourself, includes your family and then the Koorie community" Dr Mary Atkinson 2002

The Victorian Aboriginal Community Service Association limited (VACSAL) supports an integrated approach from all service systems in stemming the stream of family violence in society as a whole and welcome the Victorian State government's commitment and investment to reducing family violence in Victoria.

VACSAL strongly support community led responses that look toward the healing of all family members. Safety of children and women are paramount but isolating them from the perpetrators appears to have limited results. The very existence of family violence within our community that our women experience undermines their sense of identity self esteem and worth which impacts on the ability to maintain stable relationships which are the cornerstones of strong families.

This submission will focus on eight recommendations that support Aboriginal men who are perpetrators of family violence. This submission does not excuse the actions of men, and men who use violence should be made accountable through the justice system. However the submission does recommend avenues that may reduce the likely hood of reoccurrence of men's violence in the home and community.

Recommendations

- 1) *Recommendation cultural training to all police that respond to Aboriginal family violence incidents be funded*
- 2) *Recommendation that "funded healing programs" for Aboriginal men are designed by Aboriginal men and operated by Aboriginal services this allows the healing process to acknowledge Aboriginal cultural values that encompass the whole of family and kin.*
- 3) *Recommendation that a system be implemented for L17's to be directly referred to Aboriginal men's services from Victoria Police*
- 4) *Recommendation that an afterhours men family violence program be funded and piloted in high incident areas to respond to Aboriginal men required to leave the family home*
- 5) *Recommendation that a proportion of current transitional housing stock be allocated to Aboriginal men's family violence services*
- 6) *Recommendation that an immediate financial investment be allocated to Aboriginal training providers to develop an accredited state-wide Aboriginal family violence training package*
- 7) *Recommendation that Aboriginal men's services be notified and attend when police attend a family violence incident. Consider reviewing the privacy act in regards to Aboriginal family violence incidents.*
- 8) *VACSAL recommends that the Aboriginal Centre for Males model be considered as a model that can be duplicated across Victoria for Aboriginal men to access.*

Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Limited

Introduction

The Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Ltd (VACSAL) is a community based organisation established in 1984 that supports a range of services and provides advice to Government on a range of policy issues impacting on Aboriginal people. VACSAL has a strong interest in Aboriginal family violence and homelessness and the associated issues. We have long advocated for these positions and the increasing need to develop innovative and community driven solutions.

It is important that the definition of Family Violence recognises and reflects the perspectives and realities of all communities within Victoria, including Aboriginal communities.

The Victorian Indigenous Family Violence Task Force has defined Family Violence as:

'an issue focused around a wide range of physical, emotional, sexual, social, spiritual, cultural, psychological and economic abuses that occur within families, intimate relationships, extended families, kinship networks and communities. It extends to one on one fighting, abuse of Aboriginal community workers as well as self - harm, injury and suicide'.

The Aboriginal definition of the nature and forms of Family Violence are broader and more encompassing than those used in the mainstream. Family Violence service providers and the broader Family Violence sector need to have an understanding and be more inclusive of the Aboriginal definition to ensure the delivery of culturally sensitive and respectful services to all of the Victorian Aboriginal community.

Aboriginal Family Violence encompasses a range of acts that are criminal, such as physical and sexual assault and non-criminal, such as emotional, cultural and spiritual abuse. Community violence or violence within the Aboriginal community is also an ongoing concern within Aboriginal communities across Victoria. This violence contributes to overall levels of violence reported by Aboriginal people and the trauma experienced within families and kinship groups.

Family Violence includes intergenerational violence and abuse, affects extended families and kinship networks. An individual can be both a perpetrator and a victim of Family Violence.

Victorian Aboriginal communities have been working to address the issue, and associated issues, of Family Violence. For too long Aboriginal people have been prevented from fully participating in decision-making processes about issues that affect Aboriginal people. This has hindered the healing process, which our families and communities so badly need in order to address our social, emotional, physical, spiritual, and cultural needs.

Historically programs were implemented by various government departments with little community involvement or consultation. This stemmed from a generic approach by governments to addressing social problems within society. Consequently many strategies and programs have been culturally inappropriate and not relevant to our communities failing to meet the needs of Aboriginal men, women, children, elders, families and communities.

Today there is some recognition that for communities to access services, communities must have ownership of the service. This is achieved when communities have a say, and control, in the development, design and implementation of services that impact on their communities. Communities in the NMR have a long history of independently developing community-based responses to community needs. Many of these responses have been developed in spite of no government support.

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The future for Aboriginal Australian communities will depend on our children and young people. We therefore need to ensure that our children and young people have every opportunity to develop in a positive, caring, nurturing and culturally sensitive and respectful environment, which is free from Family Violence.

Response to the Family Violence issues paper

The State-wide Indigenous family violence partnership forum was instrumental in development of the 2008-2018 ten year plan strong culture, strong peoples, and strong families: towards a safer future for Indigenous families and communities. The 11 family violence action groups known as IFVRAGS across the state that make up the partnership provide an opportunity for individuals, families and groups in communities to receive the support they need to come together, discuss and develop solutions for family violence issues in their families and their communities. This has enabled the Aboriginal community to be a part of all discussions held about family violence so they can have input into the planning and decision making process of Government about family violence issues with Aboriginal communities

IFVRAGS across the state have access to a diminutive amount of project funds annually that has experienced no further investment for the past 7 years. In the northern region the IFVRAG receive \$59,000 for small Aboriginal family violence projects such as white ribbon promotions, educational programs for youth and women/men's camps. Limitations of both the amount of funding and the one off projects funded through the IFVRAGS pose real risks for sustainable change in the Aboriginal community.

Koorie Police Protocols - Victoria Police and the Aboriginal community services in the Northern metropolitan area have been developing protocols for the past 3 to 4 years to responding to family violence matters. Whilst protocols aim to improve police response to family violence incidents and improve Aboriginal community confidence and increase referral to support services, there has been no or little financial investment in this area. VACSAL have been working towards developing a cultural responsive program for police when attending incidents, through the roll out of Aboriginal cultural training to police officers in two different police stations in Northern suburbs. This is a local initiative based on the 2013 draft police protocols which is currently an unfunded initiative which consequently has risks for implementation of the cultural training to all police officers in the Northern suburbs.

1) Recommendation cultural training to all police that respond to Aboriginal family violence incidents be funded

Aboriginal peoples were sustained by a network of kinship, clan, and family connections as well as a deep spiritual connection to land. Colonization had quick, decisive and disastrous impacts on Aboriginal culture and language in Victoria resulting in the loss of land, disconnection from clan and traditional kinship roles. Our aim at the Aboriginal Centre for Males is to empower Aboriginal men by drawing on Aboriginal knowledge to provide both a cultural and a gender perspective solution to family violence.

Discussions with our family violence staff found that 9 out of 10 Aboriginal men using existing behavioral change programs delivered by Non Aboriginal services do not work for Aboriginal men; Impacts of stolen generation and loss of traditions, on men's roles have left many Aboriginal men empty. The importance of resilient Aboriginal men in modern society is their role in teaching other Aboriginal men traditional cultural values and guiding their healing process in family violence should not be undervalued in changing behaviors.

2) Recommendation that "funded healing programs" for Aboriginal men are designed by Aboriginal men and operated by Aboriginal services this allows the healing process to acknowledge Aboriginal cultural values that encompass the whole of family and kin.

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VACSAL has continually been advocating for direct referrals from Victoria police to Aboriginal men's services for a streamlined approach to L17's referrals. VACSAL recommends that L17's incidents that identify as Aboriginal be directly referred to an Aboriginal services so that Aboriginal services can provide a cultural response. Cultural responses should never be underestimated as part of the healing process for Aboriginal men in part of addressing a man's role in Aboriginal family violence as a perpetrator.

3) Recommendation that a system be implemented for L17's to be directly referred to Aboriginal men's services from Victoria Police

VACSAL service provides a crisis outreach response to men who have recently perpetrated or are at immediate risk of family violence and have engaged with our intake response team. VACSAL calls for an investment into after hours outreach responses much like the crisis assessment and treatment teams based in mental health services (CATT) to support police attending family violence incidents where the man is to be removed. The Department of Health and Human Services last invested recurrent funds of Men's family violence services in the Northern Metropolitan area in 2010.

4) Recommendation that an afterhours men family violence program be funded and piloted in high incident areas to respond to Aboriginal men required to leave the family home

VACSAL has highlighted the provisions within the *Privacy Act* that remain one of the key barriers to integrated services. The Act stops courts, police, family violence services and other organisations talking and sharing information with each other to ensure that they are keeping people safe from harm.

5) Recommendation that Aboriginal men's services be notified and attend when police attend a family violence incident. Consider reviewing the privacy act in regards to Aboriginal family violence incidents.

Accommodation options for men who are required to leave the family home due to their family violence actions are limited. Currently many of the options are hotels or boarding homes as crisis accommodation each one of these accommodation setting comes with its own risk to the client and those around them whilst the man is going through his crisis. VACSAL recommends allocated access of transitional housing stock as crisis accommodation beds both during and after hours so that the Aboriginal time out programs can be resourced with housing stock to provide "time out" and not just case management support. The creation of greater access to transitional housing stock provides men with meaningful time out whilst the family can be maintained and supported in their family home.

6) Recommendation that a proportion of current transitional housing stock be allocated to Aboriginal men's family violence services

Training for Aboriginal family violence workers is currently limited to utilizing mainstream training providers who often do not fully understand the complexities of Aboriginal culture. In the northern suburbs of Melbourne there are two Aboriginal registered training organizations both deliver health or community services qualifications to Aboriginal staff and organisations.

7) Recommendation that an immediate financial investment be allocated to Aboriginal training providers to develop an accredited state-wide Aboriginal family violence training package

The Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Ltd (VACSAL) operates the Aboriginal Centre for Males. The Aboriginal Centre for Males operates across the North West Metropolitan region and provides services to Aboriginal men involved in family violence situations. The Centre

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provides a range of services to both male victims and perpetrators of family violence with the primary aim of eliminating family violence from within our community.

- 8) VACSAL recommends that the Aboriginal Centre for Males model be considered as a model that can be duplicated across Victoria for Aboriginal men to access. (Please see model below)**

Men's Centre

The Aboriginal Centre for Males will work with Aboriginal men to address their violent behavior by assessing and then working therapeutically on the underlying issues that have led to men to engage in family violence. While the behavior is unacceptable and will not be excused, the method of working with the men is more one of assisting them to understand what experiences and feelings are at the core of the behavior and therefore the service is more about healing than the more traditional "men's behavior change" method of intervention. This is not to say that the men's behavior does not change, clearly the intent of the service is to achieve that change. Once clients of the service are assisted to gain insights and provided with tools to enhance their understanding of the underlying issues that have led them to engage in violence, a different way of expressing their anger and frustrations is chosen. The return to cultural practices and understanding of lore assists Aboriginal men in reconnecting to their culture, understanding the cause of their anger and frustrations and provides them with the tools they need to express their feelings in a healthy and positive manner, free from violence.

The Aboriginal Centre for Males has been established to support and assist Aboriginal men and their families to resolve immediate and long term issues associated with family violence.

The Centre hosts a range of other support agencies on site. The range of agencies available does change from time to time in response to the changing needs of men.

The Centre provides a range of services to men who have perpetrated or been a victim of violence and their families. The cycle of service provision is depicted in diagram below.

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There are three interconnected but distinct elements of the service as outlined in diagram one below.



The Time Out services has the intake and assessment component.

Intake and Assessment

The Aboriginal Centre for Males intake service operates during business hours and an on call service after hours. The intake function is a front line, first point of contact response to men in difficulty.

Referring agencies are expected to operate within the Aboriginal Centre for Males referral procedure, L17's can be made directly to the centre.

The Aboriginal Centre for Males intake and assessment processes are in line with the Victorian Common Risk Assessment Framework and the information we collect about the male and his family are outlined below.

Referral information is collected to inform referral to the most appropriate next step of service. Information includes:

- Details of any related incident including information about police involvement
- Referring agency information
- Immediate presenting needs

A triage response is provided to men at this point and any immediate concerns or risks are addressed. The aim is ensure that the man and other people are safe from immediate harm.

In all cases men are provided with a range of options and information relevant to their needs and circumstances. All men are re-contacted within 24 hours of the initial contact with the service and

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assessment of the primary causes associated with their presentation. Men who wish to access further services are invited to participate in the case management service.

Where the male is the victim of family violence supports and counseling is arranged to ensure his ongoing safety and where necessary protection of any children involved. Links to services for the partner who perpetrated the violence is also arranged. The primary aim here is to ensure the volatility of the situation does not escalate and all family members are protected and safe.

The Time out service

The Time Out Service acts as a circuit breaker in family violence situations for Aboriginal men who have used or are at risk of perpetrating family violence. The service provides a crisis outreach response to men who have recently perpetrated or are at immediate risk of family violence.

During business hours the Time Out service provides outreach support at a local police station, court or other location. Referrals will be accepted from a number of sources, including the police, courts, other support services, and self-referral. The service model also includes an after-hours response (for Victoria Police only) until midnight, including weekends and public holidays. After-hours support will be provided via telephone only as an on call arrangement.

Case Management

The primary aim of the Case Management service is to work with men on a one to one basis to develop and implement a detailed and effective case plan that addresses the substantial and long term causes men's violence and ultimately breaks the cycle of violence in families and in communities.

The case management service provides ongoing and personalized support to men who have perpetrated family violence. Case Management is a voluntary service; men who participate in the service must, by definition, be willing to work with their case worker on a range of long term objectives. Case Management is not appropriate for all men who come into contact with the service.

Case Management commences with a comprehensive assessment of needs and risks. Assessment of abuse is in line with the Family Violence Risk Assessment and Management report that is used by Victoria Police and the Common Risk Assessment Framework (CRAF).

The Aboriginal Centre for Males is currently in discussion with courts about mandating services through the male centre if the client agrees. Once these discussions are finalized and arrangements are in place, these procedures will be included in this document.

Specialist Counsellor

Where the assessment concludes that there is a need for specialist counseling for the male, a referral to the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service will be made.

The need for specialist counseling is based on an understanding that family violence is a complex phenomenon and that men who perpetrate family violence are also often dealing with a range of difficult and complex problems.

The Specialist Counselor provides individual counseling and support for men and their families. The aim of this specialist support is to enable men to overcome intractable and deep-seated emotional issues and to deal with the behaviors that arise from them.

The Aboriginal Centre for males will monitor the number of referrals to this service to determine whether the demand is sufficient to warrant a specialised counseling position to be funded and available within the services offered directly by the Aboriginal Centre for Males.

The Aboriginal Centre for Males is a safe environment for Aboriginal men to be able to speak with other services that they may require. The Centre has two rooms available at for use by a range of services providing outreach and consulting programs. The consulting rooms are provided in

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recognition of the multifaceted nature of the needs of the men and of the need for and benefits that can be gained from productive partnerships.