

Royal Commission Submission

25th May 2015

To the Commission Members

My name is [REDACTED] and I have worked as a FV (family violence) specialist over many years primarily in crisis response through direct service delivery in refuge, 24 hour crisis line, case manager and team leader, State-wide sector trainer in family violence and risk assessment/management and am about to take up a position as RAMP Coordinator.

Rather than speak from one organisational point in the family violence sector I thought I might write directly to the Royal Commission from my experience as a family violence specialist worker and include in this submission the many voices of women and children who I have had the privilege to support. I will set out this submission in two parts – my own as a worker and what the women and children have shared with me.

Sector Reform Issues:

Part 1

FUNDING/DATA

Primarily, refuge and many outreach services are funded under the umbrella of homelessness. Even our main database for case management is SHIP (Specialist Homelessness Information Platform) used in Homelessness services. Its case management tools are simple and with some creative thinking can be set out in the most basic manner to create case notes and plans. However, different services cannot transfer or migrate information to each other (such as Safe Steps making a referral to refuge). Each risk assessment has to be re-entered or uploaded on precious data storage. This is time consuming and cumbersome. Secondly, the collection of data from this system is suited perhaps to homelessness data for AIHW but not for research and evidence for FV. Thirdly, funding relates to how persons are entered on SHIP per head/under roof. There is little scope for organisations to receive appropriate funding in regards to the real costs of providing emergency safe accommodation, urgent material needs and case management support. Much energy, time and resource is spent by organisations navigating funding opportunities to complement base SHS funding with bizarre partnership tendering for “one of” projects that include a natural sunset clause as they are only funded for limited period. Rarely are they long enough to collect any real research and evidence and before long they end and the money dries up. I can only surmise that this suits the political cycle so politicians never have to say they are no longer funding efforts to end family violence. These “one of” projects just finish and there is no longer any political responsibility and will to continue. A new funding “project” will be

announced and the community has the perception that our government is throwing money towards FV. It seems from the inside that this is like “smoke and mirrors”. We who work with vulnerable families continue to apply and tender and therefore mould our services towards funding opportunities rather than funding being moulded by real, authentic analysis that creates and sustains responses instead of reactions to ending violence against women and children.

The family violence sector is in some way its own worst enemy as there is very much a geographical disconnects between north, south, east and west. Of course further to this are urban, rural and remote responses and funding opportunities. Some recent research has been released on the impact of safety of women and children living rurally and as I have spent some nine years living in a rural environment I can also account for the isolation and lack of services responding. I believe we have, via funding opportunities and early models of response relying on hiding women from perpetrators by putting them geographically a long way out of harm, created these invisible walls that have led FV services to compete against each other for funding and have by the nature of this kind of distribution worked at odds in providing state-wide whole of community solutions.

My last point regarding funding perhaps reflects my more recent engagement as a trainer for the state wide service DVRCV (Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria). I have recently been invited to train some child protection, health, municipal/community, family services groups, and some but not many Victoria police. Recently a few police members were funded by a regional steering committee to attend our 4 day Introduction to Domestic Violence course. They were collectively amazed at what they learned during the course and frustrated by their own lack of knowledge of the foundation understandings of the causes of FV and how they could through their lenses become part of the solution response rather than just a reactionary crisis call out incident by incident. Not only were they glad of the information provided by our trainers and the other participants but also worth mentioning is that their presence and input did much to educate the other participants in the important and vital role police play in ending FV. In regards to funding they were the FV Unit and needed to be funded by the FV steering Committee as Vicpol do not have the funding resource to train police in FV themselves.

Further to this we recently were provided with some private philanthropic funding to role out Risk Assessment (CRAF) training and in two sessions in a regional area at least 12 Police members took up the free training opportunity. This indicated a strong desire for FV units to be funded throughout the state to at the very least be trained in CRAF (which is embedded on their own L17 reports).

SUGGESTIONS:

Either design a comprehensive “across agency” database and IT system that talks to each other and provides readily available statistical

information, evidence and research directions easily or fine tune the current system to fully embrace such innovation.

Redesign funding to the FV sector. Include other vital services such as Child Protection, Police, Mental Health, Primary Health, Mens Behaviour Change and referral services and Homelessness as a real opportunity to provide an authentic integrated service system response. Just as the current funding model has moulded our disconnected service response, a new innovative and multi dimensional funding model might create the framework that reforms and strengthens our integrated multi agencies response and begins the journey of prevention and ends family violence in our living memory.

Provide funding to DVRCV to train other important partner agencies such as police and child protection is vital or provide FV trainers within their organisations to deliver the fundamental training on FV and Risk Assessment but with mention that the training must be consistent and quality controlled.

SPECIAL NOTE

I wish to mention that the RAMP model will optimistically model the integrated response that was an aspiration at the inception and design of the CRAF. I have recently been appointed to a RAMP Coordinators position and will for my part work towards a true shared understanding and common language across agencies so if successful, this model forms the basis for a “whole of service system response”. It is certainly incumbent on the RAMP’s to explore, analyse, challenge and invent more successful interventions in crisis response to keep women and children from being harmed and murdered.

Part 11

SURVIVOR LED REFORM

Why doesn't she leave? Many women over many years have expressed this as the most prevalent and underlying attitude expressed to them about family violence. I will leave it many of my expert colleagues to inform the Commission on the research and evidence of risk escalation regarding this question. From the women I have supported the answer is overwhelmingly simple. Two things! Firstly that they love their partners is a very simple message. They just want the violence to stop. We have a tendency to reduce what is a complex relationship to a risk assessment checklist in our crisis response rhetoric and approach. From an expert point of view this is vital and informs decisions around safety. However, this is the woman's life experience. This is her relationships, her partner and perhaps the parent of her child/ren. The woman owns her life and as a crisis response service system we must never lose sight of her agency in any decisions. I have observed over the years that sometimes we

(service responders to FV) can seemingly take on “perpetrator like” behaviours in our desire to assist and support victims of FV. We can become controlling, coercive, verbally abusive, intimidating and remove some of the last remnants of the victims own dignity and agency by assuming a “power over” attitude in our haste to intervene and desire to “fix” their situation. It is imperative that we as individual responders and as an integrated service system response situate ourselves in both our own “power over” design and mechanisms of support and acknowledge the woman’s own agency and expertise in her own life. It is somewhat ironic that on occasions our very interventions take away power from a victim who has already had her power diminished and extorted by a perpetrator. In saying this I remind the Commission that a woman who does not leave because she loves her partner is as deserving of all our assistance as any. If we are to enter the space of assisting someone responding to FV then I ask what the purpose of this kind of judgement serves, yet I have seen and heard it many times by many of the agencies that are auspiced by the community to work. I would wish to never again hear the phrase “recidivist AFM (Affected Family Member) by a police member.

The second most commonly expressed response from women is they stay for the children. It seems a dichotomous attitude to keep your children living with FV however most women I have supported go to great lengths to keep their children safe and away from the violence. Many take on the violence that would be directed at their children. I have worked in refuge long enough to recognise that moment when a child walks into their room/unit and pinches their nose because it smells funny. It does smell funny as usually it has been cleaned with strong disinfectant (including the toys) for infection control purposes and to mitigate cross-contamination from previous families escaping FV. These children sometimes arrive in school uniforms as that was the easiest and safest way for them to be “plucked out” to safety in high security refuge. It does not take long for the children to start crying about missing the school excursion the coming Friday or worrying about what their friends will think that they have gone missing. Such pressure on a traumatised mother in crisis goes a long way to explain why many women return home. We (staff) are kind and friendly but we are not their friends and family and the refuge does not smell like their bedroom at home.

SUGGESTION:

There are some very successful interventions that include early response with Intervention Orders under the “Safe in the Community” responses such as those currently being trialled at Safe Futures Foundation. Whenever possible all interventions should be aimed towards the family being able to remain in their primary accommodation/family residence. More resources to support women and children to remain safe in their own homes would alleviate the tremendous waiting lists for emergency accommodation and

crisis/transitional housing. Whether privately owned, privately rented or public/social housing responses must now penalise and traumatise the victims more by systems that involve removal of the innocent as if they are to blame for what is happening. The encumbrance of safety should never in design be laid at the feet of the victim, but rather the perpetrator should at all times be held accountable for the choice of violence.

FINAL

FV is complex but the solutions can be more simply articulated;

- *FV is primarily violence by men against women and children.
- *FV should be a crime (not just some of its behaviours).
- *All design of response should involve survivor led ethics.
- *All service system response should be authentically integrated and funded.
- *Women and children should never have to leave home because of FV
- *Our society wants to end family violence so we need to work together with common understanding, language, responses and transparency.
- *Ethical information sharing protocols will serve the victims and enhance safety.

Thank you for this opportunity to write to the Royal Commission on family violence and I look forward in anticipation for your recommendations to end family violence.