



A submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence by Emerge women and children's support network

Refuge and crisis
accommodation for women
and children: a new model



Introduction

Emerge women and children's support network welcomes the *Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence*. The topic of domestic violence is a trending issue in Australia at this time but the subject is ingrained in our culture and often avoided because of its complexity. The global evidence base of the effects of domestic violence is growing and with that comes a chance to review the way we work with this complex and demanding issue.

Community and government attention is now focussed on how we can best address the impact of family violence on the lives of so many women and children in Victoria. What can we do differently?

Without a safe place to flee to and somewhere to receive support and move forward from, women and children cannot rebuild their lives. The ongoing effects of trauma often leading to Post traumatic Stress, this must be addressed and quickly, witnessing violence in childhood has damaging long term effects, and we need to change the perpetuation of intergenerational patterns of gender inequity, violence and vulnerability.

Emerge offers women and children a safe place to start to rebuild their lives.

“At night in bed when I go to sleep, I no longer feel as though I am being stifled, I can breathe, we are safe”.



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The World Health Organisation (WHO) describes the level of violence experienced by the world's women as 'a global public health problem of epidemic proportions, requiring urgent action'.

In 2013 they published the first systematic global review of violence against women and found that over one third of the female population will experience violence. Violence against women is defined by the United Nations as any act of gender-based violence that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm, including emotional abuse ranging from controlling behaviours, enforced isolation, humiliation and intimidating actions (WHO, 2014). The WHO (2014) reports that Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is one of the most common forms of violence against women, which is enforced by a husband or intimate male partner, although same-sex violence is also recognised. The ABS reports that IPV is the most common form of domestic violence against Australian women and in the most recent survey it was found that a staggering 62 per cent of women experienced a recent occurrence of physical assault by a male in the home (Phillips & Vandebroek, 2014). It became obvious in this report that domestic violence extends across all ages, socio-economic groups and cultures however some women are more vulnerable than others. Domestic violence has a severe impact on the mental well-being of all victims involved (Phillips & Vandebroek, 2014).

The social and economic costs of violence against women in Australia are considerable. In 2009 the National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and Children (NCRVWC) estimated that violence against women and children, including both domestic and non-domestic violence, cost the Australian economy \$13.6 billion.

'Emerge women and children's support network' (Emerge) is a forty year well-respected service offering a skilled and dedicated response to women and children living with and fleeing violence. Emerge currently offers crisis support and communal accommodation to women and children living with violence from a large property in the southern metropolitan region. Emerge has a further five Crisis properties where women and children fleeing domestic violence who may need less immediate support, are also housed.

Emerge also self-funds Art Therapy for children that have been exposed to violence and may be living either with their mother or in 'out of home' care. Psychoeducation and Art Therapy go hand in hand with trauma and domestic violence because it is a way for victims to understand their psychological and physiological reactions to abuse and move forward from the crisis. The studies on traumatisation and art therapy show a trend in decreasing symptomology and the studies of female victims of domestic violence also showed decreasing trauma symptoms and an improved quality of life. Future research would be suited to continuing to research its effectiveness.



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Current funded context for family violence support:

Historically Emerge is funded to the 1980's model of family violence support that removes women and children from their situations in order to keep them safe and supports them in a high security communal setting, with one client family per room. Funding is for a six-week crisis period with the intention that safe housing will then be available. This is no longer accurate or sufficient.

The current crisis property is a partnership with Emerge funded by DHHS who has a legal interest in the property due to its term of purchase. Maintenance funding is based on \$6-8000 per annum with the service given the opportunity to be reimbursed, with approval, for major one-off maintenance expenses. The maintenance required for a property of the age of the Emerge site, and subject to a regular turnover of crisis clients, is far greater than available funds. Regular responsive maintenance is not provided by DHHS and it is very difficult to secure refurbishment funds. The property is no longer suitable or appropriate for women and children fleeing violence due to its age and general disrepair.

Strategic intent:

This current model does not serve the breadth of experience and flexible options deserved by women and children living with violence and the much broader community acknowledgement of all aspects of family violence today. The model presented here will provide a safer, flexible, diverse response that places women at the centre of their experience and tailors the individual response accordingly, while offering ongoing security around housing. The model is primarily designed for women and children needing to leave their homes to escape violence but, importantly, provides further options for early intervention and longer-term support, as required.

The Board of Emerge has committed to strategic directions that develop the model, already extended to provide a more diverse response, into one that better meets the needs of clients and is sustainable. In partnership with a housing service these support and safety options could be multiplied several times over at a vastly reduced cost. The current housing sits on a large block that has great potential and some initial pro bono architectural advice supports the proposed model.

The housing service has a strategic focus on supporting women leaving violence and the building and property management history and expertise to create an excellent partnership. In addition, Emerge has been approached by local government and regional community services that want to engage deliberately in the support of women and children living with violence.



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Premise of the model:

The communal model of crisis accommodation offers mutual support and the chance to share stories with other women. However, today's clients present overwhelmingly with highly complex situations and can also come from a wide range of cultures, backgrounds and experiences. The journey of other crisis services has proven that crisis accommodation in separate living spaces on one block, with common areas available to meet or run groups, affords a much better response. It allows for larger families, diverse and complex needs, an on-site office and support and an improved means of property management and maintenance. This premise forms the basis of the model, together with a clear proposal that secures and maintains housing in a cost-effective manner.

A sensitive building and affordable housing focus:

Following initial architectural advice and further modeling to ensure best use of the available space, it is proposed that the current building will be initially maintained and an additional 10 independent units be built at the rear of the property, flexibly designed to accommodate family groupings from single clients to larger families, with disability access also available.

A building central to the block will provide office space, allowing on-site crisis and case management support, and the capacity for communal space, groups, visiting support services and other mainstream partners in the support of clients and their children. The housing provider will construct this suite of buildings for the use of Emerge, through a legally constructed agreement. Formal negotiation with DHHS regarding their interest and the ongoing legal framework will support this arrangement. The housing provider will hold responsibility for the asset.

In a completely new model, the crisis housing will be provided to clients for up to a three-month period with secured tenancy under the Rooming House Act. Rent will only be charged when a client is in receipt of income, at 25%, and a range of brokerage options and the Commonwealth Rent Assistance program will be engaged to support clients at various stages of financial capacity to enable them to meet accommodation agreements. **This sustainably provides double the number of current clients for double the current time funded.**

It is estimated that funds collected will support all maintenance required on the buildings for over 15 years, therefore saving base funding to be used for support purposes. The housing provider will develop a 15-year modeling plan for asset maintenance. A worker will be allocated to manage property and maintenance. In addition, Emerge currently pays for off-site office space; the cost of this will be eliminated.

Importantly, it will be possible to build with attention to cost saving measures, for example, solar energy, effective insulation, building orientation, thermal mass materials, and efficient heating, lighting and appliances.



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The issue of ensuring client safety will be paramount. Fire safety will be provided with an electronic fob instead of a key and all doors will release if there is a fire. CCTV will enhance property and client safety and the property will be securely fenced. The property address itself will be secure and not made public but individual levels of safety and personal risk management will be part of each client's safety plan.

Having a builder and property manager with a clear focus on the safety of women and children living with violence adds a benefit not previously afforded to family violence crisis services and their clients. This relationship also provides a secure exit option from crisis support, as the housing service will negotiate affordable and timely housing access through their own and other partner housing agency stock – **a new benefit at a point of current impediment.**

Diverse support focus:

The proposed model has a wide range of benefits to clients and will allow access to support from early intervention to crisis to longer-term intensive case management and community connection. The style of accommodation and safety provisions means the service can move from largely regional exclusion to regional inclusion, where the safety sits with the client, not the physical area. As well as the concrete measures described, the safety of the property and each other will be grounded in the expectation of mutual respect and responsibility.

On the grounds themselves women and children could have access to groups run by invited partners; they could access mainstream services such as Centrelink onsite and potentially, for example, health, legal, cultural and education support as a link to future outcomes. In addition, Emerge would continue relationships with local councils and other community groups in running programs and providing and accepting referrals at a much earlier point in a client's experience of violence, providing a clear early intervention pathway.

In developing this model Emerge and the housing service have placed the focus directly on diverse and flexible client access and support and walking with women and children in taking agency and self-determination over their lives. They have addressed funding and system gaps and relationships, provided safe assured crisis accommodation that is sustainable, developed a broad and responsive support model, and critically, have provided a pathway to safe affordable housing post crisis.

Once in place, this demonstration model will be monitored and formally evaluated from its inception and outcomes will be shared with the sector. Peak body Domestic Violence Victoria will be included in this process.



Conclusion

The people of Victoria and Australia are calling for an end to domestic violence. In the meantime many women and children will flee their homes and require crisis accommodation and support, some for only a short period while they get back on their feet, others will require longer term support.

Emerge will continue to offer support for women and children fleeing violence, but we want to do more than help them be safe. We would like to see longer term housing and other support services for them, as we know they remain vulnerable for many years. We want to provide the opportunity for women and children to flourish - to be able to participate fully in their communities, to build strong relationships, to have dreams, to achieve a safe and happy future.

This new demonstration model, together with improved services, provides more appropriate wholistic, long term support, for women and children fleeing violence.