

The Hon Marcia Neave
Commissioner
Royal Commission into Family Violence
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Dear Commissioner

Submission on Behalf of the Electorate of Northcote

As you know, Premier Andrews and I have prepared on behalf of the Victorian Government a submission examining the gaps in the current family violence system and highlighting opportunities for you and your deputy commissioners to investigate further.

Having now completed this significant whole of government task, I am more eager than ever to receive your recommendations.

Of course, as the Minister for Family Violence Prevention, I endorse all of the matters raised in the Government's submission. But I also wanted to take the opportunity of sharing with you information about the impact of family violence in my electorate of Northcote.

The following submission draws upon contributions made by a number of local family violence service providers who participated in a community forum in my electorate and on representations made to my office by local constituents.

About Northcote

The Northcote electorate encompasses the inner city suburbs of Alphington, Fairfield, Northcote, Thornbury and a small part of Preston. The electorate takes in roughly half of the City of Darebin and a small section of Yarra City Council.

In Northcote, the main languages spoken other than English amongst its 59,640 residents include Greek, Italian, Arabic, Mandarin and Vietnamese. It has 2,732 residents with Greek heritage and 2,064 residents with Italian heritage. In 2011, 1,165 people identified themselves as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander in the City of Darebin making it the largest community in metropolitan Melbourne.

The community is rapidly changing – house prices have risen sharply, there are high degrees of mortgage stress and a large number of young families moving into the area.

Family Violence Prevalence

The crime statistics for the local government area of Darebin, show an increase in family violence incidence rates from 950 in 2010 to 1638 in 2014. This is a 72% increase in four years, paralleling the rapid rise in reports across the state.

Local family violence service providers inform me that the crime statistics are supported by a rapid increase in demand for family violence services, especially since the Royal Commission was announced.

Challenges

Several challenges have been identified for my electorate in preventing and responding to family violence.

Prevention

All stakeholders affirmed the need for better prevention initiatives that recognise the primary driver of family violence - gender inequality.

One of the leading agencies working in this area is Women's Health in the North, who have developed a prevention plan for family violence, working with a range of organisations to help them develop their own family violence prevention strategies. Local Governments have been a beneficiary of this work, particularly Whittlesea and Darebin. Darebin Council has, as a consequence of this work, hired the municipality's first dedicated family violence prevention worker.

The lack of targeted educational programs to prevent family violence continues to be a concern. There is a desire to see programs run from pre-school through to senior school years and beyond. I understand that the Northern Centre Against Sexual Assault has run a program for a local high school (in Reservoir). The Respectful Relationships education program was also considered to be an example of good prevention practice.

Stakeholders from our local Aboriginal community informed me of the difficulty in measuring the success of prevention initiatives and how problematic for ongoing funding this is. They also talked very positively about prevention initiatives targeted to Aboriginal communities through sport.

Family Violence Service Providers

All service providers highlighted that resources have not kept pace with demand. Local police recognise that the increase in reporting is having an impact on services handling L17's. One service for example is not receiving specific funding for L17 work so as demand has increased, resources have not followed suit.

Further, it was raised that there were not enough dedicated services for male perpetrators to enable opportunities to reflect on the consequences of their behaviour. It was felt that the current response strategy, while focused on women victims, was diverting attention on male violence and strategies to stop it.

There were concerns about the fact that family violence incidents do not just occur between 9-5pm, that many services are only open during business hours.

Courts and Legal Services

Courts are not seen as safe places for victims, lacking appropriate facilities to properly manage family violence cases. The loss of the Heidelberg Court due to flooding is also placing an additional burden on services and individuals.

Stakeholders expressed the view that women victims carry too much of the burden of protecting themselves through the justice system. Concerns were raised about the lack of focus on perpetrators.

The Court system is often the first time a perpetrator intersects with services and this was seen as problematic because courts lack the capacity to respond with appropriate behaviour change programs or counselling. Anger management training is not enough, and the courts need the ability to mandate perpetrator programs.

There was also support for a "one judge-one family" model for managing family violence and family law cases.

Integration within Family Violence Agencies

Local agencies highlighted 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.

Services remain siloed and are unable to form a complete picture of what is happening to victims or monitor the behaviour of perpetrators. What is happening at a state-wide level is repeated at a local level in my electorate.

There was a particular concern that homelessness and family violence response services lacked integration.

Another barrier to service integration mentioned by stakeholders was the difficulty in managing differences in reach and access to services because of conflicting geographical boundaries. While local police might cover one geographic area, two or three family violence services might overlap it. This made coordination and integration more complicated.

Family Violence Training in Agencies

Stakeholders raised concerns about the lack of workforce training on family violence. They identified the consequences of what happens when important services do not have a family violence lens. For example, a stakeholder mentioned how regularly men with IVO's get access to maternity wards of hospitals because the security guard fails to appreciate the importance of excluding them.

Early Intervention

There is a need for a bigger tool kit for early intervention, according to all stakeholders. The current forms for assessing risk are a one-size-fits-all approach and don't make it easy for police or family violence services to address high risk groups or people with special needs. Developing forms that are more simple to use, but gather more differential data is required.

There was support for Family Violence Safety notices operating for a longer period of time and for police to have more power to issue notices which excluded perpetrators immediately from the family home.

There was also support for interim orders being made automatically permanent if they are not challenged in court.

High Risk Groups in Darebin

Aboriginal Communities

Aboriginal stakeholders reported that they need tailored response services because there are aspects of the mainstream family violence system that are not culturally sensitive.

Based on Bell Street, Preston, the Aboriginal Centre for Males focuses on family violence and homelessness. Its programs primarily focus on men who are violent towards their families. The Centre also connects Aboriginal men with other support services if required such as drug and alcohol, mental health, financial and legal services. People access the service in a number of different ways, however, it was noted that L17's often take too long to reach the centre reducing the effectiveness of the service. Sometimes the L17's actually lapse before they are responded to.

Aboriginal stakeholders also emphasised that many families want to stay together, despite incidents of violence. They had developed models, including a Family Retreat Program, for ensuring safe and culturally sensitive whole of family support, to ensure victims and perpetrators could restore their relationship. This kind of restorative response is not usually adopted by mainstream services, as there is often an assumption that partners want to separate after a violent incident. As this is not always the case, services have developed strategies to respond to the desire to stay together.

The Koori Police Protocol was identified as an example of best practice.

Seniors

Service providers also highlighted an increase in the number of seniors and parents who are victims of abuse from their adult children in the local area. They noted that most victims of elder abuse in the home will find it hard to access services tailored to meet their needs. There is also an increasing number of homeless seniors in Darebin, whose family homes have been taken away from them through economic elder abuse.

CALD

CALD communities in experience high levels of social isolation. Moreover, not all services understand the cultural and language diversity of the local area and are failing to create an appropriate service response. Help cards that are culturally sensitive were considered very useful to help CALD families understand more about respectful relationships and family violence services. Without quality interpreters, the ability for CALD communities to get the services they need remains a challenge.

Children

“The system places too much emphasis on women as protector rather than men as a perpetrator.”

Stakeholders expressed concern about the way in which child protection services operated to overlook men’s responsibility while putting most of the burden for protecting children on women. The idea that the child is better off having relationships with both parents even if one is flawed and dangerous was challenged by some of the stakeholders. Supervised visits were considered to be poorly regulated. There was also a desire from stakeholders that children should automatically be included on Intervention Orders taken out by a protective parent.

Homelessness

There was perceived to be a lack of a family violence lens in homelessness and housing services. It was reported that some homeless services often interview couples together not taking into consideration that there might be a family violence issue. Children are also often present when

parents are being interviewed. Only HomeGround Services take these considerations into account when supporting people who seeking homelessness support services.

Stakeholders also raised the lack of affordable housing in the local area was also having an impact on victims.

Opportunities

Stakeholders identified a range of initiatives that could help improve family violence services. Suggestions include:

- Using sport as a way to develop preventive and early intervention programs at a local level. Fitzroy Stars 'No to Violence' campaign was highlighted as an example of a good program.
- Creating a prevention coordinator in each Family Violence Regional Integration Committee.
- Establishing a 24 hour mobile family violence crisis unit that could respond to high risk cases, immediately following an L17 notification from police.
- Changing the *Privacy Act* to ensure it is not a barrier to information sharing.
- Learning lessons from Aboriginal communities and the innovative ways in which they undertake prevention and respond to victims and perpetrators.
- Aligning funding, programs and agencies within the same geographic boundaries, to promote integration.
- Supporting a "one judge-one family" model for managing family violence and family law cases in local courts.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission. I look forward to reading your report and implementing your recommendations.

Your sincerely

Fiona Richardson MP

Labor Member for Northcote