



# **Delivering a Victoria free from violence**





VCOSS Submission to the Family  
Violence Reform Implementation Monitor

July 2020

The Victorian Council of Social Service is the peak body of the social and community sector in Victoria.

VCOSS members reflect the diversity of the sector and include large charities, peak organisations, small community services, advocacy groups and individuals interested in social policy.

In addition to supporting the sector, VCOSS represents the interests of Victorians experiencing poverty and disadvantage, and advocates for the development of a sustainable, fair and equitable society.

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VCOSS acknowledges the traditional owners of country and pays respect to past, present and emerging Elders.

This document was prepared on the lands of the Kulin Nation.



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# Introduction

The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) is the peak body for social and community services in Victoria. VCOSS supports the community services industry, represents the interests of Victorians facing poverty and disadvantage in policy debates, and advocates to develop a sustainable, fair and equitable society.

VCOSS welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to help inform the Family Violence Implementation Reform Monitor's final report on how the Victorian Government and its agencies are implementing the family violence reforms.

Family violence causes serious social, economic and health consequences. While it occurs across all ages, socioeconomic and demographic groups, it mainly affects women and their children, people with a disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, young women and pregnant women.<sup>1</sup>

One in three Australian women has experienced physical violence since the age of 15 and one in five has experienced sexual violence.<sup>2</sup> On average, one woman is murdered by her current or former partner each week<sup>3</sup> and this year alone, five Victorian women have lost their lives due to family violence. Women are around three times more likely to experience violence from an intimate partner than men.<sup>4</sup>

While there has been a downward trend in the rates of overall violence from any person in Australia, rates of partner violence and sexual violence have remained relatively stable since 2005.<sup>5</sup> Recent crime statistics show that number of family violence recorded incidents by Victoria Police is the highest on record in the 12 months for the period to 31 March 2020.

Family violence is a leading driver of homelessness for women.<sup>6</sup> Its impact on the broader economy cannot be underestimated, with research from 2015 showing that violence against women is costing Australia \$21.7 billion each year.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia, 2018, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/domestic-violence/family-domestic-sexual-violence-in-australia-2018/contents/table-of-contents>

<sup>2</sup> Our Watch, Quick facts, <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/quick-facts/>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2019. Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia: continuing the national story 2019. Cat. no. FDV 3. Canberra: AIHW, p.ix

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> PwC 2015. A High Price to Pay: the economic case for preventing violence against women. Melbourne: PricewaterhouseCoopers.

To address this scourge and bring the issue into the light, the Victorian Government established the Royal Commission into Family Violence in 2015. On 30 March 2016, the Royal Commission handed down its landmark eight volume report.<sup>8</sup> Presenting 227 recommendations to the Victorian Government, this momentous report represented a shift in family violence service delivery, matched by an initial \$1.9 billion investment and commitment to implement every single recommendation.

Fast forward four years, \$2.9 billion has been invested in the system, with 154 recommendations now implemented.<sup>9</sup> While much progress has been made, there are still areas that require continued attention and investment by government if we are to realise the benefits of this historic reform agenda.

In light of the progress made to date and informed by consultation with VCROSS members, this submission makes recommendations for preventing and responding effectively to family violence. It focuses on how the family violence service system, and users' experience of it, has changed since the Royal Commission; looks forward to what is still required in the family violence reforms; and considers the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on service delivery.

It is important to recognise that we are only four years into a 10 year reform agenda and that continued investment in the reforms will be needed to ensure we provide the best supports to victim-survivors and perpetrators of family violence.

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<sup>8</sup> Victorian Government, About the Royal Commission into Family Violence, <https://www.vic.gov.au/about-royal-commission-family-violence>

<sup>9</sup> Victorian Government, Three years on from the Royal Commission into Family Violence, <https://www.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-06/Three-Years-on-Response-Royal-Commission-into-Family-Violence.pdf>

# Summary of Recommendations

## What's still to be done?

- Increase investment in the Private Rental Assistance Program.
- Increase investment in Flexible Support Packages and make these a permanent feature of the family violence service system.
- Build 6,000 new public and community homes each year for the next decade.
- Allocate at least 10 per cent of the Family Violence Budget to the primary prevention of family violence.
- Support the coordination of women's health primary prevention partnership programs.
- Fully implement the Victorian Auditor-General Office's nine recommendations to improve the operation of the support and safety hubs.
- Invest in prevention and develop early intervention programs to minimise the negative effects of violence on children.
- Support organisations to undertake evaluations to build the evidence-base.
- Design evidence-based programs to better engage adolescents that use violence in the home.

## Supporting sector and organisational sustainability

- Develop a fairer indexation model to ensure community service organisations are sustainable and effective into the future.
- Implement new funding models that reduce reliance on short-term funding contracts and provide greater job security.
- Deliver training in regional locations, identify champions of change and establish local communities of practice.
- Increase investment in the MARAM Framework and Information Sharing Scheme to ensure non-family violence specialist organisations understand their roles and responsibilities.

## Better support diverse communities

- Improve data collection and conduct research on the prevalence and impacts of family, domestic and sexual violence among people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

- Continue to increase funding and support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led family violence prevention and response efforts.
- Review laws and policies that disproportionately criminalise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children.
- Fund the Disability Family Violence Crisis Response Initiative for three years to ensure women with disability experiencing family violence can access immediate, tailored support.



# Changes since the Family Violence Royal Commission

Since the Royal Commission into Family Violence handed down its report into the family violence service system in 2016, a lot has changed. There is now greater community recognition and understanding of family violence in public discourse and the media, including its complexity and nuances. There is also greater discussion about the causes of family violence and challenging of myths and victim-blaming attitudes. In fact, victims are more likely to be praised now for being resilient.

Five safety and support hubs, branded The Orange Door, have been rolled out across Victoria with another 12 scheduled to open by 2022. While the Auditor-General has criticised the roll out of the hubs,<sup>10</sup> they hold the potential to change the way victim-survivors and perpetrators access support and services.

In November 2016 the Victoria Government released Victoria's 10-year plan for change, Ending Family Violence which set out the Royal Commission's 227 recommendations, outcomes and initial targets to prevent and respond to family violence.<sup>11</sup> In 2017, Victoria's first primary prevention of family violence strategy, Free from Violence was released,<sup>12</sup> alongside the establishment of a central coordination agency, Family Safety Victoria. The primary prevention agency, Respect Victoria was established in 2018, with responsibility for conducting research and coordinating behavioural change campaigns. All up, \$2.9 billion has been invested in family violence reforms across five state budgets.

VCOSS members report that one area that has improved since the reforms began is police responses. There has been a significant difference in documenting L17s and how family violence investigations occur. This is having positive effects in terms of how victim-survivors interact with police.

Another positive change that is beginning to emerge is willingness to collaborate between services through the new information sharing protocols. This is seeing services working more in partnership with one another to deliver wrap-around supports for victim-survivors and children.

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<sup>10</sup> Victorian Auditor-General's Office, Managing Support and Safety Hubs, May 2020, [https://www.audit.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-05/20200527-Support-Safety-Hubs-report\\_0.pdf](https://www.audit.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-05/20200527-Support-Safety-Hubs-report_0.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Victorian Government, Ending family violence - Victoria's 10-year plan for change, 2016, <https://www.vic.gov.au/ending-family-violence-victorias-10-year-plan-change>

<sup>12</sup> Victorian Government, Free from Violence: Victoria's strategy to prevent family violence, 2017, <https://www.vic.gov.au/free-violence-victorias-strategy-prevent-family-violence>

Despite the development of the Family Violence Outcomes Framework,<sup>13</sup> which outlines Victoria's priorities in preventing and responding to family violence, VCOSS members report that there are still challenges around data collection that are inhibiting measuring the success of these reforms. In particular, concerns have been raised that there is currently an absence of data demonstrating that victim-survivors are safer as a result of the reforms.

While significant progress has been made in ticking off the 227 recommendations of the Royal Commission, with 154 recommendations now implemented, it is important that we retain focus on transforming victim-survivors experience of the family violence service system and not just ticking off the implementation of the recommendations.

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<sup>13</sup> Victorian Government, Ending family violence - Victoria's 10-year plan for change, 2016, <https://www.vic.gov.au/ending-family-violence-victorias-10-year-plan-change>

# What's still to be done?

## Prioritise housing for people experiencing family violence driven homelessness

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Increase investment in the Private Rental Assistance Program.
- Increase investment in Flexible Support Packages and make these a permanent feature of the family violence service system.
- Build 6,000 new public and community homes each year for the next decade.

The Royal Commission into Family Violence highlighted the complex link between victim-survivor's safety, the ability to recover from family violence and access to long-term housing.<sup>14</sup>

As the Royal Commission recognised, *'a lack of housing options can exacerbate the trauma and dislocation of the violence, disrupting social and economic participation and education and adversely affect health and wellbeing. In some cases it forces women to choose to return to a violent partner.'*<sup>15</sup>

There is currently a housing affordability crisis in Victoria. Only 2 properties were affordable to a single person on Newstart in April 2019,<sup>16</sup> with the median house rent in Melbourne now \$430.<sup>17</sup> Further, nearly 1 million Victorians live in housing stress.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Royal Commission into Family Violence, 'Report and Recommendations: Volume II', March 2016, p38

<sup>15</sup> State of Victoria, 2016, Royal Commission into Family Violence; Summary and recommendations, Parl Paper No 132 (2014-16), p.37

<sup>16</sup> Anglicare Australia, Rental Affordability Snapshot National Report, April 2019, 2019  
<https://www.anglicare.asn.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/final---rental-affordability-snapshot302da309d6962baacc1ff000899bca.pdf?sfvrsn=4>

<sup>17</sup> Melbourne house rents hold steady in December quarter 2019: Domain Rental Report, 16 January 2020,  
<https://www.domain.com.au/news/melbourne-rents-hold-steady-in-december-quarter-2019-domain-rental-report-921000/>

<sup>18</sup> The ABS estimates that 962,500 Victorians live in households paying more than 30 per cent of their income towards housing costs. See Australian Bureau of Statistics, 4130.0 - Housing Occupancy and Costs, 2015-16, Table 13.5 Household Estimates, Selected household characteristics, States and Territories, 2015-16.

Demand for social housing remains high, with more than 82,000 Victorians on the wait list for public and community housing.<sup>19</sup> This is projected to reach 100,000 by mid-2020.<sup>20</sup> While the Victorian population, house prices and rents continue to increase, government investment in social housing has decreased.<sup>21</sup> Social housing currently makes up only 3.2 per cent of all housing in Victoria.<sup>22</sup> This is well below the national average of 4.5 per cent.<sup>23</sup> Victoria spends the least of all Australian states and territories on social housing per person.<sup>24</sup> This has flow-on effects for the Victorian specialist homelessness service system, which sees the most clients annually of all the states and territories.<sup>25</sup>

For those seeking assistance from specialist homelessness services, more than 42 per cent report this is due to family violence.<sup>26</sup> The inadequate supply of social housing in Victoria continues to create blockages in and out of family violence refuges and crisis accommodation. In fact, 62 per cent of Victorians who fled family violence into homelessness were unable to get the housing they need.<sup>27</sup> That is, of the 11,565 Victorians who became homeless due to family violence in 2018-2019, 7,194 Victorians were still homeless after seeking help.<sup>28</sup>

Following the Royal Commission, the Family Violence Housing Blitz<sup>29</sup> saw a range of initiatives including investments in social housing, and successful subsidy programs to house women in private rental housing.<sup>30</sup>

Recommendation 18 of the Royal Commission – Give priority to victims gaining stable housing as quickly as possible – *The Victorian Government give priority to removing current blockages in refuge and crisis accommodation and transitional housing, so that victims of family violence can gain stable housing as quickly as possible and with a minimum number*

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<sup>19</sup> Parliament of Victoria, Inquiry into the Public Housing Renewal Program (Final Report), June 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Based on analysis by the Victorian Public Tenants Association, 'Budget Submission 2020-21', November 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Productivity Commission, 'Vulnerable Private Renters: Evidence and Options', September 2019, p2.

<sup>22</sup> CHP et al, Make Social Housing Work, A Framework for Victoria's Public and Community Housing 2020-2030, May 2020, <https://chp.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Make-Social-Housing-Work.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> Department of Health and Human Services, 'Housing Assistance: Additional Service Delivery Data 2018 – 19', September 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Productivity Commission, 'Report on Government Services 2020 – Part G, Section 18', January 2020.

<sup>25</sup> AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services annual report 2018–19, 18 December 2019,

<https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/ef6a725c-a863-480e-a037-d4d66cca2839/Specialist-Homelessness-Services-annual-report-2018-19.pdf.aspx?inline=true>

<sup>26</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2019. Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia: continuing the national story 2019. Cat. no. FDV 3. Canberra: AIHW, p.ix

<sup>27</sup> CHP analysis of AIHW 2018-19 data, [https://chp.org.au/social-housing-is-unfinished-business-this-international-womens-day/?utm\\_source=Council+to+Homeless+Persons+E-news+list&utm\\_campaign=1cad805394-](https://chp.org.au/social-housing-is-unfinished-business-this-international-womens-day/?utm_source=Council+to+Homeless+Persons+E-news+list&utm_campaign=1cad805394-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_04_03_01_16_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_47e37fdcf8-1cad805394-422982093&mc_cid=1cad805394&mc_eid=6e3b93c793)

[EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2019\\_04\\_03\\_01\\_16\\_COPY\\_01&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_47e37fdcf8-1cad805394-422982093&mc\\_cid=1cad805394&mc\\_eid=6e3b93c793](https://chp.org.au/social-housing-is-unfinished-business-this-international-womens-day/?utm_source=Council+to+Homeless+Persons+E-news+list&utm_campaign=1cad805394-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_04_03_01_16_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_47e37fdcf8-1cad805394-422982093&mc_cid=1cad805394&mc_eid=6e3b93c793)

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Minister for Housing, Housing blitz for women and children, 13 April 2016 <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/housing-blitz-for-women-and-children-begins/>

<sup>30</sup> Private Rental Assistance Program (funded to July 2021) provides people at risk of or experiencing homelessness with financial and practical assistance to establish and maintain private rental tenancies.

*of relocations, are not accommodated in motels and other ad hoc accommodation, and spend on average no longer than six weeks in refuge and crisis accommodation.*

The implementation of this recommendation is currently in progress. To deliver on this, the Victorian Government should continue to invest in the Private Rental Assistance Program (funded to July 2021) which provides people at risk of or experiencing homelessness with financial and practical assistance to establish and maintain private rental tenancies. VCOSS members report that the Private Rental Assistance Program is particularly beneficial for victim-survivors as it allows people to establish their own space and gives them the respect they need within their community to begin to rebuild their lives.

The Victorian Government should also continue to invest in Flexible Support Packages which deliver a personalised and holistic response to victim-survivors experiencing family violence by assisting them to access support, move out of crisis, stabilise, secure access to safe, stable housing and improve their safety, well-being and independence into recovery. Individualised packages of up to \$10,000 are available, with each package costing on average \$3,000.

VCOSS members report that these packages are being used to purchase vehicles, meet basic material needs, access safe, stable housing, pay for new furnishings in houses or put up security cameras. Significantly, they are reducing the need for victim-survivors to retell their story again, and allows them to build a relationship with their support worker who can then access the funds to meet their needs and help them feel safe again.

A 2017 evaluation of the packages found that they have had a 'transformational impact in supporting thousands of victim survivors to achieve safety and recover from their experience of family violence'.<sup>31</sup>

Currently Flexible Support Packages are only funded to July 2020<sup>32</sup> although on 10 April 2020, the Victorian Government committed \$5.1 million for more Flexible Support Packages across the state as part of a \$40.2 million investment in crisis accommodation and specialist services for people suffering or at risk of family violence.<sup>33</sup> This was welcomed by the sector.

Given the success of the Flexible Support Packages in supporting people experiencing family violence to rebuild their lives, VCOSS members strongly support these becoming a permanent fixture of the family violence system.

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<sup>31</sup> Family violence recommendations, Expand the provision of flexible support packages, <https://www.vic.gov.au/family-violence-recommendations/expand-provision-family-violence-flexible-support-packages>

<sup>32</sup> Victorian State Budget 2018-2019, Budget Paper 3 Service Delivery, [https://www.dtf.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2018-05/2018-19%20State%20Budget%20-%20Service%20Delivery\\_0.pdf](https://www.dtf.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2018-05/2018-19%20State%20Budget%20-%20Service%20Delivery_0.pdf)

<sup>33</sup> A Safe Place To Escape Family Violence During Coronavirus, 10 April 2020, <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/a-safe-place-to-escape-family-violence-during-coronavirus/>

Recommendation 19 – Establish a Family Violence Housing Assistance Implementation Taskforce – *The Victorian Government establish a Family Violence Housing Assistance Implementation Task Force .... which should:*

- ... quantify the number of additional social housing units required for family violence victims who are unable to gain access to and sustain private rental accommodation
- .... plan for the statewide rollout of ... the social housing required

VCOSS members report that increased investment in social housing is one of the key ways to help support victim-survivors. While Victoria has made welcome investments in social housing including the commitment to build 1,000 new social housing homes,<sup>34</sup> it is far less than the amount needed to sustain the current proportion of social housing.

To simply maintain the current level of social housing at 3.2 per cent of all households, Victoria would need to build 3,500 new public and community homes each year for the next 10 years. However, to meet the demand indicated by the Victorian Housing Register, the rates of housing stress and homelessness, and match the level of social housing in other states and territories, Victoria would need to build 6,000 new public and community homes each year for the next 10 years.<sup>35</sup> It is important that this housing is accessibly built and designed with a universal housing model in mind to reduce the need for major modifications to be made in the future and ensure that it is suitable for all people, including people with disability and older people.

A lack of housing for perpetrators has also been identified as a significant gap in the current system that undermines victim-survivors safety. While there is currently funding available to access crisis-accommodation or short-term rooming houses or motels, without access to longer term housing solutions, there is a greater chance that a perpetrator will exit into homelessness or attempt to return to the family home and request that a victim-survivor take them back. While accommodation for perpetrators was not a recommendation of the Royal Commission, it has become more apparent that this is an area that needs to be prioritised. Without access to safe and affordable housing, this will make it more difficult to engage perpetrators with support services and encourage them to change their behaviour.

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<sup>34</sup> In 2015-16, Victoria had 85,195 social housing dwellings, and in 2019-20, this has increased to 87,749 dwellings. (Victorian Government, State Budget Papers 2015-16 and 2019-20). A further 1000 new properties were committed in the 2019-2020 Budget for the next three years.

<sup>35</sup> Derived from DELWP, Victorians in Future 2019 (VIF2019), July 2019, p8 and DHHS, Housing Assistance: Additional Service Delivery Data 2018 – 19, September 2019, p8.

VCOSS members report that investing in housing and making it more affordable is key to ensuring that women and children have a safe place to live and do not need to return to violent households. VCOSS and our members believe that housing should be a policy priority over the next decade to help reduce family violence driven homelessness.

## Drive investment in the primary prevention of family violence

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Allocate at least 10 per cent of the Family Violence Budget to the primary prevention of family violence.
- Support the coordination of women's health primary prevention partnership programs.

Adequate and recurrent funding for the prevention of family violence is key to stopping violence before it starts. Primary prevention is aimed at the whole community, and includes public awareness raising, education programs in schools and workplace programs. It is about challenging the attitudes and behaviours that drive family violence and violence against women to stop violence before it occurs.

As a Statutory Authority, Respect Victoria was established in 2018 to drive this work. This fulfilled recommendation 188 of the Royal Commission and delivered on commitments under recommendation 187 of the Royal Commission under the Free from Violence strategy.

Respect Victoria has been funded over four years to lead research, monitoring and evaluation to inform how violence can be prevented; build community awareness of the drivers of violence; drive uptake of best practice; collaborate with others to strengthen primary prevention infrastructure; and advocate for primary prevention policy, practice and investment.

VCOSS members are particularly complementary of the public awareness and social media campaigns that have been run by Respect Victoria, and note that the establishment of the statutory agency has lifted the profile of primary prevention. However, concerns have been raised regarding the research agenda and that there is no transparency around what research is being done or planned, creating the potential for duplication.

Currently, only 3 per cent of family violence spending is on primary prevention (2017/2018 Victorian State Budget – Family Violence).<sup>36</sup> According to a PricewaterhouseCoopers report, in line with other public health prevention campaigns (smoking cessation, skin cancer reduction and road safety), the estimated optimal spend on primary prevention is 9.5 – 12 per cent.<sup>37</sup> In considering the current allocation of primary prevention spending, VCOSS members report concerns that a lot of funding is currently directed towards short term projects. This is inadequate for primary prevention which aims for long-term cultural change.

In particular, concerns have been raised that government has funded a plethora of disconnected projects that have not been primary prevention, but rather were early intervention or response type programs. Codesigning initiatives and approaches and building on existing infrastructure and expertise, for example through existing women's health primary prevention regional partnerships, would help maximise use of limited resources.

Ongoing investment in primary prevention and working with the primary prevention sector (such as women's health services) is critical to identifying the underlying causes or drivers of violence and preventing violence from happening in the first place. In particular, there are currently nine women's health primary prevention partnership programs in Victoria however there is no funding attached to coordination. By attaching funding to a coordination function, this will facilitate the exchange of information and best practice to drive primary prevention activities.

## The Orange Door

### RECOMMENDATION

- Fully implement the Victorian Auditor-General Office's nine recommendations to improve the operation of the support and safety hubs.

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<sup>36</sup> Respect Victoria, Strategic Plan 2019-2022, [https://www.respectvictoria.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/201904/Full%20version\\_Strategic%20Plan.pdf](https://www.respectvictoria.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/201904/Full%20version_Strategic%20Plan.pdf)

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.



The purpose of the hubs outlined in the Royal Commission report is to have ‘a single, area-based intake into specialist family violence services (for both victims and perpetrators) and Integrated Family Services ... to make it easier for victims to get the help they need’.<sup>38</sup>

There is currently a lack of evidence about whether the hubs are improving client outcomes. This was noted in the Victorian Auditor-General report into the hubs, which was released in May 2020 and concluded that:

*‘The hubs are not yet realising their full potential to improve the lives of people affected by family violence and families needing support with their children. This is because their service coordination is not yet consistently effective or efficient.*

*A rushed implementation schedule and a lack of detailed project planning meant FSV opened the first five hubs before they had all the infrastructure, processes or staff needed to meet demand. As a result, some people have waited months to receive support.’<sup>39</sup>*

VCOSS has also heard there was a backlog of clients in some of the hubs, although the drop in demand during the initial COVID-19 period has reduced this backlog.

Concerns remain about whether the hubs maintain a clear focus on assessing and responding to family violence risk, as integrating different services with different practice models continues to create challenges. This concern was picked up by the Auditor General, which noted that:

*‘A key challenge for FSV has been the conflicting views of stakeholders about how hubs should operate, and the level of service integration required. For example, specialist family violence services have argued that the expanded role of child and family services in hubs has diluted the focus on women victim survivors. In contrast, child and family services practitioners consider that hubs are too focused on family violence, at the expense of child wellbeing.’<sup>40</sup>*

Further clarity from government on how the hubs service integration should operate in practice is still needed to address some of the complexities that arise from combining family violence and child and family reforms. For example, Family Safety Victoria training could consider covering how services should work together to deliver an integrated service.

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<sup>38</sup> Royal Commission into Family Violence, Volume II Report and recommendations, March 2016, p.245, <http://rcfv.archive.royalcommission.vic.gov.au/MediaLibraries/RCFamilyViolence/Reports/Final/RCFV-Vol-II.pdf>

<sup>39</sup> Victorian Auditor-General’s Office, Managing Support and Safety Hubs, May 2020, p.10

[https://www.audit.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-05/20200527-Support-Safety-Hubs-report\\_0.pdf](https://www.audit.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-05/20200527-Support-Safety-Hubs-report_0.pdf)

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p.13.

Having state-wide consistency in how hubs work would also help ensure service users receive a similar service irrespective of which hub they attend.

One of the main risks is whether Family Safety Victoria will proceed with the current timelines to launch the remaining 12 hubs by 2022 without making the necessary changes. This concern, which is shared by the Auditor General,<sup>41</sup> requires a renewed commitment from Family Safety Victoria to ensuring that the hubs deliver better outcomes for families. VCOSS was particularly concerned with the finding of the Auditor General that:

*‘... there are inconsistencies in how hubs approach service coordination, information sharing and demand management. This means clients may receive a different level of service depending on the hub they access, rather than in response to their specific needs.’<sup>42</sup>*

Allowance for extra time to launch the hubs should also be considered given possible COVID-19 delays.

Ensuring that clients receive the same level of service that meets their needs irrespective of which hub they attend is critical to effective service delivery and cementing the hubs reputation in the community. In particular, demonstrating through evidence and by collecting the right data to demonstrate that the hubs are leading to better outcomes for clients is imperative. Detailed and realistic plans and timeframes are needed as part of preparing for the rollout of the rest of the hubs.<sup>43</sup>

Building relationships between the Orange Door and local providers is also critical to the success of the reform. Having strong agreements in place for how they work together can help create continuity of care for service users.

Concerns have been raised about the number and mix of staff in the hubs. VCOSS members have noted that despite the demand, there are not enough men’s practitioners in the hubs. For example in the Mallee Orange Door there are 2 men’s practitioners compared to 6 family violence practitioners, despite the majority of perpetrators being male. This creates challenges around engaging men (which is already challenging) as well as performing additional outreach. More funding is needed to increase the number of men’s practitioners in the hubs to perform this essential work.

VCOSS is pleased to see that the Department of Health and Human Services has accepted all nine recommendations made by the Auditor-General into the hubs and believes that

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p.11.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p.41.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p.11.

implementing these recommendations will have improve hub service delivery and benefit clients. These recommendations include:

1. *'Complete detailed plans outlining how it will open remaining hubs and transition them from foundational to the full model of operations;*
2. *Improves statewide consistency of hub operations and practice;*
3. *Drawing on the experiences of the open hubs, work with hub partners to develop and run comprehensive training on coordinating service responses for clients, supplemented by other activities, such as supervision, to further develop this capability;*
4. *Work with local Aboriginal services and community representatives to roll out mandatory cultural safety training that is specific to hub functions and operations, for all hub staff;*
5. *Work with hubs to strengthen their support for children;*
6. *Improves monitoring and reporting on demand in hubs;*
7. *Finalises a performance monitoring framework for hubs;*
8. *Improves the client relationship management system to allow collection of data on the quality, timeliness and outcomes of hub performance; and*
9. *Clarifies and formalises governance arrangements.*<sup>44</sup>

## Children as victims in their own right and those who use violence in the home

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Invest in prevention and develop early intervention programs to minimise the negative effects of violence on children.
- Support organisations to undertake evaluations to build the evidence-base.
- Design evidence-based programs to better engage adolescents that use violence in the home.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p.16-17.

Children can be exposed to family violence in the home through overhearing violence or being subjected to deliberate or accidental violence.<sup>45</sup> Growing up in this type of environment can often be unpredictable, creating anxiety, worry, tension and fear about the future.<sup>46</sup> Exposure to family violence can affect a child's mental wellbeing, in particular leading to depression and low self-esteem.<sup>47</sup> This can have a flow on effects to academic performance, with children experiencing learning difficulties, behavioural problems, lower school attendance and poorer academic outcomes.<sup>48</sup>

A meta-analysis conducted in 2003 found that 67 per cent of children who had witnessed family violence were at greater risk of developmental and adjustment problems, impairing their academic success, cognition and mental health and wellbeing than children who had not been exposed.<sup>49</sup> Where a child witnesses physical or emotional abuse this can cause significant emotional and psychological trauma.<sup>50</sup> Exposure to trauma over a long period of time can result in children experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder, and mental health difficulties including depression, low self-esteem, anxiety, self-harm and suicidal thoughts.<sup>51</sup> It can also impact children's ability to trust and form positive relationships in the future.

Children may also become caught in the middle of an assault, either intentionally or accidentally. They can become mediators or attempt to protect their younger siblings or mother. Some can feel powerless about a parent acting violently.

In the period following parental separation children are more likely to experience physical and verbal parental conflict, and witness violence.<sup>52</sup> This period requires greater intervention measures to reduce the risks of violence.<sup>53</sup>

Seven of the Royal Commission recommendations broadly relate to children and young people, with four categorised as relating specifically to children and young people's

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<sup>45</sup> Exposure to family violence and its effect on children, Family Court of Australia, <http://www.familycourt.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/fcoaweb/reports-and-publications/publications/family+violence/exposure-to-family-violence-and-its-effect-on-children>

<sup>46</sup> Impact of domestic violence on children and young people, Domestic Violence Prevention Centre, Gold Coast, <https://www.domesticviolence.com.au/pages/impact-of-domestic-violence-children-and-young-people.php>

<sup>47</sup> Australian Institute of Family Studies, Children's exposure to domestic and family violence, CFCA Paper No 36, December 2015, <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/childrens-exposure-domestic-and-family-violence/effects-childrens-exposure-domestic-and>

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Impact of domestic violence on children and young people, Domestic Violence Prevention Centre, Gold Coast, <https://www.domesticviolence.com.au/pages/impact-of-domestic-violence-children-and-young-people.php>

<sup>51</sup> Australian Institute of Family Studies, Children's exposure to domestic and family violence, CFCA Paper No 36, December 2015, <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/childrens-exposure-domestic-and-family-violence/effects-childrens-exposure-domestic-and>

<sup>52</sup> ANROWS, The impacts of domestic and family violence on children, Research Summary, [https://dh2wpaq0gtxwe.cloudfront.net/ANROWS\\_Impacts-on-DFV-on-Children.2ed.pdf](https://dh2wpaq0gtxwe.cloudfront.net/ANROWS_Impacts-on-DFV-on-Children.2ed.pdf); Australian Institute of Family Studies, Children's exposure to domestic and family violence, CFCA Paper No 36, December 2015, <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/childrens-exposure-domestic-and-family-violence/effects-childrens-exposure-domestic-and>

<sup>53</sup> ANROWS, The impacts of domestic and family violence on children, Research Summary, [https://dh2wpaq0gtxwe.cloudfront.net/ANROWS\\_Impacts-on-DFV-on-Children.2ed.pdf](https://dh2wpaq0gtxwe.cloudfront.net/ANROWS_Impacts-on-DFV-on-Children.2ed.pdf);

experience of family violence.<sup>54</sup> Investing in prevention and developing early intervention programs to minimise the negative effects of violence on children is needed.

Adolescent violence – which can occur between the ages of 12 and 18 years – involves behaving violently or abusively towards parents, carers or siblings to create fear and cause physical, emotional, psychological, financial or property damage and/or to gain power and control over another person.<sup>55</sup>

Research indicates that most victims are mothers and most offenders are male.<sup>56</sup> While violence is never acceptable, responses to adolescent violence should consider that they are still children and ‘consider their protection, safety and developmental needs, as well as their offending behaviour’.<sup>57</sup>

Removal from the home should be a last, rather than first resort. Whilst still prioritising the safety of victims, effective interventions should focus on adolescent wellbeing and safety alongside fostering family connections and a focus on restorative justice processes and principles.<sup>58</sup>

As adolescents can have difficulty separating emotions from behaviours, responses to adolescent violence should focus on building their capacity to problem solve and self-soothe so that they have the skills to deal with their emotions in a healthy, respectful and constructive way.<sup>59</sup> Importantly, addressing adolescent violence is imperative to helping stop intergenerational cycles of violence.

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare in consultation with Domestic Violence Victoria (DV Vic), is leading a state-wide research project to identify, translate and embed the best available research and practice expertise to build the evidence base in relation to adolescents who use violence in the home.<sup>60</sup>

One of the early findings of this project is that while there are a number of different types of projects occurring across the state that focus on adolescents using violence, the evidence-base underpinning these projects differs. Often staff have limited expertise or capacity to undertake evaluations and their organisations lack the funding resources to obtain external

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<sup>54</sup> Victorian Government, The 227 recommendations, <https://www.vic.gov.au/family-violence-recommendations?q=children>

<sup>55</sup> WIRE, Young people who use violence, <https://www.wire.org.au/young-people-who-use-violence/>; Uniting Kildonan, Adolescent violence in the home, <https://www.unitingkildonan.org.au/programs-and-services/child-youth-and-family-support/family-violence/adolescent-violence/>

<sup>56</sup> AIFS, Adolescent violence in the home: How is it different to adult family violence?, 8 December 2015, <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/2015/12/08/adolescent-violence-home-how-it-different-adult-family-violence>

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, Adolescents Who Use Violence in the Home Working with service providers to build evidence on what works, <https://www.cfecfw.asn.au/adolescents-who-use-violence-in-the-home%E2%80%8B/>

independent evaluations. Better supporting organisations to implement outcomes-based measurement practices will help lift the evidence-base to identify which projects work best and with which cohorts of young people.

# Supporting sector and organisational sustainability

## RECOMMENDATION

- Develop a fairer indexation model to ensure community service organisations are sustainable and effective into the future.

The community sector, like many other industries, is facing new challenges and disruptions because of COVID-19. Demand is high, and services are transitioning to new service models, including telehealth and remote delivery. They are experiencing reductions in fundraising and donation income. For some, the end of JobKeeper and the uncertainty around the ongoing federal funding of the Equal Remuneration Order loom as financial cliffs. Many contracts have been extended for only three months, awaiting the delayed state budget in late 2020.

Organisations are already struggling to make ends meet. Many organisations now lack adequate funding to sustainably deliver services and plan for the future. Government funding for social service organisations has stayed at two per cent per annum over the past six years. Yet Fair Work Australia last year raised the minimum wage by three per cent, and other costs, like the increase to the superannuation guarantee, continue to rise.

This is a challenging environment for community organisations to operate in. Community organisations spend most of their budget on wages and salaries. Increased costs will inevitably lead to reductions in other areas, including service delivery and contact hours.

With low indexation rates in recent years, and increasing costs, government funding has slipped behind the true cost of delivering services. Underfunding community organisations leads to job losses and reduced support for vulnerable community members.

A fair indexation formula incorporating wage rises, the superannuation guarantee, portable long service leave and the different costs of delivering services in rural and remote areas is desperately needed to guarantee community service organisations are sustainable and effective into the future.

## Tackle workforce shortages

### RECOMMENDATION

- Implement new funding models that reduce reliance on short-term funding contracts and provide greater job security.

The Building from Strength: 10-Year Industry Plan for Family Violence Prevention and Response Strategy was released in December 2017.<sup>61</sup> Alongside the Rolling Action Plan 2019 – 2022, which was released in 2019, this focuses on building prevention and response capability across the system; strengthening the specialist workforce; improving workforce health and wellbeing and building a system that works.<sup>62</sup>

While these targeted plans will help tackle workforce shortages over time, in the short-term workforce shortages continue to be an ongoing problem for the sector. VCOSS members report that one of the driving factors behind workforce shortages is short-term funding contracts that result in fixed-term employment contracts. This includes not only funding for pilot programs, but for programs that continue to be funded on a one or two year basis. For example, men's behaviour change contracts are often short-term (or even casual/sessional workforce), which creates challenges for organisations to hold on to great facilitators.

Lower rates of pay, and disparity in pay compared to government roles such as those at the Orange Door and Family Safety Victoria also make positions difficult to recruit. Where organisations continue to lose good quality staff to other community services sectors, this means that Victoria is not building the prevention and response sector workforce that is needed.

The impact on victim-survivors and families of short-term funding should also be recognised. Where funding ends for a particular program, this can mean that the relationships services have built cease and momentum is lost. Where a program is refunded, this can create difficult conversations where workers have to go back to say "that we are open again". This creates an increased workload for workers and also sends the wrong message to victim-survivors and families that their experiences do not matter to government.

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<sup>61</sup> Building from Strength: 10-Year Industry Plan, <https://www.vic.gov.au/familyviolence/newsletter/edition-10/industry-plan.html>

<sup>62</sup> Implementing Building from Strength, Strengthening Foundations First Rolling Action Plan 2019-2022, <https://www.vic.gov.au/strengthening-foundations-first-rolling-action-plan-2019-22/implementing-building-strength>



In regional Victoria, many organisations have a substantial number of vacant positions, including family violence specialist workers, due to workforce and/or skill shortages.

One of the other challenges identified by VCOSS members include gaps in middle management roles and resources required to manage larger teams and support new qualified/or inexperienced staff to effectively meet client demand. More middle management roles are needed to support training of new staff, undertake supervision as well as support senior leadership, whose roles are increasingly taken up with stewarding reform activities and implementing large scale change.

While the recently released Family Violence Jobs Portal should help, until these broader issues around pay and job security are addressed there will continue to be workforce shortages in the sector.

## MARAM and information sharing

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Deliver training in regional locations, identify champions of change and establish local communities of practice.
- Increase investment in the MARAM Framework and Information Sharing Scheme to ensure non-family violence specialist organisations understand their roles and responsibilities.

Improving risk assessment and management practice is a key focus of the family violence reform work and formed part of the first three recommendations made by the Royal Commission into Family Violence.

In September 2019, VCOSS conducted research to gather insights into how specialist and non-specialists organisations in regional Victoria (Gippsland, The Mallee and Goulburn Valley/North East) are experiencing the MARAM and information sharing reforms on the ground (Attachment A).

Concerns were raised for example that:

- Much of the early training was conducted before the MARAM and the Scheme tools and resources were finalised.

- The facilitators did not necessarily have deep industry knowledge, and as a result, the training was general in nature, and not well received.
- Larger organisations, especially those with policy capability, are more advanced with embedding the Schemes into their policies, procedures and practices.
- A lack of a forward schedule of training in regional areas has made it difficult for agencies to prepare their workforce and plan for this implementation in conjunction with the many other reforms underway, and
- There was overly long and complex documentation where simple, practical tools and user-friendly guides are being sought by practitioners and leaders.

There have been some positive changes reported including:

- Improved relationships and stronger collaboration within organisations is starting to occur,
- Greater safety has been achieved through information sourced and shared between organisations,
- The perpetrator is increasingly being viewed in a different light which provides greater safety for the victim, and
- In some organisations, clearer processes exist as to how to gain information where relationships did not exist.

This report contained a number of recommendations to government to help support organisations including for example, that

- Place-based networks are best placed to drive training and workforce development needs;
  - they can provide information on the size of the workforce that requires access to particular training and based on this, the number of courses and best locations to meet demand
  - they can also advertise and recruit the appropriate workforce to specific training opportunities
- Identifying champions of change in each regional area is crucial to facilitate local implementation;
- The need to provide training in regional locations that matches demand mapped by local providers; and
- Establishing local communities of practice to customise organisational policies, procedures and practices.

These recommendations are particularly important given the ongoing rollout of the MARAM to new workforces. In the second phase of the MARAM rollout, it is expected that an additional 370,000 employees will be in scope for implementation of the Framework.

Continuing to financially support the rollout of the MARAM and Information Sharing Scheme training is important as these reforms represent a big cultural shift for organisations and workers to develop their understanding of family violence risk and respond appropriately.

# Better support diverse communities

## Culturally and linguistically diverse communities

### RECOMMENDATION

- Improve data collection and conduct research on the prevalence and impacts of family, domestic and sexual violence among people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

According to the AIHW and Our Watch, there is no substantive Australian research on the prevalence and impacts of family, domestic and sexual violence in culturally and linguistically diverse communities (CALD).<sup>63</sup>

In the absence of comprehensive, population-wide data, understanding the prevalence and impact of violence against women from migrant and refugee backgrounds is difficult.<sup>64</sup>

A 2015 report outlining issues and perspectives specific to CALD women found that they are *'less likely to report violence, can experience more barriers in accessing support services, and are less likely to leave a family violence situation than other Australian women'*.<sup>65</sup>

Some of the specific challenges facing CALD women include:

- *'A lack of support networks.*
- *Socio-economic disadvantage.*
- *Language barriers.*
- *Community pressure.*
- *Limited knowledge about their rights and Australia's laws.*
- *Cultural values and immigration status.*<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2019. Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia: continuing the national story 2019. Cat. no. FDV 3. Canberra: AIHW, p.95, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/b0037b2d-a651-4abf-9f7b-00a85e3de528/aihw-fdv3-FDSV-in-Australia-2019.pdf.aspx?inline=true>

<sup>64</sup> Our Watch, Quick Facts, <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/quick-facts/>

<sup>65</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Social Service, Hearing her voice: report from the kitchen table conversations with culturally and linguistically diverse women on violence against women and their children, 2015, p.4.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p.9.

For women on temporary visas experiencing family violence, they experience a unique form of circumstances and challenges. For example, some temporary visa holders are at risk of visa cancellation or visa refusal if they separate from a perpetrator or report violence to the police.<sup>67</sup> They may also have difficulty accessing justice to review migration decisions through the Administrative Appeals Tribunal because of prohibitive upfront application fees.<sup>68</sup> It is important that women on temporary visas who experience family violence can access specialist support services, justice and government support needed to prioritise their safety and recovery, irrespective of their migration status.<sup>69</sup>

## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Continue to increase funding and support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led family violence prevention and response efforts
- Review laws and policies that disproportionately criminalise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children

Aboriginal women are 34 times more likely to be hospitalised from family violence and almost 11 times more likely to be killed as a result of violent assault.<sup>70</sup> But family violence is not part of Aboriginal culture and is perpetrated by both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people. It is driven by intergenerational trauma and the legacies of dispossession and colonisation.

Family violence not only has a devastating impact on the physical, emotional and social wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, it is also a leading contributor to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child removal, homelessness, poverty, drug and alcohol misuse and incarceration.

<sup>67</sup> National Advocacy Group on Women on Temporary Visas Experiencing Violence, *Blueprint for reform: Removing Barriers to Safety for Victims/Survivors of Domestic and Family Violence who are on Temporary Visas*, 2019, p.3, [https://awava.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Blueprint-for-Reform\\_web\\_version.pdf](https://awava.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Blueprint-for-Reform_web_version.pdf)

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, p.2.

<sup>70</sup> AIHW, *Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia*, 2018, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/d1a8d479-a39a-48c1-bbe2-4b27c7a321e0/aihw-fdv-02.pdf.aspx?inline=true>

The significant investment in Aboriginal controlled services, like Djirra, and the development of *Dhelk Dja – Safe our way: Strong culture, strong peoples, strong families agreement* in October 2018 has provided a strong framework to address Aboriginal family violence in Victoria. Funding and decision-making around Aboriginal specific recommendation should continue to go to Aboriginal community controlled organisations with relevant expertise, putting self-determination into practice.

There is unfinished business in addressing the criminalisation and overpolicing of Aboriginal people, and women in particular. While the Koori Family Violence Police Protocols are now implemented in most jurisdictions, Aboriginal women continue to be overrepresented in our criminal justice system. The majority of these women are survivors of trauma, family violence and abuse. Bushfires, Climate Change and the Community Sector Roundtable

When women are taken into custody, even for short periods on remand, the impacts can be life altering, long-term and intergenerational; disconnection from family and community, children taken into child protection, housing and employment lost. Too often, the impact of the justice system is to punish and entrench disadvantage, rather than promoting healing, support and rehabilitation.

## Women with disabilities

### RECOMMENDATION

- Fund the Disability Family Violence Crisis Response Initiative for three years to ensure women and children with disability experiencing family violence can access immediate, tailored support.

Due to their experience of discrimination on the basis of both their disability and gender, women with disabilities are at a greater risk of violence.<sup>71</sup> Evidence suggests that women with disabilities are subject to violence and abuse at a higher rate and for longer periods than women without disabilities.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Domestic Violence Resource Centre, Victorian Disability Family Violence Crisis Response Initiative, <https://www.dvrcv.org.au/knowledge-centre/our-blog/victorian-disability-family-violence-crisis-response-initiative>

<sup>72</sup> Ibid; Sally Robinson, Patsie Frawley and Sue Dyson, Access and Accessibility in Domestic and Family Violence

***‘when compared with people without disability, people with disability are 1.8 times more likely to have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from a partner in the previous year, and 1.7 times as likely to experienced sexual violence (including assault and threats) since the age of 15.’<sup>73</sup>***

Women with disabilities can often experience unique forms of violence and abuse, for example threats to withdraw care or provide inappropriate care; institutional abuse; restricting access to medication, mobility and communication supports; forced sterilisation and financial abuse.<sup>74</sup> Reporting violence can be challenging where a woman’s intimate partner is also her carer as this may result in her losing her support.

Women with disabilities can also experience challenges in accessing domestic and family violence services.<sup>75</sup> To be accessible, ‘services must be approachable, acceptable, available, affordable and appropriate’.<sup>76</sup>

The Royal Commission recognised the important role that the Disability Family Violence Crisis Response Initiative has played since its inception in 2011.<sup>77</sup> This successful initiative has provided immediate crisis supports to women and children with a disability who are experiencing family violence. These supports include personal support workers; Auslan interpreters; equipment hire, mobility aids and transport costs associated with a disability.<sup>78</sup> This initiative provides dedicated disability advice and liaison services to ensure that women and children who are experiencing family violence can have their disability related needs met and access immediate tailored support.

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Services for Women With Disabilities: Widening the Lens, 27 April 2020, <https://journals.sagepub.com/eprint/H2KZRZNF9TFKJ3VTB7I/full>

<sup>73</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2019. Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia: continuing the national story 2019. Cat. no. FDV 3. Canberra: AIHW, p.viii, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/b0037b2d-a651-4abf-9f7b-00a85e3de528/aihw-fdv3-FDSV-in-Australia-2019.pdf.aspx?inline=true>.

<sup>74</sup> Sally Robinson, Patsie Frawley and Sue Dyson, Access and Accessibility in Domestic and Family Violence Services for Women With Disabilities: Widening the Lens, 27 April 2020, <https://journals.sagepub.com/eprint/H2KZRZNF9TFKJ3VTB7I/full>

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Recommendation 178 states that “the Victorian Government extend eligibility for the Victorian Disability Family Violence Crisis Response to assist people with disabilities who are victims of family violence and are not eligible for services under the Disability Act 2006 (Vic) but who nevertheless require assistance. Such eligibility should apply when these individuals do not have access to alternative supports.

<sup>78</sup> Domestic Violence Resource Centre, Victorian Disability Family Violence Crisis Response Initiative, <https://www.dvrcv.org.au/knowledge-centre/our-blog/victorian-disability-family-violence-crisis-response-initiative>

It is important to note that the Disability Family Violence Crisis Response Initiative differs from Flexible Support Packages in that it is funding to meet specific disability needs, whereas the Flexible Support Packages is designed to respond to family violence needs. Without access to this initiative, this would leave many women and children with disability seriously disadvantaged as the Flexible Support Package funding would be used quickly to meet their disability needs.

A DHHS pilot evaluation found that the program is having an 'overwhelmingly positive' impact on the lives of people with disabilities. However, this initiative does not have ongoing funding attached to it and is scheduled to run out by June 2020.



## Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

Recent research conducted by Monash University on practitioners' views on the nature of and responses to violence against women in Victoria during the COVID-19 pandemic has found an increase in the frequency and severity of violence against women, with a particular increase in first-time family violence reporting by women.<sup>79</sup> Similarly, VCOSS members also report that there has been an increase in high risk cases coming through to police and crisis response agencies.

The Monash University report also found that there was less ability for women experiencing violence to seek help during the lockdown period.<sup>80</sup> This correlates with reports from VCOSS members that in some regions, there was a drop off in calls for services.

In considering how people access services, it was noted that in the initial pandemic period there has been a decrease of about 5 per cent in calls from women to 1800Respect, over the same period there has been an increase of approximately 20 per cent on the 1800Respect chat line.<sup>81</sup> During the pandemic, Safe Steps introduced a new online chat function to provide an alternative to calling services, recognising that women were seeking alternatives ways of accessing support. Men'sLine also reported a significant increase in men who are calling for help, concerned about their levels of stress and anxiety, and their behaviour towards partners and children.<sup>82</sup>

Between March and April 2020, 14 per cent of family violence calls to Victoria Police were attributed to circumstances surrounding the coronavirus.<sup>83</sup> Presentations to St Vincent's Hospital related to family violence more than doubled in the first quarter of 2020 compared to 2019.<sup>84</sup>

The courts have continued to function with urgent applications fast-tracked through the Family Courts and heard by a judge within 72 hours, the police have been responding to calls and services have generally been able to manage demand for advice, support and crisis and emergency accommodation.

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<sup>79</sup> Pfitzner, N., Fitz-Gibbon, K. and True, J. (2020). Responding to the 'shadow pandemic': practitioner views on the nature of and responses to violence against women in Victoria, Australia during the COVID-19 restrictions. Monash Gender and Family Violence Prevention Centre, Monash University, Victoria, Australia.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Rachel Clayton, Family violence campaign launched as Melbourne hospital's emergency presentations double, 9 May 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-09/victoria-family-violence-cases-double-at-melbourne-hospital/12227594>

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

For men's referral services, the amount of police referrals is similar to pre-COVID-19 but they are seeing more new people in the system than repeat offenders. It is currently unclear if this is because the 'neighbours rang' or if this represents a pattern of behaviour by the perpetrator.

There have been some challenges for services, for example not all staff and services had remote access or access to laptops and phones.

There have also been challenges in delivery of some services. VCOSS members report that there has been an impact on outreach services, especially because phones and digital access aren't options for everyone and perpetrators can also monitor internet use and phone calls. On the other hand, some clients have enjoyed greater use of online and telephone contact and found services easier to access instead of having to attend in person. Staff have also had to work more creatively, with one VCOSS member reporting that she coordinated with her colleague to contact mum on the phone, while dad was engaged on the phone with her colleague.

Some men's behaviour change programs have not been able to run group face to face sessions during the COVID-19 pandemic so this work has been put on hold. Others have been able to transfer to an online form of delivery and this has been rolled out across the state.

VCOSS members report that some staff have found working during the pandemic challenging because they are making calls in their own homes and the delineation between work and home has blurred. They have also missed the opportunity to debrief with colleagues about clients and families. Concerns remain for some staff about entering client's homes and the risks of contracting COVID-19. On a positive note, the move to online meetings has enabled a number of rural and regional organisations to participate in meetings as they no longer need to travel.

VCOSS members report that they did not see a huge uptick in demand for housing from victim-survivors looking to leave their homes and the sector has been able to meet this through existing crisis and emergency housing and the additional \$40.2 million in support announced by the Victorian Government.<sup>85</sup>

As social distancing restrictions ease, it is likely that we will see an uptick in demand for services. As people are able to move around more, they may feel more confident in calling and accessing services. Further, due to the expected economic downturn over the next 12-

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<sup>85</sup> A Safe Place To Escape Family Violence During Coronavirus, 10 April 2020, <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/a-safe-place-to-escape-family-violence-during-coronavirus/>

18 months, and the end of higher rates of Commonwealth income support, including JobKeeper and JobSeeker, this is likely to place more families under stress, increasing the risks for family violence. It is essential that the Victorian Government continues to prioritise the family violence reform agenda to ensure all Victorians can live free from violence.



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