

**Response to the Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor's Call for Submissions:
Monitoring the Family Violence Reforms – July 2020**

Submission #040 – Organisation – Whittlesea Community Connections

[Organisational submissions](#)

How has the family violence service system changed since the Royal Commission?

- What are the major changes in the family violence service system since the Royal Commission into Family Violence made its final report and recommendations in 2016?
 - Please share specific examples from your own organisation or sector.
 - We welcome comment on changes to both your sector or your organisation's service delivery, as well as any broader system issues.

Not a lot of change- the system and services within it are still trying to adapt and implement changes

- How has the experience of accessing services and support changed since the Royal Commission for victim survivors, including children, and perpetrators of family violence?
 - Please share specific examples or case studies where possible.

WCC caseworkers and lawyers have engaged with Orange Door frequently and through this experience has identified a number of challenges:

- The single entry point is not really working for a few reasons; our nearest access point is Heidelberg, which is difficult for people in Whittlesea to access; people particularly those experiencing complex and multiple needs interact with services based on trust and local connections and so may enter the system in various ways, which does not align with a single entry point; rather than simplifying the system Orange Door has added another layer to an already complex system. For example before you contact Safe Steps 24 hours 7 days a week now you have to phone Orange Door between 9am and 5pm and Safe Steps or police after hours.
- The new system was supposed to support and strengthen what was there but this has not really happened. There are long wait times and there is confusion about the role of Orange Door within the sector. Our experience is that often what is provided such as referrals and limited emergency relief can already be provided by other community and family violence specialist services. What women really need is housing and because Orange Door cannot provide this they often come in after housing is provided and look at other security options such as installing cameras.
- There have been mixed reviews from clients ranging from great, 'they contacted me straight away' to, 'I spoke to them once and they never followed up.' Feedback from WCC caseworkers indicates however that individual workers are doing the best they can and it is more about challenges within the system itself.
- It is NOT no fuss

The interaction between state and federal systems has not changed and women are still experiencing significant issues with Centrelink for example. As part of the family violence often the perpetrator controls the finances including any financial support provided through Centrelink, he holds all the passwords, the money will go into his account even if the payment is hers. In order for women to change this and receive some financial

independence Centrelink still places an unfair, impossible, unsafe administrative burden on the victim.

The Whittlesea Community Legal Service has identified significant increases in cross applications for intervention orders that are not family violence related (property, financial). People are circumventing other more expensive systems and using intervention orders as a form of retaliation and in effect, maintaining control and violence against women. While the system is responsive and quick in order to protect people it comes at the cost of forgoing some checks and balances.

Client experience and outcomes through InTouch and care teams have been positive. Clients have received support from In Touch quickly and the one stop shop approach that includes migration advice is relevant for women from migrant and refugee backgrounds. Similarly experience from some of the care teams has been positive and there is benefit in further resourcing this approach particularly with lead coordination.

Looking forward – what is still required in the family violence system

- What are the most critical changes to the family violence service system that still need to occur?

The greatest priority is ensuring greater and more seamless access to financial and housing support enabling victims of family violence to leave quickly and safely. Adequate, accessible and timely financial and housing support will provide the foundation for improved long-term outcomes. At the moment access to both housing and financial support is dependent on where or how women enter the system, how much a caseworker knows about the system or what services have access to particular initiatives, which often comes too late in the journey.

WCC has become increasingly concerned about women from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds not being able to access the support they need when they need it. We have recently advocated for example for more attention to be given to women from Indian backgrounds in response to a series of suicides in Whittlesea where family violence was present.

The system is already difficult for women to navigate and requires awareness of your rights in Australia, access to help seeking information and self-advocacy (to name a few). For women from diverse backgrounds who do not speak English and have little supports in Australia awareness and access to information and support is more difficult. Community education and engagement initiatives based on best practice approaches working with multicultural communities need greater resourcing and support.

Women need more safe disclosure points in the community like CALD women's groups. WCC funds CALD women's groups to develop informal support networks, train community leaders and raise awareness within community about family violence and available supports. This has had a significant local impact on women's awareness of family violence, level of disclosures and access to family violence services.

- Are there any parts of the family violence reforms that have not yet progressed enough and require more attention?
- Are there any improvements that could be made to the implementation approach of the family violence reforms?

The system continues to apply a white heterosexual lens that does not work for people excluded by this. While there has been a greater theoretical focus on inter-sectionality this approach has not been implemented in practice yet.

Considering the system is still built around the experiences of white women this skews all the reporting – if it is easier for white women to access and use the system then it looks like there is more demand hence the focus remains on them. So as a universal system it is not universal. The system also privileges women who leave which might not be an option for some, there appears to be some cultural assumptions built into this.

Given the Heidelberg based Orange Door was supposed to be the CALD engagement specialist greater transparency about Orange Door performance is needed. It would be important then to publish data about how often interpreters are used, how long the wait is and how many women drop out of the system for example.

Greater acknowledgement and support for bridging organisations and groups (place based community, multicultural and ethnic specific organisations) is needed. These groups and organisations act as signposts to specialist services and are an important piece in the puzzle. Most financial support for organisations like us has been in MASC FV prevention programs, which is important but as we know with prevention there are disclosures, and when groups do that prevention work well they build a profile and reputation that attracts more disclosures. These bridging groups need improved access to support, training and capacity building.

Placed based networks that build more effective information and knowledge sharing and peer support among non- specialist services has been identified as a need in Whittlesea. Funding for WCC and other place based organisations to resource a FV practitioners network would support improvements within the sector and system.

Enhanced Pathways integral to the Government's Workforce Development approach has created significant capacity and opportunity. This should be continued and strengthened. As a generalist multi- program service we are involved with FV across the spectrum and across all services. It is crucial then that everyone in the organisation has a strong FV lens to ensure regardless of the entry point people experiencing FV are prioritized and well managed throughout the service. Enhanced Pathways keeps the focus on FV and ensures that it is an explicit part of the student program which implicitly reinforces its importance to staff who are working with clients with multiple complexities (homelessness, financial hardship etc).

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

- What has been the biggest impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on your organisation or sector? How have the services that your organisation or sector provides had to change?

The biggest impact of COVID-19 pandemic on WCC and broader community sector has been the increased need for basic essentials such as food, material aid and financial assistance. Those presenting to services have either never had to access such support before or represent vulnerable communities highlighting existing inequities within our systems.

In the early stages of the pandemic there was not an increase in FV incidents presenting to WCC, as women were not able to leave the home easily they managed their own risk in order to keep safe. As well as not being able to leave the home perpetrators used COVID19 as another form of control leading to more extreme and complex incidents of family violence rather than an increase. In response WCC services have had to be more flexible to ensure access for women experiencing family violence during this time. This included for example being careful to arrange phone appointments with the victim in order to avoid the perpetrator being at home.

In the later stages of the pandemic and coinciding with schools re-opening WCC has since recorded a steady increase in women presenting with family violence. Despite services remaining open throughout the pandemic some women assumed services were closed and as restrictions started to ease felt they could access services again.

- Has the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted any strengths or weaknesses in the family violence service system?

Information and awareness raising are both a strength and weakness. Recent advertising on mainstream free to air television targeting both perpetrators and victims has been useful in reminding people of the problem and supports available. However more works need to be done in reaching communities who often miss out on this messaging. In particular working with multicultural communities to ensure information is appropriate and actually reaching them is essential particularly in highly diverse communities such as Whittlesea.

- Are there any changes resulting from the COVID-10 pandemic that you think should be continued?

Many of the women and children experiencing family violence are currently being housed temporarily in hotels and motels. While providing accommodation for people experiencing homelessness during this crisis is fundamental we would suggest so too is maintaining this strategy for the long-term. One of the most significant barriers for women either leaving a violent situation or maintaining safe and secure lives in survival is safe and affordable housing with the appropriate community amenities and support that enable a house to become a home and where a woman and her family can make some meaningful connections to their community.

General Comments

- The Monitor invites you to make any final general comments around the family violence service system reform.

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