

20 July 2020

Jan Shuard PSM
Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor
GPO Box 4912
MELBOURNE VIC 3001

Dear Jan,

Submission for Monitoring the Family Violence Reforms

Uniting Vic.Tas welcomes the opportunity to provide input into what has changed and what still needs to change in the family violence service system following the Royal Commission into Family Violence reporting in 2016. We strongly believe all the recommendations of the Royal Commission should be implemented, noting that there are still 73 recommendations in progress. At the same time, family violence is not just a Victorian issue and there needs to be more leadership at a national level.

Uniting Vic.Tas is the community services organisation of the Uniting Church in Victoria and Tasmania. We are more than 6,000 people delivering hundreds of services accessed nearly 200,000 times each year across Victoria and Tasmania. We work across the full spectrum of community services, intervening early to help people avoid crisis, as well as supporting those who live life at the margins.

Uniting is the largest provider of community services in Victoria. Our key observations are drawn from practitioners working directly in family violence and related services, as well as from experience from other practitioners where Uniting is not the direct service provider.

Our submission highlights some positive areas where the family violence service system has changed since the Royal Commission. It also addresses key areas where there has been little progress and more action is required to bring about positive change for those experiencing family violence.

Our findings are grouped according to key themes identified in the Royal Commission report and include:

Perpetrators

All practitioners reported a lack of consistency in holding perpetrators to account.

A safe home

- *Access to housing continues to be the greatest challenge to support victims experiencing family violence* – Ultimately there is still not an adequate supply of safe and affordable housing for women and children. The focus continues to be on providing crisis accommodation for women and children which results in disruption to caring, work, and education. The result is further harm and families left in unsafe situations. Even with this focus, ongoing experience is that it is still difficult for women to access crisis accommodation.
- The Victorian Government should investigate options for crisis accommodation for men to be removed from the household. When options are available, magistrates should consider making men leave the

household a requirement of the interim domestic violence intervention, with wraparound services to support men's behaviour change.

- There needs to be further change to address access to crisis accommodation for families either making plans to leave or when they are experiencing tertiary homelessness (e.g. staying with a friend/family member known to perpetrator). Currently, families have been told by service providers that such situations do not constitute an emergency situation and they are therefore ineligible for crisis accommodation or family violence support.

Risk assessment and management

- The Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework (the MARAM Framework) is not presently achieving its aim to establish a system-wide shared understanding of family violence. This is exacerbated by a lack of access to training for Tier 3 and Tier 4 practitioners.

Information sharing

- Uniting practitioners who are involved in local Risk Assessment and Management Panels (RAMPs) find they consistently deliver responsive, informed, and timely outcome for families. However, practitioners who are not involved in the RAMP find this limits their ability to support positive outcomes.
- Uniting practitioners who have access to and receive referrals from Victoria Police via the L17 Family Violence Portal said the quality of the reporting had vastly improved. However, some practitioners do not have access to this system and are required to seek this information from Victoria Police on a case-by-case basis, impacting their ability to undertake fully informed risk assessments.

Pathways to services

- The focus of intervention continues to be on a crisis response model such as refuges. We believe there needs to be greater investment to implement earlier intervention family violence services, which have the capacity to work with women who are currently in relationships and experiencing early signs of family violence. There is a lack of these services and most family violence models are based on the crisis and shorter intervention model.
- Family Violence practitioners' ability to access flexible support packages has in some instances, greatly improved families' access to therapeutic and safety measures. However, some family violence services only operate an 8-week model. In some instances, this means the services are unable to support the family for the length of time it actually takes to create safety plans, support to leave, enter safe accommodation, pursue legal orders and engage in therapeutic supports.
- As the majority of funds in family violence are flexible support packages allocated to housing, we would encourage allowing homelessness services to deliver these packages -in addition to existing family violence organisations.

Family violence and the child protection system

- Experience suggests that in some instances, Child Protection staff from the Department of Health and Human Services are placing all the responsibility on women in family violence situations to make changes rather than holding the male perpetrator to account.

Police: front-line operations and workforce

- Whilst Victoria Police have made significant improvements in the reporting of family violence, further changes are still needed at the operational level. The role the Family Violence Liaison Officers (FVLO) and Youth Resource Officers (YRO) play in our community and partnerships are invaluable. However, a greater number of police in these specialist roles should be made available to a wider number of

cases as victims of family violence experience both positive and negative engagement with Victoria Police. There are still reports of instances of police blaming women for experiencing family violence.

Court-based responses to family violence in Victoria

- Men's Behaviour Change Programs are having significant positive outcomes. Impediments to successful delivery include instances where participation is required by a Court or mandated referral and men do not attend as required. In some cases, police are not acting on notifications to charge perpetrators for breaching Family Violence Intervention Order. COVID-19 has impacted Uniting's ability to undertake face-to-face group workshops, and moved to one-on-one counselling via teleconference, thereby significantly reducing the number of people involved in the program. A likely outcome will be a backlog of men requiring participation in the program once restrictions have been lifted.
- Victims have reported that not all Victorian Courts enable victims to give evidence in alternative places via teleconferencing. There are also multiple examples where Interim Intervention Orders are still taking months to become a Full Intervention Order. This is reported to have been compounded by COVID-19.

Family violence and diversity

- Experience suggests that mainstream service providers are not meeting the needs of victims with a disability. One practitioner reported; *"Inclusive and well-trained family violence specialist services are still not widely available and not adequately funded in the eastern region and services to families with disability largely depend on individual practitioner competencies."* Mainstream family violence services have not received adequate training to ensure they are providing equitable and accessible services for clients who are living with a disability. This is especially the case where clients have intellectual disabilities and are often seen to be 'non-compliant' or have 'disengaged behaviour' because the measurements of engagement are through an arbitrary 'ableist' lens.
- Uniting practitioners in some regions report that specific evidence based CALD therapeutic and specialist services are still neither widely available nor adequately funded. Mainstream family violence services have not been trained in providing culturally competent practice and as an example often do not use translated materials in first language or interpreters for each contact with clients.

Recovery: Financial security

- Driven by the requirements of regulators since the Royal Commission, family violence policies were developed across a range of industries including banking, insurance and other essential services. Uniting has supported many businesses by working with them and their staff to provide family violence and economic abuse training. This has seen many beneficial outcomes including helping staff to identify consumers who need additional support and referral pathways into the community sector with specialist skills in family violence.
- Uniting has also assisted many organisations to develop family violence support packages that assist individuals and families to resettle when leaving unsafe circumstances.

Commonwealth Issues

- Victims are experiencing significant barriers to receiving single parenting payment from Services Australia, with some reporting waiting upwards of three months to be approved.
- Different family violence systems in different states and a lack of consistency of language and law enforcement are putting victims in greater harm.
- Whilst family violence counselling through a referral from a general practitioner under a mental health treatment plan might be an option, many victims experience a gap payment that they cannot afford.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on our organisation, with just a few examples cited above.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback to this important consultation looking at how the Victorian Government and its agencies deliver the family violence reforms.

We would be pleased to provide further input and case studies on any of the areas covered in this submission.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Bronwyn Pike', written in a cursive style.

Bronwyn Pike
Chief Executive Officer Vic.Tas