

VACCAs submission: Monitoring the Family Violence Reforms

The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) welcomes the opportunity to provide input towards ‘Monitoring the Family Violence Reforms’ following the Royal Commission into Family Violence. VACCA is the lead Aboriginal child welfare organisation and the largest provider of Aboriginal family violence services in Victoria. As an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO), VACCA provides services to vulnerable Aboriginal children, families and communities. Our purpose is supporting culturally strong, safe and thriving Aboriginal communities. We believe in the principle of the right of Aboriginal people to self-determination, the rights of the child and we commit to upholding Victorian Aboriginal cultural protocols.

VACCA recognises that a number of momentous and promising reforms have been made following the Royal Commission, however there still remains a significant demand for policy responses that focus on culturally specific prevention and therapeutic support with a holistic understanding of the drivers of family violence amongst Aboriginal communities. Violence is not part of the Aboriginal cultural way and in order to meet the needs of Aboriginal communities, responses to family violence must be designed, developed, led and evaluated by ACCOs.

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

1. What are the major changes you have seen in the family violence service system since the Royal Commission into Family Violence made its final report and recommendations in 2016?

Family Violence Protocols

Since the final report, family violence protocols for referrals have improved, becoming a stronger process. VACCA now has access to the L17 portal which has created a referral pathway linking Aboriginal families in with culturally specific services as an alternative to going through mainstream organisations.

MARAM Alignment, Implementation and Embedding

Whilst this reform initiative is applauded, there are key issues with the implementation of the MARAM framework, discussed in more detail in question 5.

Healing and Recovery Family Violence Therapeutic Programs

The Royal Commission has recognised that there were not sufficient opportunities for women, children, young people and men who have experienced family violence to recover and heal from the trauma of family violence. Funding has been made available as a result of the Royal Commission for holistic, culturally safe, trauma informed, therapeutic services for Aboriginal women, children, young people and men who have experienced family violence.

Co-design programs

Since 2016, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has begun introducing co-design programs making a significant difference in breaking down the silos between Aboriginal and mainstream family violence services. Co-design helps to create programs that are able to meet the individual needs of each family in a trauma informed and culturally safe way.

An example of this is VACCA partnering with Anglicare Victoria to deliver the ‘*A Better Way*’ program in the Bayside Peninsula region. This program works with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families to intervene where there has been violence, supporting the family to help heal and work with fathers to hold them accountable. Aboriginal Elders, respected people and cultural practice experts guide the program, helping to break down barriers that may prevent Aboriginal families for seeking

support. However, this program does not receive ongoing funding and will lapse after the trial, full funding is required.

2. How has the experience of accessing services and support changed since the Royal Commission for victim survivors, including children, and perpetrators of family violence?

Safety Hubs/ Orange Doors

While the establishment of the Safety Hubs has been a welcomed feature of the family violence reform, more work is required to improve this response system to ensure services are culturally safe, utilised to their greatest capacity and achieve their intended purpose. Aboriginal families need to have access to a simplified referral pathway and be supported by culturally specific services. Aboriginal staff located in the Safety Hubs also need to feel culturally safe to provide co-ordinated, holistic care. The Victorian Auditor General's Office Report, 2020 (VAGO Report), highlights the service coordination is not yet effective or efficient thus not improving the lives of people affected by family violence and families needing support.

Police response to family violence

While the establishment of Family Investigation Units are commended, more specialist training, specifically Aboriginal cultural awareness training across the police force is needed to ensure the response is culturally consistent and appropriate. Cultural awareness training needs to be incorporated into all aspects of the police form to ensure the training is implemented in practice

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

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

Further investment in programs and services for men and young people using violence to support behavior change and healing

Currently there is only one case management program for Aboriginal men who use violence, and no identified therapeutic services. Ignoring the healing of men, not only ignores the need for healing in those who use violence but is also a disservice to affected women and children. Those who use violence have a lead role in their community in addressing violence. Greater resourcing is needed programs that give a voice and space to those who use violence to ensure they are able to have conversations about taking responsibility for violence in their community including, recognising all forms of violence, changing attitudes towards violence, and supporting each other to change their own and the behaviours of others.

Programs are needed specifically for men and young men; with a preventative focus and a focus on strengthening culture and healing. Through such projects men can collectively take a lead role in addressing violence to increase the safety and wellbeing of families. Many family violence programs focus at the tertiary end of violence, when violence has occurred. This by itself is not effective as violence in Aboriginal Communities continues to be prevalent. The Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families 10-year plan identifies the need for a holistic approach to addressing violence. Connection to culture, healing, engagement of men, self-esteem as capacity building, and community led initiatives are identified as being some key elements of good practice for effective family violence programs and need to key elements of healing programs.

A holistic family violence system

Family violence services and the entire family violence system needs to adopt a holistic approach based on the principle of culture as a critical protective factor. The system needs to acknowledge and recognise the impacts of colonisation, intergenerational trauma, Stolen Generations and experiences of family violence on both victims of family violence as well as on those who use violence. The mainstream family violence sector has a good understanding of family violence and its drivers

however this system does not acknowledge or understand prevalence amongst Aboriginal communities. For families and communities to heal, a process of strengthening customs and practices and relationships between family and kin is required. This includes a change of language, reorienting the system away from one that categorises women as victims and men as perpetrators to one that recognises their histories, their circumstances and applying a cultural lens to working with the entire family.

Greater investment in ACCOs

Long term funding for ACCOs and Aboriginal family violence services is essential not only to reducing rates of family violence but also to progressing self-determination. Self-determination is critical to effect change for Aboriginal communities and so meaningful progression through Aboriginal community-led service responses is required. ACCOs are best placed to support Aboriginal families and thus must be resourced to design, lead, deliver and evaluate solutions to provide an effective family violence service system.

4. Are there any parts of the family violence reforms that have not yet progressed enough and require more attention?

Homelessness and Housing

Homelessness services are seeing an increase in Aboriginal women and children experiencing family violence with no additional funding for ACCOs to provide support. Homelessness points are funded by mainstream services and Aboriginal families fleeing family violence do not always feel culturally safe to engage with a mainstream provider and are forced to retell their story. For Aboriginal women and children who are presenting extremely vulnerable, this can be a highly traumatising and triggering experience and seeking emergency accommodation is extremely difficult due to the inherent discrimination Aboriginal families and communities face. VACCA staff state 'that many motels will not accept VACCA clients. VACCA does not currently have sufficient funding to provide the appropriate emergency accommodation required to meet demand.

Culturally appropriate practices across the entire family violence system

There are number of Royal Commission recommendations sought to build and embed culturally appropriate practices across mainstream organisations to help better respond to Aboriginal communities requiring support. However, the implementation of some initiatives such as 'Strengthening Cultural Safety in Family Violence Mainstream Organisations' has been considerably challenging with progress weakened due to funding ceasing after two years. A two-year time frame to achieve attitudinal and cultural change required across mainstream organisations is not realistic or sustainable.

Prevention of Family Violence

VACCA would like to see further investment for Aboriginal family violence capacity building and culturally safe, trauma informed activities in the Aboriginal community, including prevention programs teaching healthy respectful relationships throughout the life stages commencing from pre-birth. A long-term commitment from government to fund Aboriginal research teams is also needed to authentically evaluate these prevention (breaking the cycle of family violence) programs.

5. Are there any improvements that could be made to the implementation approach of the family violence reforms?

MARAM alignment, implementation and embedding

A key issue with the implementation of the MARAM framework has been the fragmented release of the tools, guides and training. ACCOs are feeling overwhelmed by the volume of resources and the amount of competencies to achieve. The investment of funding to ACCOs for a whole of organisation alignment and embedment is piecemeal. ACCOs undertaking this work need to secure additional

funding resources to increase capacity over a longer timeline. The funding amount and time frame of 12 months is not adequate to further develop workforce development strategies.

MARAM Training Packages developed by government are not culturally appropriate and are dependent on ACCOs to apply an Aboriginal lens whilst not being remunerated appropriately for the considerable amount of work required. There has been no investment in culturally appropriate facilitated training and Aboriginal staff are expected to attend mainstream training. There is also a lack of MARAM mainstream training which often sells out within a very short time frame. It is also unclear which is the most appropriate training for staff to participate in.

Culturally appropriate MARAM tools developed by ACCOs do not align with the MARAM tools embedded in the software used for funded agencies such as the SHIP system. This makes it very confusing for staff using the culturally appropriate MARAM tools.

At the time of the submission, people using violence focussed MARAM Practice Guides have not been released which means that the approach of the implementation of the MARAM Risk Assessment is fragmented.

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

6. 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?

Spike in family violence

Experiences from around the world shows that during times of crisis such as COVID-19, there is a spike in family violence. Contributing factors known to increase the risk of family violence include financial and housing insecurity, and loss and uncertainty of employment and other additional stresses. These factors will be further exacerbated by the sustained periods of time that families are forced to spend together due to isolation and quarantine arrangements. At the same time, these conditions will create an inability for many to flee family violence and reduce access to supports such as schools, activities, and community services that may be closed for containment purposes.

Provision of service delivery

One of the biggest impacts on VACCA has been the reduced face to face contact between staff and clients due to physical distancing restrictions, impeding on service delivery and accessibility of services. These challenges have been compounded by a spike in demand for family violence services as a result of COVID-19. Physical distancing and 'stay at home' measures have contributed to social isolation, the exacerbation of collective and personal vulnerabilities, while also limiting options for people to seek support.

Consultations with VACCA staff in our family violence programs reflected that physical distancing and home-schooling is confining those at risk to their home, making family violence less visible and inhibiting access to appropriate supports and safety plans. The inability for face-to-face contact, home visits and counselling to the same extent as before has meant that some nuances could be missed with clients also posing difficulties for deeper and ongoing engagement and building of rapport. The majority of our early intervention family violence programs have been unable to function as before and have pivoted to crisis response. In this role, we have observed a significant increase in demand for over the phone support.

Staffing and demand

Data from our family violence programs showed a steady increase in referrals since the emergence of COVID-19 in five of our six regions. Referrals appeared to spike a couple of weeks after physical distancing restrictions were initially put in place and then plateaued and since then have varied between weeks. Our Orange Door Family Violence Support and Safety Hubs have also seen a spike in service demand with an increase in referrals with higher complexities and intensities.

In comparing referral reports from June to July, VACCA saw the overall incoming of referrals slightly decrease; May/ June report was 279 referrals whereas this report, June/July is 269 referrals. In contrast the June/July reporting of referrals to the Orange Doors, Southern and Northern reflected a minor increase; June/July Orange Door Southern – 56, Northern – 76 whereas May/June referrals to the Orange Door Southern -52 and Northern – 66.

This data demonstrates, there has been a dramatic increase in the outreach calls to current and previous clients. Last month's reporting was 867 to this month's of 1576 calls. Family Violence reflected that the families that are currently referred due to historical or current FV are facing more complexities in their lives by the pandemic such as AOD, mental health and thus the support is more intense. This report exemplifies the challenges that families are continuing to face including; further 'lock down', unpredictability during COVID-19, stressors of social isolation, financial concerns, government announcement of reduction of financial payments, children and young people returning to home schooling as well as physical and emotional exhaustion.

Overall VACCAs most recent referral reports during COVID-19 describe a consistent pattern of referrals however the dramatic increase in calls to current and past clients suggests that the challenges for Aboriginal families are currently facing are more complex and requiring an intense engagement in keeping women, children, young people and men safe, physically and emotionally in their home.

In particular, our Southern region experienced high caseloads due to not having Family Violence Case Management funding in order to respond to the influx of L17 referrals. This is concerning in a context of already disrupted external support services where some essential behaviour change programs are no longer operating or have stopped taking referrals. Our families have also reported poor experiences in mainstream crisis accommodation suggesting the need for more culturally safe programs and refuges such as our Orana Gunyah program. As an Aboriginal organisation with a high number of Aboriginal staff, VACCA is challenged with a large number of staff identifying as high risk due to health concerns. This has resulted in our staff being extremely stretched, under resourced and underfunded to meet demand.

Family court's role in family violence reform

Aboriginal communities, ACCOs and VACCA continue to identify the Family Court System as confusing, traumatising and not always culturally safe. It is anticipated that these experiences may be exacerbated due to COVID-19 and its impact on the legal and courts system.

Courts have delayed a number of matters due to COVID-19 social distancing and government guidelines. As a result, courts are getting more and more backlogged and matters that previously would have taken 6-18 weeks are not getting their first appearance booked until the end of the year. This is concerning as when courts re-open it is expected there will be a significant demand, legal teams will be under extreme pressure and what is already an extremely stressful process, will be drawn out causing women, children and families significant family violence risk, distress and anxiety.

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

Strengths

Whilst it is not a new revelation and has been widely reported, a strength further highlighted by COVID-19 is the benefits of investing in ACCOs to meet the needs of Aboriginal communities. ACCOs delivering family violence services are well connected to our communities, families of concern and have been able to engage with and build rapport more effectively. Our practice approaches incorporate understandings of the impact of past policies on families today, understand how experiences of intergenerational trauma and racism must be incorporated into effective service system responses and acknowledge the specific risks, fears and impacts COVID-19 is having on

Aboriginal families. We know that providing Aboriginal services for the Aboriginal community is what works.

Adaptability of ACCOs

A strength evident during COVID-19 has been the ability of ACCOs to adapt to and meet the needs of Aboriginal families and communities. Given the low number of cases amongst Aboriginal communities, it is evident ACCOs have been able to identify and communicate where support is needed and provide a culturally specific response tailored to Aboriginal peoples needs. VACCA efficiently and effectively shifted our service delivery to meet government guidelines for COVID-19 as well as ensuring our staff and families are supported during the crisis. In particular, VACCA developed a number of resources and tools that were available online and shared amongst networks including; a VACCA Family Violence Risk Assessment tool, Family Violence Response Contact list, and Family Violence Fact Sheets for staff and clients.

Weaknesses

Insufficient investment in ACCOs

The Victorian Government has invested \$40.2 million in specialist services and crisis accommodation however, it is unclear what exact percentage of this sum will go towards Aboriginal-specific family violence supports. VACCA has also received funding in almost all of our regions to support the family violence and sexual assault response to COVID-19. While this much needed funding is welcomed, it does not reflect the demand of Aboriginal family violence services.

Coordination between ACCOs and mainstream

Another weakness identified in the family violence service system has been the disconnect between the strategic and operational functions of Family Safety Victoria despite many points of engagement and response potential under COVID-19. In addition, the lack of understanding of the ACCO service sector role, capacity and value in responding to and working with those who are vulnerable and at risk is a critical missed opportunity. Given the current volatile environment and the importance of this work, we need greater investment directed to Aboriginal specific family violence support programs and culturally safe crisis accommodation and refuges.

Housing and crisis accommodation

Access to safe housing and crisis accommodation is a continuing weakness in the family violence service system that has been recently highlighted by COVID-19. The pandemic has exacerbated the number of people seeking refuge and requiring housing. Whilst initiatives have been established such as the CBD Motel Taskforce, there is grave concern about what will happen to those who have been temporarily housed when these initiatives cease.

Data from our family violence programs suggests that between the 1st and 15th June, 21 of our family violence clients sought refuge and it can be expected that some of these were placed in CBD motels. There is concern that the case management and mental health support offered at CBD motels is not guaranteed to be culturally appropriate and it is unclear whether they are adequately meeting the needs of Aboriginal families fleeing a violent situation. VACCA has heard reports that some Aboriginal women and children experiencing family violence were hesitant to access CBD motels for this reason and others reported experiencing racism and discrimination when seeking accommodation, with some being turned away. Having to access support through mainstream services often creates a disjointed system with many of our clients referred between services creating additional barriers for families to navigate while in crisis.

The supports required for those experiencing family violence vary depending on their circumstances and the accommodation provided needs to be able to meet individual needs. Young people leaving care, young mothers, families, people with disability and men all require wrap around support that recognises their individual needs. For example, women fleeing violent partners have reported to

VACCA that they do not feel safe being placed in a hotel where there may not be security, fearful that their partner may find them and away from their support networks.

The increased risk to family violence in the context of COVID-19 is particularly concerning as we know this to be a significant contributor to homelessness amongst Aboriginal communities with an expected flow on effect to increase demand on the family violence and homelessness systems. VACCA is also concerned that the emergence of family violence for the first time for some families will contribute to a greater future demand on support services and crisis accommodation

8. Are there any changes resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic that you think should be continued?

Online services have further reach

Offering services online has allowed for greater reach of our programs and services with the ability for more children, women and families to participate. It has also given staff the ability to do more welfare checks over the phone as travel time is reduced.

However, this strength is only applicable to those with access to internet and electronic devices to participate online or over the phone. Some of VACCAs families do not have access to devices or internet to access services or it may be unsafe for them to call if they are stuck at home with the family member using violence. Staff also reported difficulties in flagging family violence without face to face contact or it may not be identifiable over video or phone call.

Flexible work

Work flexibility is likely to be continued such as working from home as staff are now set up with the tools to work from home.

General Comments

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

Fulfilling the vision articulated in Ending Family Violence requires continued effort and investment, with particular investment to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to see the key reform initiatives effectively embedded. Without secure long-term funding to resource capacity building across the family violence system, progress will be challenging and fragmented.