

**REF: DRAFT FRAMEWORK FOR AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL PLAN TO END VIOLENCE
AGAINST WOMEN AND CHILDREN**
CISVIC SUBMISSION TO CONSULTATION INQUIRY

28 July 2021

Australian Government
Department of Social Services
Nationalplanfeedback@dss.gov.au

To the Consultation Inquiry,

Thank-you for the opportunity to have input into Australia's next National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children. We appreciate the government's ongoing commitment to this crucial issue.

I am the Executive Officer of Community Information & Support Victoria (CISVic), the peak body representing 55 local community information and support services, across 64 sites in Victoria. We are also the lead agency in a consortium of 29 local centres delivering federally funded Emergency Relief under contracts. Services provided by our generalist, place-based member agencies include: material aid, food, information, advocacy, referral, case management, budgeting assistance, financial counselling, No Interest Loans, and personal counselling. Each year we have contact with around 500,000 Victorians, and we are very often the first agency contacted when people are in need but are not sure what is available.

Of particular relevance for this submission, CISVic member agencies are supporting women experiencing and fleeing situations of family violence every day. In fact, we are very often their 'first port of call'. We understand from our members that the family violence crisis has been escalating in recent times, in the context of woefully inadequate or locally-absent support services.

While this submission will focus on the service system, we wish to firstly endorse the following dimensions in the draft framework:

Vision:

An Australia free from all forms of gender-based violence

Mission:

Creating intergenerational change to eliminate violence against women and children in Australia.

Principles:

1. Everyone has a right to live free from violence, and reducing violence against women and children is everyone's responsibility.
2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must be at the centre of all aspects of responding to violence in their communities.
3. Gender inequality is a key driver of violence against women, and reinforced by factors such as socio-economic status, mental illness and prejudice.
4. Our approach to women and children with diverse lived experiences needs to be inclusive, strengths-based, and promote social cohesion.
5. Children and young people need responses that are age appropriate and tailored to their needs.
6. Actions will be based on evidence from lived experience and research relating to violence against women and children.

In addition we fully endorse a prime focus on *preventing* domestic, family and sexual violence as a national priority. Other priorities relating to primary prevention in the draft framework are: responding to sexual violence and sexual harassment (where this commonly occurs), and working with perpetrators in a holistic approach '*to inform prevention, deterrence, rehabilitation and to ensure accountability*'.

Indeed, if primary prevention was successful, these two 'outcomes' of the draft framework would become true: '*All communities are safe and free from violence*', and '*Relationships are respectful*' – worthy goals to be sure. Requisite to such primary prevention is a fundamental shift in culture in all parts and at all levels of society, wherein females are consistently treated with dignity and respect, and provided with equal social and economic opportunities.

Conversely, if effective primary prevention was in place, the faults of the current support service system would certainly not have such serious health and life impacting consequences, as they do at this time. Thus, while primary prevention is crucial, the national Plan needs to have a strong focus on improving service system responses as well i.e.: '***Support services need specialised skills to provide trauma-informed and strength-based support that meets the needs of women and children***'. The *outcome* most closely relating to this priority in the draft framework is: '*Services meet the needs of women and their children experiencing violence*'. A related outcome is: '*Justice responses are effective*'.

We acknowledge that all levels of government play a part in preventing and supporting those affected by all forms of gender-based violence, with different remit, but believe that this vision can only be achieved through effective collaboration. While this submission speaks to issues associated with state funded services, if parts of the national system are dysfunctional, this plan will inevitably fall short.

Although the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence in 2016 found that people affected by family violence were not receiving the support and services they needed, it is evident from the first-hand accounts of service providers in CISVic member agencies that this has not been generally resolved. In fact, members have been reporting a substantial influx of women seeking help due to family violence. At the same time, they describe a general lack of adequate services to support these women and their children. To learn more about this situation and what might be done to address it, CISVic, as the peak body for the sector, has consulted with agencies through a range of avenues, both formal and informal. Information gathered from these conversations and consultations informs this submission.

Overall, CISVic member agencies report that Family Violence support services are either locally absent, or inaccessible, insensitive and inappropriate. This is not to suggest that there are no family violence support services doing highly valuable work supporting women and children dealing with family violence. While there are undoubtedly services doing this work with immense skill and commitment, many of our member agencies are acutely aware of the *gaps* in the service system and when it is *failing* the women seeking help. To us, this indicates that the system is clearly under-resourced to meet the increasing demand, putting more women and children at risk. As a peak body for 55 agencies, CISVic is also aware that there is great variation in local service networks, thus some of the more specific points raised in this submission are not necessarily true in every local area. (For example, not all local areas have an Orange Door hub at this stage). With these qualifications in mind, the following points have been raised by our members.

- Many CISVic member agencies are putting substantial resources into advocating for people experiencing family violence to get specialist family violence services to support them.¹ Without this advocacy, many victim-survivors are either not able to access specialist services or are not receiving adequate or appropriate support from them.
- People experiencing family violence are often not able to receive formal support from specialist services due to narrow eligibility criteria such as: visa status, having no income, or if the woman is considering some ongoing contact with the partner or between the children and their father.²
- There are culturally inappropriate and unsafe responses to women experiencing family violence in the three systems of: family violence specialist services, police, and the legal system. A representative from one agency said: *‘They come back to us. All the money has gone into the hubs and our services are still*

¹ One member agency has created and self-funded a new advocacy position to do this.

² In one instance a woman’s case was reportedly closed by the service for the latter reason without her knowing it and without the service helping in any way.

doing all the work'. This refers to women from CALD backgrounds and Aboriginal women.

- While the MARAM framework³ specifies that agencies should refer to family violence specialist services, the resources don't generally exist to implement the framework. In addition, while MARAM is designed to address 'risk' there needs to be broader education and awareness about what family and domestic violence is and how to best respond to it.
- It was reported that police do not always understand the nature of family violence and the different forms it can take, thus their responses can be inappropriate or insensitive.
- Some CISVic member agencies are volunteer-only and do not have qualified case workers to support people experiencing family violence, in which case the absence of responsive specialist services in the area is a problem with risk for health, well-being and life itself.

Agency quotes

'Clients report that Family Violence services are supportive whilst they are in crisis but once they are deemed safe, they are left on their own. These clients are usually from CALD communities and do not have a good understanding of the systems and services available to them. Language barriers also make accessing services difficult. Supports such as FSP⁴ are a great resource, but they would benefit from longer term case management...'⁵

'I have found the family violence clients find it hard to speak up, there appears to be a stigma around disclosing, embarrassment etc. Most of the clients I have had that I feel are struggling with this have children and stay for them. Those who do not (have children) feel isolated and often have nowhere else to go than the perpetrator's home. That is often a barrier as women do not know who they can turn to and what is safe. Fear of losing children and having to move can be overwhelming, it would be great to see more support workers to be there from start to finish as many of these women are traumatised and the support and encouragement could go a long way. More family violence training is needed in services like ours to assist people in picking up the signs and being able to action anything ... disclosed.

In areas where 'Orange Door' (OD) support and safety hubs exist, they are said to be generally unhelpful, even while they were intended to coordinate specialist support on the recommendation of the Royal Commission into Family Violence. Feedback from member agencies about various OD services include:

³ <https://www.vic.gov.au/family-violence-multi-agency-risk-assessment-and-management>

⁴ The Flexible Support Packages (FSP) program aims to support women, children and others who have experienced Family Violence.

⁵ This agency provides case management support in the following areas: Access to financial support/counselling, ER support, Housing support, Group support, Family Violence counselling, and Advocacy.

- In some areas OD seems to be merely duplicating what the CISVic member agency is already doing e.g. assessment and referral to other services, albeit less sensitively and effectively, and without providing additional resources in the local area to assist people affected by family violence. One CISVic member agency said: *'They do nothing at the end of the day. People would rather access our services'*.
- OD services can be slow or inactive in linking with and getting to know other services in the area, for the purpose of referral⁶. Related to this, agencies report that OD hubs do not understand their service and that they make inappropriate referrals, greatly compounding the distress of people seeking help. Victims of family violence who have *'experienced so much'* are said to lose faith in systems and services.
- People seeking help come back to the CISVic member agencies when they have been unable to get help from OD. Reasons given for this include: long waiting lists, language barriers, and culturally unsafe processes and systems.
- In the absence of skilled multicultural workers who are able to communicate with women from CALD backgrounds, OD may routinely refer women to certain services whether such referrals are appropriate or not.
- In the absence of multicultural workers at OD, women seeking help rely on their own community or return to the perpetrator.
- Having perpetrators access the same hub as victims/survivors is a serious safety issue.

Of grave concern, it was suggested by one agency that OD is *'shifting people through the pipeline'* and *'closing off clients'* without them receiving genuine support. This was viewed as a serious ethical problem. I would add it presents a serious safety issue too.

Agency quote:

'I think Family Violence is an incredibly important issue that needs additional resources and support and we at [AGENCY REDACTED] have definitely seen an increase in presentations of women experiencing various forms of abuse which has highlighted the complexity of their situations and the gaps in the system designed to support them... My personal experience has been it's very challenging navigating Family Violence services. (There are) lots of barriers and exclusion criteria and the process can often leave women feeling deflated, misunderstood and like their situation isn't "bad enough" to warrant help - so then when their circumstances change again for the worse they believe there is nothing out there to help them. I've also experienced a lack of "wrap around service". They may be offered emergency accommodation but the logistics of separating are often neglected i.e. they are financially worse off and that's not addressed. (That's often where we come in). Their mental health needs are overlooked and they experience significant isolation.'

⁶ In one exception the CISVic member agency successfully engaged the OD worker to be part of local Family Violence network meetings.

It was suggested that while the 'bare bones' of required services are being put in place e.g. OD and MARAM, the next step is that they be better equipped to do their job. In addition distinct gaps in the service system were said to include: housing, support for LGBTIQ+ people, recovery, and prevention.

- There is a drastic under-supply of affordable, stable housing for women and children leaving violent situations, often forcing them to live in or return to unsafe homes. Rent payment is a particular and constant issue for many.
- There are few support services for LGBTIQ+ people experiencing family or domestic violence.
- Prevention programs are currently under—funded, and there is little in the way of recovery services for women who have experienced domestic or family violence and who are doing their best to re-build their lives.

The service system as a whole evidently requires skilling up to respond appropriately to family and domestic violence - at multiple points. Examples given by member agencies included: disability services, housing, Emergency Relief, Centrelink, police, and the Magistrates Court.

One agency said the following resources would be of significant benefit in supporting women and children leaving situations of Family Violence:

- *Funding for a Family Violence specialist in each Emergency Relief team..., or at least a contact with an organisation that Emergency Relief staff can call on when needed*
- *Advocacy from a Family Violence specialist in dealing with local police, establishing a relationship so that Emergency Relief becomes a space from where women can contact police if they are comfortable.*
- *A Centrelink contact for each organisation to connect with when Family Violence is an issue.*

Suggestions

1. Victorian Government funds a case worker in every CISVic member agency to address family violence and other serious ongoing issues.
2. CISVic continues to provide specialist training in family violence for member agencies and volunteer Community Support Workers.
3. Government resources be redirected from the current OD model which is not working, to much-needed, culturally appropriate and responsive specialist family violence services and supports in local areas.
4. Government resources be directed to more family and domestic violence support services that address the needs of LGBTIQ+ people.

5. More training be provided to a range of front line workers at different points of the system, (including service support, legal and police), to understand and *respond* appropriately to domestic and family violence.
6. More funding be provided for longer-term and sustainable *recovery* initiatives.
7. More funding be provided for longer-term and sustainable *prevention* initiatives⁷.
8. The service system be made less complex, siloed and easier to navigate.

From our experience, and that of our member agencies assisting women experiencing Family Violence, the system needs to be much better resourced, and more integrated, within a holistic, whole-person approach. Such integration could include: generalist support and multiple sites of potential first response, as well as Family Violence specialist support, and holistic case management⁸. This could usefully begin with more integration of priorities and focus areas in the actual '*National Plan to End Violence...*'.

Thank-you for your attention to the issues and suggestions in this submission. Should you wish to discuss any of them with me or with key member agencies, please do not hesitate to contact me on 0407 670 125 or at kate@cisvic.org.au.

Yours sincerely,



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⁷ One suggested that effective, sustainable preventive programs take at least five years.

⁸ Housing would be included here, except that the fundamental problem is the serious lack of supply.