



## **Response from Glastonbury Child and Family Services to the National Domestic Violence Strategy – July 08**

We would like to congratulate the Federal Government, the Minister Jenny Macklin and the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (Office for Women) for recognising the need for a national strategy for combating Domestic Violence and for working toward making women and children's safety a national priority.

Glastonbury Child and Family Services has been serving the communities of Geelong and the Barwon South Western region in Victoria for over 150 years; providing out of home care for children and intensive support for vulnerable families who are experiencing a broad range of stressors. Glastonbury is an active participant in relevant peak bodies and we seek every opportunity to provide a mechanism to hear the voices of the children, young people and families with whom we work.

We want to acknowledge the fact that FaHCSIA has been listening too and has done sufficient research to understand the multiple effects of violence and how it impacts on individuals and society more broadly – clearly this understanding has provided the impetus for developing a national strategy. For that reason we will not load our response with references to various research papers confident in the knowledge that on this issue we have common understanding and that this proposal signals a way forward from here.

### **1. Why is domestic violence and sexual assault happening in Australia?**

Family violence is a complex problem confronting our community. It transcends all social classes, is often hidden and has a profound and damaging effect on relationships particularly for children and women. It is broadly understood that social, economic, cultural, familial and individual dynamics all play a role to

varying and variable degrees in the existence and 'nature' of individual acts of violence. There is no simple answer as to why domestic violence and sexual assault exists in Australia (or any nation). Any attempt to simplify the complexities is likely to be tabloid in nature and skew the focus for remedial action adopted by the strategy. An argument could be mounted that we have gone too far in tolerating divergent opinions and actions; that the individualistic nature of our society has overridden broader obligations to the Australian cultural collective. Alternatively, we might argue that individuals who have endured violence and been deprived of the opportunities afforded most members of society are virtually predetermined to perpetuate cycles of violence. Both of these arguments have varying degrees of validity and 'truth' to them but do not stand alone as effective explanations for the ongoing existence of violence in all its forms.

What we can say with some certainty is that for violence to be perpetrated there is a level of justification in the mind of the perpetrator. We might extrapolate from that statement that for a member of Australian society to feel justified in committing violence that they feel society more broadly might support the justification. In other words, we as a nation have not enforced the 'understanding' that some acts are utterly unacceptable, unjustifiable and completely taboo. Social and legal sanctions do not reinforce the sense of taboo and often, though inaction or inadequate action effectively turns a blind eye to violence. This sense of social consent to some acts of violence not only gives perpetrators a sense of 'rightness' it engenders in the victim a sense that they 'deserved' it. Why does violence exist in Australia? It is enacted by individuals living in a society that implicitly acquiesces.

Clearly men are the main perpetrators of family violence in our community. Despite changes in social policy and attempts to address this issue, it is essentially hidden as it usually happens in private and by perpetrators that in the main that are close to or well known by survivors of assault. The public awareness campaign to bring this issue into the mainstream should be applauded as the media campaign on TV to bring this issue out of the private sphere into the public domain is absolutely necessary.

The simple answer to the question above is that family violence is happening in Australia because some men believe it is OK to treat women this way and that some women allow men to treat them this way. In short - men do so because they can. We do acknowledge that not all violence is perpetrated by men but in the main this is unfortunately the case.

## 2. What resources, programs or services are you aware of that are successful in preventing or reducing the effects of domestic and family violence or sexual assault?

Broadly speaking there are few widespread approaches to effectively eliminating violence. There is no unified, strategic response to the issue hence the current scoping of a national strategy. We do know from international experience and specific Australian programs that interventions that directly target perpetrators of violence such as behaviour change programs for men have the greatest chance of reducing and / or eliminating violence. Additionally more work needs to be undertaken with young men and young women in schools in the context of developing intimate personal relationships. A nationally unified approach that incorporates police, courts, and perpetrator-specific services must be developed. The resultant approach must strongly reinforce the message that violence is totally unacceptable; this message should be reinforced by an ongoing and sustained media campaign to reinforce the 'cultural-collective' view.

## 3. What are the barriers to family safety for women and children in Australia?

As already stated above, Australian society is unsafe for women and children because of the ongoing, inadequate nature of the socio-politico-legal response to protecting our most vulnerable members of society. We already know so much about the impact of violence and trauma on children and adolescents.

There are systemic failures in how we as a society respond to family violence. Many men seek help when it is often too late, and the opportunity for change is diminished. Sanctions imposed are often weak, are not followed through or monitored, particularly if men and women move geographically. A focus of

effort by the system and the perpetrator is on attendance of activities rather than a change in client presentation or behaviour after participating in a program. Funding for perpetrator Family Violence programs is quite limited and does not recognise the amount of psycho-education, challenging and personal counselling and support required to assist men to change entrenched abusive behaviour.

The cumulative and sustaining affect of family violence and sexual assault is enormous and has a ripple effect throughout the community. These life experiences not only impact at an individual level they influence broader social interactions and also perpetuate inter-generational cycles of abuse and trauma. Knowing so much and yet, to date, doing so little is symptomatic of socially sanctioned neglect. Additionally in terms of client presentations there is significant correlation within domestic and family violence, drug and alcohol abuse and mental health and yet no coordination of service delivery between these systems.

#### 4. What suggestions do you have to reduce domestic and family violence and sexual assault against women and children?

Clearly, more work needs to be done at both the preventative and treatment end of the service continuum. We need to develop more preventative programs particularly with primary and secondary schools. We need to develop Community Education at a number of levels – group programs and specific services to create further awareness of violence, its different forms much of which could be delivered via sports clubs and school settings – in places and spaces that people access.

As a service sector we also need to provide Behaviour Change Programs for young men who are violent. Most (if not all) the perpetrator programs that are funded generally target men in couple relationships. Unfortunately in the main there are no services for young single men who have been, or are violent to participate in such programs before they develop long term relationships and become fathers.

We strongly support the Child and Family Welfare Association of Australia (CAFWAA) view that the new strategy must be underpinned by three key principles:

- that every woman, child and young person in Australia has the right (as does every man) to live free from violence and abuse
- that a robust early intervention and prevention service system is the key to providing support and protection to families and will reduce both violence and increasingly statutory responses to domestic and family violence
- that a coordinated approach to domestic and family violence across agencies, government departments and the states is the key to the reduction of violence.

As an organisation working with vulnerable children, families and communities we welcome the opportunity to contribute to this National Plan. A new and vigorous strategy must be a national priority not just for government but for all Australians.

Yours sincerely

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

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