

# Submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence

May 2015

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## Executive Summary

This submission for the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence is written by Whittlesea Community Connections (WCC), a generalist service provider working across the Whittlesea local government area (LGA). It begins by establishing WCC's role providing integrated services across a range of programs from which clients experiencing family violence might access support. It then sets the context, detailing the characteristics of the Whittlesea community and its experience of family violence.

Theme 1 explores WCC's organisational experience of family violence and the specific challenges faced by women and children experiencing family violence in our community. It then explores examples of current promising practice, including integrated service models, legal service responses, and three specialist projects – The Whittlesea CALD Communities Family Violence Project, the Hamdel Project, and the Housing Brokerage and Support Project.

Theme 2 considers options for improving the family violence system. It first explores 'on the ground' solutions, specifically calling for better integration of specialist and non-specialist services as well as increased funding for women's support groups and men's behaviour change programs. It then suggests system level changes, including state-wide respectful relationship training in all school curricula, improvements to both the legal and immigration systems' handling of family violence cases, and targeted funding models that reflect areas and communities most at risk.

The submission concludes with a list of recommendations for consideration by the Royal Commission.

## Recommendations

Set out below are our recommendations for improving the sector across the spectrum of prevention, early intervention and response. First and foremost, encompassing all of the recommendations below, it is important that any funding models acknowledge communities at greater risk, based on a range of factors including family violence incidence rates, social disadvantage, population growth, at-risk cohorts, and remoteness/isolation.

### Integration

- Investment in integrated service models that provide a range of services in the one location, offering multiple soft-entry points, streamlined holistic service delivery, and support across the prevention, early intervention and crisis response spectrum. This includes funding for coordinated

prevention/intervention projects that encourage multi-disciplinary partnerships. One model is one-stop community hubs where community members can access lawyers, social workers, family violence workers, and meet police. These are particularly pertinent to regional, rural or growth areas where lack of transport and distance make accessing services difficult.

- Support for increased presence of specialist family violence services in all LGAs.
- Consistent data collection across all services to better capture the reality of family violence in Victoria
- More work into unpacking the link between problem gambling and family violence
  - Funding for research to determine the link between problem gambling and family violence
  - Harm minimization legislation that decreases problem gambling harm, including \$1 maximum bets, pokie machine venues banned from shopping precincts, and closing the loop-hole on cash-withdrawals in gaming venues.

### Legal

- Increased access to justice for those experiencing family violence, including:
  - Specialist family violence support workers co-located at every community legal centre
  - Specialist family violence/family law lawyers in every Victorian community legal centre with resourcing to represent women in court and support VOCAT claims, particularly where eligibility for Victoria Legal Aid or Women's Legal Service may be limited
  - Local justice precincts that reduce the distance between communities and courts
- Changes to infringement system to recognise family violence as a 'special circumstance'
- Changes to privacy laws to improve information-sharing between police, hospitals, lawyers and family violence services while still maintaining client confidentiality.

### CALD Communities

- Support to increase access of CALD communities to family violence services and projects
  - Additional accredited family violence training for interpreters
  - Family violence information provided as part of broader compulsory rights and responsibilities training during early settlement
  - Increased funding for CALD-specific family violence services to broaden their reach across the state
- Cultural-awareness and family violence responsiveness training for all police officers
- Changes to immigration law to better support family violence victims
  - Adjust eligibility for women on Temporary Partner Visas experiencing family violence to be able to access the crisis payment and special benefits, at a minimum
  - Family Tax Benefit paid to women with custody of children on leaving a violent relationship, regardless of visa status

- Faster visa processing that does not leave women vulnerable on bridging visas where fears about breaching the Immigration Department Code of Behaviour may stop them seeking family violence support
- Extend eligibility of settlement services to all forms of temporary visa holders who have experienced violence

### Prevention

- Investment in community-led prevention and early intervention projects that utilise participatory flexible community development approaches. These should build community capacity and work with both women and men. Learning from current projects such as the Whittlesea CALD Communities FV Project and the Hamdel Project should inform these. Successful pilot projects should receive ongoing funding to continue their good work.
- While it is important that prevention work be funded to address the causes of gendered violence, a downstream upstream approach must be taken that recognises prevention and awareness will increase disclosures, thus specialist services must be supported to meet increases in demand.
- Respectful relationships training embedded in all school curricula alongside funding and capacity-building to support schools to deliver this
- Gender equity mainstreaming across all local Council's every day practice, using City of Whittlesea's Gender Equity Strategy as an example

### Early Intervention

- Increased funding for generalist women's support groups, recognising that the more connected women are the more access they have to information and supports for family violence. This is a demonstrated key prevention and early intervention initiative as evidenced by the WCFVP.

### Response

- More MBC programs including CALD and indigenous-specific courses. Mandating powers should be expanded across all courts and postcode eligibility widened to allow all men to be eligible.
- Better Centrelink response to family violence
  - Training for all staff
  - More efficient processing for family violence claims
  - Family violence specialist liaison officers

### Recovery

- Continued support for women during the rebuilding phase of their journey
  - Increased rental assistance from Centrelink following the end of violent relationship
  - HBSP projects that support women to locate and sustain private rental
  - Additional support for children who have experienced violence to address impacts on their developmental and educational wellbeing
  - Specialist employment projects for women who have experienced violence to support them to re-enter the workplace and begin to rebuild their independence and self-esteem.

## Background

### Our organisation

Whittlesea Community Connections (WCC) is an independent community service agency based in Epping, Victoria with a municipal-wide profile and reach. WCC's vision is for a Whittlesea in which people and agencies work together to make a positive difference to their community, ensuring that everyone has equal access to the community's resources and services. Established in one of Victoria's most culturally diverse communities, WCC has a long-track record in service delivery, partnership development and the promotion of equity and access for disadvantaged members of Whittlesea's communities.

WCC has an approach that includes multiple entry points for receiving support and accessing opportunities; a large and diverse volunteer base creating pathways for community connection; service delivery and service planning with the community; and a community led approach to organisational governance and program development. WCC is committed to responsive approaches to the challenges posed by Whittlesea's changing population and its services and programs are driven by values that prioritise non-judgemental approaches and strengthen individuals, families and communities.

WCC is: -

- **Community-led.** It works alongside individuals and the community, creating opportunities to build and strengthen connections, supporting a community that is more resilient and therefore better able to support itself
- **Person-centred.** It aims to remove barriers to accessing information and support, working towards building individual capacity and strength.
- **Flexible.** It works to identify and create innovative, sustainable solutions to unmet needs that empower the community.

### WCC Services and Programs

- A community information and referral service
- Settlement services
- Community legal services
- Volunteer resource services
- Community transport services
- Case support and management
- Emergency relief
- A Housing Brokerage and Support Service for people at risk of homelessness
- A family violence prevention and early intervention project for culturally diverse communities
- A 'Women-in-Work' training and social enterprise
- Learner driver and road safety programs
- Youth work
- Learning support programs
- Support groups

### Our Community

The City of Whittlesea is located approximately 20 kilometres to the north of Melbourne and covers an area of 490 sq. kilometres. The LGA's large geographic boundaries includes both suburban and rural areas including the suburbs of Beveridge, Bundoora, Donnybrook, Doreen, Eden Park, Epping, Epping North,

Humevale, Kinglake West, Lalor, Mernda, Mill Park, South Morang, Thomastown, Whittlesea, Wollert, Woodstock and Yan Yean.

The municipality contains established urban, growth and rural areas and is one of the fastest growing municipalities in Australia; in 2013 the City's population was approximately 194,498, and this is expected to grow by 72 per cent over the next twenty years. This number is expected to increase to approximately 333,702 by 2036<sup>1</sup>.

The City of Whittlesea is one of the most culturally diverse populations in Victoria with more than one third of its residents born overseas. The municipality is home to migrants from more than 140 countries.

### **An overview of the City of Whittlesea's statistics includes:**

- The LGA is coping with a significant net population growth of almost 200 people a week, including a local birth-rate of 60 babies a week (equivalent to 2-3 kindergarten classes).
- The rapid urbanisation of green-field areas means communities with limited or no public transport, no local schools and no social or community service infrastructure.
- It has significant pockets of urban and inter-generational disadvantage – particularly in suburbs such as Thomastown and Lalor.
- It is one of the most multicultural communities in Victoria. 30% of residents come from a country where English is not the first language – double the Victorian average. 43% speak a language other than English at home.
- 30% of residents speak English 'not well' or 'not at all'
- In 2013 the top five birthplaces of migrants newly arrived to the municipality were India (22 per cent of new arrivals), China (12 per cent), Iran (10 per cent), Iraq (7 per cent) and Sri Lanka (6 per cent).
- The LGA lost \$99m on poker machines in 2014, with an expected financial year loss of \$105m. Each resident adult in the area loses an average of \$700 per year, higher than the state average. Losses from poker machines increased by 12% last financial year compared to the previous period. This is a higher burden on our community compared to total state losses, which increased 1% between 2012/2013 to 2013/2014.

### **Family Violence in Whittlesea**

The LGA has one of the highest rates of family violence in the north. Over the past five years the number of incidents reported to police has almost doubled (1,270 in 2009/10 to 2,359 in 2013/14). From 2012/13 to 2013/14 this rate increased by 12%; in comparison, in Victoria, the increase was only 7.4%. In 38% of Whittlesea cases children were present and in a third (33.1%) of cases an Intervention Order or Family Violence Safety Notice was issued or applied for.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://forecast.id.com.au/whittlesea/home> (accessed 30/04/2015)

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## Theme 1: The Whittlesea Experience - Promising practice and community challenges

### Whittlesea Community Connections' experience of family violence

Police statistics, of course, are only part of the picture and as an organisation we are well aware of the fact that many women who have experienced or live with family violence do not report this to the police. To understand this more and to help in our response to this critical issue in our community, WCC has developed its own data collection mechanism for recording cases and representations to us of family violence. The analysis of this is outlined below.

Whittlesea Community Connections sees almost two family violence cases for each working day. In 2014, 361 people sought family violence support, an increase of 29% from the previous year. The most recent quarter (Jan-March 2015) saw 103 family violence cases – the highest quarter on record – suggesting numbers are continuing to increase. Approximately half of those seeking family violence support are doing so for the first time and have not accessed another service or agency (including the police).

Of all the WCC service areas, our community legal service is traditionally the largest entry point (approximately 70-80% of all clients). However, recent quarterly reports have shown significant rises in those entering through the emergency relief service (more than doubling since the Jul-Sept 2014 period). Of those entering through the legal service, a majority (42%) came through WCC's lawyer out-post at the Greensborough Family Relationship Centre.

In the most recent quarter, nearly half (42%) of family violence clients were born overseas, and half of these spoke a language other than English at home. 44% of all clients had previously contacted police, and 42% had an intervention order.

This picture demonstrates the importance of generalist services as a key entry point for identifying, responding to and referring family violence cases. Our experience is that women are often not coming forward in the first instance to disclose family violence, but to seek other support which is required in rebuilding their lives as a result of family violence. It is all the more critical that generalist services like ours are resourced and trained to identify and respond effectively to family violence as a critical intervention point. We are then able to demystify the service system, reduce the stigma associated with disclosure and provide practical support for victims and perpetrators to gain access to specialist providers.

In addition to having multiple entry points, WCC's integrated service delivery model means once within the service, clients are able to access multiple supports in the one location. As well as delivering legal, case work, emergency relief and settlement services in partnership, a weekly half-day posting of a family violence worker from Salvation Army Crossroads Family Violence Service means clients can see a specialist worker onsite. In 2014, this worker provided 68 consultations to 50 individual clients. 56% of these clients were from CALD backgrounds. This service model has clear benefits to our clients which will be explored further in the submission. It is particularly pertinent in a large rapidly growing LGA where distribution and accessibility of services are far outstripped by demand.

### Challenges for our community

As an interface growth area, Whittlesea faces a number of challenges which contribute to our community's experience of family violence.

Whittlesea ranks 6th of 31 Metropolitan LGAs for SEIFA disadvantage. It is one of the fastest growing municipalities in Australia and the 3<sup>rd</sup> fastest in the state, designated by the Victorian Government as a growth area of significance. The current population is forecast to increase by 72% over the next 20 years. For instance, in Mernda-Doreen, the current population is estimated to be 36,668, having grown dramatically from a population of 3,562 in 2006, and is anticipated to grow further to 54,942 (a net increase of 49.8%) in the next 20 years<sup>2</sup>. Neighbouring Wollert, presently an estimated population numbering in the hundreds, is projected to increase by a staggering 21,940% to reach 31,911 by 2031.

This creates unique challenges for women and families experiencing violence. Like many growth areas, service infrastructure has not developed alongside population growth. Social and geographical isolation are common and affect women's capacity to seek support. Women may not be aware of support services, or if they are, may face significant barriers to accessing them, such as lack of private transport, limited or non-existent public transport, or high costs to travel beyond the LGA to access regional services such as Berry Street, the regional family violence service (which could take several hours to get to via public transport, where it exists).

For the significant CALD population, lack of awareness of legal rights, family violence supports and connection to local services reduces the capacity of women to learn more about their rights and build the trust and confidence required to seek support. Additionally, Whittlesea LGA has a large and growing number of residents who are either on temporary skilled work, spouse or bridging visas and this insecurity can be a major deterrent to disclosing violence or seeking support. Anecdotally, many asylum seeker clients have disclosed that despite their growing awareness of rights and services, they will not take action in relation to their experience of family violence until they are afforded broader protection and security that a permanent refugee visa would entail. This stems from fear of negative impact on their or their partner's visa application including fear that reporting the violence may send their partner back into detention because of breaches to their asylum seeker Code of Behaviour.

For generalist services like WCC, the virtual non-existence of specialist services in the area makes providing suitable referrals difficult. While Berry Street and Salvation Army Crossroads both have a one-day a week outpost presence in the LGA, this is not sufficient. Rapid population growth means an increase in demand across all service areas, meaning more clients with complex family violence issues (for instance, clients simultaneously experiencing both family violence and homelessness, substance abuse, problem gambling, or financial stress). In the most recent quarter, 1 in 3 cases presented to us with a family violence component involved substance abuse, and 1 in 10 involved problem gambling. Problem gambling in particular poses many challenges to our community with losses at a higher rate than the state average. A 2013 statistical analysis conducted by City of Whittlesea found a strong correlation in areas with high rates of family violence and high rates of problem gambling, and further research is needed to fully understand this co-occurrence<sup>3</sup>. It is fair to say that it is an understatement to say that women in interface growth areas like Whittlesea face additional barriers and fewer options to addressing their family violence situation.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://forecast.id.com.au/whittlesea/about-forecast-areas?WebID=160> (accessed 23/1/2015)

<sup>3</sup> 'Family Violence and Gaming statistical analysis for Whittlesea Community Connections', City of Whittlesea Research Unit, September 2013.

## What is working

### Integrated service model

Whittlesea Community Connections has developed a distinct portfolio of services that cover a broad spectrum, from prevention and early intervention work undertaken through community education, grounded research and support programs to the provision of short term emergency funding and case work support for people in crisis. WCC's integrated systems make the transition from one service to another smooth and seamless. A community member coming to the agency for settlement support may be referred to the legal service for assistance with an infringement, and may then be referred to assessment for financial support, and may then be linked into support groups, or our volunteer resource service, or be provided with community transport all without having to travel from service to service or navigate a complex system that requires individuals to repeat their story and wait for lengthy periods before being assisted.

An integrated model for service delivery has many benefits:

- It allows multiple 'soft' entry points for women who may not yet have 'identified' their family violence situation, but allows them access to trained workers who may identify family violence and provide appropriate support and referral.

### Case study

Lidia\* first accessed WCC through one of the women's groups. Lidia was new to Australia and knew few people. After attending for some time, she disclosed to the worker that she was afraid of her husband and wanted to know what supports were available for her in Australia. The worker referred her to the WCC caseworker who provided emotional support and information about services. Lidia left Australia to visit family and within days of her return came to WCC wanting support to leave her violent husband. She received referrals and intensive support, including social work casework and legal support, and is now living in stable private rental, safe and independent from her husband.

- It also allows women to access a range of supports from a single location, with staff able to work across programs to best meet the needs of the woman.

### Case Study

Maryam\* came to Australia with her husband and two children. She was referred to WCC's settlement service by another service around concerns for her children's education and the deterioration of her husband's mental health. Maryam did not have her license and was referred to WCC's adult driver education program, so as a result, she now is driving. Some time later, Maryam disclosed the continued deterioration of her husband's wellbeing and treatment of her, and wanted to separate from him. Maryam was referred to WCC's legal service for information on separation and was provided information on family violence services available to her. At this point the family violence Maryam was experiencing was not physical, however it was escalating and workers helped her make a safety plan.



Not long after, Maryam reported to WCC that over the weekend the police had attended their home due to husband's threats and violence towards her. Maryam had taken an Intervention Order out on her husband. A settlement service worker attended and supported Maryam at her court hearing a few days later for a full Intervention Order because she was too frightened to face her husband alone and found negotiating legal representation overwhelming.

The settlement service continued to support Maryam post her family violence experience with casework that involved linking her to housing agencies for assistance with a bond loan and rent in advance. She was provided assistance through WCC's emergency relief service to assist in alleviating some of the financial stress she was experiencing as a result of family violence, being a newly arrived single parent. She was also assisted to apply for three philanthropic grants that contributed to large expenses including educational fees for her daughters, outstanding bond loan debts and prescription glasses. In addition, Maryam was referred to WCC's Housing Brokerage project. Maryam and her daughters moved into a new property and she did not have the savings to afford two weeks of the month's rent in advance. Through the Housing Brokerage project Maryam was able to secure a loan and be supported in the transition to the new property. An affordable payment system was created via Centrepay with Maryam and the loan is now paid off. Over this time Maryam continued to be supported by WCC legal service with her separation and child access issues.

Maryam continues to be linked in with WCC services, such as the Persian Speaking Women's Group. Maryam has participated in meetings and trainings within this group for the Our Watch-funded Hamdel PVAW Project. She is having ongoing input into family violence prevention strategies within the Iranian community. From 2012 to present Maryam has been linked across the services at WCC which has aided in her recovery from family violence. Maryam now negotiates daily living as a single mother independently and the support Maryam seeks from WCC has reduced significantly.

- Some clients are not yet ready to address the family violence, wanting only to address their presenting issue, but hold onto the information for a period of time until they are ready to act.

### **Case Study**

Reeta\* came to Australia on a refugee visa several years ago. Her family received support through WCC's settlement program and after some time Reeta was referred to WCC's Youth Connections program due to trouble engaging in the Australian school system. After working with the Youth Connections caseworker for a while, Reeta disclosed experiencing threatening and controlling behaviour from her older brother. The worker linked her in with the Salvation Army family violence worker but Reeta didn't feel ready to seek help and didn't turn up to her appointment. Almost a year later things escalated at home. Reeta's family did not approve of her boyfriend and she was fearful for her life. She had received death threats from her brother and her mother. Reeta had held onto the family violence worker's number and contacted her to make an appointment. The worker provided Reeta with support in safety planning and in understanding her rights under that law. A month later Reeta returned to WCC in a crisis situation where she could not return home. With the support of WCC staff to advocate on her behalf she was granted access into refuge and also provided with emergency relief assistance. Reeta was in a fragile state and faced barriers in advocating for

herself to access refuge including a lack of knowledge in how to navigate the family violence system and low English levels.

Reeta took steps towards creating a new life for herself but again faced barriers accessing vital services required for her to make a fresh start. As well as the system being extremely hard to navigate, Reeta found Centrelink staff lacked family violence awareness to assist her with her claim. Her initial application for an allowance was rejected and she was without payment for over a month. The assessment interview was undertaken over the phone and Reeta said she didn't get a chance to talk about the threats she had experienced. Centrelink had presumed she was leaving home to live with her boyfriend and had disregarded the expert evidence that the Youth Worker provided to support her application. They had not re-contacted the worker to discuss any discrepancies they had in their assessment of risk. Reeta nearly became homeless as a result. Reeta again requested the assistance of WCC staff to advocate on her behalf so that her payment could be approved. Eventually, after significant advocacy, payments were approved.

Her family found out where she was living and came to the property and continued to threaten her. Approaching the police was extremely hard for Reeta but she knew it was necessary for her safety. However Reeta's experience exploring options with the police again left her confused and as a result of her encounter she took no action against her family as she was under the impression it would leave her vulnerable and under threat.

Currently Reeta is still in a happy relationship with her boyfriend and is trying to make a new and independent life for herself.

- Some clients need support advocating for themselves for resources that would allow them to increase independence and reduce the impact of family violence on their lives.

### **Case Study**

Parvin\* is a mother of three young children. She arrived in Australia in 2007 on a provisional spousal visa. Parvin's family is eligible for a Centrelink allowance but her visa status prevented entitlements being paid to her directly for two years, therefore all money was paid to her husband's account. Parvin's husband refused to provide her with any of the financial assistance the family receives or any of his own earnings. He exploited Parvin's dependency on him by preventing her from getting a drivers license or attending English classes. He routinely insulted her in front of their children.

Parvin is now a permanent resident and came to WCC for assistance getting the Family Tax Benefit transferred into her own name. In order to have the entitlement changed she needed her husband's signature. WCC's settlement worker assisted her with the paperwork and provided her with support and referral options in relation to family violence, however she was not ready to take action. She feared the reactions of her family, friends and community. Parvin has advised that she successfully had the Family Tax Benefit transferred into her name.

### Case Study

Vo\* was referred to WCC by a local family violence service. She was on temporary Partner Visa after marrying her Australian born husband. She became pregnant, but her partner tried to make her have a termination. During her regular check-ups at the hospital her doctor asked questions that facilitated Vo's disclosure of family violence including daily sexual assault and she was linked in to a number of support services and assisted to leave as a result. She feared reporting the incident to police, was unaware of her rights and didn't want to get her partner into trouble. He had started using drugs and his mental health was deteriorating. She left her husband and found temporary accommodation on a couch with a family she knew through work. She continued to work until the baby was born and was given a bridging visa.

Her application for a permanent visa was rejected by the Department of Immigration on the grounds that she was not in a genuine relationship. This was despite the history of violence, evidence from the hospital and a range of service providers, a pregnancy conceived within the relationship and the Department's own family violence provisions. The decision seemed to be made on the basis that her ex-husband did not corroborate her story and had refused to undergo a DNA test. She applied for a review of the decision with the support of a pro-bono lawyer as she was not able to receive any funded legal assistance at the review stage.

A number of services have withdrawn support because they were 'no longer providing family violence support' or had 'worked with her long enough', or because 'her visa application was rejected' despite a lack of basic income or housing security. WCC is assisting Vo in lodging the baby's birth registration application which her partner refuses to sign. Although the baby is an Australian citizen due to his parentage, Births Deaths and Marriages may not list the father's name on the certificate if they are not able to confirm his parentage which might jeopardise the baby and Vo's entitlement to income support. The department have said they will not fast track the processing of her application as the father has not signed the form.

She is still sleeping on the couch with a newborn, has no income and no permanency despite having experienced ongoing serious violence at the hands of her partner. The family where she is staying says she needs to move in the next two months because a family member is coming to live with them. Her migration review may take up to a year. She is not eligible for WCC's Settlement Service but other program areas are doing what they can to support her because she is a local woman in need. We are advocating for other services to stay involved at least until she and her baby are safe. There is a risk she might decide to return to her husband if there are no financial options open to support her and her baby's survival.

### Legal Service Responses

Whittlesea Community Legal Service has two lawyers specializing in family law (a dedicated family lawyer and a lawyer outposting to the Greensborough Family Relationship Centre). These two lawyers see a majority (67%) of legal service clients experiencing family violence and make up 46% of those seen across all WCC programs. This demonstrates the importance of dedicated Family Law positions at community legal services.

There are significant gaps in legal need which have been identified by Whittlesea Community Legal Service in recent times. The service offered by both the Magistrates' Court and courts of higher jurisdiction such as the Family Court are of no benefit to our clients unless competent work is on offer to such clients to enable them reasonable access to justice. There are significant barriers in the help available for women subject to violence in the region. Those barriers include:

1. There is no court in the region. The closest court is at Heidelberg. The Family Court is in Melbourne. For almost every woman facing difficulties with family violence, there is trouble in travel to these courts.
2. Guidelines for VLA, the largest provider of free legal representation in Victoria works against many women suffering family violence of the most severe kind, for whom for practical purposes, there is no alternative help available save for our legal service. Examples include situations where the woman has a job, or where previous legal help has been offered in the same matter, notwithstanding that circumstances have now changed.

Our service provides a range of legal supports to women experiencing family violence:

1. Applications for intervention orders which are not picked up by police;
2. Warm referrals to police where there is serious evidence of crime disclosed by a woman client who requests help in liaising with police;
3. Applications to the Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal seeking compensation for acts of violence which includes immediate safety related expenses such as changes to locks and removal expenses; cash compensation awards and awards for items that might assist the victim in her rehabilitation from the offence in question;
4. Applications to the Family Court or the Federal Circuit Court seeking orders for Divorce, sole parental responsibility, passports for children etc.;

Regarding the necessary legal service enumerated above, the legal service offers the following help:

No.	Service:	Assistance Provided:
1.	IVO's	The legal service offers help in preparation of applications for intervention orders by way of completion of application forms and sitting down with the woman in question and getting her full story onto Affidavit which can then accompany the application when filed. Distant from the nearest Magistrates' Court as it is, and with the press of business at the office with limited staff, the legal service is unable to offer representation to women in such applications.
2.	Referrals	In every case where there is credible evidence of crime and the woman concerned gives her consent, our service will take a statement from the woman concerned and communicate with police.
3.	VOCAT	In every case where there is evidence of an assault upon our client with the

		necessary report to police, our service will bring an application in the VOCAT for the client and act for her to conclusion.
4.	Family Court	The Family Court being a superior court, applications to it are procedurally more time consuming and there is the necessity of often multiple court room appearances. Be that as it may, the service will offer assistance in areas where others providers, particularly VLA, do not.

In relation to Family Court or Family Law Act Orders which need to be changed, what is offered by this legal service is best illustrated by the following two case studies.

#### Case study

Our client came to see us after having first approached Victoria Legal Aid. She had been living in Queensland with her husband and young son. Misconduct by her husband to herself included multiple rapes and assaults. As time went by, she became aware of sexual abuse perpetrated by her husband upon her son. Her husband severely restricted her social contact and her fear of him stopped her initially from reporting his misconduct. She fled the relationship to Canada. She reported the matter to Canadian police who explained that they had no jurisdiction. However, they advised that if she wished to return to Australia (as was her intention), she should settle in a place as far distant from her husband as possible, and encouraged her to report the matter to Australian police.

She followed this advice, settling in Melbourne and immediately reporting the matter to the Sexual Assault Unit at Epping Police Station. Epping police liaised with police in Queensland whose enquiries revealed that our client's husband had left his last known address with no forwarding address. Warrants were issued for his arrest but he had not come to further police attention.

Our client sought orders from the Family Court allowing her sole responsibility of her child, to effect a change of name, and a divorce. She approached VLA for this purpose but VLA declined assistance as our client was working. However, her income was so modest that it would preclude her, for practical purposes, from obtaining legal assistance privately. She approached this legal service. WCLS initially tried to refer the matter to the Women's Legal Service who declined as their resources were too stretched to allow an offer of assistance. Given the high level of crime involved, perpetrated not only upon our client, but also upon her son, the efficacy of the orders she was seeking could not have been clearer.

The Whittlesea Community Legal Service issued applications for all orders sought by the client, settling paperwork which documented both the story of crime committed by her husband and subsequent liaison between Victoria and Queensland police. The matter coming before the Family Court, the presiding Judge remarked that these were precisely the orders that were necessary in this case and dispensing absolutely with service, made the orders ex-parte immediately. It is emphasised that legal help to obtain orders which both offer her protection and allow she and her son a clear pathway to recovery would have been denied her by every available provider of legal services save for this service.

### **Case study**

A woman approached us having her application for aid declined by VLA and the Women's Legal Service. VLA had supported an application in the past for this client to apply to the Family Court for sole parental responsibility orders with provision for her ex-partner to spend time with their daughter on certain terms. Since the making of the orders by the family court, our client's ex-partner started taking ice and making serious and credible threats to both our client and the daughter, and had attended substance affected to pick up the daughter, resulting in the need to call police. Our client attended this legal service advising us that this change seriously altered the rationale for allowing the other party to continue to spend time with the child. VLA declined to act on the ground that it would not allow the client a second grant of aid in the same matter. Women's Legal Service were unable to assist also.

Mindful that making an application to the Family Court for variation is a cumbersome process, procedurally complex and often requiring multiple appearances in the court room, the legal service was also aware that the law allowed the Magistrates' Court, on an application by a woman fearing family violence, to vary any Family Law Act Order that was inconsistent with the terms of any intervention order. Our client advised that she had an intervention order, taken out over a year ago against the other party which had now lapsed. Her concern that she and her daughter may again be subject to violence and the well corroborated evidence of recent wrongdoing on his part, the legal service was able to apply forthwith to the Magistrates' Court which had made the initial intervention order to extend that order for a further year.

The presiding Magistrate made orders extending the past intervention order for a further two years, and varying the Family Law Act Order disallowing the other party to spend time with the child.

This case particularly demonstrates how this legal service, working effectively with its clients, is able through its thorough knowledge of the law and the extent of its application to the problems faced by our clients, can provide concrete remedies. What we lack however, is the resources required to give access to a court system that is difficult to reach or travel to or the required resources to appear for as many women whose situation warrants it. The best justice means nothing if you cannot access it.

## Specialist Projects

### *Whittlesea CALD Communities Family Violence Project*

WCC coordinates the Whittlesea CALD Communities Family Violence Project, a place-based integrated violence prevention and early intervention program bringing together nine local, regional and state-based agencies (Whittlesea Community Connections; City of Whittlesea; Victoria Police; InTouch Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence; Berry Street; Salvation Army Crossroads Family Violence Service; Plenty Valley Community Health; Kildonan UnitingCare; Whittlesea Community Futures Partnership). The project is funded by a range of philanthropic grants that the partnership has applied for in seeking to meet a critical gap in the family violence sector. The project was established not because there is any evidence of greater prevalence of family violence in CALD communities but because we recognized that newly arrived communities were missing out on key resources and support, lacked information about rights and service systems and had needs that are not being met by generalist approaches.

The project model was developed after an extensive scoping research exercise with community members and agencies (see Whittlesea CALD Community Family Violence Project Scoping Exercise Report 2012) and brings together six integrated elements.

- Coordinating agencies via the steering group, as well as a women's advisory group consisting of local CALD women.
- Empowering women through providing brokerage funds and coordinated community legal education to local CALD women's support groups.
- Capacity-building community and religious leaders with community legal education and referral pathway training, as well as resourcing to advocate anti-family violence messages with their communities.
- Reducing recidivism with a pilot Arabic-language men's family violence group.
- Targeting young people with respectful relationships education in primary schools.
- Early intervention during the settlement process with an adapted version of Victoria Legal Aid's 'Settled & Safe' training.

It is being evaluated in partnership with Monash University (see first stage evaluation report attached).

The project has had many successes:

- Resource and staffing capacity limitations have been overcome by a strong commitment to coordination and integration, bringing together nine family violence specialist and non-specialist agencies to combine this workload. This means acknowledging and valuing the expertise of each member agency, with each agency focusing on the areas of work that intersect with their expertise. This has allowed the project to achieve more than if one individual organisation was attempting it, and means enhanced output that reflects a range of good practice frameworks.
- A Women's Advisory Group was established in 2014 made up of women representing local CALD community groups. The women meet monthly and provide input, feedback and advice to ensure the project remains responsive to the needs of the community. The group has supported resource development, helped contextualize presentations, and facilitated relationships between the project and community and religious leaders. They have also received a range of capacity-building training, including identifying and responding to family violence training, and prevention of violence against

women training, and are building confidence as community anti-violence champions. The group is also being supported to develop a series of family violence booklets in languages, that are tailored to specific communities in Whittlesea LGA (Farsi-speaking, Arabic-speaking and those from the sub-continent).

- One aspect of the project saw brokerage funds and family violence community legal education (CLE) sessions provided to local CALD women's groups. Across 2014/15, it is anticipated CLEs will reach more than 180 women. In 2014, 1 in 5 participants later accessed integrated legal/outreach support for themselves, and many more supported friends and family to access support. It also provided an avenue for women to access legal support for non-family violence related issues. Additionally, 29 women's group leaders were trained in identifying and responding to family violence (2014-2015), and supported to facilitate their groups. Women reported this approach allowed them to build the trust and confidence necessary to access support at a pace that suited them<sup>4</sup>.
- The project will run a pilot Arabic language Men's Family Violence Group from May 2015. This ten week course will be facilitated by two bilingual workers who have both completed the Swinburne Graduate Certificate course. It is the first Arabic language program, to our knowledge, in Victoria or Australia. Learning from the pilot will inform future programs with the intention that further iterations will meet all NTV standards as an accredited MBC. This will ensure language and culturally-specific programs for men are available, increasing access to these important resources. The project has been enabled by a patchwork of funding and in-kind contributions from all steering group members, with close support from the InTouch-facilitated CALD MBC Reference group. This integration and cross-agency support has been crucial to the funding, design and implementation of this course.
- The project receives no ongoing state or federal funding. Projects that focus on CALD communities often receive 'pilot' funding and learning from evaluations is rarely if ever implemented in an ongoing way and able to inform larger, statewide, fully funded projects. CALD communities continue to be marginalized within generalist models which inadequately cater for their needs. This highlights the importance of ensuring specific ongoing funding for CALD community prevention, early intervention and response projects.

### Case study

Vashti\* participated in one of the funded women's groups in 2014 after a long history of abuse. During the information session she felt confident enough to talk about her experience with the lawyer who was presenting the session, and explained that she was currently caught in a seemingly never ending legal battle with her ex partner and felt completely trapped by her situation. Vashti had been conflicted out of most community legal centres by her ex partner, but the lawyer was able to provide Vashti with legal support around renewing her intervention order. Through her involvement in the group, Vashti elected to join the WCFVP's Women's Advisory Group, and as her confidence grew, reported that it felt good to use her experience to help make sure other women did not suffer as she had. Vashti built her friendship with other women in the Advisory Group and

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<sup>4</sup> Evaluation of the Whittlesea CALD Communities Family Violence Project: Evaluation Report 1. December 2014-January 2015. Dr Deborah Western, Gender, Leadership and Social Sustainability Unit, Monash University.



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she and another woman decided to establish a Malaysian Women's Group, applying for funding in the 2015 round of women's grants. They were successful and Vashti, with the support she has received through the project, has embraced her new role as group facilitator.

### ***Hamdel Project: Working with Whittlesea's Iranian community to prevent violence against women and children***

WCC is implementing a one-year pilot prevention of violence against women (PVAW) project funded by Our Watch and the Victorian Government Office of Women's Affairs. The project is being delivered with partner agencies Women's Health In the North and Salvation Army Crossroads Family Violence Service. Working with the local Iranian community, the project is capacity-building community members to design and develop PVAW activities. The project is:

- Training women's group members with a downstream to upstream approach, to design various community PVAW activities.
- A respectful relationships education and indoor soccer program for young Iranian men, providing targeted respectful relationships training adjusted to incorporate a human rights, legal education and settlement lens.
- Capacity-building and support for local Iranian community leaders to become anti-violence and gender equity advocates. In this case the community has identified Iranian GPs as having the relevant and critical leadership role in the community.

The project uses a women-centred approach, recognising that local CALD women are the experts on their own safety and on the unequal or harmful attitudes, beliefs and behaviours around violence and gender that create violence-supportive norms. This means the women identified which men and leaders would be the best to target, and are part of designing and shaping content to ensure that it covers issues specific to the Iranian community. Early successes of the program indicate that using a community development approach to design programs resonates, appeals and is meaningful to local CALD groups. It recognises communities as the experts of their lived experience, and supports them to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to design prevention activities and initiatives.

As with the WCFVP, this project is driven by the bringing together of expertise from a range of agencies and services, benefitting from this multidisciplinary approach, as well as ongoing participatory consultation and guidance from the women on all aspects of the project. Project training has utilised a downstream upstream approach, starting with building knowledge around understanding family violence, the law and support services, before unpacking the gendered nature of violence and exploring what prevention work means. The downstream upstream approach has been vital to working with a newly arrived community as participants establish a strong understanding of what constitutes violence against women in Australia, before starting the discussion around prevention. It also recognised that though the focus is on prevention, this undoubtedly led to disclosures so it was important that women felt confident of how and where to access support and specialist services must be resourced to meet this need, particularly CALD-specific services such as inTouch.

The women embraced the PVAW training and are actively engaged in designing a series of PVAW activities, including an adapted version of Victoria Legal Aid's 'Settled and Safe' program that has a heightened gender equality focus, and a series of family activity days to encourage safe, healthy families and parenting, through fun participatory activities that prompt discussion and unpacking of gender expectations, roles and conflict resolution (ie soccer training for the whole family, and an activity that supports parents around non-gender biased parenting approaches). The project is still in early days and evaluation will not be complete until end of 2015 through Our Watch.

### ***Housing Brokerage and Support Project***

WCC's Housing Brokerage and Support Project (HBSP) provides no interest loans to residents of the City of Whittlesea who experience barriers to accessing the private rental market. The project combines a loan with case management support to ensure people are able to overcome other issues which may impact their ability to sustain long term tenancy. This project has been effective in supporting women fleeing family violence situations.

### **Case study**

Ezra\* was referred to the Housing Brokerage and Support Project (HBSP) after visiting our emergency relief service where she was seeking financial assistance. She was extremely distressed during her interview as she was experiencing family violence from her brother and wanted to seek alternative accommodation. She was suffering depression as a result of the abuse. While the caseworker discussed options with Ezra around an intervention order and seeking placement at a refuge, she explained that she had done this before and with no accommodation available upon leaving the refuge, she was forced to return home and this worsened the family violence. Ezra explained that she preferred to seek private rental accommodation. Though Ezra was able to find a property on her own, she did not have all the funds needed to pay for her bond and first month's rent in advance. Through the HBSP, Ezra was assisted with the remaining funds. Ezra was highly motivated and empowered throughout this process and required little casework support to pay off the loan. She reported a heightened sense of self-reliance knowing that it was a loan and that once she repaid it someone else could be assisted. Ezra has since paid off her loan and is still residing in the property.

Ezra's circumstance is not uncommon for women in the Whittlesea LGA who have very few options for alternative accommodation once leaving the family home, particularly if they wish to remain within their community and close to their local connections and supports. With the assistance our project and support from a generalist social worker, Ezra's situation was stabilized and she was able to start rebuilding her life.

## Theme 2: Ways forward – What can help?

The following suggestions consider both current good practice and ways to enhance and improve this. It considers both a 'system' level of change, as well as practical improvements to the current way of doing things.

### On the ground – integrated services

Integrating services provides more opportunities for early intervention and holistic responses to family violence. The value of these services presenting as 'generalist services' with family violence capacity offers the opportunity to capture those experiencing family violence prior to things reaching crisis point, and to offer them a range of support options that are tailored to their needs. There is a range of ways this could be achieved:

- Creation of 'hubs' that offer a one-stop shop for support needs. Lawyers, social workers, health workers, family violence support workers, and access to police all available in the one location, meaning workers can co-case manage their responses easily. These would benefit from being in accessible safe areas such as shopping centres that are closely linked to public transport, and provide opportunities to access support without fear of being seen going into a family violence service. Many women report to WCC that a benefit of our location in Epping Plaza is that they can say they are simply going to the shops and that if the perpetrator is tracking their devices, it registers as such.
- These hubs are particularly important in growth areas, such as the Mernda and Doreen, where services do not currently have a presence but population growth is among the fastest in the nation. Existing Community Activity Centres could be used to house these hubs, providing a vital link to services. Additionally, further investment into community development activities from these hubs is important: opportunities for groups that promote social connectivity and information-sharing are important for building resilience, strengthening connectivity, and early intervention in family violence.
- It is important for family violence specialist services to have a strong presence in all LGAs. This could take the form of a family violence worker permanently stationed at every Community Legal Centre and able to work in an integrated way with lawyers. This would support strengthening the capacity of Community Legal Centres to respond to and manage family violence cases.
- Family violence lawyers should be available in each and every state funded community legal service. This would help meet demand, with these lawyers having capacity to complete VOCAT applications, make representations at Family Court, and appear at local magistrate courts for intervention order hearings as well as offer critical secondary consultation to other agencies and services.
- There is a need for more opportunities for women (and men) to build social connections and gain knowledge and confidence to interact with services, both as a prevention and early intervention strategy. This is applicable to the whole community, but especially so for newly arrived communities who without existing networks within their local area. WCC facilitates a range of groups – as well as those funded through the WCFVP, we also run our own Arabic-speaking men and women's groups, a Farsi-speaking women's group, English classes and homework clubs for young people. All these

provide far-ranging benefits for participants, and are excellent soft-entry points for people experiencing family violence. Research shows that socially connected women are more likely to seek assistance; funding for generalist women's support groups promote increased connectivity for women and build leadership capacity.

- Access to justice is another major issue, particularly in growth areas like Whittlesea. Attending court in either Heidelberg or the CBD can be an additional barrier for many women experiencing violence, not least because of difficulties traveling to these destinations. Ideally, a local justice precinct would better enable our community to access courts. It would also allow CLC lawyers to attend court more often as travel times would not prohibit this as they currently do.
- The need for more availability for Men's Behaviour Change courses is well discussed. In addition to more funding for MBC's, there also needs to be consideration of areas of greatest need in deciding where to run them. Only recently – 2014 – has any Whittlesea LGA postcode been included in the list of those from which magistrates can mandate men, and it is still only one postcode for the entire LGA. The inadequacy of this is starkly evident when you consider the high rates of family violence in the LGA.
- Additionally, it is important that specialized MBCs for CALD and indigenous men are funded to ensure these men have options to seek support. Culturally-specific groups are crucial to ensuring equitable access to programs. Funding to train facilitators and establish these groups are important, as is learning from and sharing in the wisdom of existing groups. Embedding ongoing funding for these programs in core work is necessary to both allow men opportunities to address their use of violence, and create opportunities for support to women and children through partner contact workers. It is important that these programs are adapted to meet the cultural needs of their target groups in order to be relevant and effective.
- There are many improvements that can be made to ensure CALD communities have better access to family violence information and services:
  - Compulsory training for all interpreters – we have had many women report to us who have experienced interpreters chastising them for speaking about family violence or divorce and making them feel ashamed. Additional training should be available for interpreters that covers things such as privacy, understanding sector jargon, and examining interpreters' own attitudes to family violence or violence against women. This would form an additional accreditation and these interpreters could be specifically requested by services.
  - Consideration of CALD specific awareness campaigns that recognise the need to not simply translate content, but adapt it to suit its audience's experience, culture and needs.
  - Family violence information provided during early settlement as part of compulsory settlement program about rights and responsibilities. This may reduce the problem of newly arrived women experiencing violence being isolated early on so that they have no further opportunity to interact with or find out about services. Funding could be provided to AMEP providers to work with community services to develop respectful relationships curriculum materials to assist newly arrived communities to become aware of rights, options and preventative strategies from a strengths based perspective.

- CALD-specific specialist family violence services such as InTouch are invaluable resources for both women and workers, providing a critical link between services, newly arrived communities and government departments. They must be funded to increase their reach across the state, including key programs like their legal service.
- Funding for targeted prevention projects that incorporate community development principles and build community capacity. Projects such as the Our Watch-funded prevention project offer opportunities to build community capacity beyond simply the prevention of violence, but strengthens connections and supports amongst communities more generally. Projects should have the flexibility to design themselves around the needs and interests of the groups they are targeting, and should be supported beyond simply 12-month pilot funding. In general, there is a need to move beyond simply funding promising initiatives for a time-limited period. There should be commitment to longer-term funding for pilots that demonstrate success, as opposed to constantly seeking 'innovation'.
- While much improvement has been seen in police capacity to respond to family violence, the quality of the response is still very much dependent on the attending officers. We still see large numbers of clients who have not received an appropriate treatment from police or who have had their experiences minimised or ignored. More family violence training for police is required to improve the overall standard of service they provide. Particularly, training on cultural-awareness, responsiveness and respect when dealing with family violence cases is required.
- Continued support for women and their families during the rebuilding and recovery stage of their lives. Women who have escaped family violence face ongoing vulnerabilities and disadvantage as a result of the violence, including financial pressure and difficulty accessing or maintaining housing. A period of heightened support is required, for instance increased rental assistance from Centrelink, or access to HBSP-type schemes to support women with private rental. This financial support must be beyond the crisis payment; for many women forced to relocate following family violence, they move away from their community and face reduced supports, requiring extra help and assistance including with childcare, increased transport costs or suddenly supporting a family on only one income.
- Children too require additional support at this rebuilding stage, with many children who have experienced family violence having missed out on positive education and early learning opportunities.
- Similarly, specialist employment programs need to be established to provide assistance for women who have experienced family violence to re-enter the workforce, especially where they are ineligible for parenting payments (when their children are of school age), where their career has been impacted by the violence and/or where they have little previous workplace experience and low self esteem and self confidence as a result of the abuse they have experienced.
- Data collection must be improved and made consistent across services. In order to have an accurate picture of family violence, detailed data must be captured across all agencies, including police, specialist, non-specialist and community legal services. This data should investigate where and when

first disclosures are made as well as previous engagement with services (see WCC's data collection form attached as an example).

### System level

- There is a need for respectful relationship training to be embedded into all school curricula. The 'Building Respectful Relationships' training package is a welcome start, but specific funding and resourcing is needed to support schools to implement it. Whole-school initiatives require resourcing, particularly for schools where curriculum will need to be adapted to suit specific target group needs, such as high-CALD population areas.
- City of Whittlesea's recently launched Gender Equity Strategy is an excellent example of mainstreaming gender equality into every day practice. Similar strategies should be supported across all LGAs, with training to support uptake of this. This is important in enabling communities to live in a gender equity-supportive and enabling environment where the values promoted in individual level PVAW work are reflected by the authorities around them.
- Many of our legal clients have fines incurred due to family violence. As a result, these clients are treated harshly within the infringement system and are often required to go through a long process to have these fines withdrawn. In some cases, clients are still required to pay the infringements. We believe this is partly due to family violence not being recognised as a 'special circumstance', which is only available if a client suffered from substance abuse, mental illness or homelessness at the time the offences were committed. 'Special circumstances' should also include family violence. People living with family violence are often forced into incurring fines for their partners in order to avoid an escalation of the violence or at times incurring fines themselves due to the pressures created by the family violence.
- Accessing Centrelink can be an issue for women experiencing violence. The process for Family Violence Crisis or Youth Allowance payments is difficult and often slow. Many women attend WCC for support in advocating to Centrelink for this payment, and this can be a disincentive to a woman leaving a violent home. Better training for Centrelink staff is required around family violence and the impacts of poor assessment and inflexibility can have on women and children's safety. Family violence cases need urgent prioritisation. Family violence specialist liaison officers within Centrelink with the capacity to respond with some degree of flexibility to meet the need (similar to the Community Engagement Officers who focus on homelessness prevention) would greatly assist the streamlining of services. Assistance for women in liaising with the Family Assistance Office and Child Support agencies would be critical in this role.
- Similarly, there are a range of ways in which immigration law can exacerbate women's experiences of family violence:
  - Women on Temporary Partner visas are not eligible for Centrelink for two years, which means they are dependent on their partners and face having no source of income in the first instance if they leave until they are granted permanency which can take a long time. They

are also not able to get Family Violence Crisis payments from Centrelink. Eligibility needs to be adjusted to ensure at minimum eligibility for crisis payment and special benefit until the outcome of their permanent visa application is known. If not, then the unequal power structures within relationships can limit women's capacity to seek support or leave, increasing their vulnerability to violence.

- Any Family Tax payments for children are paid to the sponsor (usually the male partner) and it is difficult to make changes to these arrangements on separation. Financial control of the Family Tax benefits by the male partner exacerbates other financial abuse in the relationship, with no capacity for women to receive the payment in their own right. Family Tax needs to be paid immediately to the woman with custody of her children on leaving a family violence situation, regardless of visa status.
  - Clients on bridging visas have reported that the instability surrounding their circumstances is the major barrier to them accessing family violence support. Women are scared that reporting their partners will either adversely affect the processing of their visas, or that their partners will be sent back to detention for breaking the Immigration Department's Code of Behaviour. This is clearly a barrier to their safety and more consideration needs to be given into how long asylum seekers remain in a state of uncertainty on bridging visas.
  - Extending eligibility for federally funded settlement services to those on all forms of temporary visas who have experienced family violence would ensure a greater level of safety of women and their children.
- The link between family violence and homelessness is well established and the lack of affordable housing and hidden discrimination from landlords/real estate agents is a major obstacle for women trying to escape violent relationships, particularly for women with children. When available, the quality of emergency housing is often very low. For instance, one client reported to us she had been in emergency housing for three weeks with her three children, during which time they had no gas to cook with, heat water or use of a heater. This meant they were forced to spend their money buying take away meals and showering at the local leisure centre. State funding for a flexible Housing Brokerage Support Project for those leaving family violence (alongside others at risk of homelessness) is vital. A model such as this would be much more effective if accompanied by a dedicated worker who could outreach to clients, support women to look at properties, and advocate to real estate agents.
  - Currently, privacy laws make it difficult to share information between police, hospitals, lawyers and family violence services. Consideration needs to be made to improving this system while still maintaining confidentiality for clients as appropriate.
  - Fund research that demonstrates links between problem gambling and family violence. A recent literature review suggests that up to 70% of problem gamblers experience family violence, either as perpetrators or victims. Existing data gathering mechanisms such as the Service Coordination Tool template have problem gambling as an optional question, which can be expensive to implement.



- Implement harm minimization legislation to decrease the harm from problem gambling, including \$1 maximum bets, poker machine venues banned from shopping precincts, and closing the loophole on ATMs in gaming venues.
- Consideration must be made in allocating funding that acknowledges communities at greater risk. Growth areas like Whittlesea, for instance, face additional challenges including rapid population rise, lack of essential services, large pockets of disadvantage and vulnerable CALD communities. Targeting areas of need with funding and essential intervention and crisis services will ensure an equitable distribution of family violence resources. These funding models should take into account factors such as family violence incidence rates, social disadvantage, population growth, at-risk communities, and remoteness/isolation.

## Recommendations

Set out below are our recommendations for improving the sector across the spectrum of prevention, early intervention and response. First and foremost, encompassing all of the recommendations below, it is important that any funding models acknowledge communities at greater risk, based on a range of factors including family violence incidence rates, social disadvantage, population growth, at-risk communities, and remoteness/isolation.

### Integration

- Investment in integrated service models that provide a range of services in the one location, offering multiple soft-entry points, streamlined holistic service delivery, and support across the prevention, early intervention and crisis response spectrum. This includes funding for coordinated prevention/intervention projects that encourage multi-disciplinary partnerships. One model is one-stop community hubs where community members can access lawyers, social workers, health workers, family violence workers, and meet police. These are particularly pertinent to regional, rural or growth areas where lack of transport and distance make accessing services difficult.
- Support for increased presence of specialist family violence services in all LGAs.
- Consistent data collection across all services to better capture the reality of family violence in Victoria
- More work into unpacking the link between problem gambling and family violence
  - Funding for research to determine the link between problem gambling and family violence
  - Harm minimization legislation that decreases problem gambling harm, including \$1 maximum bets, pokie machine venues banned from shopping precincts, and closing the loop- hole on cash-withdrawals in gaming venues.

### Legal

- Increased access to justice for those experiencing family violence, including:
  - Specialist family violence support workers co-located at every community legal centre
  - Specialist family violence/family law lawyers in every Victorian Community Legal Centre with resourcing to represent women in court and support VOCAT claims, particularly where eligibility for VLA or Women's Legal Service may be limited
  - Local justice precincts that reduce the distance between communities and courts
- Changes to the infringement system to recognise family violence as a 'special circumstance'
- Changes to privacy laws to improve information-sharing between police, hospitals, lawyers and family violence services while still maintaining client confidentiality.

### CALD Communities

- Support to increase access of CALD communities to family violence services and projects
  - Additional accredited family violence training for interpreters

- Family violence information provided as part of broader compulsory rights and responsibilities training during early settlement
- Increased funding for CALD-specific family violence services to broaden their reach across the state
- Cultural-awareness and family violence responsiveness training for all police officers
- Changes to immigration law to better support family violence victims
  - Adjust eligibility for women on Temporary Partner Visas experiencing family violence to be able to access the crisis payment and special benefits, at a minimum
  - Family Tax Benefit paid to women with custody of children on leaving a violent relationship, regardless of visa status
  - Faster visa processing that does not leave women vulnerable on bridging visas where fears about breaching the asylum seeker Code of Behaviour may stop them seeking family violence support
  - Extend eligibility of settlement services to all forms of temporary visa holders who have experienced violence

### Prevention

- Investment in community-led prevention and early intervention projects that utilise participatory flexible community development approaches. These should build community capacity and work with both women and men. Learning from current projects such as the Whittlesea CALD Communities FV Project and the Hamdel Project should inform these. Successful pilot projects should receive ongoing funding to continue their good work.
- While it is important that prevention work be funded to address the causes of gendered violence, a downstream upstream approach must be taken that recognises prevention and awareness will increase disclosures, thus specialist services must be supported to meet increases in demand.
- Respectful relationships training embedded in all school curricula alongside funding and capacity-building to support schools to deliver this
- Gender equity mainstreaming across all local Council's every day practice, using City of Whittlesea's Gender Equity Strategy as an example

### Early Intervention

- Increased funding for generalist women's support groups, recognising that the more connected women are the more access they have to information and supports for family violence. This is a demonstrated key prevention and early intervention initiative as evidenced by the WCFVP.

### Response

- More MBC programs including CALD and indigenous-specific courses. Mandating powers should be expanded across all courts and postcode eligibility widened to allow all men to be eligible.
- Better Centrelink response to family violence

- Training for all staff
- More efficient processing for family violence claims
- Family violence specialist liaison officers

### Recovery

- Continued support for women during the rebuilding phase of their journey
  - Increased rental assistance from Centrelink following the end of violent relationship
  - HBSP projects that support women to locate and sustain private rental
  - Additional support for children who have experienced violence to address impacts on the developmental and educational wellbeing
  - Specialist employment projects for women who have experienced violence to support them to re-enter the workplace

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## List of attachments

- [Whittlesea CALD Communities Family Violence Project: Scoping Exercise Report 2012](#)
- [Whittlesea CALD Communities Family Violence Project: Annual Report 2014](#)
- Whittlesea CALD Communities Family Violence Project: Evaluation Report 2015
- [Whittlesea Community Connections Family Violence Monitor, Jan-March 2015](#)
- Whittlesea Community Connections Family Violence Data Collection Form
- [Whittlesea Community Connections Housing Brokerage and Support Project Evaluation 2015](#)

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## Authorisation

This submission has been authorised by the Chief Executive Officer



**Jemal Ahmet**

Chief Executive Officer

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