

April 21, 2021

## **Calls for greater engagement with sector**

THE specialist family violence response sector needs long term funding, tailored solutions for regional areas and to have their voices amplified as experts in the prevention of violence against women and children.

That was the message from the chief executive officer of central Victoria's leading specialist family violence response service, Centre for Non-Violence, during a webinar hosted today by the Monash Gender and Family Violence Prevention Centre and Domestic Violence Victoria – which focused on the theme of COVID-19 One Year Later: A System Under Strain.

Centre for Non-Violence CEO, Margaret Augerinos, joined the panel of experts to reflect on the impacts of Covid19 on specialist family violence services, particularly how the past year has amplified pre-existing challenges for specialist services as a result of core funding deficits and workforce sustainability issues.

Ms Augerinos said while the sector had seen some short-term investment as a result of the Royal Commission into Family Violence, and COVID-19, there was no increase in long-term case management funding.

She said there needed to be greater engagement with the sector from all levels of government, genuinely asking 'how can we help?'

"With the messaging that family violence is now everybody's business, the voices of those with lived experience or the experts are not given priority weighting in decisions around what happens or how resources should be allocated, or how responses should be managed – so everyone has an equal say," she said.

"But with that comes the risk of not building on the knowledge capacity and wisdom of our sector, and those with lived experience."

Ms Augerinos said short-term funding models did not allow for sustainable business models or planning to address increased demand on services – and regional areas required particular attention.

She said the sector needed:

- Long term funding
- Tailored solutions for rural and regional areas
- To listen to the voices of experts about where resources should be prioritised and boosted
- An end to short term funding and pilot projects that are based on political cycles rather than local need

“Smaller regional shires are not necessarily better off as a result of the Royal Commission, not much has changed for some communities,” she said. “How do we prioritise some of these challenging areas around resource gaps?”

“The funding model is a problem. We need genuine consultation on how funding can be used in regional areas, and capacity to tailor programs to suit local needs.

“And we need acknowledgement that in many regional areas we can’t recruit to six-month or short-term roles – people are not going to give up permanent, ongoing positions to come here, we need to give them certainty.”

In 2020, Centre for Non-Violence and the partner agencies of the Loddon Gender Equality and Violence Prevention Consortium, made a number of recommendations to the independent Victorian Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor, which is preparing its fourth and final report to Parliament, following the Royal Commission.

The monitor was established to hold the Victorian Government and its agencies to account in the delivery of statewide reform following the Royal Commission into Family Violence – and has provided an annual review to Parliament and the broader community on progress in relation to the Commission’s 227 recommendations.

The Consortium consists of: Centre for Non-Violence (lead agency), Cobaw Community Health, Annie North Women’s Refuge and Domestic Violence Service, Women’s Health Loddon Mallee and Centre Against Sexual Assault Central Victoria.

The Consortium noted that since the Royal Commission into Family Violence, the sector had seen increased community awareness of gender-based violence and domestic abuse - and how it changed the life stories of so many women and children.

There is increased understanding of trauma and a strengthening of our state’s trauma-informed service system, with a focus on women’s experiences – and a shared commitment to keeping perpetrators of violence in sight, and accountable.

However, the Consortium documented concern that despite the Royal Commission identifying the strengths of the existing service systems, and acknowledging they were built during decades of grassroots work and advocacy by the women’s movement, our sector is not being respected or drawn on for our expertise.

“Engaging with the sector saves time and money, and ensures strengths are built on and weaknesses are addressed. There has been a disproportionate amount of investment and focus on The Orange Door safety and support hubs being the answer to our system response, rather than a flexible model that was designed with the existing local service system,” Ms Augerinos said.

It is our view the majority of problems that exist in our sector are because of insufficient resourcing and capacity.

The Consortium put forward a range of recommendations, which included:

- Sustained and adequate funding to enable our services to plan service delivery. We need to move away from short-term funding arrangements and replace that with recurrent, ongoing funding. Short-term funding results in ad-hoc responses and programs, often requiring us to divert funds away from some programs because of demand.
- Proper indexation and analysis of what it costs to deliver high quality, evidence-based services.
- A rural or regional loading/funding that supports the skills, qualifications and true costs of delivering services outside of one central geographical base. For example, the region our afterhours service covers is significantly larger than the area covered by metropolitan after hours services. In addition, CNV is needing to meet expenses associated with delivering services from four primary service sites as well as additional outreach services in other areas (Mt Alexander and Loddon Shires).
- Funding for staffing infrastructure is insufficient – for example, the salaries of Executive Managers and team leaders and quality coordinators.
- Funding that recognises complexity of work, in a workforce made up predominately of women.
- Boost what exists. Provide therapeutic program funds to the sector, to allow it to develop/progress innovative programs and services that have been put on hold because of insufficient funding. The majority of women and children need the therapeutic support we deliver, but there is not enough capacity to meet need.
- Increased capacity and resourcing for specialist services, because response needs to be strengthened at the same time as prevention work occurs.
- Increased support for teams such as allied health, where they can build capacity through having integrated and additional supports for complex clients.
- Acknowledgement of and sufficient funding for the prevention work done by the family and domestic violence sector. We play a significant role in primary prevention, having educated our communities for decades about the causes and consequences of violence – and what needs to happen to make change. We should not be overlooked for prevention funding and resources. We are constantly working in our local communities educating, dispelling myths, challenging victim blaming and challenging the excusing of perpetrators.
- Primary prevention of violence and gender equity needs investment that allows for building of capacity at strategic level.
- Funding that supports community education and social change awareness.
- While we are seeing resources come together through the Orange Door, there is a scarcity of service provision across the Loddon catchment. There is demand for further co-location of services in rural and regional areas, and additional resources.
- There are parts of our region where we are under-resourced and there is still very little service access and inroads. For example, in the Loddon Shire which does not have a strong geographic base, what is needed to support service delivery is a disproportionate investment to the need that is invested through data analysis such as numbers of police family violence attendance/callouts.

For example, whilst the Loddon Shire shows low numbers of L17's in comparison to other towns in our region, the reality is that we need to support people experiencing violence across a large geographic base. There is no geographic centre in Loddon Shire and to reach the numbers of women and children experiencing violence in that shire, we need capacity to service Boort, Bridgewater, Serpentine, Pyramid Hill, Tarnagulla, Mitiamo, Inglewood, Dingee, Kingower, Korong Vale and Wedderburn. To increase access for women and children, there would be significant government investment to help the sector reach some of those communities. Some of the most high-risk cases we see are women in remote or rural locations, who cannot access 24-hour police station and are hours away from critical supports. In areas like the Macedon Ranges, which are halfway between Melbourne and Bendigo (that are at least an hour away), this results in a reduced access. To compound matters, there is no 24-hour police station that services the Loddon Shire – response after hours is provided by Maryborough, Echuca and Bendigo.

- We need significant investment in other services women and children in rural and remote areas rely on – for example, community health services and hospitals. As community health by their design, provide an integrated service model, they are well placed to support the specialist services. Clients come with often a single issue and due to the holistic service community health provides an individualised support system that is led by the client.
- The risk for victim survivors in rural and remote areas is further compounded by a lack of technology and connectivity for both internet and mobile phones.
- Strategic engagement with the sector about the complexities of our region.
- Exploration of opportunities to co-locate with services in other parts of our region.
- Access to affordable, accessible housing.

We are concerned that despite the Royal Commission identifying the strengths of the existing service systems, and acknowledging they were built during decades of grassroots work and advocacy by the women's movement, our sector is not being respected or drawn on for our expertise.

The potential for meaningful and lasting change as a result of the Royal Commission could be lost, because of a commitment to unrealistic timelines that do not allow for best practice, sector-informed systems and processes to be developed.

This is complex work that takes time across multiple sectors of community services. We need to look at family violence responses, and prevention – but neither at the expense of the other.

The Consortium's submission [can be found, here](#).

**Centre for Non-Violence covers the Loddon region – which includes the City of Greater Bendigo and the Central Goldfields, Mt Alexander, Macedon Ranges, Loddon and Campaspe shires. Centre for Non-Violence can be contacted on 1800 884 292 | The 24-hour statewide safe steps family violence crisis response line is 1800 015 188 | Men's Referral Service 1300 766 491 | In an emergency, call 000 | For information, visit: [www.cnv.org.au/we-are-here-to-help](http://www.cnv.org.au/we-are-here-to-help)**