

FDV Crisis in WA: It's Time to Take Action to Keep Women and Children Safe

As a community we once again find ourselves shaken by the tragedy of yet another mass murder which we fear is the product of family and domestic violence.

Like the other incidents this year including the mass shooting of seven members of a family in a house near Margaret River, the deaths of a mother and her two children in a house in Ellenbrook and the discovery of a young woman's body in Carlisle, the discovery of five family members allegedly murdered at the hands of their father/husband/son in law have sent shockwaves through the community.

All these tragedies shake the community; each time they happen we question what we are doing as a state to address Family and Domestic Violence. We puzzle at how these individuals, who are all too often described as 'nice people', have committed such atrocities and we desperately seek answers on what can be done to address the issue.

There is no denying that WA finds itself at a crisis point when it comes to domestic violence. It's only September and already we've more than doubled the domestic violence related deaths compared to the whole of 2017.

This situation is unacceptable and if we continue on this trajectory the fate for our community is scary.

This epidemic, as it can only be considered, must be addressed. As a state we must do more now to take action on a number of fronts.

We must find ways to support a sector who is overwhelmed and who is struggling to keep up with the levels of support required by the community.

In terms of resourcing we have fallen behind many other states, such as Victoria, NSW and QLD when it comes to addressing the issue, which is of great concern when WA has the second highest rate of Domestic Violence in the country, second only to the Northern Territory.

Despite this we have a strong and connected service system and the goodwill to make a real difference to this issue.

We also have learnings from work already done in WA and in other states such as the findings from the Victorian Royal Commission into Family and Domestic Violence, the Australian DFV Death Review Network report and the Ombudsman's Reports which provide us with a clear focus as to what areas need development and the tools we need to get started on changing the future for thousands of women and children right now.

We know that increasing service capacity and availability can make a real difference.

We know that a multifaceted approach across the continuum of primary prevention, early intervention and tertiary services will have the greatest chance of real impact especially if each element of the continuum is valued for the role it will play in addressing FDV in the here and now as well as into the future.

We also know that it is important to consider the intersectionality that exists between FDV and other services such as Alcohol and Drug and Mental Health and how these other parts of the system can become a more integrated part of a DV informed service system.

When we hear statistics such as one in four women are the victim of violence the first response is, as it should still be, to provide crisis support to affected women and children. We have heard of the commitment of additional refuges in WA; an important and welcome increase to capacity in this important work.

But more is needed particularly when WA is at risk of losing Commonwealth supported programs that are providing important services to families impacted by FDV across WA.

We need to continue to bolster long term support to Women and Children through increased availability of Safe at Home and many other Women Health and community services and we need to bolster the sustainability of the women's specialist services sectors as they do this important work.

While we know that one in four women in Australia have experienced at least one incident of violence by an intimate partner¹, we don't have a good understanding around the ratio of men who are violent, but we do know that many victims suffer at the hands of repeat offenders.

We know that many perpetrators don't just harm one woman, once that woman is safe (usually thanks to women's specialist services in this area) many will go on to harm other women. In addition, we also know that even when women escape the violence his behaviour will continue to impact the family, especially children who will likely still have interactions with their father.

It is vital that we work to increase the capacity of support services who work with perpetrators to hold them to account and work with them to change their behaviours as part of our work to reduce the ongoing risk to women and children by men in our community.

We also need to consider the children who are affected by family violence. We need to have more services in the state to work with these children to address the trauma they have experienced and to support them to deal with what they have witnessed or experienced.

We need to teach boys, and men, how to relate to each other as well as to the girls and women in their lives, and we need to support them to understand what a safe and healthy relationship involves.

When problems arise, we need services that can support boys and young men to understand that sexist and misogynistic beliefs and attitudes are not OK and to develop new frameworks to understand gender and masculinity in today's world.

The organisations that respond to perpetrators are doing difficult work and are working hard to drive change and keep women and children safe, and there is a clear need to increase the support they receive to meet these challenges.

Behaviour Change is a long-term process and programs that undertake this work are an essential, but small, component of the accountability and change system and it takes the coordinated effort of the entire system to achieve meaningful change.

The current commitment for additional programs in WA is another welcome addition to the service system but many other opportunities exist for an improved response to men choosing to use violence in their family relationships.

¹ Cox, P. (2015) [Violence against women: Additional analysis of the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Personal Safety Survey 2012](#), Horizons Research Report, Issue 1, Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS), Sydney

We need programs that act early and definitively to address this choice as soon as it's noticed whether that is in the doctor surgery, sports club, AOD service, workplace, by the police, or within the criminal justice system.

We need programs targeting men earlier in their offending to build awareness of the impact of their behaviours, encourage responsibility and support intervention.

We need a service system that can respond with early intervention strategies to reduce harm rather than to wait until a perpetrator becomes 'high risk' before we act with the full capacity of our service system.

We need to strengthen our response to men who go on to choose to be violent within their family relationships.

We also need longer term maintenance programs that continue to hold men to account following interventions and support them to work through the many aspects of change that are needed to make a meaningful and long-term difference to the lives of those they impact.

As a community we can also work together to change the path we are currently on and reduce the number of women and children affected by Family and domestic violence.

We need to further strengthen our efforts around primary prevention and work towards addressing the underlying drivers of FDV such as gender inequality and toxic masculinity.

We need to acknowledge that violence in our community is largely a men's issue and men need to be part of the solution.

We need to further support the reframing of masculinity to be one that represents healthy and respectful notions of masculinity and that holds men to a high standard of acceptable behaviour.

Together we can look to government to provide additional support to the services at the frontline working hard every day to partner with victims, change the behaviour of men who are violent, and support the children in our community who are living with the effects of violence each and every day.

We can and must stand together and stand up for anyone we feel may be in danger.

We must stop asking victims why they didn't leave and start asking perpetrators why they didn't stop.

We know this is an issue in our community, we have the tools and knowledge we need to make a meaningful difference, we just need the resources and support to bolster the efforts already underway so that they can have a real and lasting impact.

It is not acceptable that women and children are dying after enduring violence from a man in their life. We can stand with them today and call that perpetrator's behaviour to account and support them to live a life free from the fear of violence.

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Media Enquiries

Damian Green

Chief Executive Officer

Stopping Family Violence

damian@sfv.org.au

0448 911 009