

ANZSOG Case Program

Victoria's integrated family violence system: from stalling to renewal

2015-168.1

'It was a reforming time'

Nine years after the roll-out of Victoria's integrated approach to family violence Rachael Green, Manager Policy and Strategy at the Department of Human Services' (DHS) Office of Women's Affairs, reflected on the 'extraordinary' conditions that led to the \$35.1 million service integration reforms. Strong and committed leadership from the Chief Commissioner, the courts and public servants, a reformist Attorney-General, and effective advocacy from the service sector all played a part in the genesis and implementation of a family violence response system that was seen as 'a model' for other states.

But in 2014, family violence was back on the state (and national) agenda as never before. Incident reporting had skyrocketed, services and courts had become overwhelmed, and despite the best efforts of a dedicated service sector, people were still slipping through the cracks. VicHealth research released in September of that year showed that the prevalence and causes of family violence were still poorly understood by much of the Australian public, and there were in fact some 'concerning negative findings'.¹

This case has been written by Sophie Yates, ANZSOG, for Professor Paul 't Hart, ANZSOG and Utrecht University, as a sequel to the case 2009-94.1 *Victoria Police and family violence*. It has been prepared as a basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The assistance of Anne Goldsbrough, Rachael Green, Fiona McCormack, Rodney Vlasis and members of Victoria Police's Sexual and Family Violence team is greatly appreciated, but responsibility for the final content rests with ANZSOG.

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¹ Several items measuring support for gender equality and understanding of family violence had actually declined since the previous iteration of the VicHealth survey in 2009. For example, only 71% of people understood that family violence is mainly perpetrated by men, down from 74% in 2009 and 86% in 2005. See <https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/media-and-resources/publications/2013-national-community-attitudes-towards-violence-against-women-survey>.

A state election loomed in November, and family violence for the first time gained a top spot in campaign platforms on both major sides of politics. Victorian Opposition Leader Daniel Andrews had promised a Royal Commission into Family Violence,² and Premier Denis Napthine had launched a \$150 million package to tackle family violence on a number of levels, including prevention campaigns, increased crisis accommodation, and men's behaviour change programs.³

So why, nine years after such significant reforms, were there still such marked problems in the family violence response system? How had the issue come back so prominently on the public agenda? What new leadership challenges had arisen by late 2014, and how could sector veterans Rachael Green and colleagues make sure the unique opportunity to reboot the family violence response system would not be squandered?

The end of the Statewide Steering Committee

In 2006, shortly after its report had led to a successful bid for reform funding, the Statewide Steering Committee to Reduce Family Violence⁴ became the Statewide Family Violence Advisory Committee, and met much less frequently. Policy development entered a new phase; the CEOs stepped back: it was now seen as a matter for consistent implementation in the trenches. Former Steering Committee member Magistrate Anne Goldsbrough observed:

The 'flavour' of the committee changed around this time. It could be said the Committee became more bureaucratic in many ways. There was noticeably less of a 'problem solving' environment and more of a government executives 'reporting back' to members approach.⁵

The eclipse of the Committee robbed the sector of a platform where shared understandings were forged between leaders of very different organisations. Turnover of key staff and the loss of casual discussions surrounding Steering Committee meetings had meant a falling off of these painstakingly built relationships and understandings. While many of the relationships endured outside the committee, the momentum was interrupted.⁶

But on the other hand, said Green:

...there needed to be a stepping back. Meeting three hours a month for CEOs was such an enormous investment, and it couldn't have been maintained. Already people were dropping off. It was an enormous amount of work for people.

According to Rodney Vlasis, Acting CEO of male family violence prevention organisation No To Violence, the Steering Committee arrangement did need to evolve, but there was much more to talk about that never got addressed:

Some of it was about shared meanings and understandings, some of it was around accountability to children's needs and experiences and exposure of children to family violence... And some was also about the very long implementation time required to turn a principle into a practice.

Vlasis also felt the possibility of putting women's organisations at the 'hub' of a coordinated approach, awarding them most of the community services money, and deciding collectively with clear leadership from government about how to spend it, was an important issue that was never discussed:

Around 2006-07, what we really needed was not only for government and non-government opportunities to thrash out some of these issues to continue, but spaces for NGOs to come together and make some decisions around these things.

² <https://www.viclabor.com.au/media-releases/labor-to-establish-royal-commission-into-family-violence/>

³ http://www.marywooldridge.com/Media_Detail.asp?ID=628

⁴ For full Steering Committee membership, see p. 62 of *Reforming Family Violence in Victoria*, available at http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0020/643124/reforming_family_violence.pdf.

⁵ Magistrate Anne Goldsbrough, personal communication.

⁶ Ibid.

Political buffeting also came in for its share of criticism, as regular meetings at the ministerial level petered out after the Coalition was voted in at the 2010 Victorian election:

One of the things about the integrated reforms that was seen as quite innovative was that we had multi-ministerial leadership under [the previous Labor government] – the women’s portfolio, community services, child protection, Attorney-General’s and the Police Minister were all involved... They came together quarterly for joint oversight and ownership, and it was quite effective. That unravelled under the last government.⁷

Vlais concurred, adding ‘There’s no doubt about it, there was a lot of inertia. Things stalled.’

Implementation and consolidation

For Green, people around the Steering Committee table ‘got to a real depth of shared understanding. But the rest of the state ...hadn’t been on that journey’. Goldsbrough felt that while the Committee had been a key driver in the planning and design of the reforms, the format of the Committee had changed before it could apply the same rigour to implementation.

From July 2006, 20 purpose-built Family Violence Regional Partnerships in DHS local areas had begun to implement aspects of the integrated approach. They were overseen by Regional Integrated Family Violence Committees whose purpose was to drive service integration at a local level.⁸ Unfortunately, according to Vlais, the governance structures to support implementation of the Partnerships were lacking:

That governance level really broke down, the reason being that [Regional Integration Coordinators or RICs] really had no power or authority. The role of governance ideally is for the Regional Integration Coordinator to actually have some power to network enough to bring departmental managers of correction, or child protection, or police, together to nut out how the reforms are going to occur in that particular region.

The RICs, often employed by women’s services who weren’t at the hub of family violence systems, didn’t have ‘enough teeth’ to make the many disparate service providers (including but not limited to police, child protection, corrections, men’s services, alcohol and other drugs) sit in a room together and develop coordinated practices and Memoranda of Understanding, talk about shadowing each other, or collect and share data. ‘They were hampered’, remembered Domestic Violence Victoria (DV Vic) CEO Fiona McCormack:

We had ongoing turnover of women of great calibre in those positions because [roles and responsibilities] weren’t clear. And it was difficult then embedding consistency across the state because there was such variation from region to region depending on personalities.

‘It’s like the government dipped its toes into a regional governance model but didn’t really give it what was needed,’ commented Vlais.

Green concurred that more could have been invested in making the Regional Partnerships work at a local level. The funding model was changing dramatically, and the sector was wary – DHS was working to consolidate the ‘buckets’ of funding (for example counselling, outreach and men’s behaviour change programs) through the partnerships. Large partnerships (upward of seven organisations) were now bidding to run family violence services in regions of 60,000-400,000 people, and there was ‘a lot of push-back’ from organisations within the sector worried about loss of specialisation, and about not being able to compete with larger agencies.

⁷ Alison Macdonald, Policy and Program Manager, Domestic Violence Victoria. Quoted in Donaldson, D. (2015) ‘How Victoria is taking some responsibility for family violence’. *The Mandarin*, 28 January. Available at <http://www.themandarin.com.au/18713-family-violence-victoria-must-keep-reforming-say-advocates/>.

⁸ DHS (2010) *Preventing and responding to violence against women: Milestones in Victoria*. Available at http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0015/643101/Range_of_reforms_resize7.pdf.

Decentralisation, while driving innovation and locally-tailored solutions, also drove sizeable inconsistencies in practice between different regions. This was exacerbated by a funding model that directed funding through partnership agreements, each in a different local area. Inevitably, silos formed.

Said Vlasis:

You'd have a Magistrate's Court over here that works really well in protecting women, and terribly over there. You'd have child protection practitioners who were doing these good initiatives over here, but nowhere else in the state... the inconsistencies were horrific. And still are.

Not all the news was bad. Some aspects of the reforms worked well and were effectively embedded. Green singled out the Family Violence Risk Assessment and Risk Management Framework (the 'CRAF') as a success story. The CRAF was developed for use by a range of professionals, including specialist family violence service providers, and the courts.⁹ According to Victoria Police Senior Policy Officer Ross Porter, the CRAF was also designed to spread out to allied non-core family violence services, and was 'simple enough that it sets up key risk indicators that any social worker can flick through and go "OK there's a number of red flags here that I may not have been able to identify otherwise"'. It built a common understanding of evidence based risk factors, and was supported by various DHS-funded tailored training packages. Victoria Police, who had already begun using a risk assessment framework in their 2004 Code of Practice for the Investigation of Family Violence, used a streamlined version of the CRAF as part of their reporting requirements for each family violence incident.

Continuing justice reform

In Victoria Police, reforms begun in the mid-2000s continued apace. Since the introduction of the Code of Practice for the Investigation of Family Violence in 2004, a watershed moment for family violence response within the force, Victoria Police's policies had undergone constant evolution. Rod Jouning, Detective Superintendent in charge of Sexual and Family Violence, acknowledged that although police members had taken some time to fully embrace the Code of Practice, there had since been a 'really large cultural shift'. Members had begun

...using the tools that the legislation provided around intervention orders, safety notices. They actually started to hold the perpetrators to account far more. And had a lot more interest for the victims. That has resulted in our reporting rate progressively increasing over that period of time.

Dedicated family violence services were also being developed and launched in the courts. They had already developed extensive internal protocols for the processing, listing and hearing of family violence applications, under the stewardship of Supervising Magistrate Anne Goldsbrough. Then in June 2005, the Family Violence Court Division of the Magistrates' Court commenced operation in two pilot locations of Ballarat and Heidelberg. It comprised specially assigned Magistrates, trained applicant and respondent support workers, family violence outreach workers, additional legal services from Victoria Legal Aid and Community Legal Centres, dedicated prosecutors, and additional security officers. Through this Division, magistrates could order perpetrators to attend behavioural change programs, sentence on family violence related crimes and make some family law orders for the one family (termed the 'one magistrate one family model'). Similar but reduced services were soon operating in four additional courts.

In 2006, legislative changes (Holding Powers) gave police the power to remove offenders from the scene of family violence incidents where their behaviour was considered to be family violence but didn't meet the criminal standards for arrest. This was a civil law tool complementing police's often

⁹ Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria (nd) 'CRAF'. Available at <http://www.dvrcv.org.au/training/family-violence-risk-assessment-craf>

more unwieldy criminal law powers. According to Claire Waterman (Policy and Projects Manager in Victoria Police's Sexual and Family Violence team):

It was one of those gaps in legislation where the poor woman would think that police could take him, and they actually couldn't. So we got the power to do that while we applied for an Intervention Order... it was great for police because it meant that they also saw that gaps they'd identified were translating on a state-wide level to the actual tools they needed in legislation.

This was a prelude to far greater legislative reforms. In 2008 the Family Violence Protection Act made sweeping changes to police powers, and even to the definition of family violence in civil and criminal law. Four of the biggest changes were that family violence was now broadened to include emotional and psychological abuse, as well as economic abuse; the exposure of children to family violence was now considered a family violence offence; the definition of 'family members' was broadened; and police were now able to serve on-the-spot Family Violence Safety Notices (FVSNs).¹⁰

These could be issued by police members of sergeant or higher rank outside of court hours, and also served as applications for Family Violence Intervention Orders (FVIOs). Effectively, they also allowed police to remove offenders from the scene of an incident for at least 72 hours, against the wishes of the affected family member/s if necessary, until an FVIO could be issued by a court (to which the FVSN acted as a summons). FVSNs were a civil option, but contravening them constituted a criminal offence. Achieving and then implementing these changes was a 'huge undertaking', said Waterman, because

...it wasn't necessarily popular with the courts in some regards, and the services and NGOs too. We had to fight for it. There was a concern that we were giving police additional powers they might misuse, but they also wanted to make sure that people being affected and the respondents had time to get legal advice.

Sensitive to these fears, in 2009 Victoria Police commissioned an evaluation of Family Violence Safety Notices. It found overall that FVSNs had contributed to an improved after-hours response, and gone some way to improving victim safety. Importantly, it concluded that although members were now more confident in their ability to act for victim safety out of hours, they were also applying FVSNs with 'appropriate discretion'.¹¹ Victoria Police accompanied the roll-out of these changes with a full day of force-wide training, which in the context of only two days of training per year helped to reinforce the message that police leadership took the family violence response very seriously.

Concerns about FVSNs remained, however, as they left much 'critical information gathering' in the hands of police, some of whom had relatively little family violence training compared to court staff who had previously assisted with the applications. According to Goldsbrough:

The quality of the information contained in the FV application through a FVSN was and still can be highly variable. Whilst this is steadily improving ...if the information – the evidence – is not correct or is incomplete, for example children are not included, no information about other court orders or firearms licences, or the history of violence ...then there can be challenges to obtaining a protection order, especially at a contested hearing. Some of these are mandatory considerations for a magistrate to make an order.

Subsequent policy changes included a major 2010 re-write of the Code of Practice (*Exhibit 1*)¹² to bring it in line with the Family Violence Protection Act, and an Enhanced Family Violence Service Delivery Model in 2011 that had 'a focus on looking at our repeat victims and recidivist offenders. It was shifting from that initial response to proactively starting to work with some of these families that

¹⁰ Magistrate Anne Goldsbrough notes that in practice, the majority of FVSNs are served at the police station after members have used holding powers to remove the offender from the scene.

¹¹ Thomson Goodall (2010) *Final Report to Victoria Police FVSN Evaluation Committee*, p. 89.

¹² It subsequently underwent several more minor updates; Exhibit 1 shows the 2014 Code of Practice.

we're going to regularly'.¹³ The Service Delivery Model was supported by an increase of specialist family violence teams across the state, from the original seven in 2011 to 32 by November 2014.¹⁴

Victims of their own success?

The efforts of government, the sector, courts and police soon had begun to pay an ambiguous dividend: from 2004-2014, family violence reporting more than doubled (see *Exhibit 2*). As community awareness grew, victims became aware of the support services available to them, and felt more comfortable coming forward. Police were generally more diligent in responding to and following up family violence incidents. As the figures continued to rise, police began to realise that reporting would not plateau in 2015, the year when the level of reporting had been expected to match the level of offending.¹⁵

The mandatory action required by the Victoria Police Code of Practice meant that both civil referrals and criminal prosecutions dramatically increased: 'pre-Code [2004] to now', said Waterman, 'we're talking about 800% increases in criminal charges'. The courts were struggling, and services only had time to engage with clients who were quick to respond. As Jouning explained:

[Services have] so many of these referrals that they just can't cope. So what tends to happen, particularly around perpetrators, is they don't engage. If they do, they don't do it well, there's no follow-up and no accountability around that.

Added Waterman: 'It's a prioritisation thing. If [services] don't get an immediate response or engagement by [the client], they move to the next one. We're victims of our own success, in a way.'

In the courts, Goldsbrough and her colleagues on the Family Violence and Family Law Portfolio Committee sought ideas and changed practices to try and deal with the demand and unpredictability of their caseload:

Lists of intervention order cases of 60-70-80+ are not unheard of and in fact have become the norm. These numbers – most of them extremely urgent – meant clients were receiving often brief legal advice and support, stretching legal and support services to the limit. Many are adjourned to another day, creating a 'churn'. The court has created additional family violence lists days at most courts, yet the numbers keep on increasing.

Added to the service fragmentation described earlier, this often presented a less than welcoming service landscape for victims, who could wind up underserved by an increasingly stretched system.

Jouning reflected that there had probably been 'over-compliance' by police members in making referrals to services, but he and his team were now thinking about how to adjust the system in light of these developments:

...there is a better opportunity to triage through a three-tiered risk assessment process. ...We reckon what'll happen there is that all this really low risk stuff will be treated as low risk, it won't necessarily result in referrals. So that's going to take a lot of pressure off support services. A lot of the stuff won't go before the courts, and take the pressure off the courts.

Another piece of work being undertaken by the Sexual Assault and Family Violence team was ensuring that family violence was represented in the police tasking and coordination process, traditionally focused on how to place resources to deal with 'volume crime' such as burglaries and car theft. Key to this, explained Waterman, was a fundamental reconfiguration of crime statistics, to disaggregate somewhat hidden family violence-related offences from their individual crime themes:

¹³ Claire Waterman interview.

¹⁴ Claire Waterman interview.

¹⁵ Bucci, N. (2013) 'Police chief warns on rising cases'. *The Age*, 22 April. Available at <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/police-chief-warns-on-rising-cases-20130421-2i8f8.html>

So what we did was shift our crime reporting last year so that in the crime stats release it identifies of all the major crime themes, what proportion of that is family violence. It didn't used to be separated....[Now] we're actually providing that information to the public, saying 'this many of our assaults directly arose from family violence incidents, this many sexual assaults, this many children were present. In abductions and kidnaps, this is how many of them were in a family violence context'. It's putting that major crime lens on.

At 42% of all crimes against the person, 34% of all rape offences, 42% of abduction/kidnap offences, 16% of property damage offences, and 47% of harassment offences,¹⁶ the data clearly indicated that family violence warranted a place around the tasking and coordination table along with burglaries and car theft. It also proved a useful communication tool for police, who were able to demonstrate that although the official crime rate was increasing, this was almost entirely due to family violence-related offences. But the data also raised other questions. Did this reflect an increase in reporting only? Or was it somehow an indicator of an underlying increase in the incidence of family violence?

Why this, why now?

In September 2014, Victoria Police Chief Commissioner Ken Lay was hopeful about retaining public momentum in the fight against family violence: 'For the first time ever, we're approaching the state election and both sides are talking about family violence reform'.¹⁷ Melbourne newspaper *The Herald Sun* was running a sustained campaign 'to confront the scourge of family violence in our community'.¹⁸ And in the Sexual and Family Violence team at Victoria Police, Rod Jouning and Claire Waterman were finding their job easier because they could talk about the gendered nature of family violence without being accused of bias against men: 'I don't have to spend my day worrying about that and dealing with fallout from that language choice, but I did have to five years ago.'

For Victoria's family violence leaders, a combination of leadership, hard work and tragedy had catapulted family violence to the top of the political and public agenda. According to Vlasis, many advocates from the service sector had spent a lot of time working with the media to lift their standard of practice when it came to reporting family violence. His organisation No to Violence had partnered with peak body DV Vic and others to deliver a media awards event known as the EVAs. For DV Vic CEO Fiona McCormack, the key had been to realise that they needed proactive and not punitive strategies to work with the media: 'our approach before had been bashing... and it never works'. Instead, 'you bring people along. You acknowledge their good work... honestly the EVA media nights are the best fun'. More than six years on from the first EVAs, reporting had improved both in quality and quantity, and competition for the awards was stiff (see *Exhibit 3* for an award-winning article with the judge's comments).

A series of shocking, high profile family violence cases had also gripped the state.¹⁹ The most well-publicised of these cases, the 2014 murder of 11-year-old Luke Batty by his father, raised his articulate, dignified and passionately motivated mother Rosie to a national stage; she became an advocate of increasing prominence, culminating in her being named the 2015 Australian of the Year. The impact of her advocacy was felt not just in Victoria but across Australia, where other states had

¹⁶ Victoria Police (2014) *Crime Statistics 2013/2014*. Available at http://www.police.vic.gov.au/content.asp?a=internetBridgingPage&Media_ID=72176.

¹⁷ Ferrier, S. (2014) 'One in five Australians believe drunk women "partly responsible" for rape: survey'. ABC News, 18 September. Available at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-09-17/one-in-five-believe-drunk-women-partly-responsible-for-rape/5749088>

¹⁸ Herald Sun editorial (2013) 'Family violence must end'. *Herald Sun*, 22 July. Available at <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/opinion/family-violence-must-end/story-fni0ffsx-1226682797077>

¹⁹ Robert Farquharson murdered his three sons by driving them into a dam in 2005; Darcey Freeman was thrown off the West Gate Bridge by her father in 2009. The 2012 street murder of ABC employee Jill Meagher, while not family violence-related, also contributed to the public discussion of violence against women as well as the capacity of the justice system to make effective use of data sharing.

been facing similarly challenging conditions. 'She's an incredible person', said McCormack, who reflected that Batty had challenged family violence myths 'right from the get go':

It's very commonly believed that women use the courts to separate their children or punish the father. With Rosie coming out and saying 'nobody loved Luke more than his dad', and saying those things about the man who had just murdered her son, I think she's captured people's attention because she's challenging that myth. ...And the other thing is people trust her, so she can say things that people think 'yeah that's sound', so having her, particularly coupled with Ken [Lay], coming out and giving family violence a profile at a national level... That's what she's done.

What next?

For DHS Policy and Strategy Manager Rachael Green, the lack of community understanding highlighted by the VicHealth research was a sign that the root causes of violence against women needed to be better tackled through prevention strategies:

...we need to make sure all of our training and resourcing includes understanding of family violence dynamics, all of that sort of stuff. And have as its core some of those causal and contributing factors. I think that's a question about training and continuing to embed.

Access to data was the other big gap identified by Jouning and his team at Victoria Police:

We need systems that talk to each other, IT systems. We just operate entirely in isolation in many senses. ...Particularly between us, DHS, Department of Health, we really don't play at all. And the Courts, including Family Court. ...they operate very much in isolation from the Magistrate's Court. We don't have visibility of them, and it's such a risk factor to us.

With data connections, fairly static point-in-time risk assessments could be seen in context, providing a bank of information that could escalate or de-escalate risk for front-line services. Courts too could benefit from data sharing, as a respondent 'can have an intervention order application go before the court, and at the same time, that respondent may have other relevant criminal matters operating through the system'²⁰ that the court doesn't know about.

For Vlasis, data sharing could also help police and prosecutors bring perpetrators to justice,

because often the best body of evidence around a man's use of violence is from the women's service who've interviewed her, yet women's services have never been connected into perpetrator accountability systems. Of course there's a whole lot of issues to work through in terms of being able to work closely with police prosecutors etc ...but it's bread and butter in strong coordinated community responses in the US.

November 2014 brought a decisive victory for the Labor Party, and with it a Royal Commission into Family Violence. Its Terms of Reference promised a wide-ranging inquiry into prevention, early intervention, victim support, and perpetrator accountability.²¹ Rachael Green and the women's portfolio were moved from the Department of Human Services to the Department of Premier and Cabinet after the election, and Premier Daniel Andrews appointed Victoria's (and indeed Australia's) first ever Minister for Family Violence. Soon after, Assistant Commissioner Dean McWhirter was appointed leader of the first Family Violence Command in an Australian police jurisdiction. The signal was unambiguous: the political masters of the day were ready to match strong rhetoric with strong action on family violence in Victoria.

The issue's extraordinary public prominence also brought new challenges. One was to sustain professionalism and coherence in the face of a myriad of new initiatives. As DV Vic CEO McCormack observed:

²⁰ Rod Jouning interview.

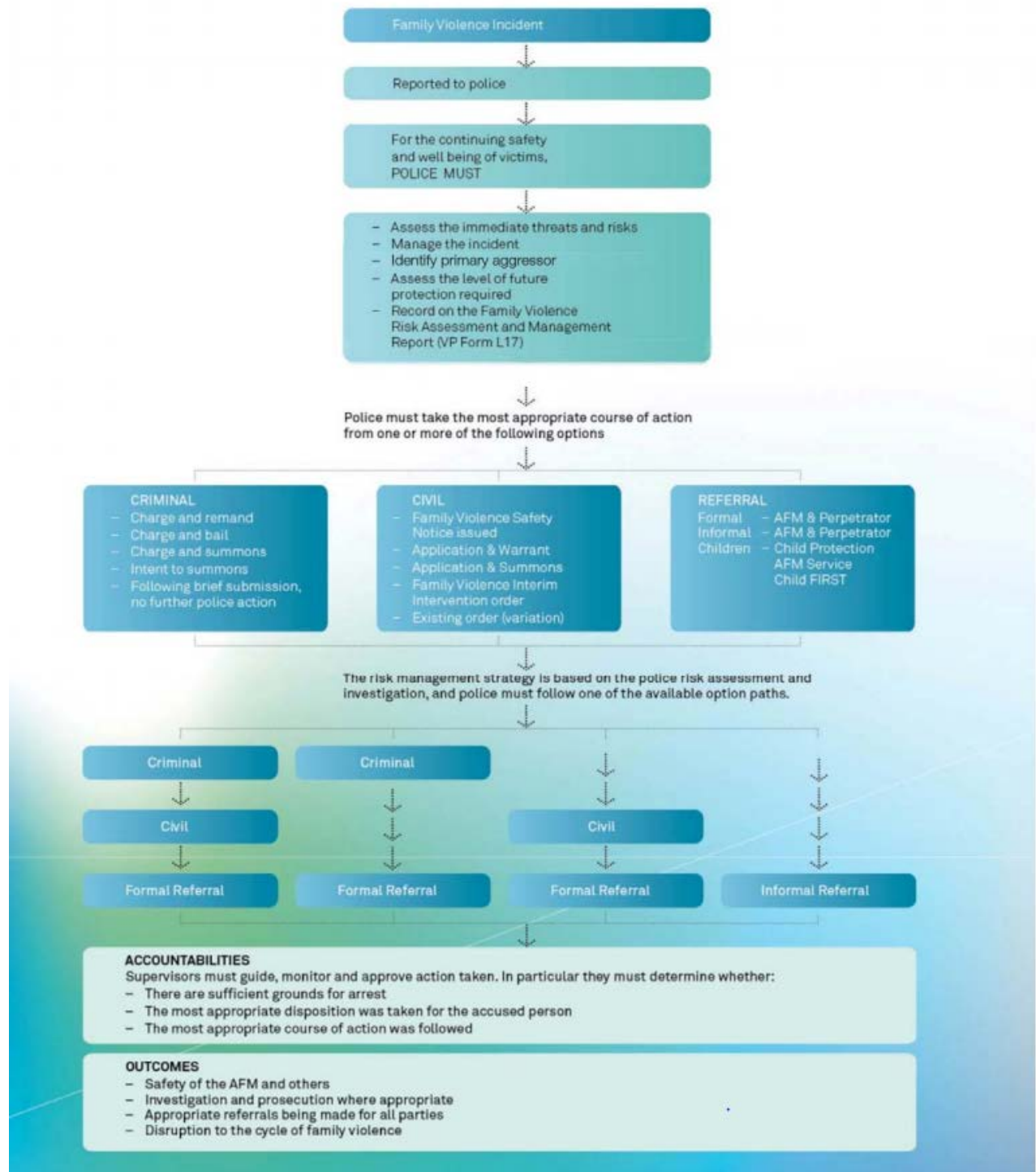
²¹ *Victoria Government Gazette*, No. S 31, 22 February 2015. Available at <http://www.gazette.vic.gov.au/gazette/Gazettes2015/GG2015S031.pdf>.

What we've got now, family violence is like the flavour of the day, and we get every man and his dog claiming 'oh yes we do prevention, we do prevention'. We get civic groups saying: 'We're starting a website, we're doing this for women, or we're doing this for men'. People who have absolutely no qualifications, expertise, they're people in the community. If we're going to prevent violence against women we actually need the community, but without a policy framework that says 'in Victoria this is what informs our approach, and this is where we're heading', it's very difficult to hold those organisations to account, or even bring them in under the umbrella, in the fold, which is what is needed.

Victoria's family violence sector was now faced with a unique opportunity to take advantage of strong election commitments, and to conduct a public self-examination and agenda-setting exercise. In this new strategic environment, how could it institutionalise and capitalise on the newfound momentum? What leadership was necessary, and how was it going to be provided?

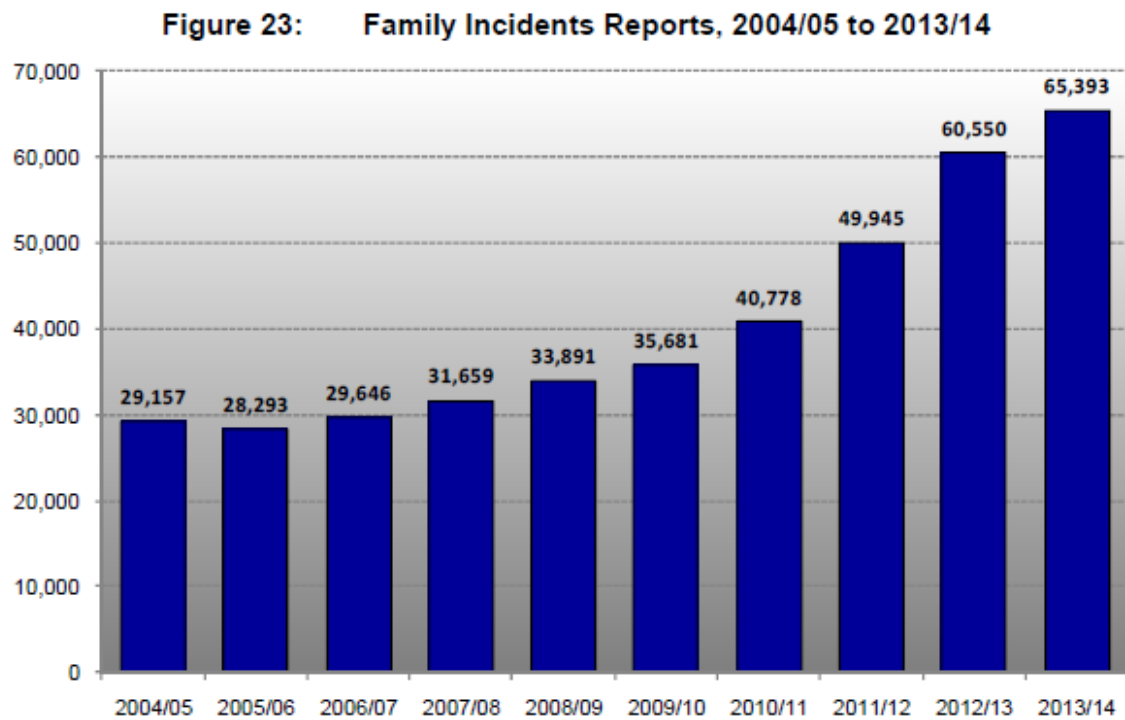
Exhibit 1 Code of Practice for the Investigation of Family Violence, June 2014

VICTORIA POLICE OPTIONS MODEL



Source: Victoria Police (2014) Code of Practice for the Investigation of Family Violence, June, p. 21.

Exhibit 2 Family violence police reports



Source: Victoria Police (2014) Crime Statistics 2013/2014. Available at http://www.police.vic.gov.au/content.asp?a=internetBridgingPage&Media_ID=72176.

MORELAND

Stop the violence

FAMILY VIOLENCE REPORTS HAVE GONE UP BY 36 PER CENT IN THE PAST FIVE YEARS IN MORELAND. IN RESPONSE, A LEGAL CLINIC FOR MUSLIM WOMEN IS OPENING. TESSA HOFFMAN REPORTS

SAFIYA never imagined marriage would come with so many bruises.

Her husband began beating her as soon as the newlyweds arrived in Moreland from Pakistan and for close to a decade she endured almost daily abuse until he filed for divorce.

Safiya, whose name has been changed to protect her identity, has now sought help from Moreland Community Legal Centre to secure sole custody and child support payments and an intervention order against her husband.

Speaking through an interpreter, she said she would not have sought help had her husband not initiated divorce.

Family violence reports to police have gone up 36 per cent to 1118 incidents in 2011-12 across Moreland in the past five years.

The epidemic crosses all cultural and social demographics and there are many barriers preventing victims seeking help.

For newly arrived migrants, those barriers are so numerous they can be almost insurmountable, according to a 2010 paper by the Australian Domestic and Family

WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

- Women's Domestic Violence Crisis Service (24 hours) 1800 015 188
- Men's Referral Service 1800 065 973 (Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm) anonymous confidential telephone service for men who want to stop abusing
- Kids' Helpline 1800 551 800, national 24-hr helpline for children and young people (Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm)
- Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights: 9481 3000 (Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm)
- InTouch Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence 1800 755 988 (Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm)
- Berry Street Victoria northern region 9450 4700 (Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm)
- Immigrant Women's Domestic Violence Service 1800 755 988 (Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm)
- Mary Anderson Family Violence Service 9353 1013

Violence Clearing House. These include language barriers, illiteracy, financial dependence, unemployment, cultural differences, lack of legal knowledge and mistrust of government agencies.

There are scant resources set up to target this problem, according to the Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights.

Moreland Community Legal Centre is hoping to help fill the gap by establishing a legal clinic exclusively for Muslim women who are victims of family violence.

The project, believed to be a first in Victoria, is spearheaded by solicitor and Muslim Mehernaz Sadafi.

Ms Sadafi said the project would respond to the growing number of women coming through their doors who have no money, no English and little or no social support. She said it was incredibly hard for these women to speak out against their aggressors and "it helps coming into our office speaking to a Muslim female who can appreciate their history, their culture, their religion".

Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights executive

director Joumanah El-Matrah welcomed the move.

She said more Muslim women were now reporting domestic violence, but a diminishing number of smaller service providers left them fewer places to seek help.

"An Anglo-Saxon woman has a multitude of options available to her, whereas if you're an immigrant woman, you don't have that choice," Ms El-Matrah said.

"Often you're just lucky if you can find someone who understands your language."

When it came to barriers to seeking help,

religion was a "key difference" for Muslim women.

"It's much easier to explain to a Muslim woman why you can't leave the relationship because of what you perceive to be your religious obligation than it is to try to explain it to someone who doesn't come from that tradition," Ms El-Matrah said.

"That is knowledge mainstream providers just don't have, and can't acquire, because it's religious information."

Safiya said she endured her husband's abuse in order to give her children a "proper family" and always

hoped one day it would stop.

But looking back "if I would know after eight long years I would get nothing but a divorce, I would (have left)".

She encouraged women in the same situation to seek help.

"I have tolerated so many things. Up to the last stage I was believing in myself and keep trying to make things normal, but now he has given me the divorce and everything has been history, but I am still under that trauma," Safiya said. "If I would take one of these steps, when things started, then things definitely would have changed."

Judge's remarks

Tessa Hoffman's article highlights the importance of cultural and religious understanding in the provision of family violence services. Tessa gives voice to women's experiences of family violence compounded by cultural misunderstanding in Australia. Safiya's comments of her experiences are frank and give insight into why women don't and can't leave violent situations. The piece importantly includes broader suburban statistics and makes it apparent that this is an extensive community problem. The 'Where to go for help' box is excellent in both content and placement.

Source: <http://www.evas.org.au/index.php/evas-winners/2013>