



## **South West Carer and Respite Services Network**

### **Inquiry into Abuse in Disability Services Stage 2**

**Submission to the Victorian parliamentary Committee on Family and  
Community Development  
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## **About South West Carer and Respite Services Network**

South West Carer and Respite Services Network (the Network) comprises 29 member organisations that provide essential carer and respite services to the carers of people who are frail aged, people who have a disability and people with a mental-ill health across South West Victoria. Network membership is open to government agencies at all levels, health and welfare organisations, community support groups and agencies that support and provide carer and respite services across the five local government areas of Corangamite, Moyne, Warrnambool, Glenelg and Southern Grampians. The Network supports member organisations to work collaboratively to improve carer and respite services in the South West by identifying gaps and issues, building partnerships, providing a focal point for interagency information sharing, identifying the needs of service users and by maximising the use of available resources to the region.

Based on current research (see relevant research finding and statistics at the end of this submission) it became clear to the Network that the lack of knowledge and skill to adequately prevent and respond to violence against women with disability is a major gap in the provision of carer and respite services. Gender-based and disability-based discrimination intersect and increase the risk of violence for women with disabilities (Woodlock, p5). The Network believes this issue is so significant that it included the following key priority in its 2013-15 and 2015-16 Strategic Plan: 'To improve outcomes for service users by promoting gender equity among all Network Members, Service Users and Stakeholders'. The Network believes this is a unique position to take from a mainstream organisation. To guide the work under this key priority the Network developed a Gender Equity Project Plan. The work under this plan has been successfully completed including promotion of the Office of the Public Advocate Interagency Guideline for Addressing Violence, Neglect and Abuse (IGUANA) and gender equity/violence prevention/women with disability professional development for member organisations.

In August 2014 the Network and Women's Health and Wellbeing Barwon South West partnered to deliver the inaugural Everybody's Business : Taking action to prevent and respond to violence against women with disabilities conference. More than 100 representatives from community organisations, local government, the disability sector, domestic violence agencies and justice sector agencies were challenged to step up and take action to address and/or prevent violence against women with disabilities.

Keynote speaker the late Stella Young opened the day with a resounding call to action, followed by a panel discussion that included Women with Disabilities Victoria, Disabilities Services Commissioner, Office of Public Advocate, Victoria Police, South West Centre Against Sexual Assault and Emma House Domestic Violence Services Inc., followed by workshops to consider how to progress local action to identify, address and prevent violence against women with disabilities.

This conference highlights the strength of local partnerships and the ability of small, agile organisations to pool their resources and take action in an area still emerging at a state, national and international level. This agility led to a tremendously successful day, a firm commitment to ongoing

action and the opportunity to put the Great South Coast on the map as a region leading action to prevent violence against women with disabilities.

The conference prioritised the learning of expert bodies such as Women with Disabilities Victoria, but also drew on the experience of local organisations and practitioners to identify current contexts for improving outcomes for women with disabilities.

The conference moved quickly from describing the problem to identifying a work plan for collaborative action by partners across the continuum from primary prevention to crisis response. A number of key local actions were derived from this forum and have now been formulated into an action plan that supports the work already being done through local government Health and Wellbeing Plans and the *Great South Coast Strategy to Prevent Violence against Women and Children 2013-2017*.

What became clear from the Everybody's Business Conference was a tremendous amount of good will and commitment on the part of local organisations and their staff to support women with disability to maintain their human right to live free from violence. They were able to acknowledge that despite best intentions there are gaps in the systems in which they work and that they need support to overcome them.

The Everybody's Business Steering Group (the EB Steering Group) has been established to oversee the implementation of the action plan. Member organisations of this steering group include Brophy, Family and Youth Services, Deaf Access, Rural Access, Gunditjmara Aboriginal Cooperative, Coinda Terang Inc, Victoria Police, Mpower Inc, Karingal, Warrnambool City Council, Emma House Domestic Violence Services Inc and South West Carer & Respite Services Network. The EB Steering Group is working on the following priority actions: promoting the Common Risk Assessment Framework training to disability workers, promoting IGUANA to disability organisations, adapting the 'Attitudes to Violence' survey to suit disability organisations and encouraging organisations to participate and developing and promoting abuse screening into all intake tools.

## Submission

We offer the following submission based on our experience and observations working with disability organisations in the South West of Victoria. Further we endorse the submissions by Women with Disabilities Victoria to this Inquiry Stages 1 and 2.

### Experience of disclosing or reporting abuse

What experiences have people with disability, families and carers had when disclosing or reporting abuse?

What systems and processes do disability service providers have in place to prevent abuse occurring in their organisation or to respond to any allegations of abuse or neglect of people accessing their disability services?

Most organisations have sound policies and procedures to prevent and respond to disclosures of abuse. Those policies are essential but not in themselves sufficient to ensure that they are carried out by all members of staff at all times. Recent examples have demonstrated that well established, well respected, organisations that pass accreditation standards and have a suite of sound policies can fail at varying levels and in various ways to protect or appropriately respond to abuse against people with disabilities in their care. The Network and the EB Steering Group have been promoting IGUANA to its members who are one by one endorsing those guidelines so that we can be confident that their policies are consistent and prompt a discussion within the organisation about prevention and responding to abuse. Initial training and ongoing professional development in the appropriate application of those policies is also essential.

### Professional development

Should minimum qualifications be introduced for all disability workers? **Yes.**

- If so, what should be the minimum qualification?
- Should this be a state or national requirement?

Should there be compulsory requirements for professional development for disability workers? **Yes.**

- If so, what core components of ongoing professional development would be required?

The Network does not have a view about the minimum qualifications or national or state requirements however, initial qualification and ongoing professional development should include gender equity, intersectionality and prevention and response to abuse or suspected abuse training. This training must cover research and statistics about the prevalence and types of abuse experienced by people with disability and the gendered nature of abuse against people with disability. The training needs to be designed to dispel myths about people with disability, perpetrators and abuse so that workers are in a position to believe service users if they disclose abuse and feel confident to immediately respond appropriately.

### Workforce culture

What does the Victorian Government need to do to support a disability workforce culture that does not tolerate abuse, neglect or exploitation?

Current State level work in this area does not reach local regional organisations in a way that helps people do their jobs. Support for organisations to better understand these issues and act appropriately needs to come from their own region.

Use all means available to it (funding, contractual arrangements, accreditation) to:

- mandate that disability qualifications include training on gender equity, intersectionality and prevention and response to abuse or suspected abuse training;
- mandate disability organisations to employ staff who are appropriately qualified to identify and respond to abuse against people with disabilities;
- mandate service coordination between the disability, domestic violence, sexual assault and justice sectors;
- mandate continuing professional development for disability workers covering gender equity, intersectionality and prevention and response to abuse or suspected abuse training; and
- mandate application and use of abuse screening to be included in all client intake tools with particular attention being paid to disability-based abuse.

Fund:

- whole-of-sector mandatory training on use of screening tools;
- whole-of-sector mandatory training, provided locally, for domestic violence services staff, sexual assault service staff, police and court staff to meet the needs of people with disability especially women;
- whole-of-sector mandatory training for Staff from disability services to understand the intersectionality of gender, disability and violence; and
- South West Carer and Respite Services Network in addition to funding State wide services as a local organisation with existing relationships with disability, organisations to support culture change within those organisations to accept gender equity and prevention of violence against women with disability as part of their core business and a necessary requirement for them to carry out their duty of care to their clients.

What do Victorian disability service providers need to do to promote and achieve a workforce culture that does not tolerate abuse, neglect or exploitation?

Strong leadership from boards and management is essential so that staff feel confident and supported to appropriately respond to abuse. Disability organisations must accept that gender equity is a key component of preventing abuse against women with disabilities and is therefore part of their core business. They must make the connection between the alarming high rates of abuse against women with disabilities and their own service users. While considered important by Network member agencies, gender and disability training is given low priority in comparison to other requirements in the context of constrained resources. Gender and disability training and prevention of violence against women with disabilities training needs to become a priority of disability services.

## Research

VicHealth's 'Preventing violence against women in Australia: Research summary: Addressing the social and economic determinants of mental and physical health' provides the following alarming statistics about violence against women with disability:

Women with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to violence, especially when perpetrators are carers who are in a position of exerting control and power. Women with disabilities are also at risk of violence from people with whom they share a house or residence. It is not uncommon for women with disabilities to experience violence by more than one person in their lifetimes and for the experience of violence to be a protracted and enduring feature in their lives (Salthouse & Frohmader 2004; Women With Disabilities Australia 2008).

- Violence experienced by women with disabilities is often specific to the nature of their disability and includes the denial of mobility and communication devices, a withholding of food or medication, and threats of institutionalisation (Curry et al. 2001).
- Humiliation, harassment, forced sterilisation, denial of reproductive rights, neglect and restrictions to social networks are other documented forms of abuse directed at women with disabilities (Salthouse & Frohmader 2004; Women With Disabilities Australia 2008).
- Overseas studies show that women with disabilities are overall 40 per cent more likely to be the victims of intimate partner violence over the past five years than women without disabilities. Women with disabilities are also vulnerable to more severe forms of violence (Brownridge 2006).
- Women with cognitive disabilities are very vulnerable, experiencing extremely high rates of sexual assault (Victorian Women with Disabilities Network Advocacy Information Service, 2007).
- A staggering 90 per cent of Australian women with an intellectual disability have been subjected to sexual abuse, with more than two-thirds of women (68 per cent) having been sexually abused before they turned 18 years of age. These rates are consistent with overseas studies (Australian Law Reform Commission 2010; Salthouse & Frohmader 2004).

The Voices Against Violence research found the following:

Women with disabilities are at greater risk of experiencing family and sexual violence compared with both men with disabilities and women without disabilities. Women with disabilities experience violence in many of the same ways as other women but also experience 'disability-based violence' including perpetrators controlling access to medication, mobility and communication supports, threats to withdraw care or institutionalise and abuse of Enduring Power of Attorney (p14).

Whilst intimate partners are the most common perpetrators of violence against women with disabilities, women with disabilities are also at risk of experiencing violence from personal carers, other support staff, service providers, medical and transport staff (such as taxi drivers), peers and male co-residents. Women experienced violence in their homes, but also in residential care settings, such as emergency housing, group homes and supported residential services (p15).

When women with disabilities attempt to seek help stereotypes about disability create barriers as they are seen as not being credible witnesses or are not listened to when they make attempts to tell others about the violence. Often women with disabilities do not identify what they are experiencing as violence due to a lifetime of cumulative discrimination and demeaning experiences can result in some women seeing their experiences of violence as normal and an everyday occurrence. Women

with disabilities are fearful of violence escalating, having their children harmed and being killed, being institutionalised or that their children would be removed from their care if they told anyone about the violence (p16).

The service systems are difficult to navigate and responses are often poor. Women were referred between disability and violence response services without coordination or collaboration. Women mentioned that family violence services were not always helpful because of the woman's disabilities, and disability services did not respond well to reports of violence. There is clear need for the disability sector to better understand the gendered dynamic of violence and for the family violence-sexual assault sector (including criminal justice services) to better understand and take account of the particular needs of women with disabilities (p17).

(Woodlock Delainie, Healy Lucy, Howe Keran, McGuire Magdalena, Gedes Vig and Granek Sharon, Voices Against Violence Paper One: Summary Report and Recommendations (Women with Disabilities Victoria, Office of the Public Advocate and Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria 2014).