



a fairer victoria achievements so far

Strategy Three Responding to family violence more effectively

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Aim

The level of family violence in Victoria, and across Australia, is unacceptably high. It is the leading contributor to death, disability and illness in Victorian women aged 15 to 44 – more significant than high blood pressure, smoking and obesity combined. It is also a major threat to child development and well-being, and is a factor in around half of all child abuse substantiations in Victoria. Family violence costs the Victorian economy around \$2 billion each year.

Through a range of initiatives, the Victorian Government is making women and children safer, supporting women to make decisions about what happens to them and their families, and ensuring perpetrators are held accountable for their actions.

Reform of legislation underpins many of these changes and we are consulting on a new Family Violence Bill to be introduced in Parliament in 2008. The Bill will better protect the victims of family violence and continue the reforms already put in place through A Fairer Victoria.

More effective police response

New holding powers allow police to detain a person suspected of family violence for up to six hours, so family members can remain at home rather than being forced to flee. Since their introduction in July 2006 to the end of February 2008, holding powers were used a total of 2,060 times. These powers have assisted women and children to remain in their homes during an immediate crisis.

Training over 6,400 operational police in the new *Police Code of Practice for the Investigation of Family Violence* since August 2004 has also led to improvements in the justice system's response to family violence in Victoria.

Initiatives to improve the quality of services and provide better coordination across the support sector, Government, police and courts, have led to:

- the number of intervention orders applied for by Victoria Police increasing by 169 per cent since 2004, and
- the number of charges laid increasing by 183 per cent since 2004.

Better protection of women and children

Additional services across Victoria are being funded to supply refuge accommodation, intensive case management, after-hours support, women's and children's counselling, and men's behavioural change programs.

Where it is not possible for women and children to stay in their homes we are helping them access private rental as well as outreach support. These new initiatives have:

- assisted more than 1,300 women with outreach and intensive case management support every year. Many of these women have complex support needs such as mental health, drug and alcohol, parenting, and financial issues
- helped more women and children to access private rental accommodation with financial assistance – for example, in the Eastern Metropolitan region alone, 72 women were given help with suitable rental accommodation in 2005/06
- assisted young men deemed at risk of using violence in future relationships through an innovative early intervention program in the Dandenong Court Region, through the GRIPP (*Gain Respect, Increase Personal Power*) program
- funded four *Indigenous Men's Time Out Services* which are now being established in Loddon Mallee, East Gippsland, Hume, North and West Metropolitan regions, and
- funded four *Indigenous Family Violence Healing Services*, located in Loddon Mallee, East Gippsland, North and West Metropolitan Region, and Eastern Metropolitan Region.

More responsive legal system

In June 2005 we set up a specialist court – the Family Violence Court Division – to improve the court system’s response to family violence. Located in the Heidelberg and Ballarat Magistrates’ Courts, the Division provides specialist family violence support workers, specialised court staff and magistrates, and specialist police prosecutors. Additional security and family outreach services are also provided.

At Ballarat:

- intervention orders finalised from complaints made by police have increased by 64 per cent – from 210 in 2004/05, to 344 in 2006/07
- the Applicant Support Worker supported 308 family members throughout 2006/07, and
- the Defendant Support Worker supported 307 defendants throughout 2006/07.

At Heidelberg:

- intervention orders finalised from complaints made by police have increased by 36 per cent – from 562 in 2004/05, to 763 in 2006/07
- the Applicant Support Worker supported 583 family members throughout 2006/07, and
- the Defendant Support Worker supported an average of 403 defendants throughout 2006/07.

We have also:

- seen over 200 male defendants with court-ordered intervention orders attend family violence counselling programs as part of the Family Violence Court Intervention Project during 2006/07, and
- trained 189 Magistrates’ Court Registrars in the nationally accredited unit ‘Recognise and Respond to Domestic and Family Violence’ in 2006/07.

In addition, we have established three new *Family Violence Specialist Services* at the Melbourne, Frankston and Sunshine / Werribee Magistrates’ Courts, to simplify access to the justice system for family members and affected children and enhance their safety. So far, over 1,700 family members have been supported, 95 per cent of whom were female.

A focus on prevention

While it’s important to get the response to family violence right, there is substantial evidence that the factors that support the continuance of family violence can be modified or eliminated. In 2007 we worked closely with the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation to develop a framework and evidence base to support primary prevention of violence against women. This is an essential next step in the Government’s efforts to address the underlying causes of family violence in Victoria.

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