

INQUIRY INTO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE TRENDS AND ISSUES IN NSW

Organisation: Relationships Australia (NSW)

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The Director
Standing Committee on Social Issues
NSW Legislative Council
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Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

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**Relationships Australia NSW submission
regarding the
INQUIRY INTO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE TRENDS AND ISSUES IN NSW**

BACKGROUND

Thank you for the opportunity for Relationships Australia to make a submission to contribute to your inquiry into domestic violence trends and issues in New South Wales.

Relationships Australia (NSW) has been providing high quality services for 64 years. In the last year we provided services to over 20,000 vulnerable individuals, couples and families regardless of age, religion, cultural background and gender. We receive Federal and State government funding towards this end. We are committed to enhancing the lives of communities, families and individuals and supporting positive and respectful relationships.

Our organisation has a commitment to enhancing the safety of children through programs which enhance respect and safety in families. Through our training arm, The Australian Institute of Australian Studies (AIRS), we provide accredited professional education. We have over 30 locations in NSW to deliver our counselling, relationship education and family dispute resolution services and are part of the National Federation of Relationships Australia.

As part of a whole of family approach to safety for women and children, RA NSW has run behaviour change programs for men who have been abusive in intimate relationships for over 20 years. Men's behaviour change programs have a mixed track record of reducing violence in intimate relationships and creating safer communities. This is due in the past to significant defects in research design and problems in methodology. Using recidivism and rearrest rates only to judge success of programs is insufficient and victims' reports can also be unreliable and based on hope. However, they do have some success in addressing the beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of those who use violence and work with motivation for change and creating safety and resilience in families. The ongoing commitment of this organisation to improving the quality of the programs, clear clinical standards for workers and the understanding of what contributes to effective and lasting behaviour change based on our experiences and according to current research being conducted within these programs is well known. This is important work that governments, community and family support organisations must progress.

TRENDS

The community has become more aware of the fact that domestic violence is a prevalent component of many families' lives and it is less tolerated than ever before. However, there is still a mismatch between acceptable behaviour in many social settings outside the home where alcohol is a factor.

RA NSW has seen some moves towards the various government and non-government departments beginning to work together in a more comprehensive way when violence is detected in families and the wider community. The adoption of changes to child protection legislation to allow sharing of information between the departments of Health, Police, Education, Community Services and organisation's involved in working in family support areas is assisting collaboration. However, resources are stretched and knowledge of procedures relating to the legislative changes still needs to increase for them to be effective. The establishment and rolling out of the Family Referral Service across NSW is also assisting in protecting children where family violence is enacted.

Knowledge about the complexity of DV has increased in the community over recent years and definitions have become more nuanced in the past 5 years (See Kelly JB & Johnson MP 2008). Treatment programs for offenders have also evolved in response to this knowledge.

There has also been recognition by the Family Court of the effects of DV on children and consideration and amendments to the Family Law Act have been made regarding the risks of shared parenting responsibilities. However, there is still work to be done between Federal and State jurisdictions to assure the safety of women and children post separation.

We commend the NSW government for the ***Keeping Them Safe*** legislation, which has improved the tracking and follow through for vulnerable children, often affected by Domestic Violence. RANSW has trained all practitioners for this important assessment work.

In particular, RA NSW has noted:

- *There is an increase in demand for early intervention seminars with a preventative focus on developing respectful relationships and appropriate alternatives to resolve interpersonal conflict as part of some schools' Personal Development programs. Currently, RA NSW, in conjunction with a number of schools, delivers highly popular programs promoting healthy relationships.

- * The Office for Women is funding a small program to support to RA NSW to deliver a "3 R's program – Recognise, Respond and Refer" to new community workers within 7 main regional local areas. Many young workers will benefit from training and support to appropriately refer family members early for support services.

- * Increasing requests for behaviour change programs for women who have been violent in their intimate relationships, and for same sex relationships. However, care is needed in the interpretation of the trend of these requests. We do know from research that women's violence is less likely to fall into the realm of coercion and control when it relates to intimate partners (Kelly JB & Johnson MP 2008). By developing programs which match the clients' situations, motivation and needs we are more able to assist in change and prevent relapse.

- *Recognition of the domains of the violence is changing. There are increasing presentations of men who are violent not only in their intimate relationships but also in many other aspects of their lives (eg fights in social gatherings, racially based assaults, road rage, poor impulse control at work etc).

- *There is a shift to a greater presentation of men who self-refer into RA NSW behaviour change programs. In the past, most presentations were in response to referrals from the Department of Community Services and Probation and Parol where clients were mandated to attend RA NSW programs. We believe that this is in part due to the perception that violence between intimate partners is now less acceptable in our communities and people using violence wishing to avoid the legal sanctions that are more likely to follow. (eg: being required to leave the family home, or have contact with their children under supervision).

*Increasing demand for access to services for children whose parents are in high conflict to provide safe changeover and supervised contact. Such services minimise significantly the potential for parental alienation while serving to reality test the parental commitment of the supervised parent and objectively report on the desire to have a healthy relationship with their child/ren. Some of these services are federally funded, but the demands are greater than the funding. This often causes unwarranted stress on family relationships as waiting lists are currently inappropriately and ineffectively long and cause extended family and friends to be given the job of supervising the parent and child/ren.

*Increasing numbers of grandparents requesting assistance regarding relationships with grandchildren where there is distress and conflict after separation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Further development of resources for government and non-government departments to work together in a more comprehensive way when violence is detected in families and the wider community in order to ensure that after referrals are made, the clients are accessing and benefiting from the services and family safety is enhanced.
2. National on-going media campaigns, such as White Ribbon Day in all forums, including public education campaigns directed at or through significant community contact groups which are not necessarily part of the community services sector, such as baby health centres, general practitioners. We also recommend that paid and free to air television regularly carry messages about hotline numbers for DV/FV prevention services and support for victims
3. Religious organisations, local authorities and major organisations involved in family life and guidance to promote prevention strategies about family violence and have these clearly promoted for their communities/constituents
4. Greater attention given, and then addressed, as to the possible cultural barriers to disclosing family violence or abuse, especially with closely knit communities
5. Department of Education to form partnerships with major non government organisations to roll out preventative seminars and courses on developing respectful relationships and appropriate alternatives to resolving interpersonal conflict as part of their schools' Personal Development programs. Currently, RA NSW, in conjunction with a number of schools, delivers highly popular programs promoting healthy relationships. However, to access all schools, these programs require further funding and co-ordination to ensure effectiveness and efficiency of service delivery.
6. Greater collaboration and co-ordination amongst relevant agencies in dealing with families presenting with family violence. Support for victims is improving where there are sufficient funds, but it is not sufficiently widespread, particularly in rural and regional areas. Greater collaboration will also assist in highlighting patterns of abusive conduct which a person using violence can otherwise obscure or conceal. The cumulative impact of seemingly minor parts of the chain of abuse on victims may also then become clearer and improve outcomes for families which are experiencing family violence.
7. Ensuring training is available to ensure continued rigorous screening and assessment and triage around DV/FV all services working with families is a priority.
8. Local integrated family education and violence prevention services for men, women and children which take a whole-of-family approach to the issues and impact of DV/FV. This

holistic approach ensures women, children and men are case managed through a support plan.

9. A 'likelihood of harm' index added to every police event file recording a cumulative 'score' of violence indicators (stalking, threats, attempting to strangle, violence towards pets, controlling money etc).
10. Continued support for training of new community workers in order to ensure appropriate referral of family members early for support services through a "3 R's program – Recognise, Respond and Refer".
11. More training in family violence to assist in the recognising, responding and referring skills for business and community leaders, that will allow them to respond more effectively when DV/FV is revealed in work places, community centres etc
12. Expansion of supervised contact services for children. This would enable children to maintain some contact with a parent who may pose a threat to their physical or psychological well-being in unsupervised circumstances. In addition, these services require integrated counselling and groupwork programs to therapeutically prepare parents around issues of reparation, restitution and healthy parenting.
13. Increasing numbers of grandparents involved in family conflict. In order to create a focus on children's needs, we recommend provision of specialised support programs for grandparents who are living with the effects of DV/FV and wish to maintain their relationship with their grandchildren and navigate conflicted relationships with the parents of their grandchildren. Some of these grandparents care full time for their grandchildren, and they benefit from ongoing understanding of the impacts of abuse or neglect on children.
14. Behaviour change programs-
Increased funding for behaviour change programs for men who have been abusive in intimate relationships. We believe the following attributes enable these programs to affect change based on our experiences and according to current research being conducted within these programs:
 - Program content follows best practice guidelines as per NSW government recommendations.
 - Multisystem interventions (treatment for drug & alcohol problems, depression and suicidality, health issues, safe housing for both person using violence and those experiencing violence)
 - Men supporting men in like circumstances and with similar family of origin issues
 - Program content to include specific strategies and skills, attention to belief systems, as well as experiential learning
 - Well trained Male and female group work facilitators to role-model respectful behaviour
 - Encouraging curiosity and learning about self
 - Couple counselling (where appropriate safety assessments are completed) be included after completion of the course in order to support the family and mitigate relapse to violence.

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