

Advocacy Summary:

Investing in a sustainable specialist family violence sector and ongoing service system improvements

Why this matters

We want a sustainable specialist family violence service sector, with clear pathways into and out of specialist services for all victim survivors who need it, when they need it.

The Royal Commission into Family Violence laid the foundations for a family violence system where every person experiencing family violence can access the support they need, when they need it. However, women and children are still being killed at alarming rates, people are waiting too long for the help they urgently need, and families are still sleeping in unsafe motels. Without the funding and infrastructure in place to respond to need, the system will inevitably fail victim survivors

The specialist family violence sector has welcomed some incremental funding increases in response to escalating demand in recent years. However, funding continues to be short term and less than what is needed to meet demand. We continue to hear of challenges and concerns about the time it takes victim survivors to be contacted and assessed for family violence risk across the Orange Door network and the time it takes to access longer-term case management in specialist family violence services. Services are reporting that they are experiencing higher levels of demand and case complexity than ever before and Safe and Equal is leading work to better understand the full scale of family violence service demand. We cannot afford to go backwards.

There are also parts of the wider family violence system which still are not meeting victim survivors' needs, ultimately having a negative impact on their recovery. For example, we know that the lack of affordable, secure housing options is making many victim survivors homeless, or at risk of homelessness, and that many victim survivors return to violence as a result. We also continue to hear that victim survivors feel poorly supported through the justice system, and that many victim survivors, particularly victim survivors who are Aboriginal, have a disability, from migrant and refugee communities, are criminalised and from LGBTIQ+ communities are at risk of being misidentified as a perpetrator of family violence.

We all want to see Victoria continue to create a family violence system which gives victim survivors a voice, a home, and a timely and clear pathway to recovery. This requires increased and secure funding for the specialist family violence sector and collaboration between government and the sector to continue to improve key aspects of the family violence system.

What we know

Victim survivors experience better outcomes when they can access a specialist family violence service quickly and case managers can take their time working with people to build trust and accurately assess and manage family violence risk. Recovery from family violence is also more likely if victim survivors can be linked into other allied services quickly to holistically support people when additional needs are identified.

Time and resources within specialist family violence services to work respectfully and holistically are critical to achieving good outcomes for victim survivors. Victim survivors' journeys through the Orange Door and

family violence system need to be better understood and improved, and funding needs to be allocated accordingly.

A strong sector is required to work with people using violence, as well as supporting systems and structures that can complement specialist family violence practice to achieve good outcomes for victim survivors. This includes victim survivors having access to safe and affordable housing, receiving good outcomes through the justice system, and being able to link victim survivors to other supports that can aid their journey and recovery, such as financial counselling and legal support, income security, access to employment, and access to therapeutic counselling.

Safe and Equal's position on this issue: recommendations and asks

Service capacity and demand

Increased funding is needed to account for the increased demand and complexity of family violence case management support. This funding needs to be more than just increasing the capacity of one aspect of service delivery, such as intake, but rather uplift all aspects of service delivery. Funding must be indexed properly, and attached to targets that are fit for purpose and meaningful for victim survivors and the family violence sector through a transparent formula applied across all government departments. This funding must also genuinely reflect the true impacts of wage growth and other costs of service delivery such as supervision support; capacity to provide secondary consultations; and quality assurance and governance infrastructure.

Priority Actions:

- All short-term funding uplifts made permanent, with indexation, including core case management service delivery, family violence crisis brokerage and core and cluster refuge funding.
- Longer-term funding commitments for services that put an end to 'drip funding' services and programs, to enable employment security and decrease workforce turnover.
- An increase in funding for targeted specialist family violence services and specialist Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, to account for the added time and resources it takes these services to help clients who experience systemic marginalisation

Intake points

We need to ensure that TODs are working as envisioned: as a key intake point into the family violence system, while also supporting client choice, ensuring inclusion and accessibility, and ensuring that victim survivors receive a consistent and appropriate intake response, no matter where they choose to enter the system.

Priority Actions:

- Streamline intake workflows across TOD locations, local family violence services and the statewide crisis service, Safe Steps, to facilitate timely access to family violence support for victim survivors and maximise the flow of contemporary risk relevant information across the family violence system
- Implement short term improvements to strengthen TOD across the state including:

- Drive better consistency and efficacy by creating a statewide governance structure;
 - Review the matrix management model;
 - Strengthen the governance model guiding TOD operations by improving the role and functioning of the Hubs Leadership Group and Operations Leadership Group;
 - Fund Home Agency Manager roles and formalise their role in TOD operations and governance;
 - Build staff capability and increase role clarity; and
 - Strengthen FSV's approach to collaboration within TOD.
- Work with Safe and Equal and relevant organisations to develop a systemic approach to timely access to risk relevant information for serious/high risk cases through the L17 portal and Central Information Point, including a prioritisation matrix
 - Family Safety Victoria to review and synthesise evidence on how TOD is functioning as part of the family violence system, and work with the family violence, child and family services, perpetrator services, and sexual assault sectors to improve the practice and functionality of TOD
 - Provide adequate resourcing to specialist family violence services to modify their intake processes so they are responsive to people with disabilities, including resourcing for the rollout and evaluation of the Disability Responsive Intake Process (DRIP) that was created under the Designing Disability Responsive Intake Process Project (DDRIPP)

Access to Housing

The family violence refuge system can currently only support around 170 households, while around 200 adult and child victim survivors whose lives and safety are at immediate risk are accommodated in motels across the state every night. Motels are inappropriate and traumatising for victim survivors of family violence, particularly children and young people. Victoria's lack of affordable housing increases the likelihood of victim survivors returning to live with violent perpetrators, which places them at greater family violence risk and increases the likelihood that they will cycle back through the family violence service system. No one should be forced to choose between violence and homelessness. We need a comprehensive policy that gets women and children out of motels, increases access to long term housing and, where possible, enables them to stay safely in their own homes.

Priority Actions:

- An immediate uplift to specialist family violence accommodation capacity, to ensure that at least 340 households can be supported in family violence accommodation on any given night and to reduce the reliance on motels
- In collaboration with family violence, youth and housing services, develop and fund dedicated crisis accommodation for children and young people experiencing family violence, to keep children and young people out of motels, particularly unaccompanied young people affected by family violence

- Dedicated family violence crisis accommodation that is accessible for people with a range of disabilities
- The development of at least 60,000 new social housing properties over the next ten years, to bring the amount of social housing as a proportion of all housing in Victoria up to the national average
- Investment into initiatives that will enable and support victim survivors to remain safe in their own homes, such as reducing the cost of housing in the rental market, increasing access to income and well-paid employment opportunities, increasing access to legal assistance and financial counsellors, and increasing perpetrator accountability

Improving justice responses

Relationships between the justice and broader family violence system need to be strengthened, with a view to embedding family violence expertise across the justice system to ensure that victim survivors receive a safe, fair and consistent response across the spectrum from Victoria Police to courts and to minimize opportunities for perpetrators to enact systems abuse.

Priority Actions:

- Create a policy and/or governance mechanism inclusive of Victoria Police, Magistrates, Children's Courts, and peak bodies, to build relationships between the justice and broader family violence systems, to ensure there is a family violence lens across the justice system.
- Expand the Alexis Family Violence Response model and continue evaluating the effectiveness of co-responder models to family violence-related police call-outs
- Increase the transparency, accountability and oversight of police through a robust and independent system for effective oversight of police complaints and misconduct,
- Fund the legal assistance sector to a level that enables services to provide all victim survivors holistic legal support, as per the intent of the Specialist Family Violence Court legal practice model.
- Enable early intervention family violence legal support by funding community legal services to work in partnership, and/or to be co-located within family violence response services across the state.
- Invest in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-led initiatives that are aimed at reducing the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in the youth justice system, and the over-incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women,

Addressing misidentification

We know that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victim survivors, alongside victim survivors from migrant and refugee communities, victim survivors with disability and LGBTIQ+ victim survivors are more likely to be identified as the primary aggressor as a result of racism, ableism and discriminatory stereotypes of how a victim survivor should behave, often with disastrous consequences. We need to implement system-wide reforms to ensure that misidentification is prevented, rectified when it does occur, and is measured systematically – so the scale of the problem, and where the most impactful changes can be made, are known.

Priority Actions:

- Bring Safe and Equal, Family Safety Victoria, Victoria Police, Courts, Child Protection, and other relevant sector stakeholders such as Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and representatives from other frequently misidentified communities together to devise an agreed whole-of-system misidentification reduction and rectification process, and update local manuals and guidelines accordingly
- Review and update client data management systems and other relevant systems to be able to rectify misidentification in data systems, particularly child protection and Victoria Police records, to limit ongoing systems abuse as a result of misidentification
- Invest in building the capacity of the specialist family violence sector to identify misidentification and build processes for initiating system-wide rectification when misidentification has occurred, through MARAM practice guidance and training.
- Build data capability to capture instances of misidentification to better understand where and when it occurs, and for which communities, so initiatives to prevent misidentification occurring in the first place can be targeted and strengthened

Enhancing family violence system stewardship

The Family Violence Implementation Monitor performed a critical function in providing system level oversight and accountability for the family violence reforms. In the absence of the Family Violence Implementation Monitor, a new approach and mechanisms are required to ensure transparency and accountability at a systems level for how the family violence system is functioning.

We cannot address what we do not measure. As it stands, no entity or agency in Victoria currently has a full, accurate sense of the scale and nature of support needed across the state, or our service system's capacity to meet this. We need strengthened data systems to build a robust understanding of victim survivors' met and unmet support needs, considering client journeys through the system from different entry points and contexts and taking into account systemic barriers and enablers.

Priority Actions:

- Invest in connected data systems that can follow people's journeys through the system. This includes a range of data sets relevant to family violence outcomes, such as TOD service delivery data, Victoria Police and Crime Statistics Agency data, hospital and other health related data, child protection data, family violence justice-related data, and specialist family violence service data.
- Establish an independent systems monitor. We know that oversight often leads to strengthened responses. Victoria's response to family and gender-based violence currently has no centralised oversight and is in need of independent, ongoing systemic review such as that undertaken by the Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor in recent years.