

## Learning Together

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### Safe and Equal's Communities of Practice



Safe and Equal acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional and ongoing custodians of the lands on which we live and work. We pay respects to Elders past and present. Sovereignty has never been ceded.

# Learning Together

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## Safe and Equal's Communities of Practice

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<sup>1</sup> Safe and Equal wish to recognise the original authors of Learning Together, as well as DVRCV staff and participants who contributed to the early development of Communities of Practice.

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# Introduction

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Safe and Equal is the peak body for Victorian organisations that specialise in family and gender-based violence across the continuum, including primary prevention, early intervention, response and recovery. Our vision is a world where everyone is safe, respected and thriving, living free from family and gender-based violence.

A key part of our role is to support and develop the primary prevention workforce in Victoria, bringing people together, developing their capabilities, and advocating for and with them.

Our primary prevention Communities of Practice (CoPs) are a proven and effective mechanism for facilitating collaboration among those engaged in violence prevention work, providing a platform to explore challenges and enhance skills through peer learning and expert facilitation. They also provide critical infrastructure for supporting workforce wellbeing and career development.

Since 2017, CoPs have been core to Safe and Equal's professional development offerings for Victoria's primary prevention workforce. Over time they have evolved to become a key element in a range of wrap-around supports for the prevention workforce, as part of a broader holistic approach that also includes training, professional development and opportunities for connection and learning through the ongoing Partners in Prevention network.

This resource describes the benefits of Communities of Practice for the primary prevention workforce and summarises Safe and Equal's approach to their delivery. It has been written for current and prospective participants in Safe and Equal primary prevention activities, and for sector leaders and policymakers interested in understanding the transformative potential of CoPs for workforce development and sustainability at scale. It includes content adapted from the original *Learning Together: DVRCV's Communities of Practice*, published by Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria (2020), incorporating learning from implementation since its original publication.

There is no one way to deliver a CoP. Our approach is built on Victoria's rich history of primary prevention practice leadership and adapted to the needs of its specific workforce. Key learnings may be useful, however, for informing similar models in other sectors working to achieve transformative social change.

# Collaborative learning

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Change the Story tells us that we need to work across communities, organisations, and society in all places where people live, learn, work, socialise and play to prevent violence from happening in the first place. This is best achieved using proven actions and mutually-reinforcing strategies that bring about transformative change. A committed, skilled and sustainable prevention workforce is essential to achieving this.

Formal evaluations of Safe and Equal’s workforce development programs across Victoria consistently show that CoPs continue to be our most valued activity for supporting connection and collaboration in the primary prevention workforce.

“The CoP has been so validating... Participating in the group with others who were feeling similar in their workplaces. Having opportunities to ‘case study’ the work I was planning. To talk about the roadblocks in getting leadership buy in. All that helped build my confidence. **It helped me to see that I do know what I’m doing. I’m now trusting myself more than before.**”

– CoP focus group participant 2024<sup>2</sup>

Reflective practice plays a pivotal role in fostering focused skill development and continuous practice improvement. We support practitioners in their growth by inviting them to think critically about their own beliefs and attitudes, including their understanding of gender, power, the drivers of violence and how they overlap with multiple forms of inequality and discrimination. In the family violence response system, this is most often achieved through structured individual and group supervision. For Safe and Equal, prevention CoPs have come to serve a similar purpose: they provide the safe and supportive critical reflection space necessary for cultivating a learning mindset and a state of ‘flow’ that can nourish innovation.

“CoPs provide me with critical reflective practice skill building. I kept bouncing back to the team and talking to my manager about, to keep pushing for more reflective practice in our work and our organization. There are not supervision models for primary prevention. The CoPs are not a supervision role but **they build that critical reflective skill base and also give me confidence to push for it and to understand its worth.**”

– CoP focus group participant 2024

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2 Participant quotes used throughout are anonymous and from ongoing evaluation of the Safe and Equal, Statewide prevention workforce development program.

For many, Communities of Practice provide a space where the personally challenging aspects of deep social change work related to violence can be **safely explored in professional ways**. CoPs have in turn had a positive effect in the way they are supporting wellbeing through safe spaces to explore challenges, with professional solidarity and care.

**“The CoP structure has wellbeing embedded** from the start with check-ins. I appreciate and it does affect my wellbeing that I can bring myself in my personal and professional way. I can table struggles without fear of saying the wrong thing or being inappropriate. That safe space really helps my wellbeing. **Sometimes I start it exhausted and then I finish it energised.”**

– CoP focus group participant 2024

We continue to hear that participants particularly value being invited to bring their whole self to each session, as there are few professional spaces where this can be done. In turn, practitioners use CoPs as a space to reflect on what brought them to the work they do, how they undertake that work and what sustains them to keep going in it.

As a result, Safe and Equal’s prevention CoPs foster professional growth in ways that are connected to each practitioner’s unique personal commitment to the work, alongside skill development and connection with others necessary for sustaining a thriving workforce.

Beyond the benefit to practitioners themselves, CoPs contribute to broader workforce development and system improvement through :

- Supporting new practitioners to build their identity as someone working in the prevention system
- Building leadership skills and supporting ongoing career progression for established practitioners
- Disseminating and making sense of evidence, evaluation results, research, frameworks and policies
- Supporting knowledge exchange and collaboration across settings and sectors that are otherwise isolated from each other
- Promoting understanding and solidarity between social movements working to dismantle other intersecting forms of structural oppression such as racism, colonialism, ableism, heteronormativity and cisnormativity
- Nurturing professional relationships across regional, rural and metropolitan areas
- Seeding organisational partnerships
- Supporting practitioners to identify and respond to backlash and resistance<sup>3</sup>
- Responding to crisis and disaster

3 For additional resources on responding to resistance and backlash see: Carman, M and Ditcham A. (2023). [Overcoming Resistance and Backlash: A guide for primary prevention practitioners.](#)

# Our approach

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A CoP involves a group of people who come together to share a set of problems, concerns, or passions about a topic and deepen their understanding and expertise by interacting regularly<sup>4</sup>.

There are three characteristics of any effective CoP:

- **Domain**  
A shared domain of interest where the group members can learn from each other.
- **Community**  
Members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information.
- **Practice**  
Members share resources including experiences, stories, tools, and ways of addressing recurring problems<sup>5</sup>.

These characteristics are key to how Safe and Equal convenes CoPs and create the kinds of spaces that foster professional growth, reflective practice and workforce connection. Part of the beauty of a well facilitated CoP is finding a balance and connection between personal and professional aspects of doing prevention work.

In line with the concept of a shared domain, Safe and Equal's approach to designing each CoP is to identify a particular area of practice exploration, such as a Respectful Relationships CoP, or a CoP for regional and rural practitioners. Within that space, the focus is then on establishing safe and interactive spaces where practitioners exchange ideas, resources and good practice, fostering an environment conducive to professional growth, knowledge and skill development and enduring collaboration needed for systemic change.

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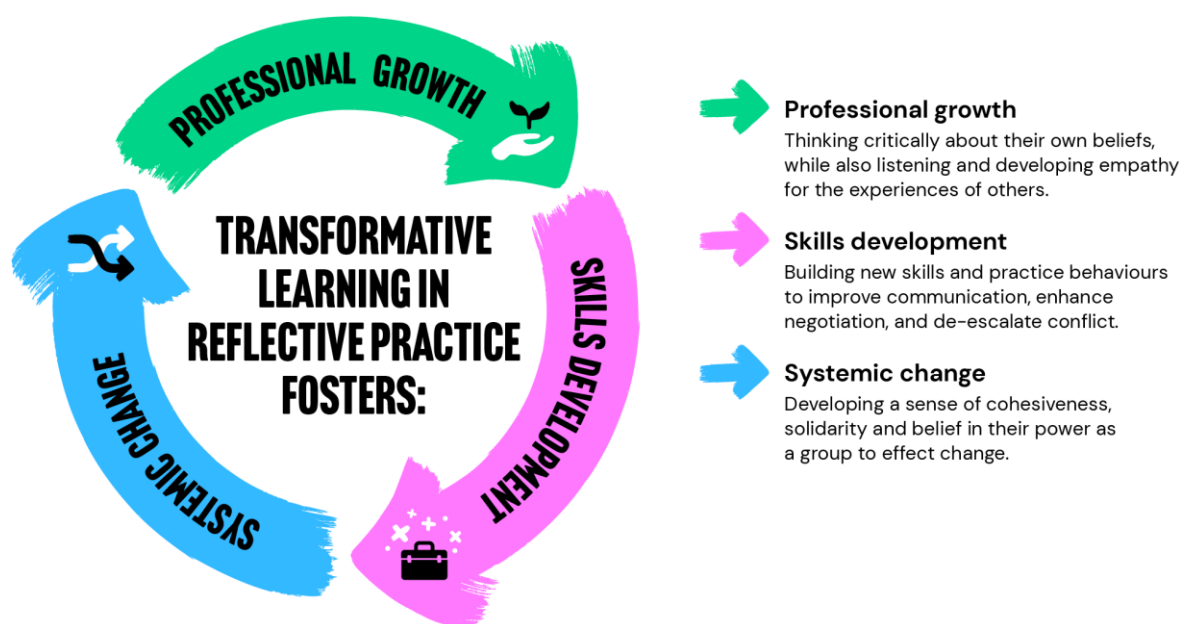
4 Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002). *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge*. Harvard Business Press.

5 Adapted from Wenger-Trayner (2015). *Communities of practice: a brief introduction* & Hoadley, C (2012). 'What is a community of practice and how can we support it?', *Theoretical Foundations of Learning Environments*. 2nd Edition. Routledge.

“The most valuable aspect of my CoP was the **safe space to reflect about our practice, including challenges of the work**. Overtly given permission to be inarticulate and vulnerable as we grappled with difficulties in the work. Sufficient structure but also flexibility to follow themes of interest as they arose.”

– CoP survey respondent 2024

**Figure: Transformative learning in reflective practice**



Adapted from Bartel, D, (2018). [Training and Mentoring Community Facilitators to Lead Critical Reflection Groups for Preventing Violence Against Women \(PDF\)](#). The Prevention Collaborative.



## Figure: Transformative learning in reflective practice – text equivalent

### Transformative learning in reflective practice fosters:

- **Professional growth**  
Thinking critically about their own beliefs, while also listening and developing empathy for the experiences of others.
- **Skills development**  
Building new skills and practice behaviours to improve communication, enhance negotiation, and de-escalate conflict.
- **Systemic change**  
Developing a sense of cohesiveness, solidarity and belief in their power as a group to effect change.

“The most valuable aspect of my CoP was connecting with people in the beginning stages of primary prevention across many different fields, organisations and programs – having the **opportunity to discuss and support each other in various challenges related to primary prevention [as well as] discussing the opportunities and room for growth in primary prevention.**”

– CoP survey respondent 2024

To be successful, Communities of Practice should have a mutually agreed and clear purpose<sup>6</sup> and continually develop and mature through sustained interaction. Over time, participants assume the responsibility for leading and managing content to develop the community and to reflect, share, explore and create new knowledge.

“The participants of the CoP are taking to running it themselves, I think is really great and a really good sign of the kind of environment that was cultivated through it...”

– CoP survey respondent 2022

6 Adapted from Wenger-Trayner (2015) & Hoadley, C (2012).

# Key features of our model

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Each component described below has been incorporated into our CoP model in order to build on the skills and knowledge relevant to the level of the cohort and support them with the challenging and dynamic nature of prevention work.

## An evolving and responsive model

Our model has and will continue to need to adapt in response to needs expressed by the prevention workforce. A commitment to being led by participants for each CoP enables ongoing flexibility and responsiveness.

## An intersectional approach

Safe and Equal's approach to intersectionality means we take action to ensure primary prevention programs, systems and policies recognise and address multiple forms of oppression and disadvantage that exacerbate the experiences of gender inequality and gender-based violence.<sup>7</sup> The facilitation of reflective practice within the CoP environment enables this same recognition and addressing of systems of power for practitioners, with a focus on integrating intersectional practice through a participant-led approach within and for each group

## Shared experience and settings

Our CoPs engage practitioners from across Victoria, with participants from across career stages, settings, locations or areas of work, around a common concern or interest. Safe and Equal identify CoP groups based on evaluation from previous years and expressed interest from practitioners. Attention to shared interests from across a diverse sector leads to meaningful exchanges, resource and experience sharing, and deeper relationships.

## Safe space, clear parameters and rich relationships

Our CoPs are delivered by experienced facilitators with a clear format and approach. We aim for spaces that enable connection within clear parameters to support group safety and cohesion.

## Supportive environment for peer learning

Peer learning improves individual practice as practitioners apply the knowledge they've acquired from others in the CoP to their own work, and sometimes return to the group to talk about their experiences for further group learning. Therefore, peer learning and cultivating a culture of continuous improvement enables the delivery of improved practice and outcomes across the sector.

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7 M. Carman and T. Farha (2023). [\*Safe and Equal's Commitment to Intersectionality in Primary Prevention\*](#) (PDF).

# Format

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Safe and Equal's format for delivering CoPs continues to evolve in response to workforce context and participant feedback.

All our CoPs are led by skilled facilitators with knowledge of primary prevention. They are responsible for creating a clear structure, consistent meeting practice, and a safe environment where participants can have robust and even vulnerable conversations. These facilitators are supported with resources and spaces for their own reflective practice – individually and collectively.

“The process of the community of practice was really lovely experience to be a part of... the facilitator really took the time to set us up well and we felt safe enough to say some things that were maybe risky to say, so that we could have an open discussion about it... The facilitator set up the conditions for people to feel safe and able to say challenging or risky things.”

– CoP survey respondent 2023

The participants are responsible for engaging with each other and producing outcomes. With the facilitator's guidance, participants work together to define clear goals and topics that are relevant to their shared practice. These goals may change over the course of the CoP series, based on group needs.

## Goals could include:

- Collectively problem solving
- Responding to requests for information
- Supporting individuals seeking to build an argument or case for change
- Growing individual confidence
- Committing to reflective practice
- Discussing sector developments
- Exploring power dynamics, positionality and assumptions in participants' work
- Documenting stories and outcomes from projects
- Mapping group knowledge and identifying gaps and strengths
- Sharing learning so to support efforts to build change across the whole community or a particular area of practice.

A group agreement is also negotiated, which establishes the expectations and tone of the group and aims to create a safe and supportive CoP culture.

This participant-driven approach supports a respectful and robust discussion. It also makes CoPs more responsive to context and the needs of participants, programs and the workforce as these grow and mature.

### **Additional considerations that inform our CoP delivery include:**

- Online platforms, such as Basecamp, support easy connection, resource sharing and continued learning between sessions. This helps to nurture a network that has momentum and ongoing benefit for its participants beyond the life of the CoP or a particular program.
- Membership is attached to the individual, not the organisation. If a practitioner moves organisations but remains in the prevention workforce, they stay within the group and there are no substitutions. This contributes to the sense of consistency and connection within the community and helps foster trust and safety.
- Session number, length, frequency and minimum attendance are set for each group by Safe and Equal to help establish a rhythm and build rapport, though subject to review and agreement with each group to support group ownership and achieve outcomes.
- Group sizes vary, considering a balance between a small enough group to allow everyone to share their voice but large enough to draw on a range of knowledge, experiences and skills.
- Evaluation is conducted in line with the Safe and Equal project evaluation frameworks and organisational processes. We use mid-way and end of series surveys, participant reflection, case study interviews and facilitator and participant focus groups.
- Facilitator practice is supported through ongoing supervision, ensuring facilitators can debrief and reflect on what is occurring within CoPs they hold. Data collected and facilitator reflections inform the ongoing design and delivery of CoPs and approaches to prevention policy, practice and cross-sector collaboration.

# Sustaining a thriving workforce

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The diverse locations and settings of prevention work can lead to practitioner isolation and challenging work environments. We also know that backlash and resistance to social change continues and is a consistent challenge facing the prevention workforce. This can impact on worker wellbeing and hinder the retention and growth of the workforce. For many participants, we continue to hear that CoPs are effective spaces to address these challenges:

“It can feel lonely at times doing this work, however the session today helped me to hear that there are others out there, facing similar challenges and left me feeling energised and motivated.”

– CoP survey respondent 2022

As the prevention workforce grows, diversifies and the complexity of the content in which we deliver our work continues, the demand for CoPs has increased. This was particularly true during the first years of the COVID-19 pandemic, where we rapidly moved our CoP approach to foster an online community, becoming a lifeline for the prevention workforce:

“The most valuable aspect of the...CoP was sustaining a sense of the value, purpose, evidence, and theoretical underpinnings of the work, especially while I was not always working in an organisational setting that properly supported or understood violence prevention.”

–CoP survey respondent 2021

Participants in our CoPs benefit from a network that supports their wellbeing by fostering a sense of safety, support and collegiality. This network is particularly crucial for developing and sustaining a thriving workforce as our we encounter increasing levels of resistance and backlash to social progress. Connecting across organisations can provide a vital source of support, inspiration and skills-sharing and help practitioners feel less like they are the only person facing common challenges.

“Most significant for me was the sense of relationships with others – the challenges and the joys. Now I feel could contact them; I feel like I could contact them with things relevant to my work or to theirs. That’s relevant for everyone but especially for me because I work alone, not in an office with others, so it was great having those relationships nurtured.”

– CoP participant interview 2023

# Conclusion

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The primary prevention workforce in Victoria continues to grow and adapt over time. We know that workforce development is a crucial part of enabling a holistic and functioning system that, if working in connected and informed ways can prevent family and gender-based violence.

Alongside other workforce development activities like training and resource development CoPs remain a valuable and important tool for building the knowledge, confidence and resilience of primary prevention practitioners and the workforce they are a part of.

“Hearing other people’s stories of achievements, challenges and identifying with those supports me to get an understanding of the bigger picture, take a step back and realise that PVAW [prevention of violence against women] is a long game.”

– CoP participant interview 2023

CoPs will remain a core part of Safe and Equal’s holistic approach to workforce development, supporting a prevention workforce that is growing and connected, and strengthening the movement to end family and gender-based violence.



Safe and Equal acknowledges the support of the Victorian Government.