



VICTORIAN WOMEN'S TRUST

Committee Secretariat
Senate Finance and Public Administration Committees
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

5th October 2017

Dear Committee Secretary,

The Victorian Women's Trust welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee in relation to the delivery of National Outcome 4 of the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Their Children 2010-2022, 'Services meet the needs of women and their children experiencing violence,' insofar as that Outcome is given effect by the 1800 RESPECT Domestic and Sexual Violence National Counselling Service. In our submission, we have identified four operating principles which we believe are non-negotiable in the review and ongoing operation of an effective, responsive national counselling service.

To meet the needs of women and their children experiencing or at risk of violence:

- The service must at all times be underpinned by deep conceptions or understandings of people's actual lived experiences; how these can vary profoundly; and how some groups of women are 'multiply burdened' due to a compounding interplay of gender, race, ethnicity, class, disability and/or geography,
- Callers must at all times receive a high quality, trauma informed response,
- Callers must at all times be safe using the service and trust that their privacy is not at risk,
- Call operators must be guaranteed occupational health and safety.

We see the 1800RESPECT service as a pivotally important part of the policy landscape in creating an Australia where women and children live free from violence. In view of this, it is critical that the service be operated to a high standard at all times.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this national discussion.

Regards,

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Submission to the Finance and Public Administration References Committee on 'Delivery of National Outcome 4 of the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Their Children', insofar as that Outcome is given effect by the 1800 RESPECT Domestic and Sexual Violence National Counselling Service

The Victorian Women's Trust (VWT) is an independent advocate for women and girls. Since 1985, the VWT has been promoting gender equality through annual grants, targeted research, education, policy submissions, events and advocacy.

The Victorian Women's Trust identifies four operating principles which we believe are non-negotiable in the review and ongoing operation of an effective, responsive service:

- Principle 1 – The service must at all times be underpinned by deep conceptions or understandings of people's actual lived experiences; how these can vary profoundly; and how some groups of women are 'multiply burdened' due to a compounding interplay of gender, race, ethnicity, class, disability and/or geography,

The 'misuse of power and control within a context of male privilege' underpins family violence and sexual assault,ⁱ and it is therefore critical that services responding to family violence and sexual assault are supported by a gendered understanding of violence that takes into account how gender is socially constructed and power is conferred. The significance of the gendered drivers of family violence has been well established by leading national and international bodies such as UN Women and OurWatch.ⁱⁱⁱⁱⁱ

Social power disparities go further than just between men and women, and it is vital that a counselling service is responsive to the needs of callers from varying backgrounds who may have additional and overlaying challenges when experiencing, or recovering from, family violence.

For instance, it is important to recognise not just how dynamics of power and control manifest in LGBTIQ+ relationships, but also to acknowledge that these groups of people may also be dealing with homophobia, transphobia and gender dysphoria.^{iv}

As other important examples, the Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention and Legal Service (FVPLS) expresses that along with factors like intergenerational trauma resulting from colonisation and dispossession, poverty and social isolation, many Aboriginal women face a heart wrenching double bind of making the decision between calling the police if their partner is using violence against them and risking being jailed for unpaid fines or having the children removed from their home.^v

Immigrant and refugee women also are more likely to face a complex overlay of additional barriers to sharing social power in Australia including isolation and lack of social support, limited English, cultural factors, stigma, limited awareness of rights and laws in Australia and fear of losing their secondary visa applicant status.^{vi}

An effective and responsive phone counselling service must ensure its framing is sensitive to the diverse lived experience and multiple burdens of inequity, marginalisation and discrimination which can impact on the way that people will experience family violence and sexual assault, and the supports and considerations that are required to meet the needs of all Australians.

- **Principle 2 – Callers must at all times receive a high quality, survivor led, trauma-informed response**

While it is commendable that calls to 1800 RESPECT are being answered far more quickly than in previous years, quality cannot be measured on answering speed alone. Measuring the quality of calls must also take into account the competence and expertise of the phone counsellor and the content and care of their response.

In this regard, we endorse the recommendation from Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS) that a system responding to people experiencing violence allows appropriate time, confidential space and strong leadership to support practitioners to deliver trauma-informed care.^{vii}

A trauma-informed system is one in which all aspects and protocols of a service have been evaluated and adapted to take into account the particular needs of people who are traumatised from experiencing violence.^{viii}

- **Principle 3 – Callers must at all times be safe using the service and trust that their privacy is not at risk,**

A central tenet of counselling people who have experienced trauma is that in order to be able to speak freely they need at all times to be safe.^{ix}

People experiencing or recovering from family violence who call the 1800 RESPECT service are likely to be highly fearful of being identified, and will not be comfortable if asked for identifying information or told that their call is being recorded.

People experiencing or at risk of family violence are likely to have been closely monitored by their partner or former partner and would be filled with fear and dread at the thought of the contents of their

conversation with 1800 RESPECT becoming available to their perpetrator.
Ensuring that all callers can trust the safety of the service is fundamental.

- **Principle 4 – Call operators must be guaranteed occupational health and safety,**

All workers have the right to a safe working environment. Counsellors speaking all day with survivors of rape and domestic violence are highly vulnerable to vicarious trauma if they are not properly trained, supported, checked in on, debriefed with and supervised.^x

It is important that workforces that take care of others take care of their own staff as well. Effective supervision and peer support are key protective factors for the prevention and healing of vicarious trauma.^{xi} We must also ensure that counsellors are appropriately remunerated and have job security.

How these principles are currently comprised

- **De-gendered approach is inappropriate and service may not be meeting the needs of women and people from all backgrounds**

MHS has come under criticism^{xii} for its de-gendered approach to understanding violence, which runs counter to the best-practice guidelines of VicHealth, OurWatch and UN Women.^{xiii,xiv,xv}

In a media release last month in response to growing community concern, 1800 RESPECT announced that it would increase trauma training to all counsellors working in the service.^{xvi}

The organisation it has announced will deliver this training, Blue Knot Foundation, is highly-regarded in relation to working with those who have survived childhood abuse and the resulting complex trauma. However, it is essential that all counsellors working in the 1800 RESPECT service model also receive training from an organisation whose expertise specifically lies in the area of rape, sexual assault and family violence and who can impart in all counsellors a gendered understanding of how uneven power relations drive and reinforce family violence and rape.^{xvii} An effective trauma response cannot be decoupled from this conceptualisation.

Along with an understanding of gender, for services to be responsive to the needs of all people experiencing or at risk of violence, it is crucial the service has deep understanding of people's lived experiences and is sensitive and responsive to how identities such as race, ethnicity, class, disability and geographic location impact on the

way different people experience family violence and sexual assault, its aftermath and accessing support.

In 2015, DSS and MHS funded *Women with Disabilities Australia* to examine the accessibility of the 1800 RESPECT service to women with disabilities, including those in institutional settings.^{xviii} The report found a number of areas in which accessibility was lacking. Pleasingly, accessibility improvements have since been made to the online and telephone service.

- **Reports of the quality of response from MHS counsellors are troubling**

There have been numerous concerning reports about inadequate, harmful and dangerous responses to callers to 1800 RESPECT from first-responder MHS counsellors under the triage model.

These include allegations that a caller was told her call would be ended if she didn't stop crying, a suggestion by an MHS counsellor to drink some wine to take the edge off, MHS counsellors telling a caller they haven't looked at the 1800 RESPECT website and referring a caller with complex post-traumatic stress disorder to look at a factsheet online rather than transferring them to a specialist trauma counsellor.^{xix}

There have also been concerning allegations that MHS counsellors were answering calls and then putting them on hold in order to portray short answering times.^{xx}

Furthermore, the practice of MHS counsellors referring callers to read an online factsheet is an insufficient counselling response. There are additional issues given approximately 44% of Australians have limited literacy skills.^{xxi} People often try to hide their illiteracy due to shame,^{xxii} and when compounded with the shame often associated with experiencing family violence, the limitations of referring to written factsheets become apparent.

- **Concerns have been raised about the privacy and safety of the service**

People experiencing violence will be understandably worried or anxious for their contact with 1800 RESPECT to be documented.

There are sensitivities at play in rape and domestic violence counselling that are not present in other sectors of phone counselling. Due to the fact victim survivors of domestic violence have often been heavily monitored by their partners, leading to immense fear and 'walking on eggshells', they are likely to be particularly uneasy about being recorded while using this service.

Counselling psychologist and National Convener of the APS Women and Psychology Interest Group, Carmel O'Brien explains:

"For women in crisis, any identifying information requested will be frightening, if someone said they were recording the call it's highly likely they would just hang up."^{xxiv}

Concerns have also been raised about the ability for recordings to be subpoenaed.

- **Occupational health and safety measures are inadequate**

Counsellors who work with survivors of violence require numerous supports and careful occupational health and safety considerations to ensure they do not suffer burnout or vicarious trauma.

It is important to note here that under the triage model, MHS first responders will refer calls featuring trauma onwards to a specialist counsellor, but MHS staff will still have a significant potential to experience vicarious trauma from their work in making these initial forwarding assessments, as well as the general burden and potential for burnout that can accompany working with survivors of sexual and family violence.

The capacity to minimise exposure and heal from vicarious trauma is correlated with regular debriefing and the sharing coping mechanisms with trusted peers, a manageable caseload, supportive administration and effective supervision^{xxvxxvixxvii}

MHS first responders can work from home. This is concerning and an inappropriate work environment given the nature of the phone calls which will be answered by a 1800 RESPECT operator and the illustrated importance of supervision and peer support for ameliorating the potential of vicarious trauma.

Additionally, empirical evidence suggests that psychological distress for counsellors decreases as income increases.^{xxviii} It has been suggested that this may be because pay raises help counsellors to feel valued and successful in their work.^{xxix}

A highly quality service that retains staff requires compensating workers well and providing secure employment conditions.

Moving forward – recommendations to restore the integrity, effectiveness, responsiveness and reputation of the 1800 RESPECT counselling service

- **The service must at all times be underpinned by deep conceptions or understandings of people's actual lived experiences; how these can vary profoundly; and how some groups of women are 'multiply**

burdened' due to a compounding interplay of gender, race, ethnicity, class, disability and/or geography

Incidents of family violence, intimate partner violence, rape and sexual assault are not isolated occurrences, but part of a larger pattern of uneven and highly gendered power relations across society.

Family violence and sexual assault occurs because of the misuse of power and control within a context where men have greater access to economic, political and social power than women.^{xxx xxxi xxxii}

It is crucial that all counsellors working in the 1800 RESPECT service model receive specialist training from an organisation whose expertise specifically lies in the area of rape, sexual assault and family violence, and who can convey a shared understanding of the underlying drivers of violence that relate to gender and power.

This training could be provided by one of the state based specialist services who will be providing the trauma specialist counselling component of 1800 RESPECT from October: DVConnect, Women's Safety Services or safe steps Family Violence Response Centre.

Many factors impact on how people from various backgrounds experience family violence, its aftermath and accessing support. It is crucial that a responsive service be sensitive to additional needs and barriers faced by communities who also experience the burden of racism, colonisation, homophobia, transphobia, islamophobia, ableism and other marginalising experiences.

The report by *Women With Disabilities Australia* and the subsequent improvements to the accessibility of 1800 RESPECT is a commendable step. It is important that the service continues to look for ways to improve in meeting the needs of all Australians who may be experiencing or at risk of violence. The Victorian Government's 'Intersectionality and Diversity Framework' provides a suitable model for designing family violence support systems that are responsive to the needs of diverse communities.^{xxxiii}

- **Callers at all times receive a high quality, survivor led, trauma-informed response**

Measuring the quality of the 1800 RESPECT service cannot be done on speed of answering calls alone, though speed is very important as people experiencing violence often only have a small window of opportunity.

What happens once the call is answered is just as crucial. If a caller feels rushed off the phone, dismissed or brushed aside they will not call again. All callers to the National Sexual Assault, Domestic Family Violence Counselling Service deserve a trauma informed, counselling response.

A best practice system for responding to people experiencing violence allows appropriate time, confidential space and managing practitioners to deliver trauma-informed care.^{xxxiv}

- **Callers at all times are safe using the service and can trust that their privacy is not at risk**

People who are experiencing or have experience trauma can only speak freely if they are safe.^{xxxv}

The impacts of experiencing family violence include 'loss of the ability to trust others, and to trust the world, such as losing a sense of safety'.^{xxxvi} People experiencing or at risk of family violence and sexual assault may already distrust services for a multitude of reasons. Their experiences with violence will have further damaged their ability to trust the systems in place to help. Establishing a safe service for victim survivors is essential or else potential callers will be discouraged from seeking help.

It is reassuring that MHS has stated that they will always look for ways to object to a subpoena,^{xxxvii} and reaffirms the importance of this operating principle.

- **Call operators are guaranteed occupational health and safety**

All workplaces should be safe for their staff. Phone counsellors working with survivors of rape and family violence risk vicarious trauma, particularly if they do not have access to supervision and peer support.^{xxxviii xxxix}

To ensure a safe working environment, the VWT recommends that phone counsellors working on 1800 RESPECT do not work from home or in different call centres without family violence focussed trauma supervision and peer support. A best practice system for workers involves all phone counsellors receiving onsite supervision and peer support.

Furthermore, a high quality service that retains skilled staff requires that employees have permanent job security and not a three-month rostering system.

Conclusion

It is crucial that the government restore public faith in the 1800 RESPECT service. There have been concerning reports that many rape and domestic

violence survivor advocates will no longer refer people to 1800 RESPECT because they do not trust the quality of response.

Callers to 1800 RESPECT may have tried for years to pluck up the courage to make this call. It can even be a matter of life and death. When people in crisis pick up the phone and dial the national domestic and sexual violence counselling service, the Australian government, and through its systems, the wider community, must not fail them.

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