



## **McAuley Community Services for Women Submission**

### **Developing the Second Action Plan -**

#### **National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010 -22**

McAuley Community Services for Women (McAuley) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of the 2<sup>nd</sup> National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010 - 22.

McAuley provides much needed services for women and their children who are escaping family violence, and for women who are homeless. Each year we help around 600 women and children to rebuild their lives, supporting them on their journey towards independence and safer futures. McAuley is a ministry of the Mercy Sisters. McAuley runs three vital services that are holistic in approach, providing a joined-up service for women leaving family violence through to providing them with help to secure employment:

- McAuley Care: Victoria's only round-the clock, 365 days of the year crisis accommodation and support for women escaping domestic violence, as well as five refuges.
- McAuley House that provides accommodation and support for women who are either homeless or at risk of homelessness, many with a poor physical and mental health.
- McAuley Works is an intensive employment program that assists women who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, primarily as a result of family violence and mental health issues, to secure meaningful employment and increases their ability to support themselves financially.

## **Our feedback:**

In general:

- Family violence is more discussed today than it was when the first National Action Plan was drawn up.
- There have been several well-developed campaigns highlighting the issue, *the Herald Sun* campaign, for instance and more recently *Shine a Light* with the *Sydney Morning Herald*. This is to be commended.
- Community attitudes are beginning to shift regarding family violence but it is still too often seen as a 'woman's issue' rather than a societal issue. While the White Ribbon campaign has been successful, far more work needs to continue to encourage men to speak out against family violence.
- Far more community education needs to be carried out to answer the question "why don't women just leave home?"
- The needs of children are addressed up to a point under the first action plan but there is increasing evidence about the long-term effect on children e.g.: how trauma affects children's brain architecture and functioning. More research is required into children's experience of family violence and the impact of that on their relationship with their mothers in particular.
- Forced and servile marriages need to be specifically addressed in the Second Action Plan, particularly for women on Temporary Visas

### ***Link between family violence, homelessness and mental health***

A major gap within the National Plan is the persistent lack of linking family violence to women and homelessness and mental health. This is manifest in the fact there is a separate plan for homelessness - the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH). Family Violence is not mentioned in 'The Roadmap for National Mental Health Reform 2012 – 2022,' COAG

We recommend that the Second National Action Plan include a section on women, family violence and homelessness to ensure the link is understood, and more funding is made available for services for women affected by multiple barriers to recovery.

We recommend that the Plan also articulate better with other critical government policies and programs, in particular providing adequate housing of all types, mental health services and employment schemes for women who are unable to maintain jobs as a consequence of family violence.

### ***The balance between prevention, early intervention and response***

Given the desire to create communities that are safe and free from violence, it is entirely appropriate that the First Action Plan concentrated on prevention. It is also appropriate that two measures of success included:

- An increase in the rates of women reporting domestic violence and sexual assault

- A decrease in repeated partner victimisation.

The focus on prevention, however, has increased the need for response. In Victoria, there has been an increase in family violence reports at a rate of about 20 per cent each year. All response services are seeing unprecedented rises of unmet need: for example, family violence services; police; courts; legal services; men's behaviour change programs; homelessness and mental health services.

The focus on prevention needs now to be balanced with early intervention and response. It is vital that the relationship between prevention, early intervention and response is better understood in the Second Action Plan. The relationship is not linear. It is cyclical.

Given the extended nature of much family violence and its serious health impacts, post-crisis support is needed for many women and children. Certainly, this is the case with the majority of the women who McAuley assists.

McAuley is increasingly concerned about a male backlash to the current successful 'prevention' campaigns. For example, the 'oneinthree' website refutes the majority of facts contained within the National Plan's research into men who choose violence against women.

McAuley also believes that the Second Action Plan should:

- Plan for a national prevention and corresponding infrastructure funding projection: if reporting continues increasing at this rate for the next 5 -10 years - what will be the cost to fund programs and services until demand starts to project down?
- Fund and roll out a financial and economic model of prevention and response funding against projected costs of \$15,6 billion outlined in the National Plan (if nothing is done by 2021).
- Increase the level of funding to respond to the increased reporting of family violence, inclusive of legal assistance, housing, police, courts and counseling, including building capacity and research on better co-ordination and integration between these services

In addition to the above, McAuley's view is that the post-crisis support services required by women and their children are not meeting the overall need now and certainly are not likely to meet future need given the current focus on prevention.

Further, we believe that potentially effective actions are undermined by system-wide deficits in housing, income security in relation to costs of living and employment.

## **Children**

Children who experience family violence have very particular needs.

They may require individual counselling, group therapy or other evidence-based interventions to rebuild relationships but also to prevent future vulnerability to youth homelessness and/or becoming victims or perpetrators of violence themselves.

In particular, we believe the Second Action Plan needs to take account of the following issues:

- Children and young people require provision of support, which is both separate and linked to their non-abusing parent
- Proactive support is available for pregnant women and women with young infants
- Informal support is a critical aspect of provision for children and young people
- Strengthening the mother child relationship is a critical aspect of provision.

In addition to meeting those needs, the Second Action Plan should build upon existing research into the effect of family violence on children of different ages and in particular:

- Consult with young people and children on their needs, especially around safe-at-home policies. A good example of such a study is from 'Literature Review: Better Outcomes for Children and Young People Experiencing Domestic Abuse ' Scottish Government 2008
- Audit crisis accommodation - particularly the effectiveness of short-term crisis accommodation - as an intervention before returning home safely and in comparison to hotel or motel accommodation
- Investigate further the effect of family violence on the mother/child bond - and link this research to current findings in Men's Behaviour Change programs which are showing men more likely to voluntarily participate when they acknowledge the risk of losing their children

### **Research into family violence programs, what works and what does not work**

There has been a plethora of reviews into family violence programs and services recently. These have mainly been about new governments acquainting themselves with the programs rather than to evaluate what is working or not working.

McAuley would like to see a national and state-wide research and evaluation agenda focus far more on what is working rather than be merely a round up of what services exist/ duplication of programs. Victoria's establishment of the SAFER research team is a good example of what is required.

We advocate too for further funding into the next level of research focusing on:

- Further analysis of safe-at-home policy initiatives including looking at affordability of housing and actual safety for women choosing to return home;
- Exploring children's views of remaining home
- Measuring and reporting on the breach rate of intervention orders, with particular attention paid to inconsistencies in the way that breaches are handled.

### ***Reporting back***

There is a danger regarding Moving Ahead, the Second Action Plan, if not enough effective reporting back on Building a Strong Foundation has happened.

Governments have a responsibility to focus services and efforts on the most vulnerable and to inform the public of what it is doing to assist those who are most vulnerable. McAuley believes that women and children escaping family violence fall into this category.

To track the action plans more effectively - and to address issues that are either not being worked on or require streamlining, tailoring or jettisoning, we advocate the establishment of a National Report Card. This should be publicly available on an annual basis and be a report against progress on the six National Outcomes.

### ***Vulnerable groups***

McAuley works with vulnerable women. We know from our own data where women and their children come from (housing, country, ages of children) and where they go (returning home, refuge, public housing). Our evidence shows that the following groups and communities require an increased focus:

- Migrant women, especially those on TPVs and spousal visas
- Aboriginal women
- 12 - 15 year children
- Women in forced and servile marriages
- Women with disabilities
- Women with drug and alcohol dependencies.

### ***Gender equity***

Recent research from the University of Melbourne's Social Department highlights the clear relationship between gender equity and more respectful relationships between men and women.

The more unequal those relationships, the more power being held by one gender over the other, the more likely the abuse of that power.

McAuley says that Government at all levels needs to lead on the issue of gender equity. This includes getting companies to report on gender equity on boards and senior executives, introducing quotas or other strategies to encourage women into all political parties, and ensuring that legislation and other obligations in place to end the gender pay gap are adhered to.

Gender equity also includes closing the gender pay gap. is an especially important area for the Second Action Plan to focus on in regard to family violence where a lack of financial skills or access to finances are often cited reasons why women stay in, or return to family violence.

As the research highlighted, where there is increased poverty, inequality and unemployment, there will also be increased rates of family violence.

### ***Timing of funding agreements related to violence against women and their children***

McAuley is concerned that the current review of national /state funding agreements is well managed to ensure a consistent, reliable and well-funded workforce is retained to manage demand. This is an area that the Second Action Plan can consider.

### ***Social and digital media***

Particular attention needs to be paid to the growing use of social media and electronic communication in relationship to family violence. McAuley believes a community education campaign focusing on helping women understand the risks associated with social media - such as the ease of tracking a survivor's whereabouts through location apps.

We also recommend that the Common Risk Assessment Framework is adapted in relationship to understanding these risks.

### ***Training and better engaging our leaders and broader civil society to reduce violence against women and their children***

McAuley urges the ongoing rollout of 'identifying family violence' training to mainstream services such as GPs and lawyers.

Further, it recommends that all undergraduates enrolled in law, medicine, speech therapy and social work receive training in family violence, what to look for in women and children, and are equipped with information about available services and programs.

### ***Language***

McAuley is concerned that the various systems, such as family violence, police and child protection, are still not using the same language and definitions. We believe these should be standardised but not as a priority over providing more services to women and children.