

"Since there is very little good that can be accomplished, or evil avoided, without the aid of money, we must look after it in small as well as in great matters."

Catherine McAuley

# Safe At Home

Funded through The Catherine Circle



McAuley Community  
Services for Women  
A ministry of the Sisters of Mercy

# Safe At Home

Safe at Home is a program aligned with the mission and values of McAuley Community Services for Women.

## **Our Mission**

- › Our mission is to provide accommodation, services, advocacy and support for women who are homeless and, women and their accompanying children who experience family violence.

## **Our Vision**

- › Through our service, McAuley Community Services for Women is committed to advocate for a better, safer and just society.

## **Our Values**

- › McAuley Community Services for Women is committed to:

Hospitality  
Compassion  
Justice  
Community

In our daily encounters, we offer women the opportunity for empowerment in their lives.

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# Background

The aim of Safe at Home is to work collaboratively with other organisations to ensure women and children can return home safely, with the perpetrator of violence removed from the home. This contrasts with the current system where the perpetrator stays, and it is the victims- the women and children- who are forced to leave. This is despite the greater emphasis on perpetrator accountability that began with the introduction of the 2008 Family Violence Act.

Since 2010, McAuley Community Services for Women (McAuley) has attempted to increase its capacity to deliver a Safe at Home response to individuals and families at McAuley Care. The organisation has always seen the value of Safe at Home, but has struggled to gain traction or broader interest from government about how best to deliver Safe at Home programs.

In the 2015-2016 financial year, McAuley supported 183 families to move on to safe accommodation. Of those families, only four could safely return home (2.2%).

In October 2015, the organisation employed a full time Safe at Home senior practitioner to provide intensive case management support to women and children in our 24/7 crisis program. This role determines what is the best possible response that could be delivered to women and children at the time of crisis, in conjunction with the increased complex support needs of women and children escaping family violence.

The recent Royal Commission into Family Violence recommended (no.13) that the Victorian Government should expand the Safe at Home programs to better support women and children experiencing family violence '...in safely remaining in, or returning to, their own homes and communities...' (State of Victoria 2016 page 49). There is recognition that these programs should include suitable case management, rental/ mortgage subsidies, personal safety devices, in addition to monitoring of perpetrators by police and the justice system.

The Catherine Circle funded this essential analysis to enable McAuley Community Services for Women to understand more why women coming into its family violence service were unable to return home safely, and to investigate the possible development of an expanded Safe at Home program.

# Executive Summary

The primary recommendation in McAuley Community Services for Women's submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence in 2015 was to support and expand Safe at Home programs in Victoria.

This was based on the organisation's philosophy that being at home should be a right for all women and children who want it. However current structures, resources and attitudes do not enable this.

Further, as was revealed through discussions with clients at McAuley Care, women generally report feeling conflicted about returning home, some being too scared to stay in their homes after violence and choosing to flee to stay safe. Others were reluctant to apply for an Intervention Order to exclude their partner from the family home because her partner would effectively be homeless. This demonstrates how the broader housing crisis is impacting and will continue to impact the safety of women and children.

The current reality is that women and children are fleeing into a system that is under resourced and potentially places women and children at further risk of trauma and harm. This again is evidenced in data that shows that most families who came to McAuley Care moved on to short term, unstable accommodation with friends or family, or to refuge accommodation. Thus, they remain homeless with all the recognised negative social and health implications this entails (Spinney, 2012).

This evaluation and analysis, made possible through the Catherine Circle, has helped McAuley Community Services for Women understand far more deeply the factors and constraints that prevent women wishing to return home safely.

These include:

- The external environment prevents women returning home safely: primarily the legal system, which is slow to address rampant breaches in Intervention Orders (Morris, 2015);
- Women's own perception of how safe they, and their children, would be if they were to return to the place of harm; and
- Staff assessment of women's safety if she were to return home. However this finding has to be balanced by the fact that the rate of women returning home safely has increased from 1.3% to 3% in the 2015 – 2016 year. This, we believe, is due to the increased awareness and understanding of staff regarding Safe at Home as an option.

This project has enabled McAuley Community Services for Women to gather sound evidence to determine whether McAuley Care can provide a successful Safe at Home program to safely return families to their homes or communities, avoiding continuing family violence and avoiding the scourge of homelessness.

We now have the beginning of a Safe at Home framework that guides the types of interventions and safety plans we work towards with the women in our service.

It now means the emergency housing cycle isn't the only option, and Safe at Home is something to introduce and explore at every point of service provision.

# Key Findings

- Being at home should be a right for all women and children who want it. Current structures, resources and attitudes do not enable this.
- Literature demonstrates that women can be helped to remain safe in their homes (Crinall, Hurley, & Healy, 2013.) including those who present as high risk, as many of the women at McAuley Care do.
- Due to gaps in systems, process and attitude, Safe at Home is not an across the board solution for all women and their children who have been subjected to family violence.
- Given the high level of risk and complexity of many cases, clear practice guidelines are pivotal.
- Although Flexible Support Packages - which are used to pay for safety upgrades, are a positive initiative, they rely on individual workers assessing the safety needs of the individual / family as well as assessing safety upgrades to the property.
- Generally, women with Child Protection Orders are unable and unwilling to return home as part of a Safe at Home response as it may place the custody of their child/ren at risk.
- Participants in Safe at Home programs in Victoria reveal that service integration depends primarily on goodwill between organisations - this should be formalised to ensure consistency of approach across the state (Spinney 2012).
- The broader housing crisis is impacting and will continue to impact the safety of women and children. This is manifest in cases when women do decide to apply for and are granted an Intervention Order that excludes the partner from the property, increased pressure may be placed on the woman by her partner to reconcile due to limited housing options.
- The extent of a woman's financial capacity to sustain her housing needs to be taken into consideration, plus the extent of her isolation which might influence her to return to a violent partner.

# What is Safe at Home?

Safe at Home is a concept used to describe a safe housing option for women and their children who have experienced family violence and wish to remain or return to their homes. They are enabled to do so with the support of family violence services and a determination that the home is 'safe.'

It is a coordinated response which includes an assessment of the risk for both the woman and her family, in returning, or staying home safely. If deemed appropriate, specific resources are provided to make the home more secure (such as locks or security cameras) and personal security for women is addressed through applications for an Intervention Order to exclude the perpetrator from the property.

Safe at Home programs seek to:

- Have the perpetrator removed;
- Include safety planning and risk assessment;
- Provide case management;
- Provide brokerage for home security upgrades;
- Provide personal security alarms for high risk clients to enforce protection orders; and
- Promote economic security for victims.

# The McAuley experience to date

The low numbers of Safe at Home returns are indicative of wider family violence structural gaps, to name a few:

- Lack of culturally-responsive services;
- Lack of appropriate legal response for women;
- Mediators and lawyers offering and encouraging inappropriate resolutions;
- Perpetrators not respecting IVO's;
- Perpetrators not following court orders;
- Perpetrators not fearing police and consequences of breaches;
- "Home" tainted due to the violent and negative experiences;
- Women feeling unsafe regardless of security protection;
- Children not wanting to return home due to broken attachment to place; and
- Women's financial capacity to afford housing.

# Methodology

We set out to identify the issues that needed to be explored to decide whether a Safe at Home program could be delivered successfully by McAuley Community Services for Women.

We interviewed staff about their understanding around Safe at Home programs and their perceptions of the suitability of McAuley Care clients being supported safely to return home.

We added three questions to the intake form for new clients of McAuley Care crisis service relating to their homes, their financial capabilities and their children's school.

We undertook a literature review of current Safe at Home programs and practice.

## Key issues that were explored

The following areas were explored:

- Determining if a Safe at Home response suits our client group's needs;
- Determining the risk and resources required to provide a McAuley Safe at Home service;
- Determining whether offering a Safe at Home response is suitable for clients at the 24/7 crisis service as well as clients in refuge and that the response fits with our current risk management strategy;
- Identifying the operators and providers already working in the Safe at Home service space and how McAuley can refer clients as part of a housing option pathway; and
- Articulating a recommended advocacy strategy for McAuley in relation to Safe at Home.

# Findings from each issue

## Determining if a Safe at Home response suits our client group's needs

Staff interviews indicated that an increasing number of individuals and families entering McAuley Care are already homeless and may not have a home to return to. This demonstrates the ever-increasing overlap between the homeless and family violence systems across Victoria.

To understand whether a Safe at Home response suits our client group and to ensure we meet the recommended 'pillars of intervention' of homelessness prevention and economic security, two new questions have been added to the intake assessment form at crisis and refuge.

Over time the inclusion of these two questions will provide evidence about the level of need and appropriateness of Safe at Home to McAuley's client group.

Where clients do not have a home to return to or they cannot financially sustain a tenancy or mortgage once returned, a Safe at Home response is not immediately appropriate. A further question needs to be asked, which is: 'Can they, or do they wish to, return to their community?'

An analysis of these findings over time will indicate whether McAuley should pursue a fully resourced Safe at Home program at McAuley Care.

## Determining the risk and resources required to provide a McAuley Safe at Home service

According to staff at McAuley Care, for a Safe at Home response to be successful, the client and worker must consider:

- Does the client have a permanent home to return to?;
- Can the client afford to maintain the tenancy / mortgage once returned?;
- Can the client be resettled in her community?;
- What are the current safety and risk issues for the women and children?;
- The worker must update the Common Risk Assessment Framework (CRAF) as part of the Safe at Home assessment process;
- Ensure client has a valid Intervention Order which includes all children and excludes the perpetrator from the home and work address;
- Worker must explore the child/ren's experience of violence and view of returning home / Child Protection involvement;
- Assess the child/ren's level of fear (with mother / directly with child if appropriate);
- Knowledge of the perpetrator's attitude and regard for the law (previous history of breaches / breaches while at refuge / stalking behaviour / affiliation);
- Consider property location / stalking behaviour / isolation / police response / attitude towards police (perpetrators and victims);
- Consider social isolation / family and friends support;
- In depth safety plan developed for women and child/ren;
- Notify children's school / workplaces where appropriate;
- Pursue family court proceedings.

### **Determining whether offering a Safe at Home response is suitable for clients at the 24/7 crisis service as well as clients in refuge and that the response fits with our current risk management strategy**

Until a broader statewide response to Safe at Home is proposed and fully funded by the Victorian State Government, McAuley has limited capacity to develop and deliver a Safe at Home response.

If a client indicates to her case manager at crisis or refuge that she wishes to return home; has a permanent home to return to and has the resources to sustain the tenancy / mortgage, the worker's role is to explore that option with the client and help her assess her appropriateness for Safe at Home.

The worker's role is to use her professional judgement and standardised assessment tools in advising the client of the pros and cons of making the decision to access a Safe at Home response. This includes assessment of the likelihood of further harm to the woman and her child/ren with safety upgrades and a full Intervention Order in place.

Safe at Home should be considered as part of the planning process from any point of exit from McAuley programs.

A thorough safety plan must be conducted in collaboration with the client prior to leaving the service.

The risk assessment process for delivering Safe at Home should be clearly documented in the client's file / case notes. This includes all steps taken to increase a client's safety once returned home (i.e. Intervention Order, liaisons with police, Child Protection plans and agreements, safety planning (for mother and child/ren), and ongoing referrals for support).

### **Identifying the operators and providers already working in the Safe at Home service space and how McAuley can refer clients as part of a housing option pathway**

McAuley is awaiting the outcome of Safe Futures 'Safe at Home' trial before identifying the relevant partnerships to develop agreements with.

Safe Futures was highly commended for its work in this area in the Royal Commission into Family Violence findings.

### **Articulating a recommended advocacy strategy for McAuley Community Services for Women in relation to Safe at Home**

McAuley should continue to advocate for a fully resourced statewide Safe at Home response with clear practice and safety guidelines.

## CASE STUDY: Blaze\*

Blaze came to McAuley Community Services for Women via another agency which told her about the crisis centre. She left over a weekend when her partner was away. She packed little and went to a motel where she stayed for a week before moving to our safe house.

**“I almost had another breakdown – I was feeling depressed and lonely; he locked me in and now I was locking myself in.”**

Blaze would never have left her home had it not been for McAuley Community Services for Women. She was too scared despite the fact she described herself as a prisoner and spent a lot of time in bed, “black and blue.”

She has had two separate IVOs which she says are “just a piece of paper.” Her experience of going to court for the IVO was frightening because she did not want to be in the same room or for him to be able to see her.

Blaze will never return home even under the McAuley Community Services for Women’s Safe at Home program. For her, there is no chance that the house could be made safe; she is afraid of his affiliates who have connections with drugs (ICE).

For her the main gaps in the system include:

- More police help with IVOs so women don’t have to go through the court trauma.
- A system in place to enable a woman who cannot or does not want to take up a Safe at Home option is able to retrieve personal belongings.
- Assistance with lease and legal issues: she and her partner were living in a rental property with the agreement in her name. She is concerned that lack of payments will damage her rental history.

**“Victorian women need more places like this (the 24/7 accessible safe house), rather than having to go to motels in between. Staying in a motel adds to the fear – you feel trapped, embarrassed and scared. I didn’t want to leave my room.”**

\* not her real name

# Literature review

As part of the analysis phase, a literature review was conducted to gain a greater sense of the current approaches to Safe at Home in Victoria and across Australia.

<p><b>Pillars of Intervention</b></p>	<p>According to the ANROWS final report (Breckenridge et al, 2016) evaluating Safe at Home interventions should be underpinned by the following four pillars:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Safety Maximisation;</li> <li>• Integral Response services;</li> <li>• Homelessness Prevention;</li> <li>• Economic Security.</li> </ul>
<p><b>A focus on staying home after violence</b></p>	<p>A literature review by Crinall, Hurley in Healy in 2013 revealed a high percentage of Safe at Home programs are aimed at supporting women and children to remain in their homes after experiencing family violence.</p> <p>These programs aim to put supports and safety measures in place (i.e. Intervention Order) 'before' women and children feels too unsafe to stay. For these programs to be successful, strong relationships between generic and family violence services and local police are pivotal.</p>
<p><b>Broader systemic challenges</b></p>	<p>Safe at Home requires a 'whole system response' by Police, Courts, Community Services (particularly Homelessness and Family Violence services), Education, Child Protection and Housing (Wilcox, 2006); At this stage McAuley has limited ability to connect each part of the system.</p> <p>Safe at Home also requires widespread community recognition of the rights of women and children to remain in their homes.</p>
<p><b>Returning home after violence</b></p>	<p>Many women report that Intervention Order breaches escalate after they have returned. For women and children to stay safe, a swift police response is required. Confidence and trust in the police is important.</p>
<p><b>Child protection involvement</b></p>	<p>McAuley's experience indicates that a high percentage of families accessing crisis and family violence outreach services have child protection involvement. Often mothers have been court ordered by Child Protection to leave the family home to be seen as acting protectively. Generally women with Child Protection orders are unable and unwilling to return home as part of a Safe at Home response as it may place the custody of their child/ren at risk.</p>

<p><b>Flexible Support Packages</b></p>	<p>The Department of Health and Human Services has continued to offer Flexible Support Packages to women escaping family violence. Flexible Support Packages have been used to pay for safety upgrades as part of delivering a Safe at Home response.</p> <p>However, although Flexible Support Packages are a positive initiative, they rely on individual workers assessing the safety needs of the individual / family as well as assessing safety upgrades to the property.</p> <p>Other fully resourced Safe at Home organisations work in partnership with experts to provide comprehensive risk and safety audits at the property and IT and cyber environment.</p> <p>Organisation such as Safe Futures have access to SafeTcards, a personal safety device that provide GPS tracking, live audio streaming to a security centre via an emergency services band. (Safe Futures Foundation, 2015)</p> <p>Basic safety upgrades may not be ‘adequate’ or ‘integrated’ with local police / legal response (even when a woman has an Intervention Order) which may place women and children at risk.</p>
<p><b>McAuley Care – geographical limitations</b></p>	<p>Due to the vast geographical scope of referrals, developing close working partnerships with local police stations is challenging and may impact on the effectiveness of Safe at Home responses. McAuley anticipates the state wide introduction of Support and Safety Hubs will assist with this necessary integration.</p>
<p><b>Intervention Orders</b></p>	<p>Currently, in Australia, there is a consistent framework and overall intention to protect women and children through the Intervention Orders, however there is large variation in the potential range of responses (Taylor et al, 2015). Some states seem to take breaches in Intervention Orders more seriously than others, with many women dismissing their usefulness at providing them with substantial protection. In Victoria around 46,000 intervention orders were finalised in the Magistrate's Court with 9,000 breaches prosecuted, although the experience of Safe Futures Foundation and the family violence sector in general is that the vast majority of Intervention Orders are breached in some way (up to 84%) but are not reported to police (Morris, 2015).</p>

## Experiences from New South Wales

The NSW Government has been most active in developing and trialling safe at home models in Australia, and has recently committed to funding 16 Staying Home Leaving Violence Projects across the state (Bega Women's Refuge 2007).

The features of the Staying Home Leaving Violence Project are summarised in Housing NSW's 2006-07 Annual Report (2007, p. 52), and include outreach support and advocacy so that women have greater choice when leaving violent relationships and are better able to sustain housing, economic security and support networks. The program also includes risk assessment, safety planning and upgrading security in the victim's home, court support, liaison

with police and other services, referrals to legal advice and counselling to address financial and other issues.

The NSW pilots, as with safe at home models generally, are about wrapping support around women to ensure they can stay safely in their home. An important and necessary feature of the programs is risk assessment (by police and/or other services). For many women improvements are made to the physical security of their home, e.g. changing locks, installing phone alarms et cetera. Simple and cost effective measures to improve the security and safety of women staying at home, and their perception of safety.

## The international experience – The Sanctuary Scheme in the UK

The success of staying safely at home models for some women is also demonstrated in the UK. The Sanctuary Scheme is generally delivered by local authorities, as one strategy to meet their obligations to address local homelessness. Funding for the schemes is sourced from central government, from general funds to address homelessness across the UK.

The Sanctuary Scheme is designed to enable victims of domestic violence to remain in their own accommodation, where it is safe for them to do so, where it is their choice and where the perpetrator does not live in the accommodation. One model provides a safe room, or sanctuary, within a home fitted with safety measures, including installation

of alarms; mortice locks; security lights; reinforced door frame; emergency lights; and CCTV. This gives the victim the confidence and security to stay in their own home, if they wish and the partner no longer lives there. (Department for Communities and Local Government 2006, p. 6).

The UK Government recognises that an important part of the response for the Sanctuary Scheme for local authorities and housing associations is to use tenancy agreements to end joint tenancies where violence has occurred and to grant a sole tenancy to the survivor of violence where appropriate (see Department for Communities and Local Government 2006, p. 13).

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