

# Victoria's Family Violence Standards and Women with Disabilities Experiencing Violence



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## The Research at a Glance

Family violence sector standards, codes and guidelines have little to say about how to support women with disabilities but there are numerous ways in which this gap can be rectified. A priority is to make the minimum standards developed for the *Building the Evidence* research a framework for action and development of services for women with disabilities experiencing violence.

## Research Objectives

- To analyse the extent to which current Victorian family violence sector standards, codes and guidelines recognise and provide for women with disabilities who experience violence
- To develop minimum standards for family violence standards, codes and guidelines that support fundamental rights to equality before the law, non-discrimination, respect and human dignity
- To make recommendations as to how family violence standards, codes and guidelines should make explicit reference to the particular difficulties faced by women and children with disabilities experiencing violence and how best to support them.

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## Reasons for Research

The focus on family violence sector standards, codes of practice and practice guidelines was part of a wider research project called *Building the Evidence: A Report on the status of policy and practice in responding to violence against women with disabilities in Victoria* (2008), a collaboration between the Victorian Women With Disabilities Network Advocacy Information Service, the SAFER Research at University of Melbourne and Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria, and funded by the Reichstein Foundation. These documents have been developed to support the delivery of family violence services and guide the respective agencies in responding to family violence.

The 2008 report documents the absence of awareness and knowledge (in Australia and overseas) about the nature and prevalence of violence against women with disabilities, their help-seeking experiences, and the gaps in – and accessibility to – the relevant support services. As part of this research, it was important to examine what the most relevant Victorian family violence standards, codes and guidelines have to say, if anything, about supporting women with disabilities experiencing violence.

## Methods

To the extent it was feasible, a participatory approach to the research was taken whereby participants in government, non-government organisations and interviewees (family violence

agency workers and women with disabilities who had experienced violence) provided feedback on the findings and recommendations, and thus contributed to their further development.

This particular component of the research involved the analysis of eight family violence sector documents (service standards, codes of practice and practice guidelines) relevant to supporting women with disabilities experiencing violence. These documents form the basis of what services are expected to provide and how the quality of a service is evaluated. They were analysed with a view to identifying gaps in relation to supporting women with disabilities. To this end, the researchers developed a set of minimum standards or criteria and provided a rationale for each. A summary analysis of the eight documents against each criteria was then provided (see key findings below).

The eight family violence documents that were analysed were (in order of publication):

- *Towards Collaboration: A resource guide for Child Protection and Family Violence Services* (Family and Community Support Branch, DHS 2003)
- *Victoria Police Code of Practice for the Investigation of Family Violence* (Victoria Police, August 2004)
- *Men's Behaviour Change Group Work: Minimum Standards for Quality Practice* (No To Violence, December 2005)
- *Code of Practice for Specialist Family Violence Services for Women and Children* (Domestic Violence Victoria 2006)
- *Homelessness Assistance Service Standards* (Office of Housing, DHS 2006)
- *Family Violence Risk Assessment and Risk Management Framework* (Family Violence Coordination Unit, Department for Victorian Communities 2007)
- *Code of Practice for Family Violence Applicant (Court Based Intervention Order) Programs* (Federation of Community Legal Centres (Vic) Inc. July 2007)
- *Practice Guidelines: Women and Children Family Violence Counselling and Support Programs* (Children, Youth and Families Division, DHS 2008)

## **Main Findings**

On the negative side:

- Only four of the eight documents recognised the broader understanding of family violence as it may relate to women with disabilities.
- Only two documents contained reference to women and children with disabilities throughout the document and only four contained a dedicated section on this population group. In contrast, seven of the eight documents had specific sections on other disadvantaged population groups.
- Only one of the eight documents indicates that data about a client's disability status is to be collected. None of them require the collection of data about the types of disabilities clients have and thus consequently do not record what the agency needs to do in order to provide a service to clients with specific disabilities.
- Two of the documents identify the presence of a disability as a risk factor that increases the likelihood of experiencing family violence.
- Five of the documents note the need for communication practice to be tailored to the individual women's communication needs, such as utilising communication aides or Auslan interpreters. Some note the importance of providing information in a diverse range of formats, such as Plain English, accessible websites or audio tapes; however, only one identifies the need to provide physical access to premises.
- Only one explicitly notes the importance of working with local and regional disability service and advocacy groups.
- Only two note relevant legislation, such as the Commonwealth *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, the Victorian *Equal Opportunity Act 1995*, Victoria's *The Disability Act 2006* (and most post-date the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*)).
- None of the documents specifically require workers to have training in the needs of women and children with disabilities experiencing violence.

On the positive side:

- Six out of the eight documents are informed by a gendered / feminist perspective on family violence and disability.
- Six out of the eight documents explicitly state that their approach to family violence is informed by fundamental rights for all and the remaining two are implicitly informed by this perspective.

### **Publications and knowledge exchange**

- A draft journal article is in process
- Healey, Lucy (2009) Feature: 'Building the Evidence: A report on the status of policy and practice in responding to violence against women with disability in Victoria', *Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse Newsletter* 35 (Summer): 8-9.
- An hour-long teleconference with Elizabeth Broderick, the Sex Discrimination Commissioner and Graeme Innes, the Disability Discrimination Commissioner and Human Rights Commissioner was held on 26<sup>th</sup> February. Discussion particularly focussed on how to progress the national recommendations contained within the *Building the Evidence* report.

Victoria Police have indicated their intention to review the *Victoria Police Code of Practice for the Investigation of Family Violence* in view of the recommendations made in the *Building the Evidence* report relating to minimum standards in the provision of services to women and children with disabilities experiencing violence.

A discussion forum was held with the Regional Integrated FV Coordinators at DV Vic on Tuesday, 10<sup>th</sup> February. The aim of this reflection was to progress the recommendations of the *Building the Evidence* Report. Outcomes of the meeting included the decision:

- To produce and disseminate a bi-monthly newsletter devoted to providing information about how to improve access to services and support for women and children experiencing violence to workers in the disability and family violence sectors. It will also provide news and resource items about Disability Action Plans in agencies and reflections on the application of local initiatives. The newsletter will be produced by the VWDN AIS Violence Policy Officer, with assistance from regional coordinators.
- A second discussion forum will be held in August 2009.
- Professor Gill Hague who recently completed research on violence towards women with disabilities will provide the stimulus for a symposium hosted by Victorian Women's Disability Network in July, 2009

### **Implications for Policy, Planning, and Practice**

The *Building the Evidence* research raises a number of issues and questions.

A priority is to make the minimum standards developed for the *Building the Evidence* research a framework for action and development of services for women with disabilities experiencing violence.

Education and support to front-line workers (police, disability and family violence workers etc.) to enable them to identify women with disabilities experiencing violence, conduct an appropriate risk assessment, and refer and manage the risks appropriately needs to continue at an exponential rate.

Greater thought needs to be given to how women and children with disabilities experiencing violence can be made safe at home, for example, through the

- Extension of the BSafe initiative currently being piloted in the Hume Region
- Use of exclusion conditions
- Provision of accessible information to women with disabilities about their options and who to contact.

Further discussion and priorities for action to develop resources to support the service provision for women and children with disabilities experiencing violence are needed. Key areas to address include how women and children with disabilities experiencing violence can have access to:

- Crisis, temporary and long-term accommodation given that very few of the statewide refuges are fully accessible to women and children with disabilities and homelessness is a great problem for women with disabilities and their children
- Intensive case management (ICM), particularly given the recent commitment made by the Victorian Government to increase provisions for ICM
- The development of formal and informal strategies to support the incorporation of women and children with disabilities into all aspects of the family violence service system
- The development and resourcing of existing specialist disability and family violence advocacy services and peak bodies to expand their capacity to provide advice, secondary consultation and education to the family violence service response system
- The development of resources to support information, knowledge and education about family violence as experienced by women and children with disabilities to disability workers.