

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into capturing data on family violence perpetrators in Victoria**

Melbourne—Monday 19 August 2024

#### **MEMBERS**

Ella George – Chair

Annabelle Cleeland – Deputy Chair

Chris Couzens

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#### **WITNESS**

Ella MacKay, Manager, Family Safety and Child Wellbeing, Child and Family Services (Cafs)  
Ballarat.

**The CHAIR:** Good morning. My name is Ella George, and I am the Chair of the Legislative Assembly's Legal and Social Issues Committee. We will now resume public hearings of the Committee's Inquiry into capturing data on family violence perpetrators in Victoria.

I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting, the Wurundjeri Woiwurrung people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to their elders past, present and future and extend that respect to First Nations people across Victoria.

I am joined today by my colleagues Jackson Taylor, the Member for Bayswater; Meng Heang Tak, the Member for Clarinda; Christine Couzens, the Member for Geelong; Annabelle Cleeland, Member for Euroa and Deputy Chair; and Chris Crewther, the Member for Mornington.

The Committee recognises that evidence to this inquiry may be distressing, and we urge people to reach out for support. You can contact Lifeline on 13 11 14, 1800RESPECT or the Blue Knot helpline on 1300 657 380.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and broadcast live. While all evidence taken by the Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege. Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of today's transcript to check together with any questions taken on notice. Verified transcripts, responses to questions taken on notice and other documents provided during the hearing will be published on the Committee's website.

I am now pleased to welcome Ella MacKay, Manager of Family Safety and Child Wellbeing from Cafs Ballarat. Ella, I invite you to make a brief opening statement of 5 to 10 minutes, and this will be followed by questions from members. Thank you.

**Ella MacKAY:** Good morning, everyone, and thank you for having me today. In the realm of family violence there is a pressing need to address the disparity in support services between men and women, particularly focusing on the holistic approach to healing. This discussion explores the challenges and the data collection related to family violence, the impacts on child and family services and the disconnect in how healing services are provided to men compared to women. By addressing these issues we can import service support systems and outcomes for all individuals affected by family violence, bearing in mind that if we stop men who use violence, we stop family violence altogether.

Under-reporting of family violence is a critical issue that hampers the understanding of family violence. Many individuals may hesitate to report incidents due to fear, shame or a lack of trust in the system. This under-reporting skews the data, leading to the incomplete picture of prevalence and nature of family violence. For men, the stigma associated with being victims or perpetrators of family violence exacerbates this problem. To address this we need to develop mechanisms that make reporting more accessible and less stigmatising, such as anonymous reporting options and public awareness campaigns.

Inconsistency to data collection—different agencies use various definitions and methods of recording and reporting family violence, leading to inconsistencies in data. This lack of standardisation complicates efforts to analyse and compare data, affecting the development of a unified understanding of the issue. For a more accurate picture agencies need to adopt consistent data collection protocols and definitions, which should include considerations for all genders and various forms of violence.

Privacy concerns—balancing the need for detailed data with privacy concerns is a significant challenge. Privacy laws and ethical considerations can limit the extent of data collected and shared, potentially obstructing efforts to fully understand and address family violence. Developing robust data protection measures while ensuring the necessary information is accessible to authorised personnel is essential for overcoming this challenge.

Historical focus on victims—data collection has traditionally focused on victims, particularly women and children, often neglecting those who use violence. To address family violence effectively it is crucial to gather data on individuals who perpetrate violence, including their demographics, behaviours and risk factors. This information is vital for designing targeted interventions and prevention strategies, particularly for men, who do not traditionally seek help.

Data-sharing difficulties—the effective sharing of data between agencies is often hindered by privacy laws, system incompatibilities and a lack of collaboration. Secure data-sharing mechanisms improve collaboration between sectors such as law enforcement, child welfare, mental health and education, are needed to integrate information and improve the overall response to family violence.

The lack of standardised definitions—the absence of universal definitions for individuals involved in family violence leads to inconsistencies in data collection. Establishing standardised definitions and categories will help in gathering more accurate and comparable data, which is critical for developing effective interventions. This should include definitions that cover the experience of both male and female victims and perpetrators.

Data on adolescents—information about young children involved in family violence is often grouped with adult data, obscuring the specific needs that are experienced by younger individuals. Distinguishing between adolescent and adult data will help in tailoring interventions to the unique needs of young people, including young men, who may be both victims and perpetrators.

Missing voices of children—children affected by family violence are often inadequately represented in data collection efforts. Their experiences and perspectives are crucial for understanding the full impact of family violence and developing effective support systems. Including the voices of children in data collection will provide a more comprehensive view of the issue, which is essential for crafting interventions that support both girls and boys.

Ineffective resource allocation—accurate data is crucial for aligning resources with community need. Without a clear understanding of the scale and nature of family violence, services may be misaligned with the actual needs, leading to ineffective resource allocation. This includes the need for services tailored to men, who may not currently have access to the appropriate supports. Additionally, there is a disconnect between funding stream tender application conditions and what is actually needed on the front line.

Limited prevention efforts—a lack of comprehensive data hampers the development of targeted prevention strategies. Understanding the profiles and behaviours of individuals involved in family violence is key to creating effective prevention programs. This includes addressing the specific needs of men, who may be both victims and perpetrators of family violence.

Difficulty in identifying high-risk cases—inaccurate or incomplete data can make it challenging to identify families who need intensive support. Accurate data is crucial for reconsidering high-risk cases and providing timely and appropriate interventions. This includes recognising the needs of men who may be at risk of reoffending or require specific support for their behaviour.

Barriers to service delivery—data inconsistencies and privacy concerns can create obstacles to providing seamless services. Addressing these issues is important for ensuring that support services are both effective and accessible for men. Overcoming these barriers might involve developing services that specifically cater to their needs, including those who might be hesitant to seek help.

Recommendations for improvement—developing and implementing standardised tools and protocols across agencies is essential for enhancing data collection. Standardisation will enable accurate comparisons and analysis, leading to a clearer understanding of family violence. This should include a focus on capturing data related to men and their experiences with violence.

Enhanced data sharing—implementing secure data-sharing mechanisms will facilitate better integration of information across agencies, establishing data-sharing agreements and fostering collaboration between sectors. This will improve the effectiveness of data use, including data related to male and victim perpetrators. This will also inform our service delivery.

I would also like to just raise the saturation model. You are obviously aware that there have been significant events in Ballarat recently. I just wanted to share that from a response service we have concerns around how we are going to respond. Currently we are struggling to respond—we are exhausted, I suppose, is probably the best way to put it. Whilst the saturation model and the design is a really great idea, and we really do want to reduce the family violence incidence, how we are going to respond as a response service is concerning across the sector. At this stage we are not aware of any funding that is going to support the responses. I understand this

may or may not be the appropriate forum for this, but that is just something I did want to raise, because it will take us time to develop or to recruit staff to enable us to respond to the demand.

In conclusion, the disconnect between the support available for men and women in family violence contexts highlights the need for a more inclusive and holistic approach to healing. By addressing the challenges in data collection and focusing on specific needs of men we can improve the effectiveness of intervention and support services. Comprehensive data collection, inclusive of community engagement and holistic support, tailored to the needs of both men and women, is essential for creating an effective response to family violence. By implementing these recommendations we can better support all individuals affected by family violence and work towards a more equitable and effective support system.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Ella. From the outset can I say thank you for appearing before the Committee today. We are all aware that there have been some tragic things take place in Ballarat over the past few months, and we appreciate the impact that it has on service providers like Cafs in responding to that demand, so we are incredibly grateful that you have taken the time out to respond to this inquiry from your already busy workload.

**Ella MacKAY:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. One of the themes that has come up throughout the inquiry, particularly from service providers, has been that there are a range of different databases that collect data that relates to family violence, including the Central Information Point, IRIS and SHIP. Can you tell us what databases Cafs use? Do you use more than one database, and are there any challenges with this?

**Ella MacKAY:** We have recently moved from IRIS into Family Journey, so that in itself has been a bit of a process. The challenges I think are more around setting it up to enable us to collect the data effectively so that we can assess the needs. Obviously, IRIS had its limitations—that is why we moved to Family Journey.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Ella, are there any barriers you find to linking and analysing data from across the different programs that Cafs provide?

**Ella MacKAY:** We utilise our quality team to help with the linking of data, but where it can become an issue is because we have it in different modules. We then have to look in different modules to sort of link the families, if that kind of makes sense—we have got an out-of-home care family that will be in the out-of-home care module, and that does not talk to the family violence module.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. With that in mind, do you have any recommendations to the Victorian Government about how databases like this could be improved?

**Ella MacKAY:** I think having a database that does everything that everybody can access—within reason, obviously—if we all could actually feed into the one database, would help in terms of understanding the level and even being able to capture the journey. I think there is an issue, because if we have got, for example, a person in utero, a baby, who is born into a family and that baby experiences family violence, over the course of the child's journey they may enter several different service systems, which will not necessarily be tracked, and if they do end up being placed in out-of-home care then that goes to a different database. I hope I am making sense here. So if I look at a young person in one of our out-of-home care programs, I am not going to necessarily know that child's history of that because of all the different data systems they have entered.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Thank you. Annabelle.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** You mentioned the Orange Door just before commencing. Just give me your thoughts about how to improve the Orange Door and the data sharing of the information that goes in and that can also come out in that space.

**Ella MacKAY:** My thoughts on sharing—I think it is important that we are open and we are able to share what is essentially Family Safety Victoria's data, because I think that that then informs government and informs all the service systems in terms of what we are actually managing at the Orange Door. Part of my role is overseeing men's services and child wellbeing at the Orange Door as well as men's behaviour change services at Cafs. So being able to share would inform the service sector of what we are actually managing at the Orange Door, which would stop some of the criticism as well, I think.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** And currently that is not possible through privacy restrictions?

**Ella MacKAY:** Yes.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** So you can contribute information to the Orange Door in terms of when you receive referrals, but you are not receiving information, whether it is a perpetrator's profile or services that they have touched in their lives—you do not have any of that information?

**Ella MacKAY:** Through private information sharing we can access that information—like, if one of our clients is from the men's behaviour change. We cannot access the family safety contact information. If we receive an L17 from the Orange Door into men's behaviour change, they will not share the AFM's details, which then means our family safety contact is not able to contact that person.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** I am not sure if you are able to answer this question, and I respect that, but of the situations—the tragedies—that we have seen in Ballarat, have the perpetrators touched services throughout their lives? What I am trying to ask, really poorly, is: this is the tip of the iceberg we are dealing with, and of those most extreme cases, have we seen them at some stage touch a service provider in their lives, or is this an example of those that have been invisible?

**Ella MacKAY:** With privacy legislation, I am not sure where I sit in terms of answering that question. Is it all right if I take that on notice?

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** Yes.

**Ella MacKAY:** Just bearing in mind that we are public.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** Absolutely. What would you like to see to make your job easier and more effective to prevent repeat offenders?

**Ella MacKAY:** I would like to see earlier intervention. I think we need to have a bigger focus on—you know, the majority of men, and this is more data that we need to be able to collect effectively, self-report in men's behaviour change groups. The majority of them, I would say 95 to 99%, would be victims of family violence themselves. I think we need to see earlier intervention with children and it needs to be a multifaceted approach. We need to be targeting children early, and when I am talking about targeting children early, that is talking about children who have experienced family violence, how we are working with them to reconnect and make their family stable and how we are working with men to support them to work through their own childhood trauma. We need to be supported as a service sector to do that. Currently our funding does not enable that. A 20-week men's behaviour change program needs to be more. When you look at what we provide women in terms of therapeutic supports, there is a big disconnect. I understand. I am not taking away from victim-survivors at all, but a lot of men who have used violence are victim-survivors in their own right also.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks. Christine.

**Chris COUZENS:** Thanks, Ella. I really appreciate your time. I have just got to recall my messages again. Of the programs that you offer—that is outlined in your one-pager—can you identify what is successful about those in terms of men's behaviour programs?

**Ella MacKAY:** I think what is successful is when we support a person who is precontemplative and we support him through the case management and then into group. But that is a process. We are funded for around 20 hours of case management and then obviously they can then move into group. But we see success when a man feels safe to actually take on some external supports, which might be counselling or it might be in mental health services, and we are linking into community supports as well.

**Chris COUZENS:** Is there evidence of further violence towards their partner? Is that something that you are monitoring?

**Ella MacKAY:** The ongoing evaluation and monitoring are something that I would like to see services like men's behaviour change be funded to do.

**Chris COUZENS:** So that is currently not happening?

**Ella MacKAY:** No.

**Chris COUZENS:** Okay.

**Ella MacKAY:** I think that when we look at the men's behaviour change funding, it is just not sufficient, you know, not only with the men's behaviour change funding alone; it also backs onto family safety contact. Family safety contact is an add-on as well, which I think actually does not give victim-survivors and their children recognition of what they are going through either, if that kind of makes sense.

**Chris COUZENS:** Yes. How can the Victorian Government support service providers to collect better outputs and evaluate data from men's behaviour change and intervention programs? You have sort of touched on that a bit, but can you talk a bit more about that?

**Ella MacKAY:** I think that it would be really nice if the government could recognise the complexity and the intersectionality with men who use violence and how it is not just a one size fits all. Like a female victim-survivor, there are so many complexities and a whole history to one person, and I think we need to recognise that.

**Chris COUZENS:** How can we help to keep people using family violence in view as they move through the intervention program?

**Ella MacKAY:** With reporting. The way we keep people in view now is obviously monitoring them through the course of their intervention and collaborating with stakeholders and ensuring that we are sharing that risk. You know, we have grant meetings and all of those sorts of things.

**Chris COUZENS:** Thank you.

**Ella MacKAY:** That is okay.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Chris.

**Chris CREWITHER:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Ms MacKay, and I appreciate your work in Ballarat and the Central Highlands area. It is greatly appreciated. My first question is: what opportunities are there to better link data on people whose use of family violence with information from gambling and financial programs to help understand how perpetration intersects with other behaviours?

**Ella MacKAY:** Sorry, can you just repeat that?

**Chris CREWITHER:** Sorry. I might not have written that down correctly. What opportunities are there to better link data on people who use family violence with information from gambling and financial programs to help understand how perpetration intersects with other behaviours?

**Ella MacKAY:** What opportunities? So from gambling and financial counselling?

**Chris CREWITHER:** Yes.

**Ella MacKAY:** Yes. And how it links to family violence?

**Chris CREWITHER:** Yes.

**Ella MacKAY:** I might have to take that on notice.

**Chris CREWITHER:** And you can take it on notice if that is all right.

**Ella MacKAY:** I might take that question on notice.

**Chris CREWITHER:** I will ask a follow-up. You mentioned during your opening statement the need for funding to support responses or for more funding. Can you elaborate on that and also how that links in with data collection and your services and everything else?

**Ella MacKAY:** Yes. As I guess you are aware, when Hannah McGuire was murdered there was a big rally in Ballarat. With that we saw an increase in phone calls and referral services, like family violence referral services, to the Orange Door. In terms of responses, we were already stretched. I am not sure how much information I can share about the volume of calls, but there was a big increase. As a response service, it was difficult to respond to that volume of calls. We did, but again it was difficult to respond. So I guess in terms of the saturation model, if we are going to be working with the community around identifying family violence, what does that look like? Are we going to see an increase in volume, and how long for? When we saw over that month an increase in calls and referrals—what does it look like over a period of time, and how sustainable is that for response services?

**Chris CREWETHER:** Is it true to say that perhaps you are not being sufficiently funded by the state government at the moment to provide those services at the level that you need?

**Ella MacKAY:** I think that when we look at the funding allocation compared to the family violence referrals at the Orange Door, that that would be fairly—yes, we are not being funded sufficiently. I think that we need to be thinking about how we sustain a workforce given the impacts. It is not just taking on the referrals, it is the impact to the workforce when there are three murders in our local community. What does that look like? How do we respond to that? How are we, as agencies with these staff, supported to support staff?

**Chris CREWETHER:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Chris. Heang.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you, Chair. Ella, in your submission you talk about enhanced data sharing. Are there opportunities to improve data sharing and analysis through the Orange Door and your men's enhanced intake program and child wellbeing service?

**Ella MacKAY:** It would depend which data you were referring to. In terms of the volume of referrals or the volume of L17s, which are police referrals that come into the Orange Door, that is Family Safety Victoria's information, so we are not actually able to share those statistics.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Yes, but in terms of your agency as partners with Orange Door, are there opportunities for that data to be shared?

**Ella MacKAY:** In terms of the L17s and the amount of L17 referrals, I am not completely sure. I know how many referrals we see in terms of men's referrals or child wellbeing referrals, because I have to report on those service hours and I can see those cases. But I am not privy to how many are L17 referrals or a professional referral or a self-referral.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Okay. All right. That is all.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Heang. Jackson.

**Jackson TAYLOR:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you very much for your time today, Ella, and for answering our questions. What are the barriers to collecting and analysing data about children and young people's use of family violence?

**Ella MacKAY:** In terms of the young children who use violence, we will talk about adolescents. Those L17s are often like, when they come into the Orange Door, they are actually coming as one L17 referral and then it actually takes somebody to systematically go through each referral to say, 'Okay, they are under 18, they go over here.' I guess, in terms of when we look at statistics, it does not always tell us how many young people under 18 are actually using violence and how many L17s have been recorded.

**Jackson TAYLOR:** What practical steps can be taken to address these issues and barriers you have mentioned, and perhaps others you might have in the back of your mind as well?

**Ella MacKAY:** I think it would be good to be able to separate a bit easier in terms of who is an adult person using violence compared to a young person using violence and if maybe they went into a separate portal instead of going all into the one portal.

**Jackson TAYLOR:** Excellent. Thank you very much. Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Just one more question from me. Can you tell us more about Cafs' Strengthening Connections program for young people who use family violence and the data that you collect through this program?

**Ella MacKAY:** Yes. We have been working with young people who use violence since 2014, I think. I might have to actually take that on notice because I have not been overseeing that program for about eight months and I actually cannot remember which data they are collecting at the moment. Is that okay? It is just about to come back under.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, absolutely. That would be great. Thank you. And just on that, and you are welcome to take this on notice as well, is: are there opportunities for research and analysis through this program to better understand young people's use of violence? And would you have any suggestions about areas of research?

**Ella MacKAY:** Absolutely. Actually, I am glad you did raise this, because this is another thing I did want to talk about. I think that, yes, absolutely, there is opportunity in terms of researching. Sorry, what was the question again?

**The CHAIR:** Around opportunities for research and analysis through the Strengthening Connections program to better understand how young people are using violence.

**Ella MacKAY:** There has been a lot of research, and I know Elena Campbell has done significant research in this area as well. I think that what would be a really good opportunity, another opportunity, even though we know the stats anyway—I think that understanding that children who use violence, the majority of them have actually experienced family violence or some significant trauma. And I think that it is important that we do not put them in the same category as a perpetrator, because they are still children. But I think, recognising the trajectory of young people under age 10 who have experienced violence, family violence, their behaviours and behaviours we have seen, what would be a really good opportunity would be to actually look at young people below 10 and intervene earlier there and see how they track compared to—because I guess what we have seen in the Strengthening Connections team is, when a young person comes in who is 15 and has been using violence in the home for four or five years, to restore and repair that relationship is actually harder than it is if we start working with a child under 10, not so much around their behaviours but around building that attachment and doing that restorative work. And we have been piloting a program called Primary Connections, which works with young people under 12 who are using violence in the home. And it is not so much about, obviously, working with them as perpetrators, but it is about recognising their own experience as a victim-survivor in their own right and generally their mother, who is a caregiver, and her experience of family violence, and repairing that relationship.

**The CHAIR:** We have heard throughout the inquiry that data around young people who are using violence is a bit of a gap. So if there is anything else that you would like to add as part of your response, whether it is around the data that Cafs is collecting on young people using violence or some recommendations for improvement and some practical steps that the Victorian Government can take, we would really like to hear that from you.

**Ella MacKAY:** Okay. I might take that on notice and think about it.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Annabelle.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** I have got a couple of questions on notice, if possible, but I am just trying to understand—year-on-year maybe is the best comparison on your workload changes while there is such attention on this space—just the number of referrals that you are managing, say, the last financial year to the year prior. And you mention the workload—calls—since the rally. I know you said that that could be confidential; the Secretariat will let you know, anyway. It would be good to know if it does not breach any confidentiality, just in understanding your workload and your funding requirements. And also, if there is a possibility of having that unidentified information on perpetrators recently, whether they have been visible in services prior to the offence being committed—but that is probably one that I have more questions about whether you are able to provide that or not. But it would just be good to understand the touchpoints of where we are collecting data on individuals. Where we need that intervention and to be sharing that information would



be excellent to understand. But otherwise, thank you so much for your contribution and everything you are doing in the community.

**Ella MacKAY:** Thank you very much.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much to Ella MacKay from Cafs Ballarat for appearing before the Committee today. We are greatly appreciative of the time you have taken out of your very busy workload to appear before us and to prepare your evidence.

We will now take a short break before our next witness.

**Witness withdrew.**