

TRANSCRIPT

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Melbourne—Wednesday, 20 May 2020

Members

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr Danny O'Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Ingrid Stitt

Ms Bridget Vallenge

WITNESSES

Ms Alison Macdonald, Acting Chief Executive Officer, and

Ms Alison Birchall, Acting Policy Unit Manager, Domestic Violence Victoria (*both via videoconference*).

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearings for the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee's Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The Committee will be reviewing and reporting to the Parliament on the responses taken by the Victorian Government, including as part of the national cabinet, to manage the COVID-19 pandemic and any other matter related to the COVID-19 pandemic. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you repeat the same things outside this forum, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible. We ask that photographers and camerapersons follow the established media guidelines and the instructions of the secretariat.

We welcome you to make a brief opening statement of no more than 5 minutes. We ask that you state your name, position and the organisation you represent for broadcasting purposes. This will be followed by questions from the Committee. Thank you.

Ms MACDONALD: Thank you. My name is Alison Macdonald. I am the Acting CEO of Domestic Violence Victoria. DV Vic is the peak body for specialist family violence response services for victim survivors in Victoria. I am joined on the videoconference by my colleague Alison Birchall, who is the manager of our policy unit. Thank you very much for the opportunity to present to the Committee today on the responses taken by the Victorian Government to manage the COVID-19 pandemic. We look forward to sharing our views on this in relation to family violence.

I would like to start by noting that there has been a very strong focus, especially through the media, since the outbreak of the pandemic in Australia on what impact COVID-19 and the associated containment measures will have on the onset, frequency and severity of family violence in the Victorian community. I think this really demonstrates that family violence continues to be a top-priority social policy and law and order issue for the Australian community. I think this focus has been particularly acute given that we were hearing from other countries around the world that were weeks or months ahead of Australia in terms of the community transmission of the virus that there had been a notable and startling increase in reported domestic and family violence. I think this really enabled Victoria to take a proactive approach to responding to family violence during the pandemic.

We know from international evidence on natural disasters that there are spikes in family violence and violence against women more broadly in post-emergency situations. There is strong evidence from Australian experience with bushfires, cyclones and floods, and various other disaster contexts internationally, that confirm this trend. Of course we do not have that evidence for prolonged public health crises such as COVID-19, but we do suspect that with the predicted post-COVID social disruption we will likely see a similar trajectory as the social restrictions start to lift.

As the peak body for specialist family violence services supporting victim survivors across the state, we have been working really closely with our member organisations to keep abreast of the trends and emerging issues for family violence during the pandemic. While it is very early and we do not yet have access to much of the formal data, we are able to share our observations with the Committee about what we are hearing on the ground. We can also speak to what specialist family violence services are telling us about the patterns of family violence perpetration during this period and how the threat of the virus and the social isolation protocols themselves are being weaponised to exert coercion and control over family members.

There is much concern about the vulnerability of children at risk of family violence during this period, where we do not have eyes on kids because of school closures, for example, and other ways of staying across

children's safety. We are also very concerned about the vulnerability of marginalised communities who already face significant barriers to accessing support.

At DV Vic we have been working very closely with the Victorian Government, specifically through Family Safety Victoria, to co-produce guidance and advice for family violence services on things like sector-wide guidance for family violence and sexual assault services, support with business and service continuity planning, translating the Victorian Chief Health Officer's advice to family violence service settings and then developing specific program and practice advice to guide practitioners through their responses in the pandemic. We have also co-hosted a number of family violence sector forums to hear directly from services about the issues affecting them during the pandemic and equally so they can hear directly from Government the most up-to-date advice as well.

Family violence services have worked very quickly to establish remote service delivery arrangements with aid agencies providing crisis interventions, case management and other services remotely, although this was a difficult shift to make as many of our services did not have the ICT infrastructure or the policies and procedures in place to support remote working arrangements, and this all had to be established very quickly. We understand that many agencies, depending on the mix of their programs, are providing a blend of remote service options with some face-to-face work still being undertaken from either their usual locations and/or in outreach sites.

We very much welcome the announcement of funding on Good Friday into the family violence service system and really acknowledge that the target areas for funding did respond to the key areas of need for the sector, specifically around additional flexible brokerage; funding to meet victim survivors' immediate needs, including accommodation where it is not safe to stay at home; investment into the workforce, particularly to fill roles where regular workers' capacity to work is affected by COVID or by caregiving obligations; and support with the technology required to shift ordinary modes of face-to-face service delivery to remote models. We were concerned by some narrative in the media early on that indicated that access to the service system was severely curtailed by the pandemic so have been working very hard along with many others to make sure that public messages reinforce that people still can contact services, they can contact police and can still access the courts and so on. DV Vic is a member of the Human Services and Health Partnership Implementation committee, and I would really like to commend DHHS and VCOSS for how swiftly they moved to establish the COVID-19 HSHPIC group, which has been a really invaluable means of ongoing dialogue between the community sector and Government and a way for the community sector peaks in particular to keep up to date with the best available information, including the information coming out of the CHO's office.

Just before I finish up, some general observations are that there have been some very practical and pragmatic steps taken to ensure service continuity for through this period. We are hearing about services quickly establishing ways of working, such as using telehealth for client engagement, for example, that they will likely keep in place post pandemic. We are hearing about good examples in multidisciplinary and cross-sectoral collaboration to meet victim survivor needs as well, and this is often premised on existing strong and local working relationships. But what we are noticing is that where there are gaps and lack of coordination across the family violence system these things are being exacerbated and made more acute during the pandemic.

There are elements of the pandemic response that we would hope to see sustained in business-as-usual service delivery post pandemic. The recovery phase of the pandemic also provides opportunities to address gaps and tensions in the systemic response to family violence that have been exacerbated by the pandemic and the associated social restrictions. Just finally, while it can seem like less of an immediate priority in a pandemic context, it is really important to note that Victoria is very much a world leader on the primary prevention of family violence and violence against women, and there are real opportunities to, over time, change the social conditions that enable violence against women to occur in our communities. So we would urge the Victorian Government to continue to invest in evidence-based primary prevention strategies, as we know from the Royal Commission into Family Violence that we will not achieve the very bold ambitions of reducing family violence in this state unless we do prevent violence from occurring in the first place. Thanks very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you, and I will hand to Ms Ingrid Stitt, MP, for the first questions.

Ms STITT: Thank you to you both for appearing this afternoon for this important Inquiry. Look, we have heard evidence already at this Inquiry that there has been a spike in the incidence of family violence across the

community in Victoria, and we have certainly heard that from the Minister for police's evidence yesterday. There has been some media commentary about it as well. I am interested in understanding what services have done to prepare for that increase in incidence during the pandemic.

Ms MACDONALD: Look, in the first weeks of lockdown specialist family violence services were reporting significant decreases in incoming contacts to their services. Safe Steps, for example, the statewide crisis service, is reporting for the first few weeks of the pandemic a 30 per cent reduction in incoming calls. However, the demand for services has since returned to pre-COVID levels, and in fact there is some anecdotal evidence that there is higher demand on services at the moment. So that has really shifted over the last two months.

We are noticing some different trends to pre-pandemic trends in terms of service contact. There is a significant increase in calls from third parties, mostly from family members and friends who are concerned about the safety and wellbeing of adults and children who might be at risk. I think it is fair to say that the sector as a whole was probably unprepared for an emergency like this in terms of service continuity planning and having the infrastructure in place to support their ongoing work. I think many ICT systems were probably inadequate to transition quickly to remote service delivery scenarios in terms of security being set up for remote access and just simple things like having enough laptops and mobile phones available for staff. I think we saw a mix where some services really understood the impact of the pandemic and social restrictions very swiftly and acted accordingly; others were probably slower to realise the impact and needed more guidance for how to respond. Nonetheless, every specialist family violence service across the state has sustained service delivery through the pandemic and through the social restrictions. So there are some interesting trends coming out there, including some caseworkers noting that they are able to do more in-depth work through this period in terms of being able to spend longer with clients and more comprehensively meet their needs. So they are examples of the kinds of initiatives that we have seen put in place that we would hope to be able support post pandemic.

Another thing we are hearing is that for victim survivors in remote parts of the state there has actually been better access to services now that they can link remotely. But I think our observations are that with the initial dip in demand for services that we were very concerned that this indicated that victim survivors may not be safe if they were socially isolating at home with a perpetrator, who might be monitoring and controlling their communications and their movements. So what we are seeing is that people are contacting services in different ways.

Ms STITT: Can you give us some examples of the different sorts of ways that people are reporting?

Ms MACDONALD: I think we are hearing from services that have had ways of engaging online, like through web chat, such as 1800 Respect, for example, that there has been a significant uptick in people contacting through that mechanism during the pandemic period, and while there has been an increase to 1800 Respect, I think because of the extensive promotion of that line on phone calls, the phone call contact has not been nearly as steep. I think Victoria Legal Aid's family violence line is also indicating a similar trend, with more contact through its web chat and its online functionality, which I think indicates to us that people at risk of family violence and victim survivors feel probably safer to make contact in more subtle ways over the internet than they do necessarily about making a phone call.

Ms STITT: In terms of people's access, women and children predominantly, to emergency accommodation in circumstances where it is not safe for them to remain in the home or if they are not safe to remain in their home while self-isolating, can you give us a bit of an insight into how services have been connecting people up with emergency accommodation in light of the pandemic?

Ms MACDONALD: One of the issues that the pandemic exposes is probably the service system's reliance on motel accommodation to fill the need for crisis accommodation. It is probably early to tell in terms of the money that has just come through—the most recent funding announcement—into services that enables them to put in place flexible funding, which is very often used to support people going into crisis accommodation. So I think Safe Steps, for example, has noted that because of the pandemic they have been able to get significant discounts on motel accommodation, which has helped free up capacity there. But I do think it is showing up probably an over-reliance in our system on motel accommodation for crisis accommodation purposes.

Ms STITT: And in terms of perpetrators of violence, how are we keeping perpetrators held to account in this sort of pandemic world that we are in? Are you able to give any insight?

Ms MACDONALD: Look, I am not sure if you are speaking to No to Violence, the peak body for men's behaviour change programs, who also run the Men's Referral Service. From my understanding they are noticing some interesting trends with the Men's Referral Service that they operate, that there is an increased number of calls from men themselves who are concerned about their behaviour, which I think indicates that messages are getting through to men who use violence or who are at risk of using violence that they should seek support. From what I understand, because we tend to rely quite heavily on men's behaviour change programs and they operate in a group environment and they have not been able to operate during the pandemic period, there is some more proactive outreach directly to men who are referred into programs, particularly through court referrals, and that is enabling the MRS to do some one-on-one work. I think that it is going to be interesting to keep a view on the nature of that engagement because it is probably quite a new way of working with men who use violence against family members. I probably do not have the most up-to-date information, but I am happy to follow up with the Committee if you would like to understand more about that.

Ms BIRCHALL: I might just add to that that even in the remote working environment, services are still working, using their multi-agent qualitative partnerships that existed in the business-as-usual environment, so a lot of joint triage and screening of referrals through existing multi-agency partnerships, and particularly as well through the work that is established, the support and safety hubs at the Orange Door, is continuing.

Ms STITT: I am interested to get your views on the overall impact of this pandemic on women. We know that about 80 per cent of women are predominantly in those frontline health and social and community services sectors in terms of employment. We know that disproportionately women have been taking on the lion's share of caring and unpaid work during this pandemic, where we have all been at home a lot more than we would be used to. I am just interested in your views about how we are going to make sure that inequality does not go backwards in terms of women in Victoria. Have you got any thoughts about that?

Ms MACDONALD: Yes. Look, I think it is a really genuine concern. I understand that there are some predictions that it is women that are going to bear the brunt of disadvantage that comes out in the post COVID recovery period. I think what we are certainly seeing in the family violence workforce, which of course is a very highly gendered workforce, mostly a workforce of women, is that the impact of caring responsibilities, particularly as schools have been closed down, has really impacted on the workforce capacity overall. We know that workforce capacity in the specialist family violence system is stretched at the best of times, although there is a lot of investment in building up the workforce and pathways into the workforce. I think we are absolutely in our service system noticing the impact on services of having workers who are working remotely but also have caring obligations for their children. It does have quite a significant impact. It has a significant impact in our own organisation as well.

Ms STITT: There is some evidence already, I think, that women are going to bear the brunt of job losses in the post-pandemic stage and the issues around making sure that economic disadvantage does not fuel further family violence. Is that something that your members are going to be turning their minds to?

Ms MACDONALD: Look, absolutely. When I spoke earlier about what we know from natural disaster contexts, what we do see in the aftermath of bushfires, floods and cyclones, for example, is that the associated social disruption often disproportionately affects women. There is often a spike in family violence and in violence against women more broadly, and it can be a time where people revert to more rigid norms around gender. There is a lot of pressure on men to be the breadwinners and for women just to put up with things, and I think we see a lot of gendered norms play out in post-emergency situations, so we are very concerned about what that is going to mean in terms of the post-COVID environment but also what we are hearing about the predictions of the disproportionate impact on women of higher rates of unemployment. We know that female-dominated industries have been significantly impacted by job losses, so I think we are now turning our mind to what needs to be in place in relation to where we need to be focusing on in recovery.

Ms STITT: I understand that the Government has recently launched an advertising campaign around family violence, particularly while so many people across the state are at home more than they would normally be. How important is that sort of initiative in terms of preventing that behaviour and violence?

Ms MACDONALD: Both the State and Commonwealth Governments have launched campaigns. Look, they are always very important in terms of both providing information for people who might be at risk to know that there are support systems out there for them and providing relevant information. I think there are also very important opportunities to raise community awareness about the drivers of family violence and about violence against women, so I think it is important to wrap those primary prevention messages up in the public campaigning. From my perspective the other really critical thing is that we know that when there are widespread community campaigns like that it does often have a flow-on effect to the response service system, and it is really important that when we are launching campaigns like that we coordinate with the response service system, because they will often be the ones at the receiving end of the increase in demand that invariably flows on.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Ms Macdonald, for appearing today. I would like to start on one thing. There have been exemptions to the stay-at-home restrictions for people that feel unsafe. Do you feel that the Government's exemption and the associated communications there were adequate, or were you hearing stories of people who were unsafe but were fearing fines or that they would be arrested or something? Do you feel that that was communicated well?

Ms MACDONALD: I think there was reasonably clear communication that one of the reasons that you could leave the home was if you were unsafe at home. I know that we promoted some materials through social media, for example, to reflect what the Victorian Government had said there. I mentioned earlier that there were ways that perpetrators of family violence were using the pandemic, I think, as an excuse to continue to exert coercion and exert power and control over family members. So what we did hear was COVID-19 being used as an excuse to tell women, for example, that they could not leave the house under any circumstances or that if they did leave the house they were going to contract COVID-19. I think there were opportunities, particularly with culturally and linguistically diverse communities, to really manipulate the information that was out there. We were certainly hearing that through our services, that victim survivors had been very, very fearful about whether or not they could leave the home for safety reasons.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Ms Macdonald. You mentioned something interesting about how after disasters—I think the term that you used was they can revert to more traditional family roles. And we have certainly seen, for example, with the homeschooling that has been having to go on, in a lot of cases it is the women that are staying home with the kids and teaching the kids in those situations and the stresses that are involved with those situations. Do you think that these extra tasks that have been given to women who may have to stay home and do these sort of things feed into or trigger any issues?

Ms MACDONALD: I do not know that the tasks are necessarily being given to women. I think that is probably just how we organise ourselves socially—so that those tasks invariably fall to women. To my mind that speaks to why we really need to tackle those much bigger issues of structural gender inequality in our society, because we know that that is where the evidence sits around being able to really work on how we understand gender in our society and therefore what we need to do to make the world a more gender-equitable place and therefore a place where the conditions that allow violence against women and that allow family violence to flourish are able to mean that we can prevent family violence from occurring in the first place.

Ms BIRCHALL: Just to add, if I may, that like we sometimes see around Christmas and how the spike of family violence incidents is related to gender in those times, when more traditional gender roles emerge like this, then failing at those gender roles can be used as a justification for further violence. So women's perhaps potentially not being able to keep the kids under control or not fulfilling duties in the home around homeschooling as well as managing other things that might be more traditionally associated with femininity and womanhood can certainly become triggers for violence in these circumstances, and we would expect to see stories emerging like that.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you for that additional information. Another issue: we often hear about this dichotomy during this crisis of saving the economy versus saving lives, but of course harming the economy also has effects on real people. How do you expect—if this is what happens—further poverty and job losses to feed into and possibly trigger further problems?

Ms MACDONALD: Look, I guess we would absolutely echo the calls that VCOSS made just prior to this about a wellbeing, as well as economic, led pandemic recovery period. I think we know while family violence

occurs across socio-economic groups and across all aspects of the community, that unemployment, that financial stress, can certainly exacerbate the conditions that enable it to occur. That is what we are very concerned about in terms of what we think we might see if the post-COVID period means that we are going to see new levels of inequality and disadvantage open up in the Australian community.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you very much.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Could I just sort of continue on on the previous last question Mr Limbrick was on about schools—and a special shout-out to the dads who are doing our homeschooling as well. I think Mr Limbrick is right; it has probably fallen a lot on mums—but I for one was happy to come to a Committee hearing to get away from it for a couple of days. But jokes aside, seriously, while there is an impact on women, do you have any reports of a higher impact on children as well, as potential victims of family violence, from them having to be at home later and longer? I know that the Government's directive was that vulnerable children could still go to school, and I also acknowledge that most schools are pretty cluey, they know who the kids are who are at risk, but perhaps just some comments on that.

Ms MACDONALD: Yes. Look, I think the decision to enable children who are in particularly vulnerable situations and are at risk to continue to attend school is a very sound one. I think probably our concern is about the children that are not coming to school during that period. I think we have been very concerned about what it means when we do not have the usual eyes on children during this period, so either through schools but also through child protection services, for example. So, yes, the family violence services work with adult victim survivors and they work with children victim survivors, but I think engagement through remote service delivery with children has been much more challenging because of the nature of those engagements. So I think what we are really interested in looking at is where some great collaborations can happen between the specialist family violence sector and those other sectors who are continuing to have contact with and eyes on children during the pandemic period. I know we are talking about school going back next week, which will be very welcome, but if we were to go back into lockdown or if there was a further period where the schools were to close, I think we would certainly need to look at very effective coordination across our service systems to enable much better eyes on kids during a period like this.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Do you have any hard data on this issue?

Ms MACDONALD: Not yet, sorry, no.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Speaking of which, I think I was right in hearing you before saying that initially there was a drop-off in demand for family violence services and now the anecdotal evidence is that it is creeping up again.

Ms MACDONALD: Yes.

Mr D O'BRIEN: That is a surprise to me. Was it a surprise to you?

Ms MACDONALD: Yes, it was—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Probably in the context of what we heard from the Minister yesterday of the Government acting fairly early on with proactive policing on the issue. The impression I got was that there would be an almost immediate spike.

Ms MACDONALD: It did actually surprise us, particularly as everything we had heard from those countries that were slightly ahead of us in terms of containment measures and in terms of the community transmission was that there had been significant increases in reporting. So when we saw a dip on the one hand that indicated that perhaps with social isolation there were less opportunities for people to contact services, as I mentioned earlier. But also I think the concern was that there was some misunderstanding that perhaps the ordinary service system was no longer open for business. So I think there was some confusion in those early weeks in particular about how regular safety nets and our service systems were able to respond, and that probably drove people—in the same way that we have been hearing about people staying away from doctors and from emergency departments, for example, I think we probably saw a similar trend. They assumed that service delivery was affected to such a degree that the ordinary services were not operating, which is why I know there has been a lot of effort to convey those messages that actually you can still contact police if you are at risk. You can leave your home, you can go to the courts, you can seek support from a specialist service, you

can identify family violence wherever it is that you are still having contact with a professional in a service delivery environment.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes. It is possible that the hidden problem became even more hidden, which is a concern. I think Minister Neville has stated that there have been around 700 cases of high harm incidents. Have you heard similar? Have you got any other evidence or data that you could provide to the Committee?

Ms MACDONALD: Family violence services and police work very closely on high-risk management of family violence, and I think that some of that data is showing up through police Operation Ribbon. I do not have access to the same data that I could reflect on here, but we are hearing anecdotally about some levels of increase in terms of severity of family violence. For example, we are hearing about more incidents and more identification of strangulation through our service system. Now, strangulation is a very high-risk indicator, so that tells us that there are trends there that not only is there perhaps an increase in the onset of family violence but actually the family violence that is being used is more severe in nature.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Could I just project forward a bit? There is a lot of discussion at the moment in various sectors that we will not go back to normal, that there will be a new normal, or that we do not have to go back to normal—we can do things better. Is there anything we can do as a community and that the State Government in particular can do to not go back to the normal of domestic violence being so high, you know, one woman being killed by a close partner every week? Or is it a case of continuing to do what governments are doing now?

Ms MACDONALD: The Victorian Government has really led the country and probably the world in terms of its response to family violence in the post-royal commission environment, so I think it is really about not taking our foot off the pedal there. We have got a clear blueprint for where we are going as a state and the investment needed to go there. We have got a plan, and I would urge the Victorian Government to absolutely stick to it, but I think because we are moving into, as you say, a new normal, there are also kind of broad steps that need to be taken in terms of looking at how we can provide more—noting that these are probably more Commonwealth issues, but often the onus falls on the state to pick up the gaps of course—like looking at the provision of Newstart, because rates of Newstart and single parenting payments are a really, really significant issue.

I should make note of the vulnerability of women in Victoria and Australia more broadly who do not have permanent residency and who are on temporary visas and their lack of access to government support—to Medicare, for example, to employment rights here—which really means that they are at extremely high risk of family violence.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Can I just jump in—we have only got a couple of seconds to go.

Ms MACDONALD: Right, okay.

Mr D O'BRIEN: On the royal commission recommendations, have you heard any evidence or do you have any concern about anything being paused or deferred or delayed as a result of the crisis?

Ms MACDONALD: Look, obviously we understand the context of the state budget being deferred in the context of the pandemic. A lot of programs and a lot of service agreements are due to expire at 30 June, and I think we are still waiting for advice from the Victorian Government about the status of those contracts. I think it can be very destabilising in an already extremely unstable environment at the moment for services not to know whether they have got continuity of funding to enable their staff to have ongoing contracts, for example. So I think that would just be my last note in terms of something that we are very keenly awaiting.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Great, thank you very much for time. It was great evidence.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Unfortunately our time has expired, but we thank you very much for appearing before our Committee today. The Committee will follow up on any questions which were taken on notice in writing and responses will be required within five working days of the Committee's request. We thank you for your time, and we will move to the consideration of the next witness. Thank you.

Ms MACDONALD: Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.