



Inquiry into Gender Responsive Budgeting

Submission from Women's Health West

2 December 2019

About Women's Health West

Women's Health West (WHW) is one of Victoria's only organisations that provides services and programs that encompass the family violence continuum - from primary prevention, to early intervention and response. Our work has actively contributed to improving the health, safety and wellbeing of women and their children in western metropolitan Melbourne since 1988.

We provide a range of early intervention and response services for women and children who are experiencing family violence. We also run programs that focus on promoting positive health and wellbeing among our communities, to reduce inequities that limit the lives of women and girls.

WHW is a member of Gender Equity Victoria (GEN VIC), the Victorian peak body for gender equity, women's health and the prevention of violence against women.

Introduction

WHW has participated in the production of GEN VIC's submission and endorses that submission. We encourage the committee to implement GEN VIC's recommendations.

WHW adds an additional recommendation to support gender equity in the context of better achieving the outcomes of the Royal Commission into Family Violence (RCFV):

The Victorian Government reviews and updates the funding model for specialist family violence services as a priority, in order to recognise and adequately remunerate staff for the complexity of work undertaken in a post RCFV environment.

WHW congratulates the Victorian government on its dedicated efforts to implement all 227 recommendations of the RCFV. If ever there was a budget initiative aimed at responding to gender inequity, this is it. The \$2.7 billion spent on responding to family violence is an outstanding example of a gender budget initiative (see terms of reference number two).

However, the speed with which the state government acted to allocate funds to improve service access for victim/survivors meant that planning and review of classification levels and pay rates behind funding models did not occur. Nor did we anticipate the increase in complexity of work undertaken as a direct result of recommendations designed to improve client experiences of service access, continuity and accountability. These two factors have, ironically, further entrenched inequalities for those women working in specialist family violence services (SFVS).

Differential funding models

SFVS are funded under a different model from that applied to other sectors funded to undertake family violence work post the RCFV – including child and family services, Orange Door services, sexual assault services and services that respond to men who perpetrate family violence. These sectors can afford to pay a higher classification and therefore wage to their family violence staff for the same work, either as a result of higher rates of funding, and/or their ability to cross-subsidise program costs. SFVS do not have this option. This has contributed to high turnover and resultant costs in an intensively competitive market, perpetuating gender inequity by inadvertently creating a two-tier wage structure within the family violence response sector.

The establishment of Orange Door services (recommendation 37 of the RCFV) is one example that highlights this pay disparity. Differential funding lead to SFVS staff in the 'home' agency being paid at a lower rate, for the same work, than staff working in the hub – or to financially-stressed SFVS having to reduce staff numbers to offer wage parity in a high-demand environment, leading to burnout and turnover. Similarly, recommendations 31 and 32 of the RCFV promote collaboration, even unification, of family violence and sexual assault services. Yet the funding model for sexual assault counsellors is significantly higher than that of SFVS.

While we acknowledge the role of all organisations in building an attractive employee value proposition, SFVS operate in an economy created by differential funding models, not by a free market. It is therefore only possible to be competitive if the funding model is relevant to its operating context, including the new, highly-competitive market that the RCFV recommendations have created.

Differential funding models also result in those SFVS who, for decades, have responded to the most extreme impact of gender inequity – violence against women – having to implement a funding model that does not support wages that reflect the complexity of work undertaken by our female workforce.

Increased complexity of work undertaken

RCFV recommendation 209 outlines the need for a 10-year industry plan leading to the introduction of a mandatory social work (or equivalent) qualification for all family violence practitioners in funded services within five years. WHW has already transitioned to the employment of social workers. To attract and retain a skilled workforce who can provide high-quality, seamlessly-integrated and consistent services for victim/survivors of family violence, it is critical for SFVS to offer competitive wages that recognise the complexity of work required.

Not only have recommendations arising from the RCFV led to multiple new compliance regimes that take significant time away from front-line service delivery, without matching funds, they have also ushered in much higher expectations of staff in holding risk and managing compliance.

Further, significant and growing demand for services post the RCFV has led SFVS to introduce demand-management strategies that prioritise the most complex and at-risk clients. SFVS staff are no longer dealing with a continuum of risk; high risk situations have become the norm.

The current funding model for SFVS is not based on a classification level that reflects the complexity of work undertaken by specialist family violence response staff in a post-RCFV environment.

WHW recommends that the Victorian Government reviews and updates the funding model for SFVS to recognise and adequately remunerate staff for the complexity of work undertaken. The model must reflect the outcome that we seek for women in Victoria in order to reduce and prevent family violence – gender equity. Workers in the family violence sector are predominantly women and the current funding model for SFVS perpetuates gendered wage inequality. Financial inequity leads women to experience greater housing insecurity, higher risk of homelessness and poverty and lower superannuation than men – all factors that contribute to the conditions under which violence against women continues to occur.

Our recommendation is consistent with current government policies that lay the groundwork for enduring and sustaining change, including *Free from Violence* (2017) and *Safe and Strong: Victoria's Gender Equality Strategy* (2016). It rectifies systemic disadvantage and supports Victoria to achieve gender equity. Gender responsive budgeting provides an opportunity to redress some of the incidental outcomes of the implementation of the RCFV's recommendations. It also provides an opportunity to allocate appropriate funding to achieve the impressive and ambitious outcomes outlined in the RCFV's recommendations and the visions of the 10 year industry plan, *Building From Strength*, to create a safe and equitable society.

Recommendations

WHW recommends that:

The Victorian Government reviews and updates the funding model for specialist family violence services as a priority, in order to recognise and adequately remunerate staff for the complexity of work undertaken in a post RCFV environment.

WHW supports all 8 recommendations outlined in GEN VIC's submission.