

Safe Steps submission to the *Strong Foundations: Building on Victoria's work to end family violence* online consultation

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Safe Steps summary of recommendations:

1. *Increase the supply of crisis and refuge accommodation to get children and young people fleeing family violence out of motels.*
2. *Provide resourcing to support children and young people in crisis access age and stage appropriate early intervention and recovery services and activities.*
3. *A dedicated crisis line and response service for children and young people experiencing family violence*
4. *A dedicated crisis accommodation facility for children and young people escaping family violence; and*
5. *Supports for children and young people in crisis accommodation.*
6. *Enhance workforce capacity to allow the system to flex to meet the range of needs of victim survivors*
7. *Resource crisis accommodation alternatives for the most vulnerable victim survivors*
8. *Government and sector work in partnership to develop community sector resilience to data security, cyber threats, and using technology to promote and enhance services*
9. *Develop an evidence-based approach to measuring impact, that takes into account the multi-faceted needs of people who experience family violence*

Section 1: Drive down family and sexual violence

What steps would you recommend the Victorian Government take to build a community-wide approach to preventing family and sexual violence?

Safe Steps supports the work of the specialist prevention sector to continue to work on evidence-based community-wide approaches to preventing family, domestic and sexual violence.

What steps would you recommend the Victorian government take to support Aboriginal-led prevention?

Safe Steps supports Aboriginal self-determination and community-controlled organisations leading responses to family and domestic violence against Aboriginal people.

What steps would you recommend the Victorian government take to engage men and boys to change attitudes and behaviours that can lead to violence?

Safe Steps supports the specialist prevention sector in their endeavours using evidence-based interventions to engage men and boys to change violence-promoting attitudes and behaviours.

Section 2: Focus on children and young people

What steps would you recommend the Victorian Government take to engage children and young people to create generational change?

Safe Steps recommendations on children and young people

1. *Increase the supply of crisis and refuge accommodation to get children and young people fleeing family violence out of motels.*
2. *Provide resourcing to support children and young people in crisis access age and stage appropriate early intervention and recovery services and activities.*

Case study

The following composite case study illustrates the need for early intervention. Intervention and recovery are ongoing, and not linear, and opportunities for intervention occur throughout the family violence continuum. The case study is based on evidence provided by our family violence specialist workforce and illustrates the importance of early intervention to that focuses on children and young people to create generational change.

Emma* (mother) and Nicholas* (ten year old son) came into crisis accommodation. Emma told her case worker that Nicholas can be really “mean” and sometimes hurts her. She expressed concern that Nicholas would “turn into a perp”. Emma believed that this was as a result of Nicholas seeing his father being violent towards Emma. However, she was concerned about reaching out for help for him as she didn’t want him to come to the attention of the police.

While in crisis accommodation, staff also noticed that Nicholas was very physical towards Emma.

The child support worker on-site supported some activities between Emma and Nicholas to strengthen their relationship and prepared a referral for a program with a local community agency focused on supporting families healing from family violence.

Emma and Nicholas also attended a local GP who provided a mental health plan and made a referral to a child psychologist. Emma made contact with the child psychologist but they were unable to accept the referral as they were not taking any new referrals.

With the support of the on-site nurse, Emma phoned around other bulk-billing child psychologists and they are able to find an appointment time in 4 months time.

Emma and Nicholas were then accepted into refuge in regional Victoria and moved on from Safe Steps crisis accommodation without Nicholas having received any personalised therapeutic care. The new accommodation also took the family out of the catchment of the community organisation and the psychologist they have been referred to. Once in refuge, Emma and Nicholas had to start the process of getting support for Nicholas all over again.

On-site intervention while in crisis accommodation would have provided Nicholas and Emma with the starting point they needed, instead of having to refer out.

*note names have been changed

What steps would you recommend the Victorian government take to provide support for children and young people where, when and how they need it?

Please see Safe Steps Recommendations 1 and 2.

Context and evidence

Over 40% of Safe Steps clients are children and young people (22-23). On any given day, we will respond to calls from as many as 160 adults, almost half of who have accompanying children. For those that are in immediate danger requiring a crisis response, hotel/motel accommodation can be the only option. The average number of households in hotel/motel accommodation for the 2022-2023 financial year was approximately 100 per night, 40% of which were of children.

Hotels/motels are not therapeutic spaces. People who are escaping family violence who are accommodated in motels do not receive wrap-around services, and are potentially kept in trauma, or re-traumatised by the experience. Hotels/motels are not appropriate for a number of reasons. The need to stay quiet (to be mindful of other guests) and lack of play space can be particularly difficult for younger children. Disconnection from social outlets and education, lack of access to child-focused specialist family violence supports and mental health professionals means that young people can feel isolated and trapped. This setting can compound the recent experiences of family violence, embed trauma and slow the recovery process.

Access to appropriate accommodation and supports for children and young people escaping family violence is an investment in the future. Front-ending support to children and young people will disrupt the cycle of violence and stem the intergenerational nature of ongoing trauma and abuse.

Therefore to provide support for children and young people where, when and how they need it Safe Steps recommends a threefold approach:

3. *A dedicated crisis line and response service for children and young people experiencing family violence*
4. *A dedicated crisis accommodation facility for children and young people escaping family violence; and*
5. *Supports for children and young people in crisis accommodation.*

The first two require comprehensive feasibility research and pilot approaches that Safe Steps would welcome the opportunity to drive with funding support to undertake these projects. Given the synergies that would likely exist with the current crisis line and response service provide by Safe Steps, we are well positioned to manage and inform such a process. Safe Steps views these as longer-term priorities.

The third can, and should, be implemented as swiftly as possible, to ensure that children and young people escaping family violence, wherever they are, receive supports that will encourage their healing and recovery.

Evidence-based primary prevention/early intervention initiatives have a place in crisis work. The evidence base must also include the experiences and voices of children and young people drawn from research, with a focus on their views of what works. The goal is to better align policy and services to the needs of children and young people.

From a service perspective, we do what we can to support children and young people. An example of this when we engage children in safety planning we talk about consent in relation to touch. However, we are not resourced to provide the specialist interventions required with children and young people to set them on a positive, violence-free life course. we lack the resources to provide the level of specialist support

required to ensure children and young people have an appropriate level of intervention. Anecdotally, wait-times to see a bulk billing psychologist or paediatrician are alarmingly high range from 4 to 8 months, and many specialist children's services have closed their books, due to the ongoing impacts on child development since the long breaks from school and social life experienced during COVID.

Prevention work is not just "out there, in the community". It is also very much part of the work of crisis response and healing. As victim survivors in their own right children and young people that we work with are particularly vulnerable and require specialist prevention interventions.

This is absolutely the type of work that can commence in crisis accommodation when we have, on average, some 40 children per night in our accommodation for around 2-3 weeks at a time. This time can be utilised for therapeutic and preventative intervention in safe environment that can help stop the intergenerational cycle of family and domestic violence.

In Safe Steps experience, prevention and early intervention can be promoted through specific child-focused strategies: 1) Developmental and behavioural mental health; and 2) Education support. These interventions must be therapeutic and trauma-informed.

While children's workers are available in some specialist family violence services, they are not universally accessible and staff ratios for work with children and young people are not commensurate to staff ratios for adults/head of household.

A focus on children necessitates resources dedicated to responding to their needs from the moment they enter the family violence response system.

Although Safe Steps' alternative crisis accommodation supports families with children and young people providing some age-appropriate wrap around supports to better ensure children and young people are safe when escaping family violence, these services do not have access to professionals who are specialists in responding to children and young people who have experienced family violence.

Due to the ongoing state-wide shortages of mental health professionals for children and young people, families in crisis are particularly vulnerable – there are simply no services that can respond quickly to the needs of children and young people at the point of crisis.

Additionally, having skilled and experienced educators accessible in crisis and refuge accommodation would provide additional opportunities for children and young people. Remaining engaged with school and learning can provide stability, promote engagement and support ongoing healing and recovery.

While basic safety needs are met while children and young people are in service, we are unable to provide the level of therapeutic and counselling support that is required to ensure their immediate, short- and long-term needs are met.

What steps would you recommend the Victorian government take to support children and young people who use violence to heal and change their behaviour?

As noted above, early intervention with children and young people entering the system will promote healing and behaviour change. Programs that focus on rebuilding the relationship between the non-violent parent and the child/ren are central to this work. Properly resourced, this healing can commence as soon as people enter the family violence service system.

Section 3: Strengthen support for victim survivors

What steps would you recommend the Victorian Government take to provide all Victorians who experience family or sexual violence with the support they need when they need it?

Safe Steps recommendations on providing all Victorians who experience family violence with the support they need when they need it:

6. *Enhance workforce capacity to allow the system to flex to meet the range of needs of victim survivors*
7. *Resource crisis accommodation alternatives for the most vulnerable victim survivors*

In Safe Steps experience, victim survivors with complex presentations and/or intersectional identities continue to face the greatest barriers to access support when they need it.

To overcome these barriers, we suggest a twofold approach involving improved access to appropriate crisis accommodation and enhanced workforce capacity. Issues related to crisis accommodation are explored in this section. Issues related to workforce capacity are dealt with in the section titled “Intersectionality: What steps can the Victorian Government take to ensure the next stage ... addresses the diverse needs of different communities and peoples in our community?”

In our experience the people who face the greatest challenges getting into crisis accommodation and/or refuge are those with multiple needs. Anecdotally certain groups experience the longest wait times for accommodation, as their needs are multiple and complex, and they are viewed as being difficult to accommodate. Some of the reasons, as we understand them, include: multiple needs mean they may be disruptive or place other residents at risk; accommodation is not physically suitable; or because they are viewed as harder to “move on”.

For these reasons, people with multiple intersecting needs are more often placed in hotel/motel accommodation and stay there longer than other clients.

Their needs continue to be unmet in that environment and this can exacerbate trauma, triggering mental health decline. For example, people with disabilities can be in accommodation that is physically unsuitable. People from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds can be further isolated by language barriers and lack of access to culturally appropriate support. Hotel/motel accommodation carries significant risks for victim-survivors, including (but not limited to) limited security (resulting in easier access for perpetrators) and limited support (resulting in higher rates of self-harm and inadequate services for children and young people).

Alternatives to hotel/motel accommodation are essential to ensuring all Victorians, in particular those who face additional barriers, get the support they need when they need it. An innovative pilot alternative to hotel/motel accommodation is currently being run by Safe Steps. The Sanctuary pilot has brought together philanthropy, other community services and government, to improve the crisis response for victim survivors.

Early findings from the pilot indicate residents of Sanctuary leave our service with more effective supports in place, having experienced a wrap-around service while in crisis accommodation. The pilot is grounded in the concept of providing support both from within and outside Safe Steps. We provide a safe environment (compared with hotels/motels) and a supported response – through bringing together legal, migration, financial, child-focused and health supports to one place.

The interim evaluation findings indicate that the model is effective, but resource intensive, as we are appropriately responding to complex needs – who may otherwise be in hotels/motels with limited support,

and associated risks. Since Sanctuary opened, client profiles have included people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, some of whom have complex visa situations; people with substance use issues; people experiencing mental illness; and people with a disability (including children).

Safe Steps seeks a commitment to be able to continue this work and expand broader sector capacity to provide alternative models across Victoria and get all victim survivors the suite of supports they need to commence the journey to healing.

What steps would you recommend the Victorian government take to continue to shift the focus onto people who use violence?

Safe Steps supports the continuation of evidence-based initiatives in the sector working with people who use violence.

A key element of this is the expansion of the Safe at Home approach, providing a rapid response to households affected by family violence.

What steps would you recommend the Victorian government take to support Aboriginal-led responses for Aboriginal victim survivors and people who use violence?

Safe Steps supports Aboriginal self-determination and community-controlled organisations leading responses to family and domestic violence against Aboriginal people.

Section 4: Respond to change

What steps would you recommend the Victorian Government take to respond to cultural, social and technological shifts that impact family and sexual violence?

The impacts of technological advances are multi-faceted, impacting on victim-survivors in the many ways technology can be used as a tool for abuse but also as a mechanism to seek help; the workforce, as they strive to understand and support adults, children and young people about using technology safely; and the many governance and compliance challenges for sector organisations.

Across the broad topic of Responding to Change, Safe Steps recommends:

- 8. Government and sector work in partnership to develop community sector resilience to data security, cyber threats, and using technology to promote and enhance services*

Organisations have increasingly complex responsibilities in relation to data security and cyber threats. Small organisations are disproportionately impacted by the need to protect against external threats and require Victorian Government support and guidance in relation to these issues.

What steps would you recommend the Victorian government take respond to new forms of family and sexual violence?

Safe Steps supports the continuation of evidence-based initiatives in responding to cultural, social and technological shifts that impact on family violence. Safe Steps are increasingly seeing the impacts of technological abuse on the people we work with. As such, it is another area of complexity that family violence crisis specialists need enhanced knowledge to be able to respond, support and provide the tools to protect victim-survivors from technology-based violence.

What steps would you recommend the Victorian government take to embrace technology in how we prevent and respond to family violence?

Marketing to people who may need our services has become increasingly complex. People use a multitude of new and old media platforms to get information – including about where they can seek help for family violence. It is no longer enough for an organisation to rely on a paper-based directory or stand-alone website to promote the services of an organisation like Safe Steps.

To ensure the people who need us know about us, we need to be able to reach audiences across a range of platforms - including in languages other than English. Without additional support, organisations are unable to increase awareness of where victim survivors can get immediate help.

Additionally, victim-survivors also use different mechanisms, beyond the traditional phone call – to get help. In late 2023 the national phone and online counselling service, 1800 Respect, expanded their services to be able to provide support via text message. Text is a more flexible and discreet mechanism for offering information and support. Safe Steps, as Victoria's 24/7 crisis service, also needs to be able to provide support to people seeking support via text message. Without this capacity, we cannot respond to all people seeking safety.

Section 5: Understand and demonstrate our impact

To demonstrate our impact Safe Steps recommends:

- 9. Develop an evidence-based approach to measuring impact, that takes into account the multi-faceted needs of people who experience family violence*

The family violence sector has traditionally been valued by reference to the number of people who use a service, rather than the complexity of needs and the outcomes achieved. The focus on “through-put” undermines the multifaceted, intersecting and diverse needs of people seeking help for family violence. Through-put and numbers or call volume measurement is a simplified model of cause and effect. In reality, complex programs related to social issues rarely operate in such a simplistic fashion. Generally, there are multiple factors which achieve long-term positive outcome. Measurement of resources, effort, client need and outcomes is a far more appropriate approach in our view to measuring the success of our collective response to family violence.

Overarching principles

Lived Experience: How do you think people who have experienced family violence can be involved in developing policy, services and activities in the next stage of Victoria's work to end family violence?

Engaging people who have experienced family violence in policy development and service improvement is essential. Experts by experience need to be appropriately reimbursed for their time and expertise - they should not be expected to volunteer for organisations to benefit from their insights. They also require therapeutic trauma informed supports to ensure their experience of providing advice is not re-traumatising. This work is resource intensive, and Safe Steps supports adequate resourcing for organisations seeking to engage lived-experience experts.

Intersectionality: What steps can the Victorian Government take to ensure the next stage of Victoria’s work to end family violence addresses the diverse needs of different communities and peoples in our community?

As prefaced above, our experience indicates that people who are most to experience barriers are those with intersecting needs. Part of the response to this is a better funded and equipped workforce. To ensure support continues to be extended to any person who experiences family violence, regardless of the complexity of their needs, workforce planning should address the range of skills required by staff to improve confidence and competence.

This means family violence specialists being able to respond to mental health needs, disability, CALD victims or people experiencing alcohol and other drug dependencies and know when to refer or obtain secondary consultation.

Alongside this, access to community-based specialists to provide on-site support and/or secondary consultation would help ensure better outcomes for both clients and staff.

We would like all our staff to be able to respond appropriately to the needs of victim survivors with intersectional needs and respond in ways that are trauma informed. To do this, family violence specialist services need resourcing to build skills and access to experts from other sectors.

Is there anything else you think the Victorian government needs to do for all Victorians to access the support they need and be safe, thriving and live free from family violence?

Safe Steps submission has focussed on key areas related to our experiences. Additionally, we support the submissions of our peaks that we are assured will focus on a number of areas across the sector.