

Family violence and carer abuse



Introduction

Domestic and family violence is a violation of basic and fundamental human rights that is caused by a person in a position of trust.

In this context, family violence means any act of physical violence, verbal abuse, economic and/or financial abuse, religious abuse, emotional and/or psychological or sexual violence that has been perpetrated by one person to another. It includes any behaviour that causes someone (within the family) to hear or witness any incident of abuse or violence and may involve deliberate damage to property. It also includes threats made in order to dominate or intimidate – the actual act does not need to have been carried out (Parliament of Victoria, 2014).

As a provider of family and community services and aged care across Victoria and Tasmania, Baptcare is concerned about the level of abuse suffered by women and their children from their most immediate family members. Baptcare is concerned about the less publicised incidence of elder abuse perpetrated on vulnerable seniors by adult children, spouses, and carers.

Further, persons with a disability or mental health issue are also vulnerable to violence and abuse from those who provide care to them. Baptcare believes long-term investment in building individual, family and community resilience and zero tolerance against violence and abuse will promote improved health, wellbeing and family preservation, and that the high personal, family, social and community cost of abuse and violence in Australia makes it an important national issue.

History and background

For the past two decades, policy development has been characterised by a continual focus on 'tertiary' levels of intervention, that is, providing the victim with care after the assault, reducing further harm. Apprehended violence orders, the provision of refuges, health accommodation, law reform, domestic violence services and the refinement of policy and procedures for the care of victims of violence and abuse post-assault are all examples of tertiary intervention. Notwithstanding the importance of such policies, they do not prevent violence (especially against women), as the intervention is applied after the violence and abuse has occurred.

While there has been a significant shift over the past 20-30 years in relation to both policy and practice around abuse and violence, only recently has social policy started to identify ways of intervening to prevent violence and abuse from happening in the first place (i.e. prevention as opposed to intervention). (REF)

Domestic violence and abuse traditionally has been perceived as a 'private issue' that often occurs 'behind closed doors.' This perception needs to be challenged, given the domestic violence and abuse towards vulnerable people is multi-faceted and the rates of abuse are alarmingly high. For example, an estimated one in four women have experienced violence perpetrated by their intimate partner (Australian Personal Safety Survey, 2012). In Victoria, during 2013-2014, a greater increase in the number of rapes recorded as part of family violence (up by 15.6 per cent) meant that a third of all Victorian victims were sexually assaulted by someone in their family circle.

Harassment offences are also on the increase in Victoria. In 2012-13 a quarter of these were family violence cases. Further, property damage as part of family violence has increased over the past few years (up 9.4 per cent in 2013-14), at the same time as other instances of property damage were decreasing (Victoria Police, 2014).

In its submission to the 2015 Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence, the Victorian Council of Social Services [VCOSS] asserted that family violence is a communal problem as it is a leading cause of: homelessness for women and children; poorer physical and mental health; unemployment, poverty and disadvantage; disability and death of women aged 15-44 years, and children being placed in out of home care.

In recognition of the scale of family violence problem facing Victoria, the 2016-17 Victorian State Budget has allocated just over \$80 million to respond to the challenge of family violence via community services and the justice system.

Current context and situation

The increasing incidence and impact of family violence affecting vulnerable groups within our communities cannot be ignored. For example, children experiencing family violence have their psychological and emotional health, and social and cognitive development undermined. The effects of family violence can include a child developing: distress and anxiety, sadness and depression, social problems, confusion, anger, aggressive behaviour, hyperactivity, eating problems, sleep disturbances, increased irritability and crying, hyperactivity, poor concentration and academic delays, post-traumatic stress disorder and unwanted remembering of trauma events (Bagshaw, 2007).

People living with a disability may have limits with their physical, cognitive, psychological or social options for self-protection and autonomy. They may be dependent on others for intimate personal care needs (such as washing, toileting and dressing) and these situations may be targeted. Men who use violence often target victims who they perceive as less powerful, such as women who are unable to communicate to others what has happened to them and those with restricted physical movement (Women with Disabilities Victoria, 2013). Indeed, such perpetrators may use the woman's disability as a weapon of control. This can include deliberately manipulating situations to make the woman and other people around her question her physical and mental competence, and even her ability to manage her finances (Domestic Violence Resource Centre, 2010). As a result, those with a disability or living with a mental illness are twice as likely to be physically and sexually abused as members of the general population and have fewer pathways to safety. People with disabilities or mental illness are also abused within institutional settings that are supposed to treat, heal, care and protect.

The majority of victims of elder abuse family violence are female and poor; though older men are also vulnerable. Seniors with some form of decision-making disability are also more likely to be abused (DHHS, 2010). Older people with few social networks are at risk – the homeless; those isolated from family, neighbours and community; and

those migrant seniors without English skills who are wholly dependent on family. Seniors who are physically frail or suffering a chronic illness are vulnerable, as are those with dementia who may be confused about their finances and belongings, and those who exhibit challenging behaviours such as aggression which may provoke abuse and violence (Benevolent Society, 2013).

As aged care has moved into consumer-directed care, the financial abuse of seniors will become an increasing concern. Older women are at greatest risk of financial abuse with abusers most commonly family members, particularly adult sons. Family attitudes of entitlement (particularly when a Will has set up expectations) can result in financial abuse.

Baptcare's Mission & Christian Witness

As the aged care and community services agency of the Baptist Union of Victoria, our mission and values arise out of a Christian philosophy of the intrinsic value and inherent equality of all people as God's creations (Genesis 1:26). Baptcare's position and response to family and domestic violence is consequently driven by principals that acknowledge the inherent dignity and equality of all people, regardless of circumstance, the equality of opportunity, safety and consistency of outcome for all, and consistency between word and deed.

Our inspiration is Jesus, who in his daily interactions within a deeply patriarchal society responded to women, children and the marginalised. He admonished the powerful and oppressive and taught with startlingly positive feminine imagery validating the disenfranchised, acknowledging their humanity and giving them respect and a voice in their community. (Matthew 23:37, Mark 5:21-42).

Jesus said "I come to give life – life in all its fullness." (John 10:10) His life demonstrated that this includes belonging, celebration, good health, a home, family and friends and a meaningful purpose to life, not one tainted by the effects of violence and abuse.

A better future / what needs to change

All levels of government must continue to support their strategies for family and domestic violence and child protection reform. We particularly urge investment in early intervention; in support for families to improve parenting; in prevention and recovery programs in family violence; and in more collaborative approaches between sectors. We believe that programs to intervene early are preferable to inaction leading to more severe situations later in a child or adult's life.

There is a need for a whole-of-community approach to the issue. A shift in community attitudes, investment in education, increasing awareness in the workplace, church and community groups all play a part in tackling this issue. For families caught in cycles of violence, provisions must be made to ensure the needs are met for physical safety, financial assistance to leave, access to safe and affordable housing, and employment or other stable income. The decrease in public housing options available for those families and the safety and suitability of public housing stock remains a concern. Hence, more funding is needed for crisis and transitional housing.

Baptcare supports vulnerable families and children impacted by the trauma of family violence, people with disabilities who are at risk of experiencing abuse and violence from family and formal carers, and frail and vulnerable older people facing abuse.

These client groups locate the concern of domestic or family violence at the centre of Baptcare's advocacy mandate. Baptcare has developed a range of policies and procedures to uphold the safety of individuals and children who have experienced or are experiencing family violence or elder abuse.

Policy position

- 1 Baptcare affirms that all Australians should be free of fear from the reality of family violence and abuse and calls on all members of society to tackle the issue of abuse and violence to discharge our responsibility to provide protection and facilitate equal opportunity and participation in communal life.
- 2 Baptcare assures our Baptist stakeholders that we affirm our faith basis and the spiritual dynamics of grace through our hospitality, core values and mission, and zero-tolerance to violence or abuse for our consumers.
- 3 Baptcare recognises and publically endorses the Interagency Guideline for Addressing Violence, Neglect and Abuse (developed by the Office of the Public Advocate in Victoria) and ensures its practice policies and organisational procedures are in line with this guideline.
- 4 Baptcare calls on the Federal and State governments to expand financial support for care givers with dependents who are affected by family or domestic violence. This should include more funding directed towards crisis and transitional housing.
- 5 Baptcare encourages church family programs to provide welcoming, safe and socially inclusive spaces where people impacted by family and domestic violence or abuse can find personal support and solace and model positive life skills and parenting practices.

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Baptcare is a customer focused, faith centred and purpose driven organisation working across Victoria and Tasmania, providing residential and community care for older people and support to children, families, and people with disability, financially disadvantaged people and people seeking asylum.