



Submission by

**The Ipswich Women's Centre Against
Domestic Violence**

to the

**Queensland Child Protection Commission of
Inquiry**

September 2012

Our Service

The Ipswich Women's Centre Against Domestic Violence (IWCADV) is a community-based organisation located in Ipswich. Since April 1994 the IWCADV has been committed to working with our community towards the prevention and elimination of domestic and family violence. To this end, IWCADV is actively involved in supporting women and children who are experiencing or who have experienced domestic & family violence as well as providing information and education to the community at large.

IWCADV provides a range of services to the community of Ipswich and the regional communities of Gatton, Laidley, Esk, Toogoolawah, Lowood, Boonah, Goodna and Inala. These services include:

- Telephone information, referral, advocacy and support services to women and children,
- Court support for women in our four regional courts,
- Counselling services for women and children,
- Group work for women and children,
- Safety upgrades for women and children wanting to stay in their homes
- Providing professional training and resources to other service providers and stakeholders.
- Community education and awareness raising events
- 2 year High Schools Community Education project,

In addition to this, IWCADV has a lead agency role in the community facilitating an integrated response to domestic & family violence issues. This role involves encouraging other key stakeholders to engage in collaborative responses to domestic and family violence issues throughout our community to ensure safety for women and children and accountability for violent perpetrators.

IWCADV staff all hold tertiary qualifications, in fields such as Social Work, Community Development, Social Science, Human Services and Humanities. Our staff are all extremely experienced and are actively encouraged to undertake ongoing professional development opportunities to enhance their existing skills and knowledge.

Basis for submission

The Ipswich Women's Centre Against Domestic Violence is pleased to have the opportunity to provide input into the Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry and is optimistic about positive outcomes which may be generated by this inquiry, particularly for women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence.

The domestic violence and child protection sectors overlap and interact extensively, and yet still operate largely independently of each other. This lack of integration represents a loss to both sectors, where greater collaboration and support would lead to better outcomes for both adult and child victims of domestic violence and child abuse. For this reason, and other concerns outlined below, we respectfully submit the following contribution.

Areas of Concern

The IWCADV identifies a number of areas of concern, particularly in relation to staff training and development, lack of resources and collaboration, unclear and inequitable processes in relation to confidentiality and transparency, a lack of perpetrator accountability, a culture of mother blame, and inadequate legislation, and these issues are further extrapolated below.

Staff Training and Development

Child Safety Officers do difficult work, and are the *single most important resource* of the Department of Child Safety. They are interacting with some of the most vulnerable members of our community, and are in a position of making critical decisions about safety and wellbeing, often with little information and in a context of adversity and conflict. This type of work requires a high level of sophistication, integrity and professional judgement, and well as ongoing supervision and support combined with adequate resources and recognition. And yet, the realities of this workforce are very different. For instance:

- The tertiary qualifications are not well matched for the skill sets required. That is, for the past several years, the Department of Child Safety appears to have moved away from employing qualified human services professionals, in favour of backgrounds in criminology, justice, policing or record-keeping. While degrees in criminology or justice may provide some skills in relation to statistical or systems analysis, they are poorly equipped and trained for dealing with humans in crisis, where global assessment processes and structural analysis needs to be combined with specific skills in effectively engaging with people.
- Ongoing training and development is not prioritised. We have been informed, on a number of occasions that Department of Child Safety staff have not yet completed an induction for the work *up to 6 or 7 months into their employment*, let alone ever had training specific to domestic violence, and that this is a common occurrence. While we remain very aware of resource pressures and the need for staff on the ground, this appears to be a poor use of resources, and places individual staff members and their clients in difficult if not dangerous situations. It also means that Child Safety Officers are not well equipped to conduct the assessments and make the decisions that are such an integral part of their job.
- There is minimal staff supervision, monitoring and support. While we recognise that some regional offices are indeed demonstrating good practice in relation to supervision and support, there are many that do not appear to prioritise this aspect of the work, which leads to poorer outcomes. Regardless of an individual's qualifications, the provision of good quality supervision can: ensure that the detrimental effects of this difficult work can be mitigated; provide for greater accountability and better outcomes for vulnerable clients, and; ensure greater consistency of practice across an organisation.

- High turnover of frontline staff. We believe that limited access to supervision, high caseloads, lack of training and support and misguided recruitment strategies are partly what contributes to high turnover of staff. This in turn has a detrimental impact on the client group, through the loss of expertise, loss of contacts and relationships between workers and clients, and the inherent lack of experience that this creates.

Recommendation 1:

That the Department of Child Safety revises its recruitment strategy, and returns to prioritising human service professionals with qualifications such as social work and psychology for employment.

Recommendation 2:

That the Department of Child Safety commits to completing a comprehensive induction and training package, including aspects of child development, the effects of trauma on children, and family dynamics in relation to domestic and family violence before furnishing workers with a case load.

Recommendation 3:

That all Child Safety Officers, Team Leaders and Senior Practitioners be required to complete the '*Course in Responding to Domestic and Family Violence*' (30949QLD) and attend regular DV training provided by the Regional Domestic Violence Service maintain professional currency and relationships with the broader service sector.

Recommendation 4:

That all Child Safety Officers, Team Leaders and Senior Practitioners are offered ongoing and regular supervision, including external professional or clinical supervision.

Lack of Resources

The services provided by the Department of Child Safety represent some of the most critical and important social services of our community – they are responsible for ensuring the safety and wellbeing of some of the most vulnerable community members – our children. One could argue that the measure of a civil society is reflected in how it treats and resources it's most vulnerable members. It is also important to note that while working with families in crisis and addressing chronic poverty, violence, abuse and neglect effectively is

very expensive work, it is still much cheaper than not effectively addressing it. That is, future social problems relating to criminality, the burden of disease, problematic drug and alcohol use, juvenile offending, mental illness and violent and anti-social behaviour are all costs that are borne down the track. As quoted directly on the Australian Government website “The direct economic costs of child abuse and neglect are substantial. *The additional costs associated with long-term effects of child abuse and neglect make the prevention of child abuse and neglect a priority.* More importantly, the prevention of child abuse and neglect is a critical priority because of the social costs of child abuse and neglect and the imperative to prevent children from experiencing its devastating effects” (Scott, D., AIFS, 2012 (emphasis our own)).

And yet, the Department of Child Safety is chronically under-resourced, specifically:

- There are not enough staff. Poorly trained and inadequately supervised staff have unrealistic and growing caseloads. This has a direct impact on their client group, and means limited contact with clients, poor or incomplete assessment processes, missed tasks and deadlines and a lack of communication within and outside the department.
- Prevention programs are not adequately funded to meet demand. One of the best ways to address child abuse and neglect is via well-resourced intensive early intervention support services. There are simply not enough of these in existence, and the demands experienced by the existing services are enormous.
- Expert domestic violence counselling is not provided. The Department of Child Safety frequently refers women to the IWCADV for DV specific counselling, and yet does not fund positions to enable this, and does not recognise the limitations of the service in relation to demand and resources. It is often women and children who bear this cost, as they are penalised for not meeting the goals of their case plan, but are never adequately resourced to do so.
- Resources for clients to execute case plans are not provided. Access to counselling spaces is often not enough to ensure attendance, as clients often need practical support in the form of transport or costs in order access services, particularly when they are located in rural or isolated areas or are generally impoverished.

Recommendation 5:

That the Department of Child Safety increase the number of frontline and other support staff to enable them to adequately investigate, assess and support the number of children in need.

Recommendation 6:

That the Department of Child Safety invest in more high quality, comprehensive and intensive early intervention programs to meet the needs of families and keep children at home when safe as much as possible.

Recommendation 7:

That the Department of Child Safety provide funding to Domestic Violence Regional Services for dedicated counselling positions for both women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence.

Recommendation 8:

That the Department of Child Safety facilitate access to services through the provision of transport or costs.

Inadequate Legislation

It is the position of the IWCADV that the current legislation administered by the Department of Child Safety has at least one serious limitation, and that this has an immense impact on the capacity of the department to adequately support vulnerable children. That is, in giving the Department of Child Safety workers and police the power to only remove children from harm, rather than ***removing the perpetrator of abuse from the home***, the victims of abuse are being both re-victimised by the system, punished for the abuse (children often perceive that they are now in trouble for disclosing the abuse), and further punished by being removed from an often protective and caring primary caregiver (not the abusive parent).

While we recognise that there will always be cases where the removal of children is the best and safest option, it is worth noting that there is also a much greater economic cost attached to removing children from the home, who then require care from a family member, a foster carer, or sometimes an institution or group home. It would be far more cost effective to remove perpetrators from the home, especially in cases where there is already a caring, protective and non-abusive caregiver in the home. This would also address the difficulty that many women in violent relationships face in trying to leave, or worse, getting the perpetrator to leave.

Recommendation 9:

That the Queensland Child Protection Act 1999 be amended to ensure that Child Safety Officers are empowered to remove the perpetrator of violence and abuse against a child or children from the family home where safe and appropriate.

Perpetrator Accountability and Mother Blame

As quoted in Department of Communities Practice Paper, *Domestic and family violence and its relationship to child protection*, (November 2006, p.6) “The Child Protection Act 1999 section 5 outlines the general administrative principles for departmental officers to maintain. In addition to these, further practice principles are recommended to apply when domestic and family violence as a child protection harm is identified or suspected. These principles have been identified as crucial to achieving the primary goal of ensuring the safety and well-being of children, which may often best be accomplished by ensuring the safety of the non-abusive parent.

The principles are:

- domestic and family violence is a harm to a child, and can impact on their physical, developmental, psychological and emotional well-being;
- the safety and wellbeing of a child will be increased by increasing the safety of their non-violent parent;
- the safety of a child will be increased by supporting the autonomy of the non-violent parent and enhancing their capacity to protect their child;
- the domestic violence perpetrator, not the victim, will be held responsible for the violent behavior and for stopping it, with departmental officers directly addressing the behaviour with the perpetrator where safety allows; and
- inter-agency coordination and collaboration is an essential service delivery response to ensure a family’s safety and wellbeing.”

It is our experience as a service working with women engaged with the Child Protection system that these principles are outside the scope of practice for many departmental staff. The reasons for this seem to relate back to the training issues previously identified (that is, many workers have reported to us individually that they are yet to be fully trained in departmental procedures, let alone specifically relating to the interaction between domestic violence and child protection), and also stems from a cultural belief that in order for women to be a “protective parent”, they should just leave the violent relationship. The concept of protective parent seems to render the perpetrator of violence invisible (suddenly, he has no

role in, nor responsibility for, his own violence) while assuming that the adult victim of his violence is in a position to manage his violence (which ignores her relative powerlessness and vulnerability in the face of his use of violence against both her and her children).

Also, many Child Safety Officers seem unaware that women are often actively protecting their children within the relationship, intervening in violence or removing their children to safety. Further, many women perceive that to leave their violent partner could place her children at greater risk, as he would then have unsupervised contact with the children (frequently Family Court ordered) and leaving the relationship could escalate his use of violence towards her and the children. This perception is backed by research – “Separation from an abusive partner after cohabiting was associated with increased risk of femicide, particularly when the perpetrator was highly controlling. ‘It is also clear that extremely controlling abusers are particularly dangerous under conditions of estrangement’.” (Campbell et al, 2003, p. 1095 in Laing, L. *Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse Topic Paper: Risk Assessment in Domestic Violence*, p.7).

Further, perpetrators of violence need to be held specifically accountable for their violence and abuse against children. It is our experience that the Department of Child Safety tends to focus case planning on the parent deemed the ‘non-protective parent’ in terms of expectations of change, goal setting, managing the violence, and future outcomes. Meanwhile, the person using violence seems to have no consequences or expectation of responsibility attached to their behaviour, and seem to be invisible in the process.

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Recommendation 4:

That all Child Safety Officers, Team Leaders and Senior Practitioners are offered ongoing and regular supervision, including external professional or clinical supervision.

Recommendation 10:

That men's behaviour change programs be funded and utilised by Child Safety Officers in addressing violence against women and children in the home.

Recommendation 11:

That the person using violence is held wholly responsible for their choices and behaviour in assessments about children's safety, and that this responsibility is translated into required actions and behavioural change for the perpetrator and not their adult victim.

Collaboration

Community partnerships and collaboration are an important element of violence prevention work in general, and have been demonstrated to be extremely effective in addressing domestic and family violence. Further, collaboration between government agencies and community services is generally a reflection of good practice and is actively encouraged by the Department of Communities both in funding models and public statements – “Due to the significant interface between domestic and family violence and child protection, it is important that the department and domestic and family violence services establish and maintain a collaborative and coordinated relationship. This interagency collaboration is essential to deliver services that will address all forms of violence present within a family, and secure the safety and wellbeing of the children involved.” (Department of Communities Practice Paper, *Domestic and family violence and its relationship to child protection*, November 2006, p.5).

However, the experience of the IWCADV is that collaboration is rarely practised in any meaningful way on the ground, and that this is reflected in such ways as a lack of attendance at meetings organised by community services, a lack of inclusion of support services in processes such as case planning and operational feedback, poor attendance at training, community forums and other professional development opportunities (even those organised internally), and an apparent resistance to receiving or prioritising notifications from domestic violence services (possibly stemming from a lack of understanding regarding the nature and scope performed by these services).

Recommendation 12:

That the Department of Child Safety prioritise and invest in collaborative practice with both domestic violence services and the broader community services sector. This would be evidenced by greater attendance at meetings, inclusion at strategic meetings (e.g. SCAN), and the development of Memorandums of Understanding with local services that would improve professional relationships for the benefit of the client group.

Confidentiality and Transparency

An important element of best practice in work with vulnerable populations is a focus on confidentiality and transparency. Confidentiality simply means that we respect a client's right to privacy, and will only breach that when other considerations outweigh this right, such as a duty of care to them or their children. Transparent practice means that we keep our clients informed of our decisions or actions, when we have not directly included them in the decision-making process. Client confidence in the operation of these principles allows for the building of rapport (hence disclosures and honest sharing of concerns and difficulties) and development of effective interventions, strategies for addressing barriers and issues of concern, and plans to achieve goals for the future and positive outcomes. However, in our interactions with the Department of Child Safety, the IWCADV has experienced a number of challenges in relation to these principles, such as:

- IWCADV client confidentiality is not respected. We value the referrals that we receive from the Department of Child Safety and often prioritise these clients, however, our confidentiality policies remain the same. We will only share information with other services if consented to by the client, unless there are safety concerns that we are not able to address directly. We frequently experience an expectation that we will share information about clients via phone call or in the form of reports or files. This is a breach of our own internal practices and of the client's right to privacy.
- Department of Child Safety decisions are not transparent. Our client group is often confused about why their children have been removed, when they will be returned, what issues need to be addressed to ensure that they are reunited with their children, or why the goalposts have shifted. This lack of transparency reduces client confidence in, and understanding of, decisions which in turn has an impact on their ability or willingness to engage positively with these processes.
- Primary clients are not kept informed about the progress of their case. Fundamentally children are the primary client in all child safety investigations, assessments and decisions, and yet there is a distinct lack of consultation with

children about their experiences, desires and hopes for the future. There is also a regular failure to inform them of the outcome of investigations or decisions, or to take into account their wishes in these processes.

- Non-violent parents are not included in decision-making. While the child is the primary client, children do not exist in a vacuum – they exist in a family and each member of that family is of critical importance when it comes to determining outcomes for children. Parents not using violence or abusing their children should know what needs to change, who is responsible for this, be resourced adequately to achieve these goals, and be included in decision-making around all of these issues.

Recommendation 13:

That Department of Child Safety clients are afforded the right to privacy and confidentiality when accessing services, in order to recognise best practice and promote positive outcomes for all parties.

Recommendation 14:

That the Department of Child Safety commit to transparent and inclusive consultation, decision-making and planning process when working with children and non-abusive parents in order to address safety concerns comprehensively.

Summary of Recommendations

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