

**Perspectives:**

# Victorian Disability Family Violence Crisis Response Initiative

The expansion of eligibility criteria means victims of family violence who have disability-related needs including mental health, chronic health or ageing issues or have a temporary injury resulting from family violence can now access the Disability Family Violence Crisis Response Initiative. Broader criteria means more support is available to more women and children, but the future is uncertain.

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**When Henry was removed from the house it took eight weeks to get someone to come in and do something as basic as give me a shower. They removed my carer but didn't put anything in place to back that up.**

Witness statement of Melissa Brown, Royal Commission into Family Violence<sup>1</sup>

Women with disabilities are particularly at risk of violence because of their experience of discrimination on the basis of both disability and gender. Research shows that women with disabilities experience violence at a higher rate and for longer periods of time than women without disabilities<sup>2</sup>. In fact, over one-third of women with disabilities experience some form of intimate partner violence<sup>3</sup>. They also encounter significant barriers to receiving appropriate services and adequate justice responses to their experiences of violence<sup>4</sup>.

In cases where the woman's intimate partner is her carer, reporting the violence means she faces losing disability supports in addition to experiencing violence. Moving to ensure safety has more implications for women with disabilities than for other women; it can mean changing support providers and requiring assistance to manage a new environment. Despite the greater risk of family violence and the level of supports required, women with disabilities are under-represented in the family violence system.

Since 2011, the Disability Family Violence Crisis Response Initiative (DFVCRI) has provided immediate crisis supports to women and children with a disability who are experiencing family violence. These practical supports include attendant care, equipment hire, Auslan interpreters and transport costs associated with a disability.

As Melissa Brown's witness statement above to the Royal Commission into Family Violence (RCFV) demonstrates, access to the DFVCRI has been limited. In some cases, the woman's disability didn't fit the narrow definition in the Victorian Disability Act (2006) in others, increased awareness of the Initiative could have helped.

Fortunately, the RCFV recognised the need to make a specific recommendation to extend eligibility to a wider group of women and children whose disability fell outside the Act<sup>5</sup>. As a result, the DFVCRI can now assist women and children who are experiencing family violence and have disability related needs including mental health, chronic health or ageing issues or have a temporary injury resulting from family violence.

The fund was created due to a recognition that disability services are not designed to respond to crisis needs. While Victoria's new Flexible Support Packages support disability services to respond to family violence needs, they can't offer the dedicated disability advice and liaison available through the DFVCRI.

The Disability and Family Violence Liaison Officer is located in Wangaratta but can help workers across the state assess whether a woman or child's experience falls within the extended criteria for immediate supports. They can also advise about longer term disability supports after the 12 week period, including flexible support packages.

The DFVCRI is unique in that it draws attention to family violence while sitting within the disability sector, which generally perceives family as a positive support. The Initiative will continue until the end of Victoria's transition to the NDIS, and has committed to following up all referrals for both NDIS and non-NDIS participants until July 2019. Availability of such a fund beyond July 2019 is not certain.

RCFV recommendation 179 is for the Victorian Government to encourage the National Disability Insurance Agency to provide flexible family violence crisis packages.

## More information

Disability and Family Violence Liaison Officer (DHHS) 0437 741 920 or 9843 6358 (business hours)

safe steps Family Violence Response Centre 1800 015 188 (24 hours a day, seven days a week)

Short-term funds can be provided for up to 12 weeks to a maximum of \$9,000 per person. During this period, a family violence worker will work with the woman to develop a longer term plan to address the family violence risk.

1: <http://www.rcfv.com.au/MediaLibraries/RCFamilyViolence/Statements/WIT-0047-005-0001-Brown.pdf>; 2: Woodlock D, Healey L, Howe K, McGuire M, Geddes V and Granek S: *Voices Against Violence Paper One: Summary Report and Recommendations (Women with Disabilities Victoria, Office of the Public Advocate and Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria, 2014)*: 3-4; *Ibid*; 5: *Recommendation 178 states that "the Victorian Government extend eligibility for the Victorian Disability Family Violence Crisis Response to assist people with disabilities who are victims of family violence and are not eligible for services under the Disability Act 2006 (Vic) but who nevertheless require assistance. Such eligibility should apply when these individuals do not have access to alternative supports."*