

Feature:

# Building from Strength: a bold vision for the family violence workforce of the future

In December last year, the Special Minister of State, the Honourable Gavin Jennings MLC launched the Victorian Government’s 10-year plan for Victoria’s future family violence workforce, in response to a key recommendation of the Royal Commission into Family Violence.

*Building from Strength: 10-Year Industry Plan for Family Violence Prevention and Response* (the Plan) is a vision of how to equip a range of different workforces with the expertise and resources to support Victorians impacted by family violence and to prevent it from occurring in the first place.

The Plan’s vision is one in which effective support is orchestrated across multiple workforces and adapted to the individual needs of every woman and child who experiences family violence across the lifespan of their experience, while the perpetrators are kept in clear sight and held to account. The Plan also envisages that primary prevention will also be coordinated alongside these efforts.

The vision is ambitious in scope (and it should be, given the immensity of family violence and the reach and depth of primary prevention required to ‘turn off the tap’). Visions are by their nature high-level, yet still it begs the question: how do we build a workforce for a service system that is still being designed?

Some detail will be provided by the document’s subsequent three-year rolling action plans (the first of which is expected in May), but there are considerable challenges ahead to realise this vision, all of which will need not just long-term planning but short- and medium-term strategies, implemented sequentially to meet our immediate needs and still set us up for long-term success.

**Looking ahead**

A central premise of *Building from Strength* is that in order for the state to respond to and prevent family violence we will not only need a larger workforce, but also the orchestrated efforts of several vastly different professional sectors, all equipped to prevent and respond to all forms of family violence in a coordinated way.

But how do we build a workforce when we are yet to develop a shared understanding of the skills that workforce will need, with a prevention sector in its infancy and with skill sets that are hard to predict in three years, let alone ten?

**Engaging and training new sectors**

Training workers from new sectors will be challenging when they are only peripherally engaged with the family violence reforms

and the impacts of these on their workforce. Last year, Family Safety Victoria conducted the first census of the Victorian workforces that intersect with family violence, revealing the education and training sector were least likely to consider family violence training as necessary, followed by those working in the health and justice. While this is not surprising – family violence has been hidden and the sole remit of the tiny specialist response system for decades – it is concerning that despite a Royal Commission, these workforces are yet to understand just how critical they are in supporting victim survivors and holding perpetrators to account.



*From the Census of Workforces that Intersect with Family Violence, Companion report to Building from Strength: 10-Year Industry Plan for Family Violence Prevention and Response. December 2017, Family Safety Victoria.*

This brings us to a crucial absence of data. Professor David Hayward from the VCOSS-RMIT Future Social Service Institute describes how this plan is markedly different from most other industry plans:

“*Building from Strength* is oddly wedged between two different processes, the Royal Commission into Family Violence, and an enormous amount of sector consultation, all while trying to achieve tight deadlines before the next election. Along with that, we have such little data on the family violence sector that there are bound to be some gaps.”



**How do we build a workforce when we are still yet to have a shared understanding of what skills that workforce will need?**

**CAPABILITIES FRAMEWORKS**

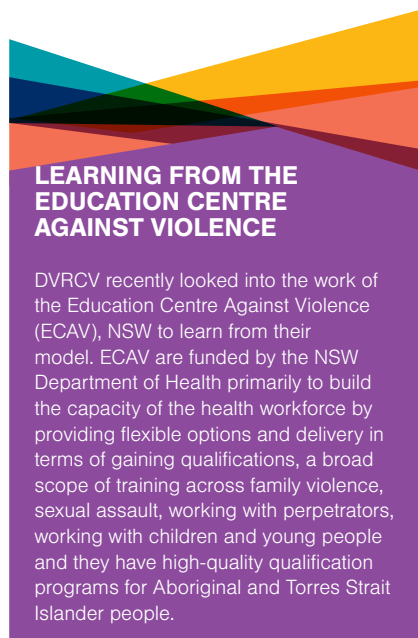
A clear articulation of skills and knowledge needed is the first step to building workforce capabilities. Family Safety Victoria’s Centre for Workforce Excellence collaborated with DVRCV, Our Watch and Women’s Health Victoria to develop the *Preventing Family Violence and Violence Against Women Capability Framework*, to outline the skills needed to deliver prevention of violence against women and with DV Vic, No to Violence and the Centre Against Sexual Assault on the *Responding to Family Violence Capability Framework*, for a range of professionals who have contact with victim survivors, children and young people and perpetrators of family violence.

However, Professor Hayward is still optimistic about the plan. “It is a highly ambitious plan, but it is imbued with great hope and goodwill between the government and the family violence and other community sectors, which is something new. It will take patience and encouragement to see it through.”

“We have never had a detailed and complex industry plan like this in the community sector before. This (tragically) wasn’t done for the disability or the aged care sectors, so it’s an enormous achievement, and it was only possible thanks to the considerable efforts of a group of key women.”

#### **Guidance from experienced family violence workers**

With so much demand on family violence services, it’s time to start considering how to best utilise these highly expert specialists and their extensive practice knowledge.



**LEARNING FROM THE EDUCATION CENTRE AGAINST VIOLENCE**

DVRCV recently looked into the work of the Education Centre Against Violence (ECAV), NSW to learn from their model. ECAV are funded by the NSW Department of Health primarily to build the capacity of the health workforce by providing flexible options and delivery in terms of gaining qualifications, a broad scope of training across family violence, sexual assault, working with perpetrators, working with children and young people and they have high-quality qualification programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The family violence workers and early prevention practitioners are the key to expanding the workforce and increasing the capacity of others to prevent and respond effectively to family violence, and it is their advice that the government, industry leaders and professionals should heed. Having said that, we run the risk of burdening an already overwhelmed group of experts even further, so that guidance needs to inform the training and education capacity of larger institutions.

Professor Hayward agrees, “It needs to be set up so that the family violence sector guides universities, and not the other way around.”

The tertiary, vocational and community sectors will need to be willing to innovate. We’ll need creative and flexible approaches to fast-tracking people through the necessary education (such as micro-credentialing, work placements and recognising prior capabilities) so we can meet workforce demand without compromising on the training and education professionals need to reduce risks to women and children and hold perpetrators to account for the violence they chose to commit.

#### **Courage to approach the present and the future differently**

The solution to solving skills gaps and building an effective workforce is more than just training, and while this is acknowledged in the Industry Plan, real courage will be needed from the government, community organisations and the tertiary sector to design an implementation strategy that will tackle these issues in a staged, strategic and coordinated way.

The first step to building capability across workforces is a clear articulation of the skills and knowledge that are needed, such as the prevention and response capability frameworks that DVRCV collaborated on with other agencies to develop last year. Professional development needs to be available in more

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## **Family violence and prevention practitioners are the key to expanding the workforce and increasing the capacity of others to prevent and respond effectively to family violence**

than just face-to-face training and with a focus on the new integrated family violence system. Any strategies must also recognise that the effectiveness of a workforce is influenced by more than the individuals themselves.

Looking at our future workforce from an ecological point of view would reveal what infrastructure will be needed. What leadership and management skills will be embedded in our workplaces to support the professionals doing the work? What policies will be in place to ensure that the necessary gender and family violence lens is being applied? And whether it’s IT systems, human resources or recruitment, what infrastructure will ensure new skills, knowledge and practice will be applied?

Most vitally, we need to acknowledge and have a strategy for the communities who face greater barriers to gaining qualifications and joining the workforce, whether that’s people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, people with disabilities, people who are carers, women who have children or women who are getting older.

#### **Where to from here**

The government has made considerable efforts in consulting with the sector to co-design this plan, but in real terms there is limited scope to what a state government can mandate, which means the success of how Victoria prevents violence against women or responds to family violence will depend on what short and medium-term strategies we come up with to fill the gaps, on the partnerships we forge with each other and on how well we listen to the professional, expert and experienced women who have been working in family violence for decades.

To ensure Victoria is able to achieve the vision set out in *Building from Strength*, we need every profession and sector to recognise that preventing and responding to family violence is a core part of their business, and that we all have a responsibility to achieving this change. ■



Victoria’s experienced family violence workers need to be the expert voices that guide any family violence-related education provided by universities, TAFEs and training organisations.