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## **Victim Support submission on Violence Free Aotearoa National Strategy**

### Introduction

Victim Support welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to guide the government's violence free Aotearoa National Strategy and Action Plans. We support the strategy and the seven action points to prevent family and sexual violence in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Victim Support is a non-government organisation that has been offering practical and emotional support to victims of crime and trauma for more than 30 years. Victim Support is recognised for the breadth and responsiveness of its work, and providing free 24/7 support nationwide, across all demographics, for a wide variety of incident types.

Last year Victim Support helped more than 40,000 victims of crime and trauma—including **15,438 victims following family harm and violence**—in the immediate aftermath, through the justice process, and beyond.

We work with the full spectrum of adult family violence clients, including many who slip through the cracks between other services, such as whānau affected by “low risk” family harm, male victims, and intra-familial violence (IFV) victims — those harmed by a family member who is not their intimate partner. There is a strong evidence base for supporting these groups.

This submission seeks to give voice to those groups and ensure greater consideration of their needs in future strategy, investment, and services, as well as convey feedback from the frontline personnel in our family violence teams.

### The importance of providing support after “low-risk” family violence

It is well-known that the frequency and severity of family violence may escalate over time.[1] [2] [3] For example, recent research with New Zealand women showed at least 42% experienced abuse for 10 or more years.[4] Many of the women described how psychological abuse and/or controlling behaviour escalated to subsequent physical assaults.

As one Police Officer told Victim Support in a recent service evaluation: “It’ll often start with psychological abuse and then work its way up to physical abuse. And even the physical stuff, as you know with any relationship, it starts low-level but ultimately it’s going to escalate.”

Such escalation means that risk is never static and that victims of “low risk” family harm episodes are at risk of more serious, and even deadly, harm over time. Indeed, 98% of intimate partner violence homicides in New Zealand have a recorded history of abuse.[5]

Moreover, early intervention is also critical to identify the true extent of abuse. Often a reported verbal argument may be the entry point for engagement with a whānau but, as trust is built and the true extent of the family violence is revealed, our engagement becomes longer term and more complex.

Without early support such as this, evidence suggests victims do not get the support they need until harm escalates. Barriers to seeking early support include wanting to preserve the relationship; not recognising non-physical abuse as abuse; fear, lack of trust, shame, helplessness, and cultural barriers; wanting to protect the abuser; lack of knowledge about support services; a controlling abuser; and normalisation of abuse.[6]

It is important that adequate support is consistently available nationwide for those affected by “low risk” family violence and that public campaigns emphasise the importance of early help seeking.

## The importance of providing support after intra-familial violence

Intra-familial violence (IFV) refers to harmful behaviours perpetrated by a family member who is not an intimate partner. This includes including siblings, parents, and grandparents, in addition to other non-intimate cohabiting individuals such as flatmates.

Recent New Zealand research found that 14% of the 528 women surveyed were abused by a non-intimate partner family/whānau member.[7] It is well known that IFV can be lethal: for example, while approximately 17% of New Zealand homicide victims each year between 2007 and 2017 were killed by their partner, 10% were children killed by a parent, and 4% were a parent killed by their child.[8]

It is therefore important that family violence prevention and support is also targeted at the wider family/whānau context.

## The importance of ensuring non-gendered/male support options

Victim Support acknowledges the gendered nature of family violence and the appropriateness of gendered support services, particularly for emergency accommodation. However, it is also important to acknowledge the large minority of victims who are male (or non-binary), and the need for more equitable access to services for these groups.

The 2020 Ministry of Justice Crime and Victim Survey showed one in five victims of intimate partner violence and one in three victims of intra-familial violence were male. These figures are broadly in proportion with Victim Support’s own referrals.

While these disparities warrant a gendered response, greater investment to achieve a safe baseline of essential services for men is still necessary. More research is also needed to better understand the needs and experiences of male victims in New Zealand and how these can be better supported.

## Feedback from our frontline

We'd like to share some feedback from our frontline Whānau Support Workers to help shape the Focus Areas. This is particularly relevant to Focus Areas 4 (Strengthen workforces to prevent and respond to family violence and sexual violence), 6 (Develop ways for government to create changes), and 7 (Enable continuous learning and improvement).

### What works and what needs to change?

- Support needs to be personalised, genuine, and localised from within the community – not from a call centre. We have highly trained and skilled Whānau Support Workers but they also have genuine compassion and invaluable local knowledge that allows them to connect with clients. They know the resources available in their community and understand the cultures of their community. We have a diverse workforce, that can draw on the cultural understanding of various ethnic groups, religions, gender and sexual orientations to connect with the diverse communities they serve. Community-based support sends out the message that society cares.
- The independence of NGO services is essential. Whānau are not obliged to work with Victim Support like they might with a government agency and this enables our Whānau Support Workers to occupy a non-threatening position. Our clients often feel more comfortable disclosing harm to our Whānau Support Workers than they do to Police and other government agencies. This trust is essential in order to encourage reporting, to access services, and to prevent escalation.
- Collaboration, integration, and relationships across the sector are important to action support quickly for our clients (e.g. Protection Orders, food parcels, safe houses/refuges or accommodation through Victim Assistance Scheme). Our staff were supportive of the suggestion that we should “Focus on removing existing barriers to safety and providing supports and services victim/survivors need before extending funding for new services.”
- Victims need a variety of referral pathways, including self-referral, so they can still access support and any entitlements such as Work and Income or food parcels independent of whether they report the incident to Police. Clients often come to us as victims of other crimes, or trauma such as suicide. We know family violence is also identified through other pathways including housing, Work and Income, and substance abuse. We need to identify all potential pathways and be ready to support victims even if they come in the “back door”.
- Clients need a variety of engagement options with support services including phone, email, and face-to-face. Our Whānau Support Workers report that they often obtain a better understanding of the nature of the abuse if they visit clients in their own home, while some clients prefer to speak on the phone. When victims have options for engagement, they are more likely to seek help.
- Support needs to be available 24/7 and not be time-limited, including both crisis support and support in the longer term because family violence is often a pattern rather than a

single event. Our Whānau Support Workers have long-term clients with whom they provide regular follow-up, and many who re-engage with us when they need to. We continue to support our clients for as long as they need, including through the court process, and even if they move to another part of the country for safety reasons.

- Support needs to be tailored and client/whānau-led. Our experience is that our clients know what's best for them and they can be empowered to make the best choices when they have the best support and information available. Often this is best approached from the perspective of the whole whānau. Empowerment is especially important because family violence strips victims of their power and control.
- We cannot prevent family violence in New Zealand without addressing the additional barriers Māori (especially wāhine) face such as the impact of colonisation, inter-generational violence, racism, and social inequality including poverty and inequitable access to health and social services. There is an urgent need for Kaupapa Māori support and services at all levels, including counselling and court support.
- We routinely support other ethnic minority groups and we recognise the need to have culturally-responsive services that enable us to genuinely connect with a wide range of clients, including Pasifika, Asian, Indian, and Muslim. This is where support workers who are part of the client's community can make a huge difference.
- There is an urgent need to promote prevention strategies and support to members of the Rainbow community who suffer a disproportionate level of victimisation along with discrimination and mental health challenges. This must be in the context of public education to prevent discrimination so that LGBTQ+ victims *are* safer in their own whānau, relationships, and communities, and *feel* safer to report abuse.
- We're seeing more clients having the confidence to leave violent relationships. A big part of this is educating them on legal options, Work and Income, and housing, to show that there are options for them, and that they do not need to be reliant on their abuser. Again, this comes down to good relationships with appropriate organisations and Whānau Support Workers' ability to empower clients.
- Clients are increasingly feeling sufficiently informed and empowered to seek Protection Orders, Trespass Orders, and Parenting Orders. This makes a large statement, especially to the perpetrator, and while we know this may place clients at more risk, it is making the abuse public and known. We need to continue to inform clients of these options, and that these can also be effective measures even when victims want to stay with the abuser.
- More clients are also reporting to the Police which is an effective safety measure; we just need to ensure there are enough Police and support resources to respond to these calls.
- Many clients want their relationships to work, yet they often believe that reporting family harm/violence is only an option if they want to end the relationship. Education that family harm is not OK is vital, but it must be alongside education about options for staying safe while staying in the relationship. Reconciliation support must remain a central option for victims and whānau. We work with our clients to develop safety plans and maintain ongoing communication so that this remains an option.

- It can take over a year for a case to go from a charge to conviction. In the meantime, victims remain living in fear while their abuser is out on bail. Clients often tell us they only feel safe when their abuser is remanded in custody. Even if convicted, the sentence may not reflect the impact it has had on the victim, which may put victims off reporting subsequent abuse.
- We need to have the resources to move the perpetrator rather than the victim(s) in order to keep the victim(s) safe.
- However, when the only option is for the victim(s) to leave in order to stay safe, we need refuge/housing options for male victims and victims with boys over the age of 12. This is a huge gap and makes it harder for some victims to stay safe.
- There is an urgent need to educate all players in the family violence and justice sectors about the impact of family harm and violence on males. While we acknowledge that male support is available, sadly, we frequently hear stories of our male clients not being believed by Police, which is a barrier to reporting and accessing support.
- Unfortunately, the current justice system still favours offenders, while victims face barriers such as fear, exclusion, and unfairness.[11] Abusers can use the justice system to deliberately maintain power and control tactics. For many victims, the court system and facing the offender is revictimising, and we see many wishing they had never informed Police in the first place.

## Conclusions

### Focus on those who could fall through the cracks

- Victim Support is one of the few agencies that works with nearly all victims of family harm and violence, including males/non-gendered and victims of IFV and “low risk” family harm. We believe it is essential to target prevention efforts at these groups of victims because they often fall through the cracks and are at risk of more serious and even lethal violence.

### Early intervention

- Family violence early intervention should be premised on the fact that any family harm incident has the potential to escalate. Early support with a victim and whānau may prevent more serious subsequent violence.

### Cultural responsiveness

- We desperately need services and support that are culturally-responsive to Māori, other ethnic groups, and the Rainbow community. This must include addressing discrimination and inequality at the population level, and the provision of services rooted in the communities they are serving, including Kaupapa Māori.

### Build trust

- Trust between the victim/whānau and Police and support services is crucial to family violence reporting, prevention, and successful support. NGOs have a vital role in providing independent and trusted support. Support must be built not only on education and specialist knowledge, but on genuine connection and empathy. Community-based support is key to fostering this trust-building connection.

### **Eliminate fear**

- Fear is a huge barrier in reporting family violence, especially for minority groups who fear discrimination and not being believed. Fear is also prevalent among those who do report. We need to ensure all victims are physically and emotionally safe while seeking help and engaging in the justice system.

### **No wrong door**

- Family violence victims must have multiple referral pathways, including self-referral, and to be identified if they come to Police or social support attention for other reasons. They must also be able to access support if they choose not to report violence to the police.

### **Range of engagement options**

- Victims need to have a range of support engagement options, including phone, email, and face-to-face.

### **Victim/whānau-led support**

- Victims must be empowered to make their own decisions, to work alongside the support of their whānau, and to be supported and safe whether they choose to leave a violent situation or stay with an abuser.

### **Systemic changes**

- There is much work to be done to address prevailing myths in the family violence sector, including amongst social services and even family violence service providers. It's imperative that all players in this sector understand the nuances of family harm; that family harm can be emotional, financial, or sexual abuse — not just physical; and that males can be and often are family violence victims. More victims would report if they felt safe to do so and didn't fear being misunderstood or not believed.
- We need major systemic changes in the justice system. Any changes we make in the family and sexual violence sectors will only go so far while we continue to have an offender-focussed criminal justice system that revictimises those who have already been hurt.

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