

Counting the 'Cost' of Family Violence in Melbourne's North

The Northern Integrated Family Violence Services Coordination Team, Women's Health in the North

In the last five years, police referrals to the key family violence intake service in northern metropolitan Melbourne have more than tripled. This dramatic rise in the number of women requiring family violence services in the north was not met with a reciprocal increase to funding for all parts of the system — including police, courts, legal services and specialist family violence services. In 2014, the Northern Integrated Family Violence Services (NIFVS) partnership undertook a piece of research¹ to understand the impacts of this funding shortfall.

NIFVS is the partnership that leads the integration of family violence and related services in Melbourne's northern metropolitan region. Partners, including specialist women's and children's family violence services, refuge services, Victoria Police, courts, alcohol and other drugs service and mental health services, provided data for the research into the cost of the current, crisis-driven model of family violence funding.

The research by Dr Kristin Diemer found that a lack of funding for service provision — including a shortage of safe and affordable housing — meant that women were, in many cases, unable to break the cycle of violence. Many women re-entered the family violence system multiple times. Paradoxically, women cycling through the system repeatedly was shown to almost double the economic cost to the system. The research highlighted that the best outcomes occur when women and children who have experienced violence are able to have their immediate needs met, receive long-term support and access suitable housing.

The Cost of Multiple System Re-entries

In an ideal world, women experiencing violence would be able to be made safe in their own homes with perpetrators of violence being excluded from the home. Women in high risk situations, though, will often need access to refuge services.

There is, however, a lack of refuge accommodation — especially for single women and women with disabilities — with many women spending at least some time in emergency accommodation prior to accessing refuge. There is also a severe shortage of safe and affordable post-refuge housing. On an average day, nearly 60 per cent of all new requests for immediate accommodation are unable to be met by Australian homelessness services funded under the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program.² Most women who have accessed refuge have no choice but to return to their violent partners at least once,³ with some women attempting to leave violent relationships six or more times.⁴

The NIFVS research showed that, when women who must leave their homes are supported immediately with material aid, direct referral to refuge and long-term case management support, and go on to be safely re-housed, the cost to the system in the northern metropolitan region is just under \$30,000, per woman. Where women have to access emergency accommodation, including motel accommodation, before refuge and are unable to have their long-term needs met or be safely re-housed, the cost to the system blows out to just over \$53,000, per woman. This number takes into account the additional

support costs when the woman re-enters the system after further violence — it does not take into account recurrent refuge accommodation costs, which would make the figure even higher.

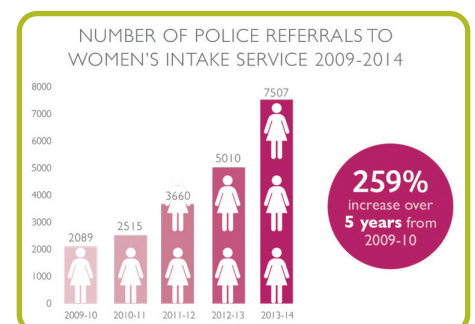
When Women are Unable to Access Services

Many women who are unable to access services or housing — and who choose not to return to violence — become homeless. Family violence is the number one cause of women's homelessness in Victoria.⁵ Over half of women who access homelessness services cite family violence as the reason for their homelessness.⁶

What can be done?

The No More Deaths Campaign, led by key Victorian family violence organisations, makes a number of key recommendations about issues of housing and family violence. These include:

1. Urgently funding specialist services so they can meet demand, including responding to police referrals, case management, counselling, and therapeutic programs for both women and children.
2. Implementing consistent 'Safe at Home' programs across the state so women and children can remain in their homes where it is safe to





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do so and have the violent perpetrators removed.

3. Renegotiate the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH) which, in part, funds programs to address homelessness precipitated by family violence.⁷

While the Commonwealth Government recently committed to a further two years' NPAH funding, family violence services require long-term funding certainty, as well as increases to funding in line with the increase in demand. It is also clear that the current housing crisis in Victoria must be addressed in order to meet the needs of women who cannot stay in their homes due to violence.

It is by no means certain that all women would be prevented from returning to violent partners if alternatives were available. What is clear, however, is that the best outcomes occur when women and children who must leave their homes are able to access immediate refuge accommodation, ongoing outreach support and secure, long-term housing. As the NIFVS research demonstrates, not only are these outcomes good for women, they make good economic sense.

Endnotes

1. Northern Integrated Family Violence Services 2014, *Fund the family violence system Factsheet*. Available online at: www.nifvs.org.au
2. Australian Institute of Health and

Welfare 2011, *People turned away from government funded specialist homelessness accommodation 2010–11* (Vol. Cat. no. Hou 260), Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Canberra.

3. Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012, *Personal Safety Survey Australia* (Cat. No. 4906.0). Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.
4. García-Moreno C, Jansen H A F M, Ellsberg M, Heise L and Watts C 2005, *WHO multi-country study on women's health and domestic violence against women: initial results on prevalence, health outcomes and women's responses*. Geneva: World Health Organization.
5. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2011, *op cit*.
6. *ibid*.
7. No More Deaths 2014, *Factsheet 1: Keep women and children safe and housed*. Domestic Violence Victoria, Melbourne. Retrieved online at: <http://www.dvrcv.org.au/>