

## MEDIA RELEASE

### Royal Commission into Family Violence

#### It's time to shift the burden off family violence victims

Submissions released by the Women's Legal Service Victoria (WLSV) today have called for long term investment in the legal system to shift the burden off family violence victims seeking protection for themselves and their children.

WLSV's wide ranging recommendations to the Royal Commission into Family Violence shine a spotlight on the experience of women in the legal system, particularly women dealing with intervention orders, family law issues and economic abuse.

#### **Improving the family violence intervention order system**

WLSV's recommendations to the Royal Commission include interim and long term changes to the family violence intervention order system.

"Often victims of family violence carry the burden of having to come to unsafe courts for intervention orders and face their abuser the day after the incident" said Pasanna Mutha-Merennege, Policy Manager at WLSV. "In some instances they're at court all day with their children; it's such a weight on their shoulders."

"For women from high risk groups, the burden is even greater. Imagine what it must be like to deal with the police and have to go to court without an independent female interpreter or without a culturally specific worker."

The burden also sits with victims to access support services. "Many of the women we assist tell us that they knock on the doors of multiple different support services and legal services in order to keep themselves and their children housed, fed and safe."

Shifting the burden requires moving away from the "one size fits all model" that currently operates in the intervention order system. WLSV's recommendations include:

1. A roll out of the family violence vide-conferencing pilot to all Magistrates' Court regions.
2. The establishment of safe "off-site" court locations for victims to attend on the day of their hearing as an alternative to attending unsafe courts.
3. Engaging a broader range of support services and child care services to provide more holistic support to victims in the intervention order process.
4. Greater funding to employ a specialist pool of family violence interpreters together with court protocols to engage female interpreters for female victims.
5. Specialist training for Victoria Police, court staff and Magistrates to improve engagement with victims from high risk groups.

## **Recognising economic abuse and promoting economic recovery**

WLSV's submission to the Royal Commission highlights the devastating financial impacts of family violence and the reforms it says are needed to legal and financial systems to prevent homelessness and poverty for victims.

WLSV are calling on energy, water and telecommunication companies to introduce family violence policies to help alleviate the burden placed on victims.

Women have reported particular issues with utility providers, including:

- essential services being cut off by perpetrators
- being chased by service providers for joint debts in times of serious family violence and financial hardship and
- having their experiences of family violence and hardship dismissed or diminished by utility providers when attempting to deal with outstanding bills or joint accounts.

“What we want to see is the Essential Services Commission developing industry guidelines addressing the treatment of customers in circumstances of financial hardship that specifically include policies for situations involving family violence” said Ms Mutha-Merrennege.

“It is vital that the utility providers get a handle on issues of family violence, particularly economic abuse. Women need consistent, empathetic responses at points of crisis and where there are issues of keeping the power on or joint debts and accounts that need to be severed to stop the abuse.”

WLSV is currently running the Stepping Stones project documenting the stories of economic abuse and financial hardship of women who are victims of family violence. As part of the project a financial counsellor works closely with WLSV's lawyers to free women of debt. “Through our project, we have assisted over 140 women in the last year and had their collective debt reduced by over \$200, 000. A lot of this debt was incurred by an abusive partner as a form of family violence.”

## **Family violence victims dealing with family law issues**

WLSV raises with the Royal Commission the multiple and complex legal issues that victims often face.

“Women who are victims of family violence carry the weight of not only dealing with intervention orders but also issues relating to separation, divorce and child access arrangements. It's a revolving door for victims that have to move between the family law system and family violence system; these systems must be better equipped at dealing with these overlapping legal issues” said Ms Mutha-Merrennege.

Improving family violence victims' access to timely and free family law legal advice is one of WLSV's recommendations. In the long term, WLSV also supports moving towards a “one family, one court” model to resolve multiple legal issues that arise from family violence and separation.

**You can read a summary of WLSV's recommendations [here](#) and our full submissions on our [website](#).**

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