



Mapping the service journey of victim- survivors of family violence and practitioners in Gippsland.

Brief Report to the Gippsland Family
Violence Alliance

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Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge First Nations People as the Traditional Custodians of the unceded Australian lands, skies and waterways. We pay our deep respect to First Nations Ancestors and Elders, as well as First Nations People past, present and emerging. We acknowledge the importance of Indigenous knowledges in our research, practice, teaching and learning.

Acknowledgement of Lived Experience Victim-Survivors and Practitioners

We acknowledge the important contributions of people with a lived experience of sexual violence in research, practice and policy. We recognise their contributions in advancing understandings of various disciplines, without which we would not have a thorough understanding of the application of our research to the community. We are especially grateful for the contributions of the victim-survivors of family violence from Gippsland who have so generously shared their experiences with us and contributed to the understanding of the service engagement experience of survivors in Gippsland. We are also very grateful to practitioners from different services in Gippsland who shared their client engagement experience and contributed to the understanding of the practitioner service provision journey in Gippsland.

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Executive Summary

Given the significant and lasting impacts of family violence, and the known value of formal service engagement, increasing our understanding of the service journey of victim-survivors of family violence is critical to better meet the needs of rural and regional communities. The objective of this project was to map the journey and experiences of victim-survivors of family violence and practitioners in the Gippsland region for the purposes of understanding and improving the family violence support system. This research project conducted surveys, focus groups and interviews with women victim-survivors and family violence practitioners in Gippsland to achieve the objectives of the study.

Our findings present an in-depth understanding of community-wide knowledge of referral pathways for victim-survivors of family violence, the barriers to successful service engagement and service delivery, the positive aspects of the service system, and recommendations for best-practice frameworks for integrated, effective, warm, and adequate support for women and children who have been subjected to violence in regional, rural and remote areas.

The information collected through this research has advanced our understanding of formal service engagement among family violence victim-survivors in rural and regional communities and have helped us to map their journey with services in Gippsland. Specifically, the outcomes of this study inform us that women victim-survivors from Gippsland: (1) have been subjected to physical, emotional, social, sexual, financial, and technological abuse; (2) are engaging extensively with family violence services; (3) face a number of barriers to access the necessary support; (4) encounter a range of challenges with the justice system; (5) require specialised support for their children; (6) have formed their own pathways to recovery to heal from the abusive experiences; and (7) are prepared to support other victim-survivors by being informants and through advocacy.

The findings highlight the experiences of family violence practitioners in supporting their clients in Gippsland. Their experiences mirror some of the challenges faced by victim-survivors. Specifically, we now know that family violence practitioners in Gippsland: (1) go above and beyond their designated roles to support victim-survivors in Gippsland; (2) are limited in their capacity to provide the broad range of services due to inadequate funding, limited staffing, remoteness of services and the distance between the client's residence and the service, and inadequate referral pathways; (3) face challenges in supporting the children of victim-survivors with limited referral pathways available for them; and (4) are seeking further support to provide their services.

The journey maps of victim-survivors of family violence and practitioners in Gippsland suggest that while there are several parts of the service system that are functioning well and meeting the needs of victim-survivors, there are improvements required to give women the confidence that when they approach any service, they will be believed, understood, supported adequately, provided with culturally competent services, and will not be negatively impacted especially by justice system responses. The journeys highlight the importance of adequate support to promote recovery and healing from family violence.

Recommendations for improved service response and victim-survivor support

The following recommendations are made to improve service response, community education, and victim-survivor experience for holistic support. The recommendations have been categorised into those that could be adopted by the Gippsland Family Violence Alliance or family violence related support systems and services and the broader support services.

Recommendations the Gippsland Family Violence Support Service System

- Establish a shared database to capture victim-survivors' experiences and information comprehensively and reduce re-traumatisation by avoiding repeated narration of survivors' experiences.
- Provide training for health and mental health clinicians to better identify, care for, and refer cases of domestic, family violence, and sexual violence.
- Strengthen referral networks and communication within the domestic and family violence sector to ensure holistic care for victim-survivors. This will support victim-survivors to obtain the range of supports they may require.
- Information sharing between service providers and across the Gippsland family violence system is needed to benefit the wellbeing of clients and practitioners; this will also support appropriate referrals.
- Engagement of available information should increase among practitioners and services to ensure uniformity in the knowledge and availability of services across Gippsland.
- Avoid short-term staffing contracts. This will ensure skilled staff retention and employment security for service provision staff.
- Ensure that adequate support is provided in refuges by providing emotional warmth and material comforts.
- Incorporate victim-survivor advocates into service provision to empower victim-survivors and enable survivor-centred care.
- Increase the availability of mental health support services to enable recovery and healing from family violence.
- Offer flexible services outside of business hours to improve accessibility and based on the needs of the community.
- Offer support and training to service providers to enhance their skills, address burnout, and address vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue.
- Community education about accurate family violence service information and the recent improvements to the service system should be promoted to counter historical experiences that may lead some women and children to fear the service system.
- Provide cultural competence and cultural humility training to family violence services to enable the provision of culturally appropriate support to victim-survivors from multicultural backgrounds.
- Support the resourcing and establishment of special groups or sub-ethnic groups within neighbour/community groups for women from multicultural communities to support the cultural needs of the Gippsland community.
- The GFVA and peer advocates could further support multicultural council-run community groups. Positive examples of informal helping could be publicised. Further training and information could be provided to foster neighbourhood and community groups to provide care, empathy, compassion, and support to victim-survivors.
- Support the further recruitment of bicultural workers to support the multicultural community.
- Increase the breadth of service-related information provided by Orange Door at the point of intake of clients.
- Advocate for improved access to legal aid.

Recommendations for Family Violence Support Services: Legal, judicial, community, and health.

- Increased funding to support adequate housing, upgrading of court infrastructure, adequate mental health support, and increased staffing among services.
- Invest in the capacity building of schoolteachers and staff to screen and adequately (in a trauma, violence and culturally informed way) intervene and refer cases of family violence.
- Improve various parts of the justice system to ensure adequate justice at all levels for victim-survivors.
- Improve processes for victim-survivors accessing legal and judicial services.
- Implement family violence education programs at various levels, including communities and schools, to ensure consistent recognition of and help-seeking for family violence.

Develop and evaluate programs to support better integration of family violence service systems and other systems including legal, justice, and mental health service systems. Potential models that can be operated by family violence services include information, counselling, advocacy, and mentoring programs. The objective of such programs should be to reduce the stress, trauma and risk that victim-survivors have articulated in the current report relating to their difficult journeys navigating legal, justice and mental health service systems.