

Prioritising Safety in Post COVID-19 Tasmania

Submission to the Premier's Economic and Social Recovery Advisory Council, November 2020

Introduction

Engender Equality welcomes the opportunity to make a further submission to the Premier's Economic and Social Recovery Advisory Council (PESRAC), at what is a critical juncture both in Tasmania's overall pandemic recovery and in the state's response to the 'shadow pandemic' of violence against women during COVID-19ⁱ.

This submission addresses Recommendations 57 and 58 of the PESRAC Interim Report, released in July of this yearⁱⁱ.

57.	The State Government should quickly review how the additional COVID-19 government funding for mental health, family violence, and emergency food relief has been used and the outcomes delivered.
58.	Monitoring and rapid contingency planning should be undertaken to ascertain if further additional funding is needed across these important community impact areas.

About Engender Equality

Engender Equality provides specialist counselling, psychoeducation and support for individuals and groups affected by family violence, along with advocacy and training to address gender inequality and reduce violence against women and children.

Our service operates state-wide from offices in Hobart, Launceston and Burnie with a small core workforce of five part-time specialist counsellors and a CEO. With the addition of State and Commonwealth COVID-19 funding boosts this workforce has grown to 9 part-time counsellors for a time limited period. We have no reception or administrative support and these basic business support functions are shared across the service.

Despite our small size we have a well-established reputation, across the state, for helping people who have experienced family violence towards greater safety for themselves and their children. For people who have achieved safety we are here to assist them to integrate the experience of trauma into their lives.

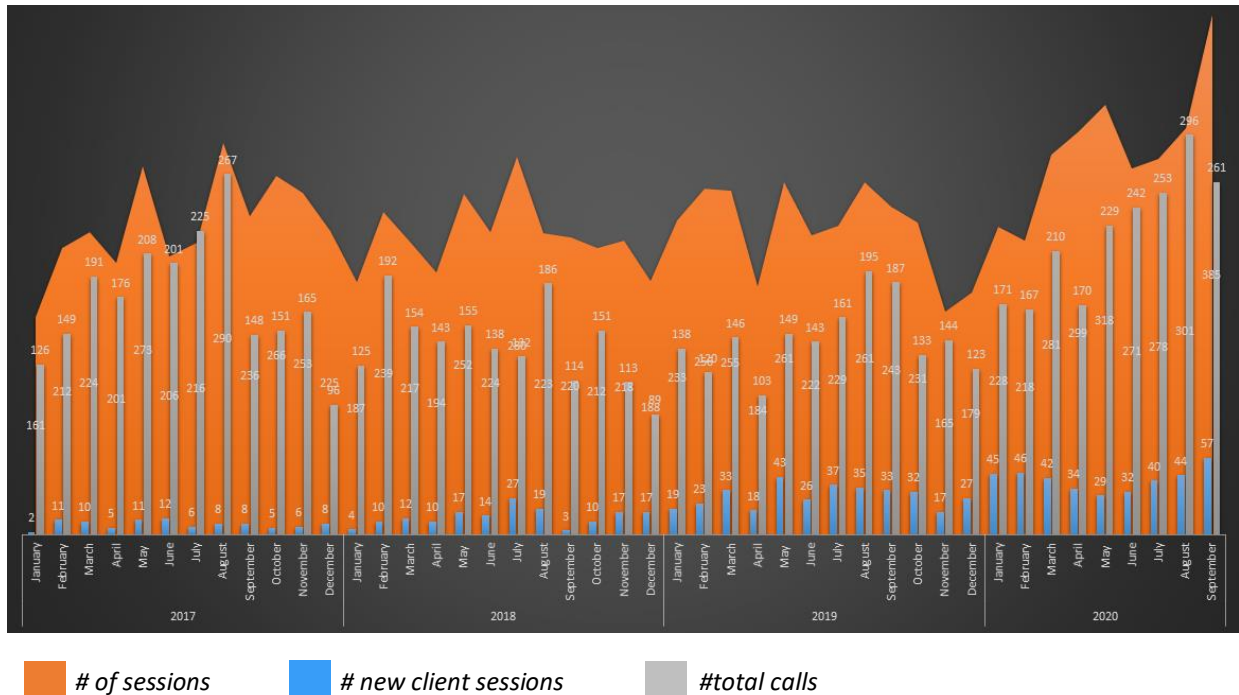
Demand for specialist family violence services during COVID-19

During 2020 Engender Equality has updated the Tasmanian Government at regular intervals regarding the observable intensification of violence in the lives of our existing clients, as well as the increasing rate of referrals for individuals seeking specialist family violence support for the first time.

While the PESRAC Interim Report described "variability in reported rates of family violence" by services including Tasmania Policeⁱⁱⁱ, Engender Equality has experienced ongoing and consistent growth in demand across all regions of the state throughout the year.

The significance of this growth is illustrated by a longitudinal snapshot of Engender Equality service demand and delivery, spanning January 2017 through to September 2020.

Figure 1. Longitudinal snapshot of Engender Equality service demand and delivery, Jan 2017 – Sept 2020.



The scale of service growth experienced in 2020 is perhaps best expressed as a percentage. Client service statistics show that between the 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 financial years the number of individuals accessing Engender Equality’s services grew by **108%** while the overall number of counselling hours delivered by our practitioners across the state grew by **143%**.

Figure 2. Engender Equality Service Delivery in 2018-2019 v. 2019-2020

Engender Equality Service Delivery	FY 2018-2019	FY 2019-2020
Individuals accessing counselling	637	1327 [↑108%]
Counselling hours delivered	1192	2902 [↑143%]

What these figures reveal is that during a year in which the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to “the onset or escalation of violence and abuse for many Australian families,”^{iv} and during which avenues for help-seeking by victims of abuse were often limited by the impacts of the pandemic^v, Engender Equality remained a viable support option for many individuals who may not have been able to safely access mainstream services.

This speaks directly to the value of specialist family violence services, under all circumstances but especially in times of disaster or crisis. The unique service attributes offered by a specialist service such as Engender Equality that facilitate help-seeking for victims of abuse in even the most tenuous circumstances include:

- *Total confidentiality and discretion* – victims who may be fearful of their perpetrator’s response can access support with complete privacy, allowing them to make discreet plans to change their relationship or leave their partner with safety plans in place;
- *Flexibility* – our practitioners can support clients whose experiences of violence and abuse may be difficult to recognise or not fit existing criminal-justice definitions and who may therefore be unable to access protection from police and/or adjacent government service systems;
- *Trauma-informed* – we recognise the impacts of family violence are multifaceted and long-lasting and may intersect with a range of other experiences of disadvantage and deprivation;
- *Tailored* – we offer access to long term, non-discriminatory and individualised counselling and can provide support remotely by phone, internet or any modality that will support a client’s safety;
- *Collaboration and outreach* – we arrange co-appointments with other services and sectors, including children’s services, and can support clients in a range of settings including drug and alcohol rehabilitation and prison;
- *Psychoeducation and recovery* – our specialist approach includes psychoeducation about the social drivers of gendered violence and the impacts of trauma, supporting whole-of-person recovery.

Meeting the increased demand

The extent to which Engender Equality has been able to service the unprecedented level of community demand for family violence support during 2020 is directly a result of the Tasmanian and Australian Governments’ willingness to provide a range of vital, time-limited funding measures and initiatives in response to the escalation of pandemic-related violence and abuse.

The Tasmanian Government’s contribution of an additional \$62,000 to Engender Equality through its Social and Economic Support package critically bolstered our capacity to reach and support Tasmanian families experiencing violence and abuse this year.

Engender Equality also received sums of \$135,000 and \$62,000 through the Tasmanian Government’s partnership with the Australian Government to increase frontline family violence service provision and encourage help-seeking behaviours during the pandemic.

Direct service outcomes from this combined funding boost have included:

- Increased capacity to deliver specialist family violence counselling state-wide with the recruitment of additional counsellors in all three regions of the state;
- Expanded outreach capacity enabling us to meet requests from community agencies to provide on-site family violence support to clients (including alcohol and other drug services, health services, children’s services and welfare services);
- Capacity to deliver a partnership with Rotary that provides safe technology (laptops or tablets) to at-risk families to ensure safer connections and reduced social isolation during the pandemic;
- Capacity to support the Australian Dental Foundation initiative ‘Rebuilding Smiles’ which provides free dental assistance to victim-survivors who may have suffered oral injuries or oral disease as a result of family violence;
- Increased capacity to support delivery of the Flexible Support Package initiative for clients in need of practical assistance to secure stable living arrangements;

- Increased capacity to support delivery of the Keeping Women Safe in their Homes initiative through home security assessments and upgrades.

The urgent question now for services such as Engender Equality who are supporting a significantly greater number of individuals and families impacted by violence and abuse in 2020 is: what happens when COVID-19 funding measures end?

Capturing unmet need

Complicating the above question is the ever-present dilemma for family violence services of how to capture and express the issue of 'unmet need'. In relation to family violence, unmet need is understood and defined differently across the range of agencies and community services responding to individuals and families experiencing abuse and is variously discussed under banners such as 'under-reporting' and 'barriers to help-seeking'.

From our perspective as a specialist family violence service, unmet need includes the following:

- Women and children who have escaped or are trying to escape abusive and violent relationships;
- Individuals caught in chronic cycles of abuse who may not recognise what they are experiencing as violence as a result of disproportionate tolerance thresholds, diminished agency and self-worth;
- Individuals experiencing violence who may be unable or feel unable to access support as a result of their sexuality, disability, cultural background or religion, past criminality, substance use, sex worker status, immigration status, employment status/social standing, relationship to a member of the police or other government representative;
- Individuals who may be aware that they are using violent and abusive behaviours but are hesitant to seek help or advice due to shame and fear of punitive responses;
- Individuals and families who have made contact with support services but remain on waiting lists for active assistance.

In relation to the final point, it is essential to note that even with the addition of State and Commonwealth funding boosts allowing Engender Equality to expand our service delivery in all regions of the state, the Tasmanian community has more than absorbed our additional capacity to deliver family violence support in 2020.

In fact, as we approach the end of the year, the waiting period for a first appointment with Engender Equality is around 11 weeks.

The risk for individuals and families who have contacted services and are awaiting family violence support must be confronted. The importance of responding to victims of family and domestic abuse in the help-seeking moment is well established by research, as is the fact that the absence of timely responses means the help-seeking window may close for that individual, sometimes permanently^{vi}.

Specialist organisations like Engender Equality must have enough provision in place to offer services when help is sought.

Conclusion

We hope this overview of our experience as a provider of specialist family violence services during 2020 will assist PESRAC to understand both the beneficial impact of additional COVID-19 funding measures to date, and the urgent need to continue funding specialist services to meet the ongoing, increased demand from Tasmanian families experiencing violence.

Responding to client need is the prevailing priority for family violence services, and it is critical that this remains our priority for as long as resources fail to cover the complex breadth of activities that are required to improve secondary and primary responses to family and sexual violence in Tasmania.

Engender Equality implores the Tasmanian Government to acknowledge that specialist services such as ours reduce the burden of disease, reduce the cost of family violence (to individuals, to the community and to the Government) and prevent deaths. These outcomes are immediately possible for those able to access our service in a timely fashion.

It is our firm belief that the Government's response to family violence and its impacts for victim-survivors, including children, is critical to all other expectations for Tasmania's post COVID-19 recovery and growth in the months and years ahead.

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References

- ⁱ *The Shadow Pandemic: Violence against women during COVID-19*. UN Women. Accessed 10 November 2020. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19>.
- ⁱⁱ *Premier's Economic & Social Recovery Advisory Council Interim Report*. Department of Treasury and Finance, July 2020, p.63.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p. 29-30.
- ^{iv} Boxall H, Morgan A & Brown R 2020. *The prevalence of domestic violence among women during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Statistical Bulletin no. 28. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology. <https://www.aic.gov.au/publications/sb/sb28>.
- ^v Pfitzner N, Fitz-Gibbon K, True J 2020. *Responding to the 'shadow pandemic': practitioner views on the nature of and responses to violence against women in Victoria, Australia during the COVID-19 restrictions*. Monash University. <https://doi.org/10.26180/5ed9d5198497c>
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