

**Title:**

**The Darebin Family Violence Working Group – A Partnership Approach**

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## **Abstract**

In 2002, the City of Darebin initiated a partnership involving individuals and organisations who provide services to people in Darebin who experience family violence. This coincided with the establishment of a Family Violence Coordination Unit for the Darebin Police. Subsequently, the Darebin Family Violence Working Group developed and strengthened the relationship between its members, resulting in improved communication, increased and better informed referrals, and a greater understanding of members' professional roles and limitations.

Traditionally, local governments have not considered it as their role to address family violence at the policy level or to improve the local service system for individuals and families experiencing family violence. By taking leadership and establishing, supporting, and facilitating the Darebin Family Violence Working Group, the City of Darebin has demonstrated that local government can play an important role in this area and achieve positive outcomes for its community.

This paper describes the partnership of local services and organisations that came together in the Darebin Family Violence Working Group, the resulting changes to the service system, and the factors that have contributed to the success of the partnership.

## **Introduction**

Family violence may seem an unlikely focus of work for local government. However, a partnership approach initiated, resourced, and facilitated by Darebin City Council has achieved positive and tangible outcomes for the local service system.

In response to the identification of family violence in the Darebin Community Safety Plan and concerns raised by family support workers and the Darebin Domestic Violence Network, the Darebin Community Safety Committee established a working group to progress strategies aimed at reducing family violence in Darebin. Darebin City Council has resourced and coordinated the Darebin Family Violence Working Group since August 2002. As a Council officer, I have chaired the Working Group since its inception.

This paper discusses the partnership of local services and organisations that came together in the Darebin Family Violence Working Group, the resulting changes to the service system, and the factors that have contributed to the success of the partnership.

## **Context**

### *The City of Darebin*

The City of Darebin is located in Melbourne's north and has a population of over 128,000 people who make up one of the most diverse communities in Australia. One in three Darebin residents was born in a non-English speaking country, with the major contributing countries comprising Italy, Greece, China, and Vietnam. Significant growth is being experienced in the number of people born in Sri Lanka, India, Egypt, the Philippines, and countries from the Middle East (Darebin City Council, 2003).

While Darebin's indigenous population has declined slightly in recent years, largely due to increasing property values throughout the municipality, the municipality's more than 1,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people form one of the largest indigenous communities in Victoria (Darebin City Council, 2003).

A significant number of Darebin residents live in poverty, with one in seven households earning less than \$15,000 a year. This is five times the Melbourne average. The proportion of households earning more than \$100,000 annually in Darebin is 6.3%, which represents only half that of the Melbourne metropolitan area overall (Darebin City Council, 2003). The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2003) ranked Darebin as the sixth most disadvantaged municipality out of the 31 metropolitan municipalities.

#### *The role of local government*

The legislation that covers local government ("The Local Government (Democratic Reform) Act," 2003) includes a Local Government Charter, which describes the purpose, objectives, and functions of local councils. While the objectives described in the Charter are broad, it could be argued that the objective "to improve the overall quality of life of people in the local community" gives support to local government's role of leadership, facilitation, and advocacy in addressing family violence given the implications for the social health of the municipality.

#### *Family violence in Australia*

Women's Safety Australia, a national survey of 6,300 women (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1996) found that:

- 38% of women had experienced one or more incidents of violence since the age of 15. Of the women who had experienced physical violence, one third had experienced more than one incident.
- Women are four times more likely to experience violence from a man than from another woman.
- 23% of women who had ever been married or in a de facto relationship had experienced physical violence from a male partner.
- Of those women who experienced violence by a partner in a previous relationship and who were pregnant at some time during the relationship, 42% reported that violence had occurred during the pregnancy, and 20% experienced violence for the first time when they were pregnant.
- 46% of women who had children in their care and had experienced violence from a partner said that one or more of the children had witnessed the violence.
- Of the women who had experienced violence from a partner in the last 20 years, 80% had not sought help from services at all. Just 5% of women experiencing

violence from a current partner reported the last incident to police.

- 73% of women who often experienced violence from a current male partner identified that they lived in fear.

For the above survey, violence was defined in a narrow way as incidents involving the occurrence, attempt or threat of either physical or sexual assault. This survey found that younger women were more at risk of violence than older women. In the 18-24 years age group, 19% of women had experienced an incident of violence in the previous 12 months, compared to 1.2% of women aged 55 and over.

A survey of over 40,000 women conducted as part of the Women's Health Australia longitudinal study on women's health (Research Centre for Gender and Health, 2003) asked whether the participants had been "pushed, grabbed, shoved, kicked or hit" during the last 12 months. The survey was completed by women of three different age groups: young women (22-27 years), mid-age women (47-52 years), and older women (70-75 years). Of the older women, 1.2% answered 'yes' to this question, as did 2.4% of the mid-age women, and 7.0% of the young women.

The mid-aged women in this sample who indicated that they had experienced any form of physical, mental, emotional or sexual abuse, or violence either as a child or as an adult (36.6% of the women had experienced such violence), were invited to participate in a separate survey. Subsequently, 1,159 women took part in this additional survey. The women in this group were more likely to experience emotional abuse than any other type of abuse. Almost all perpetrators were known to the victims and the majority of the reported abuse had occurred in the home. Most women in this sample had experienced more than one form of abuse and multiple acts over time. Many of these women had wanted to leave but were unable to do so for lack of practical alternatives.

The study found that the experience of abuse significantly affected the general health and well-being of mid-aged women. The participants had poorer physical and mental health than non-abused women of a similar age, and many were psychologically distressed and depressed. The majority of women had discussed their circumstances with close relatives, friends, or professional persons. Every third woman had reported abusive episodes to the police, but less than half of these had found it helpful to do so

(Parker & Lee, 2002).

Post-separation violence affects many women and children. Approximately 30% of Australian women killed by male partners are killed after separation, and 35% of children killed in Australia between 1989 and 1993 died at the hand of a male offender as a consequence of a family dispute, usually relating to the termination of the parents' relationship (Laing, 2000).

The economic, social and health cost of family violence to the community is extensive. While it is difficult to calculate due to the hidden nature of family violence, there is evidence to suggest that it disrupts employment through days of work lost, and there are significant welfare costs for women who are unable to obtain or keep a job because they are leaving a violent relationship. Recent research by the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (Heenan et al., 2004, p. 25) found that "intimate partner violence has a greater impact on the health of Victorian women under the age of 45 than any other risk factor. The burden contributed by this form of violence is greater than that for many other risk factors, such as obesity, high cholesterol, high blood pressure and illicit drug use". The study estimated that intimate partner violence accounts for an estimated 9% of the total disease burden in women under the age of 45 years, while it represents 3% of the disease burden in Victorian women overall.

Violence against women has been reported to be second only to traffic accidents in the police time it consumes. Other costs include housing support, provision of specialist counselling and support, and the costs associated with legal action and the court system. Long-term costs include the effects on the mental health of victims and children, and costs relating to the economic and opportunity costs of disruption to children's education (Office of Women's Policy, 2001).

Research has identified a frequent co-existence of domestic violence and child abuse and neglect and the harmful effects of living with domestic violence on children's and young people's physical, cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and social development (Laing, 2000). Further, family violence and cruelty towards animals have been linked (Gullone, Volant, & Johnston, 2003).

### **The Darebin Family Violence Working Group**

In July 2002, the Darebin Community Safety Committee established a working group to progress strategies to reduce family violence in Darebin. Subsequently, the Darebin Family Violence Working Group had its inaugural meeting in August 2002, including representation from the following stakeholders:

- Aboriginal/TSI community;
- Centrelink;
- Darebin City Council;
- Darebin Community Health;
- Darebin Domestic Violence Network;
- Darebin Ethnic Communities Council (DECC);
- Department of Education;
- Department of Human Services, Child Protection;
- Department of Human Services, Office of Housing;
- Local welfare agency;
- Northern Family Violence Prevention Network;
- Victoria Police; and
- Women's refuges.

A magistrate, a domestic violence outreach support worker, a housing outreach support worker, and a researcher from Deakin University joined the Darebin Family Violence Working Group some time later.

The Darebin Family Violence Working Group determined its purpose as the coordination of a partnership approach to address family violence issues in Darebin, including the following objectives:

- to bring together local knowledge about family violence in Darebin;
- to identify and monitor family violence issues in Darebin;
- to facilitate liaison between government and non-government agencies and networks involved in the prevention of and response to family violence;
- to develop joint protocols and guidelines to address family violence in Darebin;

- to contribute to Council's Darebin Family Violence Policy; and
- to coordinate initiatives that aim to reduce family violence, such as initiatives in schools, the development of a Darebin family violence service directory, and contribute to Community Safety Month and the Week Without Violence.

The Working Group acknowledged that family violence has been defined in a range of ways, and after some deliberation agreed on the following definition:

Family violence is violent, threatening, coercive or controlling behaviour that occurs in current or past family, domestic or intimate relationships. This encompasses not only physical injury but direct or indirect threats, sexual assault, emotional and psychological torment, economic control, property damage, social isolation and behaviour which causes a person to live in fear.

Family violence is predominantly, but not exclusively, perpetrated by men against women and children. It occurs in all kinds of relationships and families, including heterosexual and same-sex relationships and against older people and people with a disability. It is an abuse of power and reflects hierarchical structures and hierarchical gender relationships in society (Merkes, 2004, p. 8).

The sections below provide a brief overview of the Working Group's main strategies to date. These are outlined in more detail in a background paper published by the City of Darebin (Merkes, 2004).

#### *Darebin Family Violence Forum*

The Darebin Family Violence Working Group's first project involved a forum for police and support workers. The forum targeted people who work with those affected by family violence in Darebin and aimed to increase the understanding between the police, legal, and support systems. The Darebin Family Violence Forum was held in November 2002, and more than 100 people – a third of these were police officers – attended the one day event. The speakers included an assistant police commissioner, a magistrate, Darebin's police inspector, and a survivor of family violence.

Further, small groups discussed case scenarios and agreed on ways of working to achieve better outcomes for people who experience family violence. These agreements related to networking, information provision, better informed practice, training, community education, better understanding of roles, pro-active communication, and advocacy.

#### *Family Violence Practice Issues Network*

Following the forum, the Family Violence Practice Issues Network was formed. The network meetings provide the opportunity for local police, support workers, and people working in the legal system to learn from each other and to gain a better understanding of others' working practices, challenges, and role limitations.

#### *Darebin Safety Card*

The Darebin Safety Card was developed in partnership with the Darebin Domestic Violence Network. It provides information for people who experience family violence. In particular, the card offers advice on what to do in an emergency and how to develop a safety plan. It also lists telephone numbers of services that provide support, legal advice, counselling, and assistance with housing. The card was printed in English, Arabic, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Macedonian. It is also available in electronic format on Council's website in English and six community languages<sup>1</sup>.

#### *Information sessions on Intervention Orders*

The Darebin Family Violence Working Group received a grant to undertake a series of 12 workshops for women and families applying or intending to apply for Intervention Orders, including families from culturally and linguistically diverse communities. The sessions aim to provide women with detailed information about the process of applying for an Interim Intervention Order and the requirements of the court for the granting of long-term orders.

#### *Local media*

On several occasions, the activities of the Darebin Family Violence Working Group were portrayed in the local print media. In particular, the Mayor sent a clear message that family violence is not acceptable in the Darebin community. Further, the role of the

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.darebin.vic.gov.au/Page/Page.asp?Page\\_Id=634&h=0](http://www.darebin.vic.gov.au/Page/Page.asp?Page_Id=634&h=0)

Family Violence Coordinator with the Darebin Police was described in several articles in the Preston and Northcote Leader newspapers.

#### *Leadership among local councils*

The work undertaken by the Darebin Family Violence Working Group has provided inspiration to other councils. Officers from other councils have sought advice from members of the Darebin Family Violence Working Group on the process of establishing local partnerships to tackle family violence.

#### *Data collection*

When the Darebin Family Violence Working Group first came together, few data were available on the extent of family violence in Darebin. Subsequently, data have been collected in regard to domestic violence notifications to child protection services, the number of intervention orders taken out, and the number of family violence incidents attended by police. These data have been made available to the public on Council's website (Merkes, 2004).

#### *Relationship building*

The Darebin Family Violence Working Group has brought together local knowledge and monitored family violence issues in Darebin. Arguably, its most significant achievement is the relationship building that has occurred between the support, police, and court systems.

#### *Safer Families, Safer Communities Strategy*

Prior to the establishment of the Darebin Family Violence Working Group, Darebin City Council had received funding from the Commonwealth Government's *Stronger Families and Communities Strategy* to undertake the Darebin Local Mapping Project (Phase 1), which was completed in March 2002. The project identified local priority needs in targeted geographic communities. Family violence was identified as a major issue for the wellbeing of women and children, particularly in the East Preston and East Reservoir areas. In February 2003, Council's Community Services Department engaged a consultant to assist with a consultation process and the preparation of a submission to the *Stronger Families and Communities Strategy* (Phase 2). The project proposed for the financial year 2003-04 (Phase 3) included prevention and early intervention strategies.

The Darebin Family Violence Working Group was involved in the Phase 2 consultation and agreed to act as a reference group for the *Safer Families, Safer Communities* project (Phase 3) should the submission be successful. However, unfortunately the submission was unsuccessful.

#### *Rapid Health Impact Assessment*

A group of researchers from Deakin University offered to conduct a Health Impact Assessment (HIA) on the process of developing a family violence policy and/or strategies for Darebin. A HIA involves a combination of procedures, methods, and tools which are applied to policy development processes to assess the potential, and often unanticipated, effects on the health of the population and the distribution of those effects within the population. Apart from health services, a range of economic, social, psychological, environmental, and policy factors influence a community's health. A HIA considers these factors and the combined effects of policies. The information gained from a HIA can be used to assist decision-makers and the community to make adjustments to a proposal or policy to mitigate the negative and maximise the positive impacts.

The researchers from Deakin University have participated in the Darebin Family Violence Working Group and conducted a Rapid Health Impact Assessment on the development of a family violence strategy for Darebin (Mahoney & Potter, 2003). The findings of this HIA were meant to be considered in the further development of the Phase 3 *Safer Families Safer Communities Strategy* for Darebin (see above).

#### *Evaluation of the partnership*

An evaluation conducted by the author of this article in November and December 2003 found that the work of the Darebin Family Violence Working Group resulted in a better informed local service system and more effective communication and collaboration. This was achieved in addition to other positive outcomes, such as the provision of information sessions, greater clarity about other professionals' roles and limitations, improved referral processes, and a decreased number of recidivist family violence incidents attended by police (Merkes, 2004).

### **Factors that made the partnership work**

The literature provides a range of terms for the phenomenon of organisations and individuals coming together to solve community problems, such as partnership, network, collaboration, coalition, consortium, alliance, or structure. These terms have been used interchangeably by some authors while others have offered a range of definitions and frameworks.

For example, Mandell (1994) distinguished between networks, active collaborations and structure. She defined networks as formalised efforts, rather than as informal relations and/or linkages; active collaborations as arrangements where the parties are not only interdependent but also make decisions jointly about directions and operations; and structures as systems of organising activities that effect the ability to manage, “ranging from bureaucratic to organic to matrix type structures” (p. 100).

Alliances have been defined as close collaborative relationships between two or more organisations with the intent of accomplishing mutually compatible goals that would be difficult for each to accomplish alone (Isabella, 2002). The Canadian Council on Social Development (2003) suggested various levels of collaboration, ranging from network, alliance, partnership, and coalition to full collaboration.

The Darebin Family Violence Working Group can be described as a partnership with the following characteristics: The group shares a joint vision, has a focus on one issue (i.e., family violence), shares resources to address this issue, has a facilitative leader, and uses consensus in its decision making. Communication occurs formally and informally, and the membership of the group is flexible. However, a committed core group has emerged.

Mattesich, Murray-Close, and Monsey (2001) identified six factors that make collaborations work. These are related to the environment, membership characteristics, process and structure, communication, purpose, and resources. In the following section, I outline how these factors apply to the Darebin Family Violence Working Group.

*Factors related to the environment* refer to the geographic location and social context within which a collaborative group exists. Darebin has a history of collaboration in the community. For example, the Darebin Community Safety Committee has been in operation for many years. It is jointly chaired by Darebin's Mayor and the District Police Inspector, involving a wide range of local stakeholders in addressing community concerns about safety. The Darebin Community Safety Committee is seen as the legitimate leader on community safety issues, while local governments are perceived as representing the whole community. This made Darebin City Council the appropriate organisation to take leadership on the issue of family violence.

When the Darebin Family Violence Working Group was established, the social and political climate at the local and at state level was favourable for such a partnership. At the State Government level, the Victoria Police Chief Commissioner Christine Nixon had nominated family violence a key priority for Victoria Police and the Office of Women's Policy (2002) released the Women's Safety Strategy. This five-year strategy brings all ministers and government departments together, working within a single policy framework. The Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre in Melbourne (2004) commented that these developments have fostered trust and good faith in the intentions of those working within government, and that many women working in the family violence area have felt for the first time that their expertise has been taken seriously.

At the local level, the Police District Inspector actively supported the formation of a working group on family violence issues. Further, Victoria Police established a Family Violence Coordination Unit in Darebin. This Unit advises police members on how to support people who experience family violence and how to report and handle incidents of family violence. The officer in charge of this unit took a very proactive approach to his new role and has been instrumental in implementing improved police practices in regard to family violence.

*Factors related to membership characteristics* highlight mutual respect, understanding and trust, as well as an appropriate cross-section of members. At the beginning of this partnership in Darebin, sufficient time was spent on the development of the terms of reference, including a joint understanding of the term "family violence", and the Working

Group's aim and objectives. In the process, members got to know each other, learned about each other and their organisations, and developed trust.

The Working Group started with a broad representation of local general and family violence specific support agencies, police, State and Commonwealth Government, together with ethnic and Aboriginal/TSI communities. Since the establishment of the Working Group, several people have left and others have joined the group due to resignation from their place of work or the Working Group's efforts to ensure appropriate and broad participation.

Mattessich et al. (2001) suggested that members should see collaboration in their self-interest, and that the advantages of membership should offset costs such as loss of autonomy and turf. In the past, police and family support agencies in Darebin have not worked closely together to achieve systemic change in the family violence service system. Initially, police were motivated to join this partnership because a large proportion of their work was generated by family violence. In particular, they felt frustrated when attending family violence incidents repeatedly at the same address and not being able to assist families beyond temporarily bringing the violent behaviour to an end. The Working Group has created opportunities for police officers, support workers, and court representatives to meet and discuss common practice issues. This has resulted in increased and better informed referrals, more personal communication between support workers and police, and a decrease in the number of recidivist family violence incidents attended by police.

*Factors related to process and structure* include multiple layers of participation, flexibility, adaptability, appropriate pace of development, development of clear roles and policy guidelines, and members sharing a stake in both process and outcome. The Working Group includes approximately 20 members, half of which attend meetings on a regular basis. A small number of members find attending meetings difficult, but they wish "to be kept in the loop" and receive minutes and information material. Further, there are opportunities to be involved in a range of projects that have been generated by the Working Group.

During the establishment phase of the Working Group, adequate time and resources were devoted to developing terms of reference and ownership among all participants. Approximately after one year, individual members of the Working Group felt ready to take on responsibility for different projects that have been initiated by the partnership. Thus, the roles and responsibilities have changed over time.

*Factors related to communication* include open and frequent communication as well as established informal relationships and communication links. A recent evaluation of the partnership found that the partnership has improved communication and cooperation within the service system, in particular between police officers and support workers. Members of the partnership meet monthly, more frequently if they are involved in the projects that have been initiated by the Working Group, or on a needs basis.

*Factors related to purpose* refer to concrete, attainable goals and objectives, a shared vision, and a unique purpose. Mattessich et al. (2001) argued that collaborative groups must experience a progression of successes in order to be sustained, and that successes are more likely if a group develops both short- and long-term goals. Since its inception, the Working Group has generated and completed a range of successful projects (see above). A shared vision and unique purpose were developed early in the collaborative process. To our knowledge, the composition and purpose of the partnership are unique in Victoria.

Finally, *factors related to resources* include sufficient funds, staff, materials, and time as well as skilled leadership. Since its foundation, the Working Group has been chaired, coordinated and supported by a Council officer, while all partner organisations have contributed staff time and expertise. However, some members of the Darebin Family Violence Working Group have found it difficult to find the time for active participation in the partnership due to the demands of their direct service work.

Mattessich et al. (2001) suggested that the collaborative process should not be rushed, that solid relationships take time to develop, and that goals are more easily attained when pursued with patience and persistence. The experience of the Working Group supports this claim. As the chair of the Darebin Family Violence Working Group, I have attempted to keep a balance between process and task activities – creating the space

and time for discussions and developing relationships while at the same time undertaking projects with more tangible outcomes. This consideration was important as Working Group members have varying needs for process and concrete outcomes.

## **Conclusion**

In 2002, the City of Darebin initiated a partnership involving individuals and organisations who provide services to people who experience family violence. This occurred in response to concerns expressed by local welfare and support agencies and the Darebin Domestic Violence Network. It coincided with the establishment of a Family Violence Coordination Unit for the Darebin Police. Subsequently, the Darebin Family Violence Working Group developed and strengthened the relationship between its members, resulting in improved communication, increased and better informed referrals, and a greater understanding of members' professional roles and limitations.

Local government has the capacity to draw together a wide range of stakeholders who may otherwise not be in regular contact with each other. Further, local government's role as leader, facilitator, and coordinator is well established in many areas of community concern and enshrined in legislation ("The Local Government (Democratic Reform) Act," 2003). Traditionally, local governments have not considered it as their role to address family violence at the policy level or to improve the local service system for individuals and families experiencing family violence. By taking leadership and establishing, supporting, and facilitating the Darebin Family Violence Working Group, the City of Darebin has demonstrated that local government can play an important role in this area and achieve positive outcomes for the health and wellbeing of its community.

Characteristics of this partnership include open and frequent communication, formal and informal relationships, inclusiveness, and multiple layers of participation. It takes time to develop trust and work together well. Consequently, resources were required to develop the partnership as well as the commitment by individuals and organisations to sustain it. The Darebin Family Violence Working Group generated a "progression of successes" (Mattessich et al., 2001, p. 25) , that is, successful short- and long-term projects that were designed to achieve the objectives of the partnership. This contributed to the continued relevance and sustainability of the partnership.

Further, the time for this partnership in Darebin was right. The identification of family violence as a policy priority at State Government level combined with a cooperative Police District Inspector, a new police resource (i.e., the Family Violence Coordination Unit), the commitment of a local magistrate, and the determination of relevant support services and other stakeholders have contributed to the success of this partnership.

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