

# Family Violence Response for Women with Disabilities

## A guide for the disability workforce

Please note that this resource may contain content that is triggered and distressing. Should you feel distressed at any point while reading this document, you can contact any of the services listed on the last page.

### Coronavirus and Violence

There is currently a global pandemic caused by a new strain of Coronavirus known as CoVid-19. Some sections of the community are more at risk of contracting health complications as a result of CoVid-19, including people with disability, people living with chronic illness and older Australians. Many women with disabilities are experiencing disruption to services and support and are increasingly isolated.

There has been an increase in reports of family and intimate partner violence in Australia and around the world during the pandemic. Violence against women is overwhelmingly perpetrated by men and is a major cause of preventable death, disability and illness in Australia. Given that many women are having to practice self-isolation with their abusers during the current pandemic, family violence services are bracing for an increase in women accessing support.

If you are working with a woman with disability who is experiencing violence, it is important to support her in a safe and culturally sensitive way. This resource outlines the best practice response to violence against women with disabilities and lists a number of services to which you can refer these women.

### Violence against Women with Disabilities

Women with disabilities are more likely to experience violence than women without disabilities. They are more likely to experience violence over longer periods of time, and from multiple perpetrators. It is important to remember that under The Victorian Family Violence Protection Act, a carer may fit the definition of a family member.

Women with disabilities experience the same forms of violence as other women, such as physical, sexual, psychological, technological or financial abuse. However, they can also experience specific disability-based violence. Some examples of disability-based violence are:

- Taking a wheel off a wheelchair
- Threats of institutionalisation

- Denial of communication aids
- Denial of medication or being overmedicated
- Denial of food and water
- Denial of support services
- Rough handling by support workers
- Physical and chemical restraint
- Not being allowed access to own money

It is important to note that whilst it may not be intentional, any time a women with disabilities has control of her life taken away it is classified as violence. The woman herself may not even realise she is experiencing acts of violence.

## Responding to a Client who is Experiencing Violence

### What You Can Do

There are a number of specialist services that exist to support women experiencing family violence. Information about these services and how to make a referral are listed below. Here are some important steps in assisting a client who is experiencing violence.

#### 1. Believe

Believing a survivor of family violence is a key part of managing a disclosure. It is never your place to question her account of events or suggest she may be lying. One of the main reasons a woman with disability may not disclose violence is the fear of not being believed. You might not be the first person she has told, so it is vital to provide her with a safe and supportive response.

Do not push the women to disclose specific details or ask her leading questions. Listen supportively and cater to any communication requirements she may have.

#### 2. Validate

Validating is another extremely important part of responding to a disclosure. Take time to listen and respond to a woman before you respond to a situation by offering actions or solutions. Some validating responses might be:

*'That sounds like it would have been really scary for you.'*

*'I'm sorry that you have been going through this.'*

*'You are very brave and strong for managing this situation for so long.'*

Remember that a woman is taking a huge step in sharing her story with you. Make sure you are patient and present, and don't rush her through it.

### 3. Reiterate Anti-violence Key Messages

When you are working with a woman who is experiencing violence, it is important to reiterate the key anti-violence messages. This is vital as the woman may have heard the opposite of these messages from the perpetrator and society, often over many years. Some key messages are:

*'Violence is not okay, and it's **never** your fault.'*

*'Family violence is a big deal, and it is against the law.'*

*'The perpetrator made a choice to use violence, and they alone are responsible for that.'*

### 4. Make Referrals

Your most important role when assisting a client who is experiencing violence is to direct her to the family violence services that can most appropriately support her. This may involve assisting a woman to contact a service or making contact on her behalf (known as a warm referral).

There are a number of family violence services that may be able to support her, from counselling or outreach to accessible refuges. Most services are operating as usual throughout the pandemic, though they may be experiencing higher demand. Gently let your client know that this is the case, and that they may need to attempt contact more than once for some services. But reassure them that there will be support available to them.

You should also be aware of your own organisation's policy on handling serious incidents. This will inform what services you choose to access and how you support the woman experiencing violence.

Below is a list of services you can contact or refer your client to, as well as details of any changes to operation as a result of the pandemic.

## Responses to avoid

- Asking the woman why she did or did not act in a certain way. Questions such as 'Why didn't you call the police?' or 'Why would you stay with him?' suggest that the woman is in some way responsible for the violence, and shifts blame from the perpetrator.
- Telling the woman what you think she should do. The survivor is always the expert of her own experience and empowering her to make her own decisions may give back some of the agency the perpetrator has taken away. Provide her with as many options as you can but don't push a specific one, even if you think it is best.

- Reinforcing negative myths and stereotypes around family violence. Making excuses for the perpetrator's actions or highlighting their positive traits can undermine key messages around the seriousness of family violence.

## Referral Services

There are a number of family violence, disability and specialist family violence services that you might refer a woman. You may also choose to contact these services as a worker, to discuss concerns about a particular client or to access third party support for yourself.

Where possible, flag to the referral service that your client is a woman with disability experiencing violence. They may have workers who have experience working with women with a disability.

## General and Disability Services

**In case of emergency or if there is imminent danger, always call 000.**

### **1800RESPECT**

Phone 1800 737 732 or visit [www.1800respect.org.au](http://www.1800respect.org.au) for online chat.

1800 respect is the national counselling, referral and information service and is open 24/7. Services are operating as normal but are experiencing higher volume. 1800 Respect is fully accessible.

### **Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre**

Phone 1800 015 188 or visit [www.safesteps.org.au](http://www.safesteps.org.au)

Safe Steps is Victoria's family violence support service and is open 24/7. The helpline is operating as normal but ability to place families in refuges may become limited as the crisis escalates.

### **The Orange Door**

Visit <https://orangedoor.vic.gov.au/find-a-service-near-you>

The Orange Door is a state-funded service that provides direct support for those experiencing family violence, including a walk-in service in five locations. The Orange Door is fully accessible and is operating as normal during the crisis.

### **Centre Against Sexual Assault (CASA House)**

Phone 1800 806 292 or visit [www.casahouse.com.au](http://www.casahouse.com.au)

CASA can provide counselling and crisis support if you have been sexually assaulted recently or in the past. Their helpline operates 24/7 and is operating as normal during the crisis

## **WIRE**

Phone 1300 134 130 or email [support@wire.org.au](mailto:support@wire.org.au) or [www.wire.org.au](http://www.wire.org.au)

WIRE offers a free information and referral service for all Victorian women on a number of topics, including family violence. They have closed their walk-in centre as a result of the pandemic but are still available by phone, email or text chat.

## **Disability and Family Violence Crisis Response Initiative (DFVCRI)**

Phone the Disability Family Violence Liaison Officer - 03 9843 6304

The DFVCRI can provide funds to women and their children who may require immediate disability support. Money can be provided for up to 12 weeks. You can also access this service by contacting Safe Steps.

## **Disability Services Commissioner (DSC)**

Phone 1800 677 342 or 1300 726 563 or visit [www.odsc.vic.gov.au](http://www.odsc.vic.gov.au)

If you would like to make a complaint, or talk about violence, abuse or neglect you can contact the DSC for advice or information. This service is operating during the crisis.

## **Specialist Services**

### **Djirra**

Phone 1800 105 303 or 03 9244 3333 or visit <https://djirra.org.au/>

Djirra provides information, referral, support, legal service, and workshops for Aboriginal women who are experiencing family violence. Djirra is operating as normal during the crisis.

### **InTouch Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence**

**Phone** 1800 755 988 or visit <https://intouch.org.au/>

InTouch supports women and children from migrant and refugee communities who are experiencing violence. You can contact for free and confidential advice. InTouch is operating as normal during the crisis.

### **Thorne Harbour Health**

Phone 03 9865 6700 or visit <https://thorneharbour.org/lgbti-health/relationship-family-violence/>

Thorne Harbour is a LGBTQI+ specialist organisation that provides a range of services including family violence support and counselling. Services are operating as normal during the crisis.