

Tragedy of DV funding crisis

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Vital services to people experiencing family and domestic violence are being cut right now as you read this article.

If it seems surreal, that's because it is. Especially given that Western Australia currently has the country's second highest rate of reported physical and sexual violence against women.

This is occurring in the shadow of coronavirus, historic economic turmoil and skyrocketing demands for help.

Relationships Australia WA is just one of a group of critical providers delivering family and domestic violence counselling and advocacy support services being forced to cut services as part of contract "negotiations" with the Department of Communities.

As a frontline organisation, we and others help women, men and children directly address family and domestic violence and its impacts.

We assist while people are still living at home, and before they need to flee to safety or wind up in prison.

Our work involves specialist responses that improve women and children's safety, practical and targeted counselling for ongoing trauma, and behaviour change work.

We are there, before, during and after FDV marks lives.

COVID-19 has brought FDV into sharper focus in the past few months.

We all understand that the lockdown, social isolation and economic impacts can compound or exacerbate FDV, but the very nature of the issue, and the stigma attached to it, make it very difficult to quantify.

Recent WA Police statistics shed some light, showing a five to seven per cent increase in reported incidents — and that's on top of an existing 10 per cent jump between 2018 and 2019.

Other anecdotal and



Illustration: Don Lindsay

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departmental reports point to increased hospital presentations related to FDV and more pressure on services for mental health, homelessness and child protection.

While the virus situation may have stopped many people from presenting directly to support

services, nationally, organisations including Relationships Australia WA have moved to offer more remote forms of support.

It is via these platforms that we are seeing jumps in the number of people calling and visiting our websites to seek out pathways to help when it is

safe to do so, and we are bracing for the second wave of that demand.

All of us working in family and domestic violence know the drill.

Service providers are used to juggling meagre resources with rising demand. We constantly restructure services, cut costs to the bone and have staff who work well beyond their paid hours, simply to keep services running.

Relationships Australia WA will, as a direct result of the current Department of Communities contract negotiations, be forced to close two of our four men's behaviour change groups — essential in helping

perpetrators address their violence and to keep women and children safe.

In our case the grim reality is that we have over many years subsidised our FDV program — now at a rate of 37 per cent — in the face of no funding increases and a doubling of the number of women, children and men seeking help.

Now, extrapolate that across the sector and imagine the growing number of lives affected as FDV and its impacts surge throughout our community.

Police, hospitals, drug and alcohol services and our fellow counselling organisations can all attest to growing inquiries and demands for help well before COVID-19.

When WA's first Minister for Prevention of Family and Domestic Violence, Simone McGurk, last year launched the 16 Days to End Violence Against Women campaign to raise community awareness of FDV, we collectively wondered how we would meet the increased demand without additional funding.

If a funding announcement is made, the reality is that funding is usually fragmented, insufficient and piecemeal and does not result in direct clinical services on the ground.

Relationships Australia WA, and the sector in general, is not strident and we are notoriously reticent to make a fuss.

However, we have been pushed to this current critical point of service cuts over many years.

The sector's roadmap — the ten-year strategy for reducing family and domestic violence in WA — missed last year's release date and is yet to be seen.

In the face of escalating demand and increasing costs, deciding which services must be cut, and which individual women, children and men will no longer be assisted is a tough one — and one which we believe the Government should take responsibility for.

Terri Reilly is the chief executive of Relationships Australia WA