



Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence

Submission from Helping Hand Aged Care Inc.

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Helping Hand
new aged care

Introduction

Helping Hand commends the South Australian government for initiating a Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence and sincerely hopes the resulting recommendations lead to investment, education, and societal change where all people experience safety and respect across their lifespan.

In this submission, we have chosen to share the experiences from within our organisation in relation to our Family and Domestic Violence Policy and response, as a case study of workplace commitment, partnerships and implementation. We have also included discussion points of where we believe the State Government can play a role in supporting victim-survivors.

As an aged care provider with the responsibility to support some of the most vulnerable within our community, we also urge the State Government to consider elder abuse as part of the scope noting that 1 in 2 people who perpetrate elder abuse are a family member. It is recognised that elder abuse that occurs in families differs from other types of family and domestic violence because it often involves abuse of parents by adult children.

We acknowledge the work – over many decades – of advocates, academics, frontline service providers, victim-survivors, and more recently governments who have been relentless in their drive to reduce and eliminate family and domestic violence (FDV). The international body of evidence which explains the causes of FDV is indisputable. The position of Helping Hand is that efforts and investment should be directed toward prevention of FDV.

About Helping Hand

Helping Hand is a well-respected aged care provider caring for older Australians living in metropolitan, rural, regional, and remote South Australia. Established in 1953 and part of the UnitingCare Australia network, it is a profit-for-purpose organisation.

We provide services across many lands, traditionally owned by the Kaurna, Narangga, Ngadjuri, Nukunu, Banggarla, and Peramangk peoples. Helping Hand acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work and provide services. We pay respect to their culture and heritage, and Elders past, present and emerging.

Helping Hand supports more than 1,000 home care package clients; and 948 residents in licensed accommodation across 12 residential care homes; as well as over 100 people living in retirement villages. We employ 2,200 staff across South Australia and have had a skill based independent board for over a decade.

Of relevance to this submission, Helping Hand was founded by Padre Arthur Strange who saw a need for providing safe and secure housing for older women at risk of homelessness. He fundraised to purchase a property in North Adelaide to provide housing for single women, which grew to become the widespread aged care service it is today.

Our workforce

More than 80 per cent of people working at Helping Hand are women or identify as women. We are aware that people of all genders can and do experience FDV. However, we are also aware that FDV is a gendered epidemic and that women are overwhelmingly the victims and victim-survivors of FDV.

Aged care employs a high proportion of people born overseas. At Helping Hand, 48 per cent of our staff were born overseas. The diversity of our workforce is one of our greatest strengths. It can also present challenges regarding attitudes and responses to FDV.

According to the Australian Government's Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, some people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds may experience vulnerability due to temporary and dependent visa status, language barriers, and/or lack of community support and networks. These factors may increase their risk of exposure to FDV, exploitation by perpetrators, and heighten barriers to seeking help. Further, cultures can differ in their attitudes towards gender roles, relationships, and family dynamics which can impact the way FDV is perceived and tolerated. Some forms of violence are more likely to be influenced by a person's visa status and/or by religious, cultural or community contexts.

Recommendation: Helping Hand recommends that strategies are developed and implemented to raise awareness among CALD communities about FDV, and that partnering with workplaces with high proportions of CALD staff could provide an avenue to reach communities with key messaging.

Housing

It is well understood that gender inequality is a key driver of FDV and that two of the most prevalent factors which often prevent people from seeking support or trying to leave a relationship where FDV is occurring are economic independence and safe and secure housing. The aged care workforce is one of the lowest paid workforces in Australia and the sector welcomes recent pay increases by the Fair Work Commission and Federal Government.

Helping Hand welcomes the recent announcement of the South Australian Government's Housing Roadmap, as well as the Federal Government's Social Housing Accelerator Payment. It is undisputed that access to housing in Australia is one of the most critical current social issues. While streamlining building processes, and increasing social housing are welcome, we may have reached a point as a society where we need to radically re-think what our expectations are regarding access to housing, and how we live. Governments have a role to play in shaping community expectations and have the capacity and resources to test alternative models.

Recommendation: The State Government may consider testing new housing models that re-frame perceptions around how we live which can provide safe and affordable options for people leaving violent relationships, as well as partnering with organisations which have property and landholdings available to test new models.

The Aged Care Bill 2024 was introduced into Federal Parliament on 12 September 2024 and includes the following:

Individuals can apply to the System Governor for access to funded aged care services and are assessed against a set of eligibility criteria. An individual with care needs who is age 65 or over (or age 50 or over and an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person or homeless or at risk of homelessness) is eligible to undergo an aged care needs assessment by an approved needs assessor.

The inclusion of people being able to access aged care support from age 50 who are homeless or at risk of homelessness is a new development and differs from the Aged Care Act 1997. If legislated, this could transform the accommodation options available to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness aged 50 and over, and potentially reframe a role of the aged care sector.

Helping Hand's Family and Domestic Violence approach

For many years Helping Hand supported staff in an informal capacity when experiencing FDV. For example, in a 15 month period to March 2021, seven staff members within residential services accessed support through our People and Culture team.

Staff were supported to:

- Have flexibility with shifts to allow them to seek assistance
- Utilise personal and/or annual leave provisions with immediate notice
- Counselling support via internal staff and/or EAP services
- Change physical work location
- Front line staff who answer phones were supported in how to respond when perpetrators regularly phoned a workplace
- Managers were supported in how to respond when a perpetrator was regularly turning up to a workplace.

From 1 July 2022, Helping Hand introduced a formal policy and response to FDV. This video was one of many communications to announce the program:

<https://vimeo.com/723208963/83ab88fb39>

To prepare for the introduction, the organisation partnered with Our Watch and Working Women's Centre SA to implement a holistic approach.

The Executive team and senior managers across the organisation were supported by Our Watch through workshops and education sessions to understand the gendered drivers of FDV.

More than 60 managers also participated in training with the Working Women's Centre SA to enable managers to recognise signs of violence; and to safely respond to disclosures.

Support is available to staff including:

- Ten (10) days of paid leave to attend matters associated with FDV, and recorded as Leave – Other
- Flexible working conditions (such as changing location or rosters)
- Emergency support in the form of basic personal items, food vouchers, phone, and emergency accommodation up to \$1,000
- Referral to expert services.

This support is available to all staff, including casual staff, and irrespective of how long someone has worked at the organisation.

The organisation introduced a new Procedure, Risk Assessment process, Personal Safety Plan for staff, and increased awareness through the use of 1800Respect posters. All Managers who were trained in responding to disclosures have 1800Respect business cards on their desks, and staff can search for 'family and domestic violence support' on the Intranet to see a list of Managers who have completed the training. This way, staff have options of who they can choose to talk to.

Staff receiving support

Between July 2022 and September 2024, twelve staff members have accessed FDV support through Helping Hand.

All staff who have accessed support are women.

Ten work in residential care, and two in home care.

One person who works in a regional area and 11 who work in Adelaide have accessed the support.

80 per cent of those who have accessed support are care workers, and 20 per cent are enrolled nurses.

While ten days of paid FDV leave is available, the average leave taken is 4.4 days.

Since the introduction of our policy, from a process point of view, there have been extra measures implemented to fine-tune management of the FDV leave, making it more efficient and confidential in how paid FDV leave is requested/approved and processed by our payroll team.

Case study: At a Helping Hand residential care home, two staff members were walking to the car park after a shift. The partner of one staff member arrived at the workplace and forced his partner into the car. The other staff member alerted management and the police were notified.

The employee was later dropped off at the police station by the partner. Police subsequently found the perpetrator who was arrested.

The People and Culture team at Helping Hand provided support to the staff members involved, who accessed counselling. Safety precautions were reviewed and the staff member was offered to change work locations.

Extra precaution was required because the partner had the staff members phone, which contained her roster information.

Staff at the care home were supported in how to respond if the perpetrator arrived at the workplace again.

The staff member felt confident to continue working when the perpetrator was charged.

The above example demonstrates the pervasive and complex experience of FDV and how widespread the impacts can be within families as well as workplaces. It also demonstrates the critical role of Police, despite evidence of FDV being chronically underreported. The essential role of the work colleague – who was a positive bystander – is also highlighted.

Helping Hand is deeply proud of the commitment it is making to creating a safe workplace, promoting respect, and supporting people who are victims and victim-survivors of FDV. However, the number of people who have accessed support within the workplace only represents 0.5 per cent of our workforce. Given the statistics of FDV, it is conceivable that many other staff are victims and victim-survivors of FDV but are not accessing support. We understand the many reasons why this might be.

Recommendation: Helping Hand encourages the State Government to inspire workplaces to increase FDV leave and other support measures; and to increase awareness among the general population about FDV leave to potentially increase uptake.

Elder Abuse

While there is no agreed definition for elder abuse, the definition most commonly used in Australia is from the World Health Organization:

Elder abuse is a single or repeated act or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust, which causes harm or distress to an older person (WHO 2022).

The number of older people in Australia experiencing abuse is likely to increase over time with Australia's ageing population. While 17 per cent of people in Australia were aged 65 and over in 2021, projections indicate that this group will make up around 21 per cent of the population by 2066.

As an aged care provider our workforce has mandatory training around identifying and reporting elder abuse but many in the general community may not be aware of the signs or impact of elder abuse.

We recognise and acknowledge the work that SA Health does through the Adult Safeguarding Unit. However, more needs to be done to increase awareness within the community. 1 in 2 people who perpetrate elder abuse are a family member. The hidden nature of such violence, often perpetuated behind closed doors, makes it difficult to detect, and victims may hesitate to report abuse out of fear, shame, or loyalty to family members. Addressing elder abuse within the family requires increased awareness, legal protections, and accessible support systems to ensure that older adults live with dignity and security, free from harm.

Recommendation: Helping Hand encourages the State Government to consider elder abuse in the context of family, domestic and sexual violence, as part of the Royal Commission noting the ageing population and the need to create awareness to support vulnerable members in our society.

In closing

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this essential conversation, and to the State Government for holding this Royal Commission. Helping Hand reiterates its position that efforts and funding should be directed to prevention, education and awareness.

Further comment

If you would like to discuss this submission in any further detail, please contact Helping Hand Chief Executive Officer Chris Stewart on [REDACTED]