

Agencies need to change response to family violence

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The Family Violence Death Review Committee (FVDRC) says agencies must take more responsibility for the safety of family violence victims, rather than expecting victims to keep themselves safe from abusive partners.

Women in New Zealand experience a higher rate of violence from their intimate partners than women in 14 other OECD countries. Over a 10-year period there were 312 family violence deaths in New Zealand.

The FVDRC's Fifth Annual Report calls for a number of changes to how both government and non-government organisations (NGOs) respond to family violence, to reduce the rate of violence, abuse, and deaths.

The report says:

- there is a need to stop asking victims to keep themselves safe from abusive partners - practitioners need to proactively make sure victims are safe
- practitioners need to provide long-term assistance to victims rather than one-off safety advice
- there must be more focus on the person using violence, in addition to the victim – changing the behaviours of those using violence is the most effective way to prevent family violence
- violence must be recognised as being not just physical – it is also carried out through control, coercion, and intimidation. These behaviours trap victims.

The report also identifies how the family violence workforce – including the justice, child protection, and mental health and addiction sectors – can be strengthened and work together better.

The FVDRC co-chair Professor Dawn Elder says it is time to change our collective understanding of how we should address family violence.

“We need to think differently about family violence and understand it is not a series of isolated incidents affecting an individual victim. Rather, family violence is a pattern of abusive behaviour used by an individual and between individuals that can have multiple victims – both children and adults – in the past, present and future.”

She says government organisations and NGOs have a crucial part to play in reducing family violence in New Zealand, but they are not currently as effective as they could be.

“Some of the thinking around family violence leads to ineffective responses from services to both victims and those using violence,” she says.

“Treating abuse as a problem that can be remedied solely by giving victims advice and leaving them to take action alone, or treating abusive people as being beyond saving, doesn't work. Family violence is a pervasive problem in our society that has the potential to destroy the lives of both the direct victims, and indirect victims (usually children), and also the lives of those using violence. We need to work

together and improve our responses considerably if we are going to bring about change.”

Professor Elder says agencies still see the victim as having the ability to walk away if she wants to; this kind of thinking further entraps victims and their children in the abusive situation.

“Victims do ask for help – often repeatedly – but our FVDRC reviews indicate that they often need to get a more helpful and informed response. There are many barriers to help-seeking that need to be identified and understood.”

Some organisations also still don’t see the link between intimate partner abuse and child abuse.

“If a person is abusing a child, FVDRC reviews have found they are likely to be abusing the child’s primary carer as well. Also where there is intimate partner abuse and children are present in the home, then by definition there has been exposure to emotional abuse and the children are at increased risk of being physically abused as well. These are entangled forms of family violence and must always be identified and addressed together.”

FVDRC co-chair Professor Denise Wilson says in spite of the needed changes in thinking, the FVDRC is encouraged by the willingness of agencies to work in a more integrated way.

“The report has been drafted in consultation with many of the agencies responsible for policy around family violence and we are working closely with them.”

These agencies include the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Social Development, the Ministry of Health, New Zealand Police, Te Puni Kōkiri, the Department of Corrections, the Ministry for Women, the Office of the Children’s Commissioner, the Judiciary, the National Collective of Independent Women’s Refuges, and other family violence NGOs.

Professor Wilson says the current cross-government focus on family violence is also very encouraging.

“The Ministerial Group on Family Violence and Sexual Violence, led by Ministers Adams and Tolley, is committed to improving the systemic response to family violence. The group has launched an ambitious cross-government work programme.”

The FVDRC fifth report does not contain updates on statistics. A data report will be released by the committee later this year