Yarra Ranges Council Family Violence Guide for Leaders (Covid-19)

*For families affected by violence, COVID-19 driven social distancing and isolation measures can pose increased risk. No matter what the external stressors, violence is never excusable* *(Respect Victoria).*

**March 2020**

This guide for Leaders accompanies the ‘Fact Sheet: Family Violence in Emergencies (COVID-19)’ being distributed to employees as part of Yarra Ranges Councils support to employees during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Context**

It is well established that family violence reports, incidents and police call outs increase during periods of emergency. Yarra Ranges Council employees are no different to any other community member. Many have been, and may be currently be, impacted by family violence. The support mechanisms we have in place are regularly enacted by our People and Culture (P&C) department and we are committed to continuing this regardless of how we are operating.

We are communicating with employees that, as an organisation, we take the increased risk that emergencies can create seriously and are committed to continuing to support anyone experiencing family violence.

Teams may now be interacting in different ways. Online platforms, while useful to maintain team cohesion and ensure business continuity, may not give employees the same level of confidence to share deeply personal and difficult circumstances.

Arranging a face to face meeting with a designated P&C family violence response representative may not be an easily accessible option and people may be less willing to make contact through non personal means such as phone or email. As such we need Leaders to appropriately respond to those who share their experiences and require organisational support.

The core principles underpinning this Leaders Guide are:

* The well-being of the employee and ensuring continuity of support in an environment known to lead to increased exposure to family violence.
* The well-being of the Leader responding to any disclosure and ensuring that they are not isolated throughout this process.

Any leader who has questions after reading this document is encouraged to make a time to discuss with either XXX, Manager People and Culture, [XXX@yarraranges.vic.gov.au](mailto:XXX@yarraranges.vic.gov.au) or Kathy Oliver, Gender Equity Lead, [k.oliver@yarraranges.vic.gov.au](mailto:k.oliver@yarraranges.vic.gov.au)

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Family Violence in Emergencies

Family violence increases during emergencies. Local agencies responsible for responding to family violence are warning of a very likely increase in cases as a result of the Covid-19 Pandemic. Community responses and resourcing which were already stretched to capacity are anticipating they will be even more so throughout this period.

COVID-19 specific factors

Isolation and social distancing practices may mean that victim-survivors are forced to share space with perpetrators for extended periods of time. This brings with it a backdrop of external stressors including:

* anxiety arising from the state of flux (for themselves as well as family and loved ones)
* financial uncertainty including for other household members such as job loss, small business failure and reduced or cancelled shifts for casual workers
* food insecurity (fuelled by panic shopping) and the stress of increased time sourcing food
* restlessness from changed daily habits and reduced social interaction

These could lead to a spike in family violence. It should be firmly noted that *violence is never excusable*.

Key features of family violence in emergencies

* For half of the people who experience family violence during this crisis it will be the first time they have experienced it.
* Family violence may escalate or remerge for someone who has previously experienced family violence.
* Anecdotal reports from other countries indicate that family violence call outs were 2-3 times higher as the crisis peaked.
* Many cases will go undetected because it is happening in the privacy of someone’s home.
* Victim-survivors report feeling trapped during times of emergencies as they may feel unable to make plans or leave. Perpetrators may also prevent them from enacting their plan.
* Victim-survivors may minimise their experience during times of crisis. They may feel that attention is more deserving or needed elsewhere.
* Phone lines and service providers may become stretched with both an increase in need but also if workers themselves become unwell.
* Social support structures, such as those found in the workplace and amongst their regular contacts, will not be as easily available.
* Shared custody arrangements may require renegotiation and may lead to increased conflict with an ex-partner.
* Other factors may impact someone’s experience of family violence. This can include, but is not limited to, gender-identity, disability, Aboriginality, age, culture, sexuality, language and socio-economic status.

*Resources*

<https://www.respectvictoria.vic.gov.au/news/staying-safe-current-environment>

<https://providers.dhhs.vic.gov.au/family-violence-emergencies>

Gender in emergencies

Research indicates that gender inequality can be worsened in emergency situations as people adhere or revert to traditional gender roles. Examples of this include men taking control of the emergency-related decision-making processes in the family, and women taking on caring for dependents (both sick and healthy) and household duties such as finding suitable food and necessities, cooking and cleaning.

These gender roles might play out differently depending on aspects of identity including Aboriginality and sexuality.

*Resources*

<https://providers.dhhs.vic.gov.au/family-violence-emergencies>

2. YRC Leaders Responsibility for Responding to Family Violence

2.1. What is Family Violence?

As per the *Family Violence Protection Act 2008 (Vic),* Council understands that family violence includes behaviourby a person towards a family member that:

* + is physically or sexually abusive
  + is emotionally or psychologically abusive
  + is economically abusive
  + is threatening
  + is coercive
  + in any other way controls or dominates the family member and causes that family member to feel fear for the safety or wellbeing of that family member or another person.

2.2 As a leader your role is NOT:

* To be a Counsellor or provide case management.
* To find the solution for someone.
* To judge any decision someone makes for themselves.
* To encourage someone to leave.
* To undertake safety planning on someone’s behalf.
* To commit to a long-term plan of action.

2.3 As a leader your role IS:

* To be responsive and supportive towards team members when they have the courage to disclose family violence or fear for their own safety.
* To respond with appropriate levels of care and empathy.
* To notice if something isn’t ‘quite right’.
* To remember that someone may not be able to communicate in case a perpetrator is present in the home or remotely monitoring them (phones, computers, tracking devices and hidden video cameras are all possible).
* To appropriately explore what the cause of someone’s reduced performance might be.
* To understand that family violence is not just physical.
* To understand that people’s experiences may be impacted by their gender identity, sexuality, culture, economic-status, health, disability and many other factors.
* To seek support for others if needed.

3. Responding appropriately to Disclosures of Family Violence

3.1. Expectations

Leaders need to provide a basic and appropriate response to team members who disclose family violence. You are required to equip yourself with the information to do so. We acknowledge that on occasion some leaders may not feel they have the skills to do this or may have previous experiences which may lead to trauma. If you do not feel able to respond appropriately, please immediately refer to a nominated P&C Family Violence Response representative (listed at the end of this document).

In most cases however, responding in the moment to a team member or colleague is the best course of action. Please see below some guidelines to assist you:

3.2 Recognise

***Recognise the key indicators***

Someone experiencing family violence:

* appear nervous, ashamed or evasive
* describe their partner as controlling or prone to anger
* seem uncomfortable or anxious when their partner is present in the home
* suffer anxiety, panic attacks, stress and/or depression
* appear emotionally ‘flat’
* have a drug abuse problem including dependency on tranquillisers or alcohol
* have chronic headaches, asthma and/or vague aches and pain
* have sleeping and/or eating disorders
* have attempted suicide and/or have a psychiatric illness
* have physical signs of violence such as bruising on the chest and abdomen, multiple injuries, minor cuts, injuries during pregnancy and/or ruptured eardrums

3.3 Respect

***Respect the experience of others***

* respect the story, do not question the ‘truth’ or ‘validity’
* validate their experience – for example, ‘that sounds really difficult’
* respect the integrity of their decisions

3.4 Refer

Refer your team member to the appropriate agencies as listed at the end of this document and on the Fact Sheet: Family Violence in Emergencies (COVID-19).

4. Checklist for Responding to Family Violence Disclosures

4.1 Checklist

It may be useful to work through this list as you are having a discussion with someone who has disclosed they are experiencing family violence. This list is not exhaustive. You will need to use your discretion as to what is and isn’t appropriate.

* Do they feel safe right now? If the answer is no, ask them to call 000.
* Listen to what they have to say and believe what they tell you.
* Respond with an appropriate level of empathy for their situation.
* Do not ask lots of questions about the situation – you do not need details.
* Discuss support services they might be best placed to contact. EDVOS will be appropriate in most cases.
* In other instances, more dedicated services may be appropriate. Do not assume that you are aware of all aspects of someone’s identity. Ask them to look at the fact sheet to see if there are any specialist support services that may be appropriate for them.
* Ask them what support they require from Yarra Ranges Council as an employer.
* If a period of leave from work is required the following may be helpful to discuss:
  + All needs are assessed on a case by case basis
  + At times immediate leave may be appropriate e.g. for someone with medical requirements, attending court, moving to emergency accommodation or organising clothing and items for themselves, children or pets.
  + Discuss what is required in terms of leave for the immediate situation.
  + Continuity of employment and the network this provides may be critical to an individual. Sometimes, it is preferable to support someone with short ‘bursts’ of leave, particularly initially, to alleviate pressure. Please discuss any leave request with a nominated P&C Family Violence Response representative.
* If someone is not feeling safe to work at home, remind them that they have a safe place to work at a YRC office. They can practice social distancing due to the low numbers in the office.
* As appropriate, discuss with the person if their workload needs to be adjusted. People experiencing trauma may not have the same level of output as they usually do. Negotiate adjustments as needed.
* Determine if there are any privacy concerns. Do they need their work contact details changed or adjusted?
* Encourage them to contact our EAP provider.
* Explain confidentiality with the person as per below.

4.1 Confidentiality

As a general principle, the less people who know the better.

* You can reassure the employee that you will maintain confidentiality, however, due to the specific nature of a pandemic context the following exception applies:
  + You are strongly encouraged to report a disclosure of family violence to a P&C Family Violence Response representative as listed at the end of this document.
  + The name of the employee will need to be disclosed only to this person. This ensures that support can be provided to the employee if you become unable to perform your role. It also provides P&C with the opportunity to ensure you are not isolated and sitting with the knowledge of family violence and provide additional support to you.
  + The details of their situation do not need to be disclosed
  + There is no requirement for the employee to speak directly to P&C. This is available should they choose to, but you can remain the key point of contact.

5. Looking after Leaders

5.1 How you might feel after a disclosure is made you

* Distressed for your team member
* Sad that our support is limited to the workplace
* Concerned about their welfare and safety
* Reflective on the support you provided in the moment
* Positive that you have been able to support someone

It is normal to feel a whole range of emotions including unsettled, upset or distressed following a disclosure of Family Violence. Our natural inclination is to help someone and to feel concerned for their welfare. Talking to someone else such as our EAP or a P&C Family Violence Response representative may assist you to process this.

5.2 What support can you expect from YRC

* Opportunity for you to reflect on how you responded – we don’t always know if we handled it well and talking through what happened can be beneficial.
* Confirmation that the support you offered was appropriate.
* Ideas on how to extend support if needed.
* Recommendations around monitoring someone’s safety and appropriate level of follow up.
* Recommendations to discuss your experience with our EAP provider.
* Reassurance that you do not hold the information and accountability alone.

Supporting someone experiencing family violence can be difficult. The support provided to you can be negotiated based on what you need.

6. Suspected abuse toward others

6.2 What if I suspect an employee is abusing another adult in their home

With the increase of people working from home you may witness or hear something in your interactions that leads you to suspect an employee is abusing someone in their home.

It is not recommended that you confront the person at this time *unless* you believe someone’s safety to be at immediate risk. You should call 000 if someone is in immediate danger.

If you don’t believe anyone to be in immediate danger, your first point of call is to contact XXX, Manager, People and Culture, to discuss your concerns and determine a course of action.

6.2 What if I suspect a child is being abused

The Safeguarding Children Policy promotes child safety and guides employees in identifying and reporting alleged child abuse. It also outlines how to manage various risks when working with children.

Examples of what must be reported include:

* Physical Abuse – non-accidental infliction of physical violence, which injures or harms a child.
* Sexual Abuse - when an adult uses force or power to involve a child in sexual activity.
* Emotional/Psychological Abuse –rejecting, isolating, excluding, threatening, verbal abuse, coldness.
* Neglect - failing to meet a child’s basic needs; food, drink, clothing, hygiene, medical attention, supervision.
* Family Violence – any violent, threatening, coercive or controlling behaviour in a domestic setting.
* Grooming – when an adult communicates and/or attempts to establish a relationship to prepare a child for sexual activity at a later time.

**Immediate physical danger or if the concern relates to child sexual abuse**

* You must report it to Victoria Police on 000 and contact your Supervisor/Line Manager to inform them a report has been made.

**Concerns where there is a reasonable belief that a child is at risk of abuse**

* You must contact your Supervisor/Line Manager before reporting to authorities.  
  Report to DHHS Child Protection  on 1300 363 391 or 13 12 87 (after hours).

People and Culture Family Violence Response Representatives

*XXX*, Manager P&C, 04XX XXX XXX, [XXX@yarraranges.vic.gov.au](mailto:XXX@yarraranges.vic.gov.au)

*Kathy Oliver*, Gender Equity Lead, 03 9294 6709, [k.oliver@yarraranges.vic.gov.au](mailto:k.oliver@yarraranges.vic.gov.au)

*XXX*, EO Human Resources, 04XX XXX XXX, [XXX@yarraranges.vic.gov.au](mailto:XXX@yarraranges.vic.gov.au)

*XXX*, EO Organisational Development, 04XX XXX XXX, [XXX@yarraranges.vic.gov.au](mailto:XXX@yarraranges.vic.gov.au)

*XXX*, HR Business Partner, 04XX XXX XXX, [XXX@yarraranges.vic.gov.au](mailto:XXX@yarraranges.vic.gov.au)

*XXX,* EO, Employee Relations, 04XX XXX XXX, [XXX@yarraranges.vic.gov.au](mailto:XXX@yarraranges.vic.gov.au)

Family violence service providers

* If in danger call 000
* Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre, 1800 015 188 (24 hours)
* EDVOS, 9259 4200 (Mon to Fri, 9am–5pm)
* Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault, 9870 7330
* Women’s Information Referral Exchange (WIRE), 1300 134 130
* Boorndawan Willam Aboriginal Healing Service, 9212 0200
* In touch Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence, 1800 755 988
* Kara House Lesbian Domestic Violence Outreach Service 1800 900 520
* Victorian Police Gay and Lesbian Liaison Officers 9247 6244
* Q Life 1800 184 527 (3pm to midnight)
* Lifeline, 13 11 14
* Parentline, 1300 301 300
* Kids Helpline, 1800 55 1800
* Child Protection Crisis Line, 1300 360 391
* Homeless Crisis Line, 1800 825 955
* Anchor (Housing Support), 9760 6400
* Eastern Community Legal Centre, 5962 1665
* Men’s Referral Service, 1300 766 49
* Domestic Violence Resource Centre (DVRC), information for women with disabilities, young people, men and employees at <https://www.dvrcv.org.au/>ing