Local Government Preventing Violence Against Women Projects

**Wimmera Act@Work to Prevent Violence Against Women**

**Horsham Rural City Council**

**Project Process:**

Horsham Rural City Council contracted Women’s Health Grampians to deliver the Act@Work program to the Wimmera Councils. Two staff from Women’s Health Grampians were involved in the delivery of the Act@Work Program; both staff have had experience within the local government sector.

The Act@Work program is a workplace culture change program to increase knowledge of sexism, discrimination and violence against women by taking action at the organisational level and by developing skills of individuals to take action to intervene safely and effectively. The Act@Work Program involves the following steps:

1. Leadership briefing to senior management of each organisation on PVAW and Act@Work
2. Formation of an internal Act@Work Action Group
3. Conducting an Organisation Needs Assessment to look at the policies of each organisation, training and induction processes, workplace culture, history of involvement in PVAW, community connections etc.
4. Baseline Survey of staff to ascertain attitudes and willingness to take bystander action
5. Delivery of Bystander Training – all staff (2hrs) and a more intensive bystander training session (6hrs) for the Action Group and leadership team
6. Development of an organisation wide Action Plan
7. Post training Survey to measure change in attitudes
8. Resources to support organisation are provided – e.g. posters, resource information,

Action Plans contain action in four area s - workplace culture; physical environment; community connections and health and wellbeing of staff. The actions that have been developed were tailored to what each Council identified based on where they were at, and their capacity to deliver and sustain action.

**Achievements and successes:**

Each Council now has a framework for action to progress work going forward in relation to PVAW. For organisations that have not had much history in this space, the action plans provide a focus for this work. For Councils that have had more involvement to date in PVAW, the Action Plans provide for greater involvement across the organisation in delivery of PVAW actions. Delivery of actions from the plans is still in early days, but the recent round of Council Plans have shown that there is greater recognition of PVAW and gender equity in these critical Council documents.

Training has been provided to Council staff in relation to the extent and nature of violence against women, the causes of violence against women, gender equity and the importance of bystander action, as well as some tools to use when taking bystander action. Over 450 staff in the four municipalities have received training, and it is hoped that this information will then spread to families, clubs and groups within the community. Since the training there is greater awareness of prevalence of violence against women and also of gender stereotypes; and increased levels of confidence in taking action – as per the quote below from an Action group member -

*“Initially there was scepticism about the Act@Work program and that there were any issues within the Shire in relation to violence against women. The response to initial surveys indicated this, but statistics presented during the training program provided evidence that there are issues and staff members now clearly have a better understanding.*

*Some male staff members had concerns about how to talk to and approach females after the training as they were confused by some aspects of the training, but those concerns now appear resolved after they spoke to other people”.*

Surveys that have occurred show overall positive shifts in knowledge, skills, attitudes and willingness to be an active bystander from pre-program results. This is consistent with the evaluation conducted on the initial Act@Work program. The surveys also show areas where organisations can continue to focus their work.

Overwhelmingly the training feedback showed that staff were very happy or happy for their organisation to be involved in the Act@Work program.

**Project challenges and issues:**

A challenge for the rollout of this program was the change within Councils following the 2016 election and the planning cycles associated with Council Plans and Health and Wellbeing Plans which take up considerable resources (time) in smaller Councils.

The start-up time of the project late in the 2016 calendar year also meant that detailed work within Council’s was unable to occur until February 2017, creating time pressures in delivery of the program.

The focus of the Act@Work program on prevention of violence against women has been challenging for some Council staff. This gender specific focus has been seen as discriminatory (by some) and as a consequence in some organisations there was backlash – e.g. removal of posters regarding PVAW, why focus on women, what about violence against men etc. Some of this backlash was experienced in the initial phases of the program prior to training, and is something for organisations to be aware of when undertaking similar work. The application of a gendered lens and the equity – equality journey is also something that is challenging – i.e. use of gender specific or gender transformative policy approaches.

Culture change requires a long term approach. Sustaining action will be critical. Training participants often indicated “we are too old and set in our ways, you need to focus on the kids”. The Act@Work program has challenged people to think about language, behaviours and stereotypes, and this can be difficult. Of the issues surveyed the telling of sexist jokes in social and workplace settings is the area where there is greatest diversity as to whether people think it is OK, sometimes OK, rarely OK or never OK. This is also the area where there is greatest diversity in people’s willingness and levels of comfort in taking action.

**Advice:**

Organisations need to be clear what they hope to get out of the Act@Work program.

It is important for referral information to be included in material associated with the program internally as there have been disclosures by staff members who have or know of people that are affected by family violence.

Commitment from leadership of Council is critical and a clear show of support from the Chief Executive and other senior officers is critical to send a message to staff on the importance of the issue and to the overall success of the program.