

Organisational spotlight:

Collaboration between family violence and sexual assault services

Historically, sexual assault and family violence services had separate funding and approaches, albeit with the same feminist framework and gendered lens. The Royal Commission into Family Violence recommendation 31 endorses collaboration between specialist family violence and sexual assault services, and recommendation 32 will determine whether the two service responses should be unified. Pre-empting these recommendations, Minerva Community Services and Barwon CASA signalled their intention to merge in 2016 and we asked some of their staff to discuss how the merger between the Geelong based sexual assault and family violence services has progressed so far.

Why did the two services decide to merge?

Janice Watt: The same group of women were involved in the creation of both organisations and lobbied governments of the day for funding. We've always been like sister organisations with the same philosophy and cooperative, supportive ethos, which made the merger easier. The Boards of each organisation had been talking for some time.

Tina Rowley: The value of a more coordinated way of working emerged about three years ago when a Barwon CASA counsellor advocate provided out-posted counselling support for 12 weeks at Minerva. She saw that partnering with a Minerva case manager who could take women through the next phase of their support was a good way to link women with court support, a Risk Assessment and Management Panel or to access housing/ refuge. When Minerva relocated across the car park from Barwon CASA that proximity led to further referrals which strengthened an already intentional relationship. Our data showed that 65% of clients impacted by sexual assault experienced it within the context of family violence, which is a significant co-occurrence.

What's the benefit of a combined sexual assault and family violence response for women?

Bri: We understand that a woman's progress through a service is not linear and her risk may elevate while engaged in therapeutic counselling. Because we offer both a family violence and sexual assault response, we're now able to respond immediately when a woman's risk elevates and keep her engaged with therapeutic counselling without the interruption that would happen if we referred her to another service. We've had great feedback from clients who've experienced the benefits of accessing different streams of the service.

After accessing the service, one of the clients said, "The fact that all the services are in the one building helps heaps too. Not just that it is more convenient, but that it is less unsettling – especially for kids – if you have to familiarise with one place. It's more comforting to be in familiar surrounds."

Deb Mountjoy: Shared professional development opportunities has led to our Counsellor/Advocates understanding more about L17s, intensive case management, court support and the refuge and our case managers have broadened their understanding of therapeutic trauma-informed practice, which has led to more effective responses. We conducted a series of workshops to give staff an opportunity to share what they do and how they do it which informed a practice framework for our client-facing services. The practice framework and accompanying implementation plan will guide and strengthen our work as we move towards operating as a single high performing organisation over the next 18 months.

Bri: We've also created more entry points to our range of programs and services as a result of the merger. For example, women accessing counselling can now easily access case management and vice versa. It's been heartening that the Royal Commission into Family Violence emphasised collaboration, it vindicates the direction we were already taking.

How would you define the major challenges of such a merger?

Deb Mountjoy: One of the challenges of bringing two organisations together is managing two strong cultures. We understand the importance of preserving the specialist nature of the different services while sharing knowledge and skills. Both organisations are high volume operational services and the demand doesn't stop while you're creating a new organisation, investing in staff, building a shared culture and combining practice knowledge.

Janice Watt: We've found that family violence and sexual assault services have more in common than not, there's so much to offer as an integrated holistic service rather than operating separately. Our data, our merger, the way we work, the outcomes, all tell us that this is the most appropriate way to assist people towards recovery from the trauma of experiencing family violence and sexual assault.

Barwon CASA started as Women Against Rape in 1978, one of the first sexual assault centres in Victoria. In 2006 they started providing family violence counselling as part of the integrated family violence reforms.

Minerva Community Services has provided specialist family violence support for women and children including a refuge since 1979.

Both services operate within a feminist framework, focussing on social justice, gender equality, and human rights, and view family violence and sexual assault as gendered violence.

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Multi-Disciplinary Centre Client