

**Organisational spotlight:**

# Are we two steps closer to ending family violence?

If community legal centres can step in when early signs of family violence present themselves, we can minimise harm and make the lives of women and children safe and more secure. Eastern Community Legal Centre (ECLC) has moved outside of traditional legal practice and developed two early intervention programs proving to be ground-breaking. We spoke with Marika Manioudakis, Manager – Major Projects, from ECLC to hear first-hand how these programs are helping to keep women and children safe.

For nine years, ECLC have been looking at the whole continuum of family violence response and what more they can do as a community legal service. Almost three-quarters of their work directly involves family violence, so it's critical for them to respond sooner and integrate services to reach women before crisis point. It's something the whole legal sector continually grapples with. To do this requires a new way of thinking, designing and employing early intervention models, which all organisations, including local governments and health services, need to be open and brave enough to try testing new and more challenging approaches.

The challenge for ECLC was responding more safely to the legal needs of women at an earlier stage, when those initial warning signs of family violence begin to show. But they couldn't do it alone — they needed the expertise and support of other organisations who had relationships with women at that critical time. As the evidence shows, high risk periods for women experiencing family violence are during pregnancy and in the months after a woman gives birth. With almost 99 percent of women visiting their local Maternal and Child Health (MCH) centres during those first months, these services were an obvious starting place for ECLC to design three models for reaching and engaging mothers.

## **Mabels: Defining and establishing early intervention.**

Developing their Mabels program called for ECLC to understand and define what 'early intervention' means within a legal and family violence context. Establishing a clear definition was essential in developing a practice model that worked best for the needs of women. As Marika reflects: "we had to question: 'how can we work in health settings and not just provide a standard legal or family violence response that may cause a woman to disengage?'" After lots of

conceptual grappling, they found Domestic Violence Victoria's (DV Vic) definition – "identification and support for individuals and families experiencing family violence with the aim of stopping early signs of violence escalating, preventing a recurrence of violence or reducing longer-term harm"<sup>6</sup> – most useful for Mabels.

During 2015, ECLC established their Mabels program as a Health Justice Partnership between MCH services within two local government councils and Boorndawan Willam Aboriginal Healing Service. Although the program was inclusive of all women, they wanted to direct focus to Aboriginal women due to the high rates of family violence they experience - three times the rate of non-indigenous women. Aboriginal women are also far less likely to attend MCH appointments so a more targeted approach was needed.

Health Justice Partnerships are unique because they provide an opportunity for legal services to work directly within healthcare settings. For ECLC, it means their lawyers get out of their offices and into the community. This might sound simple but it involves a slow and dedicated process of building and sustaining relationships with organisations they're not normally familiar with. It's also about having that shared approach which helps break down the silos that have made responding to and preventing family violence so difficult. What's more, it aligns with the recommendations that came out of the Family Violence Royal Commission.

Mabels' early intervention approach involves having both a family violence lawyer and

family violence advocate attend clinic appointments at an MCH site. The two then work with nurses to build their capacity to clearly identify the often subtle early warning signs of family violence. For early intervention and integrated practice to succeed on the ground, all parties need to see value in the work; need to support each other; and need to feel ownership in the process and outcomes. Put simply, they need to embed trust in all parts of the model and its delivery. ECLC call this 'trust transference', where trust snowballs from mother to nurse to family violence advocate and lawyer.

Having that level of trust and coordinated approach has produced some fantastic results. Between 2015 and 2018, they helped 357 women and 480 children. What astounded them most was the feedback they received from women going through the program: 88 percent said they had a better understanding of what family violence is after their appointment; 100 percent said they felt safer after their initial appointment; and 82 percent felt understood and felt confident to ask the lawyer questions.

## **WELS: working with women in the antenatal phase.**

Given the success of Mabels, ECLC decided to apply the same practice principles to support women during the antenatal phase, another high-risk period for women. As a spin off from Mabels, they worked with Eastern Health and brought to life another Health Justice Partnership – the Women

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Engaging in Living Safely (WELS) program. This relatively new program focuses on women accessing maternity services prior to giving birth.

One day a week, the WELS lawyer is based at the hospital's antenatal services making it possible for them to be more responsive to women needing legal advice for family violence or any other legal problem. While this program is in its early stages, it is already showing promising results from the anecdotal evidence from lawyers on the ground.

#### **SAGE: Taking integrated practice to a whole new level.**

Given the opportunities that Mabels and WELS provided women, ECLC wanted to direct their response to the more complex legal and support needs of women. So, in 2017, their SAGE (Support. Advice. Guidance. Empowerment) program was developed for women who would not ordinarily engage with the legal system. SAGE helps women from priority communities overcome the barriers to getting the support they need.

SAGE works with women with the most marginalised backgrounds in our community:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women;
- women from migrant, refugee or culturally diverse backgrounds;
- women living with a disability;
- women experiencing mental health issues; and
- women living in rural or remote locations.

ECLC coordinate a specialist community lawyer with an advocate to collaborate on intensive legal and family violence support and link them into wraparound support services as well as provide co-case management. Marika emphasises: 'by bringing the lawyer, advocate and the woman together into the appointment, she doesn't have to repeat her story and risk being re-traumatised. That's the kind of integrated practice we're committed to establishing and embedding into everyday practice.'

The program may require a short-term intervention or, in some cases they will work with a woman for over two years, depending on her needs. These women will have complex issues and are in a vulnerable situation with unstable or no housing, children to care for, fines, and criminal issues in some cases. All of this on top of experiencing trauma and family violence. With the SAGE approach, women get the support they need to remain safely engaged within the legal system. The program will refer her to services that help safeguard her and minimise the trauma she and her children may be experiencing.

Eastern Community Legal Centre's innovative approaches to legal service helps make a difficult and traumatic period for women and their children safer and smoother. Connecting with services and reaching women before they are at crisis point not only keeps women safer but also demystifies the legal system for them. At a policy level, these programs have proven to be best practice and have the potential to influence, innovate and ultimately improve other service models. ■

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To find out more about Eastern Community Legal Centre and their programs visit [www.eclc.org.au](http://www.eclc.org.au)

For a visual overview of how Mabels can be applied universal settings see our infographic on page 16

To learn more about the Mabels program you can access a copy of the evaluation report at <https://www.eclc.org.au/what-we-do/partnerships-and-projects/mabels/>

To learn more about the SAGE program visit: <https://www.eclc.org.au/what-we-do/partnerships-and-projects/sage/>