



SERVICES AND PRACTITIONERS
FOR THE ELIMINATION OF ABUSE
QUEENSLAND

Working with men because women asked us to

Rodney Vlasis, with Rosemary O'Malley

Rosemary O'Malley is Director of the Domestic Violence Prevention Centre in the Gold Coast (DVPC), which has been at the hub of one of Australia's longest running integrated domestic and family violence responses. In this interview, Rosemary discusses how the integrated response came about, why they decided to work with men, and some of the current growing edges of this work.

We really appreciate your time to talk to us today Rosemary, we know it's such a busy time in many ways. There are few specialist women's domestic and family violence agencies in Australia – whose core work is women's and children's advocacy – which run a program for men who perpetrate violence. Outside of Queensland I can only think of one example each in the ACT and Victoria at the current time. Why did the Domestic Violence Prevention Centre take this work on?

It's quite simple really. The women we worked with told us to.

Women teaching us how to do the work is the basis of all that we do as an agency. Some were telling us that they didn't want to leave their partner, that they loved him and wanted his violence and control to stop. Or that they still had to co-parent with their ex-partner, and wanted to be able to do that without the threats, intimidation, coercion and fear. We had to listen to them.

Yes, I think that's the experience of many men's behaviour change program providers, that some women want the relationship to continue and their partner to get help about their behaviour. Why did DVPC decide to take this work on, however, as a specialist women's service? Why didn't you advocate for a different agency to develop a program as part of the Integrated Response?

That's a really good question. We really wanted the work with the men to sit firmly within the integrated response, not as a stand-alone program. Running it ourselves through a very close relationship with Southport Corrections was the best way we could wrap safety around the program, and keep what women and children needed at the centre at all times.

It felt to us the best way that we could work with integrity to our agency's mission, and the best way to be transparent to the women we support, was if we had a strong hand in working with the men. It meant that risk assessments arising through our role as the victim advocate, through the men's program, and through supervision provided by Probation and Parole officers, could all feed into each other on a detailed and weekly basis. It felt the best way to keep women and children at the centre of the integrated response.

This arrangement is not that unusual anymore. The DV service in Townsville has a long running men's program, the DV service at Logan runs a men's program, and the Brisbane DV service has recently started up a men's program with Probation and Parole doing the assessments and being heavily involved in supporting the program.



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How did the men's program initially come about?

Our integrated response started in 1996, a few years before the men's program started. We had an awful period in 1996 where five women were killed on the Gold Coast by their current or former partner in the space of just eight months. Some of these women were killed by men who were being supervised through Probation and Parole. These women's deaths provided the authorising environment for us to try something different.

Probation and parole were a big part of developing the integrated response. We now have an increasing proportion of men coming into the program along different pathways – child protection, family support services and courts via the civil Voluntary Intervention Orders. But until the last few years, 95% plus percent of our referrals came through Probation and Parole. They were wanting help, not just a program to refer the men they were supervising to, but an additional set of highly specialised and experienced eyes on the men. To help identify and to support them to respond to risks.

So the integrated response back then was driven by us, Corrections, police, the local sexual assault service, and the refuge provider. It's been a slow, gradual development. We've had to learn how to work together over the years, not all of it has come naturally. For quite a while Probation and Parole co-facilitated the men's program with us, which really helped our relationship to grow. Now we have a diverse facilitation team and recently we had our first child safety officer co-facilitating the program, which will also grow that relationship.

The men's program started around that time?

A few years later. We started the men's behaviour change program in 1999. But it really got going in the early 2000s. Betty Taylor won a Churchill Fellowship in 2001 where she strategically visited a number of sites of Batterer Intervention Programs in the US, that were part of integrated responses: San Diego, Duluth, etc. She came back really energised by Duluth. And we've been on a journey to apply Duluth with the most integrity we can ever since.

What was it about the Duluth approach that attracted you all at the time?

There's a lot of stereotypes and myths about the Duluth approach flying around. That it's all about just challenging the men all the time, all about social education and classes and not about walking with men on their journeys. After some recent skype-based training by Scott Miller from Duluth, we realised we needed to update our understanding of how they have been going about the work, and how this has changed in the past 25 years. We've been using all the updated materials, but not appreciated how the approach is a living thing that's changed from how we've been used to thinking about it. It was quite a humbling realisation, really!

We were attracted to it back then, and still are, because it's an approach to working with the men that fits really well within an integrated response. It's like, well, here's the integrated response – now how does adding work with the men fit with everything else? How does it improve the response? That's the whole basis for working with men, to improve the integrated response's ability to focus on women and children's safety.

That's the core of Duluth. Yes, it's feminist, and yes, it focuses on a structural understanding of men's choices to use violence. But Duluth isn't the only approach influenced by feminism and structural understandings of gender-based power. It's the focus on the men's program, on probation and parole, on specialised DV courts, or police responses, on child protection responses, as part of a greater whole. It's not a siloed approach of different services coming together and trying to find reasons and processes to be integrated. The integrated response is a living thing in itself.

Could you tell us more about how this joined-up risk assessment and risk management approach works in practice?

Apart from daily ongoing conversations, and weekly feedback from program sessions, we have monthly co-case management meetings with Probation and Parole to focus on each of the men in the program in detail, to make sure that risk issues don't slip through the cracks. Sometimes it's the quieter men that we need to

give more focus to, the ones that don't have obvious red flags. These meetings are a good way of reviewing where each man is at in his journey, how the risk he poses to family members might be decreasing or increasing, things that worry us about him that we haven't yet been able to get a handle on.

However, the weekly exchange of information is crucial. This is where the co-case management model can really shine. The men's program workers, women's advocate and probation and parole officer share detailed info on a weekly basis. This is not only the usual sharing of information between the women's advocate – or 'partner contact' worker – and the men's program practitioners. It's the three-way sharing of information that informs the individualised co-case management approach to the man, each week.

Probation and parole get a report from the men's program after each session about relevant issues concerning the men they are supervising, based on their participation in the program. This includes not only what the group session focused on, but also how each participant engaged with the material, what seemed to come up for him during the session, and so on.

And also, we might discuss stuff going on in the man's life that's pertinent to the work he's doing. We might know this from what he says in the group, or from the victim's advocate work with his partner, or from what he says he's discussed with his Probation Officer during previous office or home visits.

After our weekly exchange, the probation and parole officer checks in with the man about how he's doing and whether he's getting the support that he needs. They also talk with him about the focus of last week's group session – to reinforce the material that was covered and explore with him the meaning he took from the session – and how he might put some things into practice from the session. For example, they might ask "You talked about some ways that you've put your partner down in the past week. What were you trying to do with that behaviour? What's the cost for you and your relationship?"

The probation officer can also prepare the man for the group session ahead. If he was feeling wobbly in the last group session – and yes, it's entirely consistent with the Duluth approach to support men's journeys when they are feeling wobbly – the probation officer can ask "How Are you going to handle Thursday's group session with everything you're holding onto this week? What do you need to focus on so that you can continue to make changes the changes you want to now and into the future?"

We're totally upfront with the men about this exchange of information. And it increases the intensity of the intervention when the men's program practitioners and probation and parole work this closely together. If he's supervised weekly, it's like two sessions of behaviour change work per week, in a way. Or at least an integrated approach focusing on risk, his motivation to change, what's happening in his life that could support or get in the way of the change process.

This sounds pretty intense. How do you get time for this?

It's the thing about the Duluth approach, or our attempt at a Duluth approach. It's not just the group sessions. They're important, but the stuff happening in-between the group sessions is just as important. Each component of the response contributes to other components. That's got to be factored into the budget, and people's position descriptions.

We're now running four parallel programs per week. That's an average of 64 men. There's a lot to do to take this approach. We're far from perfect. Women died last year on our watch. We need to keep reflecting, learning. We ask the men to look back at their behaviour, which is the last thing they want to do, as the basis of making different choices into the future. We've got to do the same.

Queensland is rolling out a high-risk team model across the state, to support integrated responses at the point of police triage. You've been operating something of this kind for a while now?

Yes, our model involves ourselves, police, child safety, probation and parole, and more recently, Centrecare. We meet twice per week, so it's also quite intense. Each of these agencies brings the two or three men who perpetrate DV that they are most worried about to the meeting to share information and discuss joint risk management strategies. It's perpetrator-focused, on information sharing about the men. We find sometimes

one agency might be working with a man they are quite worried about, and unbeknown another agency in the response is also having contact with him or his partner, or has relevant information to share from a previous time. This isn't uncommon. The meetings are a way to promote a more integrated risk management response.

Housing and Health also participate in these meetings. They don't have clients to put on the agenda, but rather, they are there as a resource.

These are triage meetings, so we don't usually talk in much depth about individual men during the meeting. It's more about helping to map who might be involved or could be involved in a risk management response.

One of the things that's unique about this is that it's a way to keep a focus on the person causing the violence, regardless of whether he's a serial perpetrator or has only just been identified. We try to establish who has responsibility to try to reduce the risk that he poses and we pool information, to understand more about him and his patterns and behaviours. The integrated response focuses on patterns of violent and controlling behaviours, not isolated incidents. And we're interested not just in the effects of violence on his family members, but also in what he does to produce these effects.

You mentioned earlier that you've had Child Safety practitioners co-facilitating the men's program. Could you tell us more about your work with Child Safety and family support services?

This has been one of the biggest developments for us over the past few years. Together with the specialist domestic and family violence court being trialled at Southport, which would be great to talk about another time. And the police taskforce which has detectives auditing all DV callouts on the Gold Coast and investigating all DV cases, rather than uniformed first response officers.

One of our local Child Safety offices has a Domestic Violence Prevention Centre and an Act for Kids (a local family support service) worker co-located with them. We provide three workers, including one of our men's program practitioners who is there three days per week. His role is to engage with fathers and assist Child Safety Officers to develop their own skills. He focuses on building the officers' capacities to have difficult conversations with dads and to make them more visible in their case planning. And he helps them to see the patterns in a dad's behaviour and the impact this has had on the family, rather than just focus on the incident that has resulted in the recent notification. Equally, we have an advocate to support the mothers and make sure their experience is made visible to the Child Safety Officers. That advocate draws the officers' attention to all the things a mum might be doing to protect her children. Because we also offer children's counselling, referrals can be made for the kids to get support early in the investigation phase.

The child-centred integrated model, called Assessment Service Connect, involves Act for Kids, Child Safety, DVPC, and Kalwun as the Indigenous recognised entity. Police, Education and Health are also involved. We work together on cases that come in to Child Safety, that involve a domestic and family violence component.

We don't necessarily go out on initial family support service visits, or child protection investigations. However, we will become directly involved in client contact if consent is provided. If the client or family doesn't want our involvement, then we consult with the other agencies involved to strengthen the DV lens they apply to their work with the family, so we are indirectly involved in these situations. We also provide training on applying a DV lens, and look to create practice development skill-sharing opportunities.

This is really new, but it's already creating additional demand both for our women's advocacy services, and potentially for our men's program. We're needing to resource this flow-back effect, but hopefully it's a sign that the trial is working to promote a more child-centred integrated response.

Just finally Rosemary, have there been recent changes in the components or structure of the men's program at DVPC?

The basis of it is still a minimum of 27 group sessions, with three case reviews held during the program involving the probation or parole officer, and the program facilitators. Plus the additional 12 session fathering program when there is funding available for those participants who are fathers.

As mentioned before, it's a co-case management model. Supervision by the probation or parole officer can be weekly, depending on the level of risk. But even when it's less frequent, it still adds greatly to the program, just as the program can add to the ability of the probation or parole officer to supervise offenders and to identify and manage risk.

You mentioned before that you've had something of a re-awakening about the Duluth approach?

Yes, we've definitely had a re-awakening about where the Duluth approach is at now. We recently had intensive, three-day training from Melissa Scaia and Scott Miller over the internet. It was amazing. It made us realise that we needed to update our approach to Duluth-based work. Scott and his colleagues have been evolving their work to include grounding activities and strengths-based tools, but always bringing the discussions back to critical thinking. I think sometimes we had been too focused on getting through the elements of the curriculum and not bringing everything back to critical reflection. We also noticed how they inject their own stories into the discussions when it's useful and this was something we had shied away from.

One of the several big things we learnt in this training is that you can only take someone as far as you have come yourself. If you're not comfortable talking about the gendered nature of DV because you're still not sure you entirely believe it, you're not going to have an authentic conversation in the session about male privilege or sexual violence. If you haven't recognised how you've been emotionally abusive or manipulative in your own relationship, it will be difficult (and hypocritical) to unpack these strategies in program sessions with the men. If you can't have discussions with your own partner about being accountable for their behaviour or actions that impact you, how can you possibly (legitimately) describe what accountability looks like in relationships to the men in the group? It's about knowing your 'own stuff' before you walk into the program room, knowing how to recognise it, how to figure it out, and who to talk to about it. We were left with the stark reality that we can only ask someone to come on a journey with us towards change, to the extent that we've been on that journey too. We can't walk alongside the men in our programs if we haven't trodden the path ourselves.

Duluth has a lot more emphasis on walking along with men as they journey towards change than we realised. Working at the pace that they are at. Not cajoling or educating the hell out of them to get to non-violence, as the stereotypes about Duluth might try to make you believe. But patiently walking with them. Not for one minute losing sight of their behaviour, or the effects of the terror they instil on their families, or the way they deliberately work towards destroying lives for their benefit. But working with them at their pace, and inviting them into a process of change rather than imposing our beliefs or way of thinking on them.

The benchmark we use in the program for defining 'violence' is Gandhi's idea that "Any attempt to impose your will on another person is an act of violence". We will not replicate power and control (or violence) in our work with the men – you can never force or coerce anyone to change. We try to model safe respectful co-facilitation relationships between the male and female facilitators, and communicate by our words and actions the thinking and strategies on the Equality Wheel. And always, always, bringing the discussions back to the critical thinking about beliefs they have about relationships, where they learned these; about their actions, and how these have impacted their families and themselves; about the stories they have told others and themselves about their behaviour; and about what they want for themselves and their families as they work through the process of change.

We're always learning. We are always learning, reflecting, changing. Trying to meet things with an open mind. Listening to what women and children need and want us to do in this work with the men. Always trying to put our imperfect best foot forward.

Rodney Vlasis is a policy analyst, writer, researcher and trainer in family and domestic violence perpetrator interventions and intervention systems. An experienced men's behaviour change program practitioner and social justice activist, Rodney is currently consulting to NGOs or governments in most Australian states/territories.