



## Australian Domestic & Family Violence Clearinghouse

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### **ISSUES IN GOOD PRACTICE**

#### **Multi-Agency Responses to Domestic Violence – From Good Ideas to Good Practice**

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##### ***Component features of multi-agency responses***

Multi-agency responses to domestic and family violence are high on the strategic agenda of most states and territories. With the successful introduction of integrated responses in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and Tasmania, the ongoing development in Victoria of the New Approach to Family Violence and the recent piloting of the Family Safety Framework in South Australia, it is timely to examine integration models from a “good practice” perspective.

There have been a number of excellent overviews of multi-agency responses to domestic and family violence, many of which were reviewed in the Clearinghouse’s earlier Topic Paper on integration (Mulroneu 2003). More recently, state government planners in Victoria and Tasmania have provided background information for service providers or policy makers interested in this area (Office of Women’s Policy 2005; Tasmanian Government Department of Justice and Industrial Relations 2003). Rather than revisit these reviews, this article will highlight some of the component features of multi-agency responses which have been successful or which demonstrate promising practice. In doing so, some of the pitfalls in program development will also be observed.

##### ***Why integrate?***

The reasons behind the development of an integrated response vary, ranging from local issues, such as a preventable homicide or child abduction, to a ministerial level commitment to addressing domestic violence. The prompting factor leading to the initiation of interagency collaboration is a threshold issue in determining promising models. Mulroneu (2003) suggests that development of a response ‘aimed at enhancing victim safety, reducing secondary victimization (by services) and holding abusers accountable for their violence’ defines integrated models.

Surprisingly, this is not the impetus for all multi-agency responses. Process issues for agencies or cost-saving agendas for government can provide the main rationale for

program development. The danger of this is that they either fail to address victim safety (for an excellent discussion of this, see Pence, Mitchell & Aoina 2007) or actually lead to increased danger (for example if they are not culturally safe), while draining time and resources away from service delivery. Where the integration is driven by other aims, such as the desire to improve relations between police and services, these might be better achieved through alternative strategies, such as joint work on community campaigns or forums, or police involvement on management committees.

### **Integration or coordination?**

Descriptors such as “interagency”, “multi-agency”, “collaborative”, “integrated” or “coordinated” are used arbitrarily across the sector (Wangmann 2006, p. 4). Although there are clear differences in the scope, scale and outcomes of the various schemes across using these labels, they are not used consistently. Wangmann (2006) argues that integration in one region looks very similar to what she would label elsewhere as a ‘police-civilian crisis response’.

Yet in practice, models can be distinguished in relation to the extent to which they sacrifice organisational autonomy for case-focussed unity. O’Connor (cited in Wangmann 2006) describes a continuum, which is adapted below:

1. Autonomy	2. Streamlined referrals (incident-based processes, such as faxbacks and yellow cards)	3. Cooperation (communication and some common goals)	4. Coordination (agreed plans and protocols or a separately appointed coordinator)	5. Integration (single system with sub units and cross unit accountability)
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The capacity for successful outcomes for victims will often depend on where on this spectrum a particular model lies and whether it is adequately resourced in regard to the level of integration which is expected. Token references to “integration” in program development may mask a poorly conceived strategy, which is neither resourced nor developed to address any change away from the service-autonomy end of the spectrum. Where there is little movement away from individual service delivery, and additional resources have not been provided to develop systems which enable integration, then little by way of enhancement of victim safety or reduction of violence can be expected. And if they don’t achieve that, then we might ask, “what is the point?”

### **Systems for sharing information**

Multi-agency responses which aim to enhance safety are most likely to achieve this aim if all agencies are on board regarding knowledge of risk issues. In addition, shared information systems reduce paperwork and triple handling (Wangmann 2006) and reduce the endless retelling of women’s stories which can lead to secondary victimisation. Information sharing allows for the development of evidence led criminal justice interventions and is also vital if children’s needs, including child protection, are to be met adequately (Pence, Mitchell & Aoina 2007).

Sharing of information across agencies also greatly enhances prosecutorial work in relation to incidents. Information sharing systems can involve shared access to databases (e.g. Safe At Home) or continuous updating at regular case management meetings (e.g. Family Safety Framework, Safe At Home). What is vital is that there is a systematised process which engages all agencies involved in the response.

### ***Accountability and transparency***

Wangmann (2006) notes that ‘an important feature of a good integrated response is its capacity to critically evaluate and reflect on the work performed and to continue to change and develop over time’. Indeed, one of the main advantages of an integrated response to domestic and family violence is its potential to open up domestic violence work to collegial scrutiny and accountability. This not only leads to the development of systems of continuous improvement but also provides a pathway to enhanced safety for individual victims, because responses which jeopardise safety are detected more readily. For example, when this author observed the workings of the Tasmanian Safe at Home Program, it was clear that the sub-regional Case Coordination meetings played a crucial role in ensuring enhanced policing under the new system.

Yet accountability is only achievable if outcomes are monitored and data in regard to incidents and outcomes is collected and made available for scrutiny within the collaborative program. Not only is it good practice to have clear aims to reduce violence and enhance safety; these must be observed, monitored and measured. Rigorous methodology is also important. A recent external evaluation of a small scale project claimed an increase in the rate of applications for protection orders, whereas careful scrutiny of the data demonstrated anomalies in sample comparison; the increased proportion of successful orders could in fact be explained by intake filtering which provided a skewed sample of more serious cases, rather than the work of the project.

Transparency in regard to evaluation is also good practice and is crucial to establishing accountability to the community which invariably funds family violence interventions. Within some jurisdictions there is a culture of cover-up, coupled with an unwillingness to reflect on problems and develop enhancements. By comparison, the recent Western Australian Benchmark Integration Program Audit aimed its evaluation at risk and safety assessment, while rigorously interpreting data and prioritising transparency (Pence, Mitchell & Aoina 2007).

Successful integrated responses in Victoria, Tasmania and the ACT have been driven by state-wide commitment to policy change, accompanied by earmarked and adequate resourcing. These strategy-driven models generate senior management allegiance to the goals of integration, which in turn leads to the introduction of structures of accountability within organisations. Less successful integrated programs are often initiated by local ground-level service providers, without commitment or resourcing from senior levels of their department and without the accountability which senior officer oversight affords.

### ***Family law decision making***

Divisions of responsibility under federalism have created another “silo” which has thwarted the sector’s drive towards effective integrated responses to domestic violence. Effective integration aimed at victim safety needs to move beyond the integration of

service “silos” and tackle the federalism divide. Family law-related matters, particularly in regard to children, provide a major stumbling block to development of safety-focused responses to domestic violence, given that ongoing contact exposes women and children to risk of abuse (and often serious danger). Any integrated domestic violence response attempting to enhance risk and safety needs to develop mechanisms to address this. In Hamilton (New Zealand), a specialist court with a concurrent jurisdiction in family law has been established as an integral component of the model. The Victorian Family Violence Court Division exercises concurrent jurisdiction in family law matters, so that safety issues in regard to ongoing contact between abusers and their children can be resolved at the time of the Intervention Order or criminal matter. While the Magellan and Columbus programs have been introduced in Australia, they are specialised referral systems within a family law paradigm, rather than integrated responses to family violence.

### ***Working Towards Good Practice***

Other studies refer to additional features to those discussed above and it is worth taking note of these in order to compile comprehensive table of what might constitute good practice. (The additional features are outlined further in Mulroney 2003, p.10; Wangmann 2006; Pence 1997).

<b>Compilation Features of Good Practice in Multi-Agency Responses</b>	
√	Focus on victim safety and perpetrator accountability
√	Inclusion of all family violence related services at all levels (service delivery, policy, problem solving)
√	Shared missions, aims, values, approaches to domestic violence and protocols
√	Collaborative approach to policy development and memoranda of understanding
√	Willingness to change organisational practice to meet the aims of the response and develop operating procedures to achieve this
√	Practices and protocols which ensure cultural safety, inclusivity and access and equity issues
√	Information sharing system
√	Adequately trained and professional staff
√	Senior level commitment and coordination
√	Adequate resourcing
√	Workable structure of governance, with coordination, steering, troubleshooting and monitoring functions
√	Transparency, particularly in regard to outcomes, including criminal justice system outcomes, and evaluation processes
√	Commitment to continual self auditing, with data collection and monitoring processes to enable this
√	Regular and frequent coordinated case management meetings
√	Mechanisms to enhance legal equality, such as access to legal services and representation
√	Identification of service gaps (e.g. children’s counselling) and development of new services to address them
√	Incorporation of specialist courts with concurrent family law jurisdiction

## Conclusion

In assessing good practice for the Clearinghouse database, the author has become aware of the wide range of programs across the nation that are promoted as integrated responses. There are a number which demonstrate some or many of the features compiled above. Others are restricted by challenges such as:

- exclusion of key agencies (leading to competition for clients or gaps in the response's capacity)
- lack of monitoring and accountability
- inadequate resourcing or governance
- the absence of coordination from senior management level
- limited information sharing (hence ineffective case management) or
- they are driven by personalities rather than policies (which is often a reflection of the absence of top-level or governmental support for organisational change).

Other responses, although well-planned, are hampered in their capacity to make a difference because of significant gaps in service provision within the region. This is particularly the case in jurisdictions which lack government-funded family violence services for women and children. As new programs develop, the longevity of the Duluth and Hamilton integrated responses and their demonstrated commitment to ongoing improvement and rigorous evaluation, suggest that these overseas models still provide the starting point for planners interested in good practice.

## References

- Mulroney, J 2003, *Trends In Interagency Work*, Topic Paper, Australian Domestic & Family Violence Clearinghouse, Sydney
- Office of Women's Policy 2005, *Reforming the Family Violence System in Victoria: report of the Statewide Steering Committee to Reduce Family Violence*, Department for Victorian Communities, Melbourne
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<<http://data.ipharos.com/praxis/documents/ccrdv.pdf>>
- Pence, E, Mitchell, S & Aoina, A 2007, *Audit of the Armadale Domestic Violence Intervention Project*, WA Department of Communities, Perth
- Tasmanian Government Department of Justice and Industrial Relations 2003, *Safe At Home: A Criminal Justice Framework for Responding to Family Violence in Tasmania (Options Paper)*, Hobart
- Wangmann, J 2006, *Examining Integrated Models to Respond to Domestic Violence*, Report prepared for the Sutherland Shire Local Domestic Violence Committee, Sydney

### **Examples of Integrated Responses uploaded or under review for the Clearinghouse Good Practice database**

- Armadale Domestic Violence Intervention Program (WA)
- Dovetail (Q)
- Family Safety Framework (SA)
- Family Violence Intervention Program (ACT)
- Gold Coast Integrated Response(Q)
- New Response to Family Violence (VIC)
- NPY/ Cross Border Justice Project (NT, SA, WA)
- Safe At Home (TAS)

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