



# Australian Domestic & Family Violence Clearinghouse

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## Issues in Good Practice

### **To change attitudes and to bring change: the role of the media**

*By Megan Hughes, Manager, Southern Domestic Violence Service, South Australia, and Member, Coalition of Women's Domestic Violence Services of South Australia*

#### **South Australian vigils to mourn deaths**

Over the last eighteen months, the Coalition of Women's Domestic Violence Services of South Australia, together with the Domestic Violence Death Review Advocacy Coalition South Australia, have taken the initiative of holding a rally on the steps of the state's parliament after each new death of a woman and/or her children resulting from domestic violence. We started our vigils in March 2009, following the reported deaths of a woman and her child from a previous partner, the fifth domestic homicide since February of that year. Our aim was to draw the attention of both the government and the broader community to the plight of women and children victims of domestic violence. It was an opportunity for members of the public to show their grief and concern at the frequency of deaths due to domestic and family violence, and to give a platform for those campaigning for the establishment of a Domestic Violence Death Review process in South Australia. We invited members of parliament to stand with us as a sign of their support for victims of domestic violence and to show that they too were determined to prevent further shocking and avoidable instances in which women and children were murdered by (ex-) partners and fathers.

#### **FIVE TIPS ON USING THE MEDIA EFFECTIVELY**

1. Make contact with your local and state journalists who report on social issues. Give them feedback about the stories that they are writing and give them new leads to information sources that could add to their articles.
2. Send out two media releases/alerts before any event that you are planning. Release the first about five days before the event and the second on the day before.
3. Develop a list of fax numbers for the media outlets in your state and send the alerts to all of them – you can never be sure about who will pick them up.
4. Try and collect data and statistics about the issue that you want to raise community awareness about – all media outlets will ask for them.
5. Think about the pitch that you are going to be feeding the media about your particular issue. Make it interesting and topical and if possible have someone to interview that is close to the story, giving it a 'personal' angle. For safety reasons, this is not always possible for domestic violence stories but it could be someone whose issues have been resolved.

## **The role of the media**

One of the factors that drove our campaign and motivated us to take our concerns to the streets was the way in which these deaths were being described in the media. All too often articles carried headlines such as 'Woman and child die in domestic dispute'. In these cases, the reality of many years of violence and brutality was reduced to being a mere 'dispute', and those who suffered and died as victims of family violence were implicated in their own deaths – as one party involved in a dispute which somehow produced an 'unfortunate' victim or victims. The individuals – women, children and men – who died in such horrific circumstances (a total of sixteen people in South Australia from November 2008 to March 2010) did so because they were victims – or, in a minority of instances, perpetrators – of domestic violence, not mere disputes. All the eleven dead women and children, and a further two who were seriously injured while a murder or attempted murder was in progress, were victims of violence directed at them by violent men. Four of the men who died killed themselves in murder-suicide situations, and one other was shot dead by police<sup>1</sup>. In all of these cases the media tended to treat the deaths as though they were surprising and unfortunate accidents, and as 'crimes of passion' resulting from a single heated argument rather than reporting them for what they were – the predictable results of long histories of systematic and escalating abuse of women and children. Reports of these deaths failed to acknowledge the reality that in South Australia we do not yet have the laws or provide sufficient resources to ensure adequate protection for women and children at risk of dying as a result of domestic violence<sup>2</sup>. Since we have held vigils following each subsequent death in our state, we have seen a difference in the way that the media are reporting these events. Some reporters are now using the term 'domestic violence' rather than 'domestic dispute' to describe the situations leading to the deaths. We are also seeing longer and more in-depth articles dealing with the issues relating to domestic and family violence.

Members of the two coalitions have been working hard to engage the media in South Australia to keep the issue alive amongst the general public. We have done this through circulating a media release for every vigil held and cultivating relationships with journalists so that they are able to contact us and get comments quickly and easily when an incident occurs or when domestic violence is in the news for any other reason. This approach has helped the profiling of this issue in the community and has been an effective strategy for increasing the depth of coverage regarding an issue that most people would like to avoid discussing. A public health issue like domestic and family violence requires a comprehensive response from all sections of the community to prevent the reoccurrence of violence against women. The media is a key ally in the struggle to educate legislators and the community at large, and to mobilize support for a zero-tolerance, pro-arrest policy in relation to perpetrators and policing. This requires the cooperation and support of reporters, editors and media owners if we are to maintain consistent messages, accurate information, and portray situations in a way which does not diminish violence against women or encourage acceptance of its continuation.

## **The Canadian experience**

I stumbled on a good example of how the media can be not only an ally but an instigator of positive reform in this area on a visit to Winnipeg, Canada. Along with a colleague from South Australia's Riverland district, I was lucky enough to travel to Canada to attend the first World Conference of Women's Shelters in Edmonton, Alberta in September 2008. After the conference, we visited a number of provinces to study best practice in responding to and preventing domestic violence. In Winnipeg, we spent a day with Dr Jane Ursel, an internationally recognised scholar and director of a seven-year longitudinal study of the Winnipeg Family Violence Court. This specialist court is itself an example of good practice and

works to uphold the safety of women and children by ensuring that the criminal justice system focuses on the accountability of perpetrators of family violence. Its zero-tolerance, pro-arrest response to violence results in more custodial sentences for proven violence against an intimate partner, as well as a more vigorous response to breaches of apprehended violence orders. We saw that these specialised courts in Winnipeg and elsewhere in Manitoba are developing sophisticated ways of responding to family violence and building their capacity to find and implement effective ways to prevent further violence to women (Department of Justice Canada 2003, pp. 40-41). We were very impressed by what we saw in Winnipeg and asked Jane about the factors that led a small province like Winnipeg to take such progressive responses to a very complex issue.

Jane identified a turning point in the public response to a double murder which occurred in the province a number of years earlier. It was a particularly shocking murder which elicited a strong response in the community. Sections of the media paid particular attention to the story over a number of weeks. They explored how such an awful incident could occur and, importantly, how it could have been prevented. Some media outlets utilised the data that Jane had been collecting regarding the ways the criminal justice system responded to men who had used violence against their partners. They reported that the men who committed these murders each had a long history of violence against their partners and had been before the courts at regular intervals. However, their pattern of offending was not taken seriously by the courts and they were released again and again, to continue to make their families' lives hell and, ultimately, to take their partners' lives. The media reported the relationship between the court's (lack of) action and the escalating spirals of violence. Weeks of focused media attention on these issues contributed to growing community outrage. Soon legislators were so overwhelmed by letters and questions from the public that they were forced to think about ways in which deaths such as the one they had experienced in Winnipeg could be prevented in the future. It was clear from what Jane described that the media played a significant role in the way the community perceived the problem of domestic violence, and that articles and news reports helped to shape community understandings and responses.

If the media had not taken such an active role in following the story of these deaths and the background to them, community concern may have faded and the issues may have been forgotten. As a result of the collaboration between reporters and Jane, the community was given an opportunity to learn about the realities of domestic and family violence, to consider the legal and social issues, and to call their legislators and policy makers to account. They were able to join in the campaign to demand the safety of women and children.

## **OTHER MEDIA INITIATIVES AND RESOURCES**

### **The EVAs**

In 2007-08, Domestic Violence Victoria (DV Vic) and No to Violence received funding from VicHealth to stage a media awards event to recognise excellence in reporting on the issue of domestic and family violence in print, television, radio, photography/artwork and online media within Victoria. The inaugural Eliminating Family Violence Media Awards (EVAs) were first presented in May 2008.

[www.evas.org.au](http://www.evas.org.au)

### **Grampians Family Violence Prevention Network 2005, *Family violence in the news – a media toolkit*, Child and Family Services Ballarat Inc, Victoria**

In 2005, the Grampians Family Violence Prevention Network published a media toolkit to inform the reporting of family violence and highlight the role the media plays in influencing public perception. The toolkit contains facts and statistics about family violence, addresses common beliefs about the causes of violence, and lists useful contacts and research sources for

journalists. For a copy of the toolkit, contact the Clearinghouse Information Officer at [clearinghouse@unsw.edu.au](mailto:clearinghouse@unsw.edu.au) or on (02) 9385 2990

**Lemmer T 2004, *Working with the media: a toolkit for service providers*, Michigan Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence, Okemos, Michigan**

Developed in collaboration with journalists, state administrators, victim advocates, and educators, this North American resource prepares service providers to respond to media requests, as well as suggesting strategies for directly approaching local media outlets. [www.preventconnect.org/images/PDFsforPC/Guide\\_for\\_Advocates\\_B\\_W.pdf](http://www.preventconnect.org/images/PDFsforPC/Guide_for_Advocates_B_W.pdf)

**Taylor B 2009, *Dying to be heard: media reporting on domestic violence*, Queensland Domestic Violence Death Review Action Group**

This information resource was developed to assist media professionals gain an understanding of the nature and dynamics of domestic violence. The guide addresses key issues (including definitions of domestic violence, barriers to leaving, and legal interventions) and lists useful contacts. It discusses common problems with the reporting of domestic violence, while also highlighting examples of good practice in media coverage. [www.tavan.com.au/attachments/media\\_kit.pdf](http://www.tavan.com.au/attachments/media_kit.pdf)

## **Conclusion**

The media offers a very effective way, and possibly the only way, to educate and enlighten the broader community about a reality that cannot be gleaned by looking at these incidents on a case by case basis. It requires an investigative eye which is prepared to see the patterns and systems that allow such horrors to occur. The media helps us see, if reporting responsibly, the stories behind the headlines of war-torn countries on a regular basis. Media outlets spend considerable money to bring this news into the homes of all Australians. This coverage mobilises the community to ask the hard questions of our legislators and leaders, and keeps them accountable for the lives they are prepared to sacrifice for particular causes. There is a silent war occurring in our community that happens, in the main, behind closed doors. The media – newspapers, television and radio – needs to assist women and children, and show our community and politicians the damage and suffering that is occurring on a large scale to a group of citizens within our community. The media has the power to make a difference to the lives of these women, children and men. Domestic and family violence agencies and activists need to partner with the media to help get our message across. We need more substantial responses and systems that protect women and children, or anyone who experiences violence from an intimate partner. While domestic violence deaths remain a one day headline, we are unlikely to see any substantial changes to what we have already got.

## **References**

Department of Justice Canada 2003, *Final report of the Ad Hoc Federal-Provincial-Territorial Working Group Reviewing Spousal Abuse Policies and Legislation*, prepared for the Federal-Provincial-Territorial Ministers Responsible for Justice, Ottawa