

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE

**INQUIRY INTO THE MAGISTRATES COURT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA'S
MANAGEMENT OF MATTERS INVOLVING FAMILY AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**



**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE
TAKEN AT PERTH
WEDNESDAY, 11 MARCH 2019**

SESSION THREE

Members

Mr P.A. Katsambanis (Chairman)
Mr M.J. Folkard (Deputy Chairman)
Mr A. Krsticevic
Mr S.K. L'Estrange
Mr D.T. Punch

Hearing commenced at 11.13 am**Mr RODNEY THOMAS WEST****Executive Manager, Community Services, Centrecare Inc, examined:**

The CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank you for agreeing to appear today to provide evidence in relation to our inquiry into how the Magistrates Court of Western Australia manages matters involving family and domestic violence. The purpose of today's hearing is to discuss your submission to the inquiry, and we will probably ask you some broader questions based on what we have discovered so far. My name is Peter Katsambanis and I am the Chair of the committee. The Deputy Chair, Mark Folkard, is just coming in. This is the member for Churchlands, Sean L'Estrange, and the member for Bunbury, Don Punch. The member for Vasse, Libby Mettam, will be with us in a moment. It is important that you understand that any deliberate misleading of this committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament. Your evidence is protected by parliamentary privilege; however, that privilege does not extend to anything you might say outside of the hearing. Do you have any questions about your appearance here today?

Mr WEST: No.

The CHAIR: Is there a brief opening statement you want to make, or do you want us to go straight to questions?

Mr WEST: I am happy to go straight to questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you. One of the things that has struck us about your organisation is that you provide a men's behaviour change program, and in looking at family and domestic violence and breaking the cycle of violence, that is one of the key issues that needs to be looked at. Are you able to give us an indication of what that program entails, the level of contact that is required, what people learn, what sorts of activities it involves and what are the challenges associated with delivering that program in Western Australia?

Mr WEST: Yes, absolutely. We are funded by the Department of Communities under Child Protection and Family Support to provide a number of men's behaviour change groups in the northern suburbs. We run three groups—one based in Perth, one in Mirrabooka and one in Joondalup. The groups are non-mandated. In saying that, we do have a lot of male participants—I will refer to them as perpetrators—who I guess we would see as potentially being mandated by the Department of Communities where they currently have open cases with that department where there are children at risk. Each of those groups can take a maximum of 10 men at any one time and the groups run for a period of 24 weeks. It is a group program. It is an open group, so men can come into that group at any stage. In terms of assessing those men, they will go through generally a minimum of three individual counselling sessions, but potentially up to six, maybe more, depending on what issues they are experiencing in preparation for them to go into a group.

The group itself contains a range of modules to work with men around enhancing their understanding of the violence they engage in, their patterns of abusive behaviour and the impact of that abusive behaviour both on their partners and largely their children as well. I do not have the exact figures but I think the men's behaviour change programs that are funded both through the Department of Justice and Department of Communities are a wonderful part of the system's response, but they are no silver bullet. I think that sometimes people, even men themselves and the families of the men who attend, do expect that this is going to be a one-off life-changing event. However, from what we see, men who come into these programs have longstanding issues, as I am

sure many of the other people who have given evidence would have testified to, and so changing behaviour in 24 weeks is a big ask for anyone, let alone men who often have ongoing mental health and drug and alcohol issues. What we do see—this would be pretty consistent—is that in a six-month period we would probably be referred 200 new men to come into the program, and of those 200 men, probably 150 would end up seeing us face-to-face for a first appointment and maybe 100 would actually get their way through the assessment process. You would have a further drop-off, so you might get 50 of those men who actually engage in a group, and then out of those 50 men you might get 10 who actually complete the 24-week program. The dropout rate is extremely high and there is a range of reasons for that. That said, we do not believe that that necessarily makes it a failure. Any opportunity to engage with these men is valuable, both in terms of their education and knowing where they can access support at a stage in the future.

Of those 10 men who may complete the program, there will be a percentage who will go on to reoffend, as it may be, or engage in ongoing and abusive behaviours. The process of changing this behaviour is a long one. We have not necessarily had capacity to follow up over a long-term period. It would be nice if we were able to follow-up those men over a two-year period and understand the change that has occurred, but we do believe that the behaviour change programs are a vital part of that service system response. Often men are highly resistant coming into those programs. As I mentioned, a lot of them do have pre-existing mental health and ongoing drug and alcohol issues. It is really important—I guess we consider it vitally important—that a lot of the men are difficult to engage. They are highly resistant. As I said, they can be extremely aggressive and abusive to other services, whether it is the Department of Justice or the department for Child Protection and Family Support, so they get pushed out to the fringes. People find that they are too hard to deal with, so we make a concerted effort to continue to engage those men, even when some of our staff do feel as though we should be cutting off services. As I am sure you have heard, it is vital to keep those men visible to the community so we can report back, whether it is to the police, an ex-partner, or the Department of Communities, to provide that ongoing information so we may know where they are at or what sort of level of risk they pose.

[11.20 am]

The CHAIR: Do you have any specific or mandated reporting mechanisms?

Mr WEST: No, we currently do not; however, we happily provide the Department of Communities with reports on the participation of the men in our programs. We quite frequently update the Department of Communities on open cases or cases in which they are looking at the reunification of the men's engagement in the program. Again, I guess that comes with the caveat that we see these men for two hours a week in this program and many—not all—of the men will put on their best self for that two hours, so we find that facilitators are getting a version that, "Wow, this guy is really engaged. He's fantastic. He's saying how much he's changed." An important part of the men's behaviour change program is the partner contact service which occurs alongside other programs. We will have other female staff who are contacting the partners and ex-partners of these men to inquire with them what change they may be seeing in regards to their partner's behaviour, or if the abuse and violence is ongoing. Sadly, there are even flaws in that process. As we have seen in the past, men are still in these relationships. The partners might be too scared to be honest with us and say that the abuse is ongoing. We have seen that in the past and it is only when they have had the opportunity that they will call us and express the entirety of what is going on. It is very difficult to track; however, we certainly are doing everything we can to understand whether the work we are engaging in is trying to achieve the objects that we set out to.

The CHAIR: With the men that you see, obviously they present with multiple issues a lot of the time. Do you do some formal assessment of what their other needs are and then do you refer them off to appropriate services to deal with those needs? Does that assessment fall in your lap?

Mr WEST: Yes, absolutely. As well as the domestic violence risk assessment that we undertake with the men to better understand what abusive behaviours they are engaging in, we will do a comprehensive psychosocial assessment to understand drug and alcohol issues, learning disabilities, any cognitive impairments, mental health issues, whether they are taking medication or whether they are a suicide risk. So it is quite a comprehensive assessment when the men first come to see us. As you say, it is important that we support them to engage in other services, whether it is around homelessness or other issues, so that they can, at the same time, be working on addressing the abuse or violence that is occurring.

The CHAIR: I have a number of questions around access to the program. Is this program accessible enough to meet demand that is out there for programs like yours? Are there any gaps?

Mr WEST: I would say probably not, given from what we see in terms of the police and domestic violence incidents response numbers. I do believe there is probably a much greater need than even we see. We do have currently a waiting time of two to four weeks—that varies—before we can see the men. There is a waiting period and demand is consistently high for the service, absolutely.

The CHAIR: You also run a commonwealth-funded specialised family violence service?

Mr WEST: Yes.

The CHAIR: How does that differ from this service?

Mr WEST: We would use the specialised family violence funding that we receive from the commonwealth potentially where we see men who present as victims. Many of the men who we see as perpetrators will also present themselves to be the victim. However, we have a comprehensive assessment to try to ascertain genuine men who might be victims or where we see women who in fact may be perpetrators. I would say that they are a minimal part. We also run some additional programs that are not men's behaviour change programs. There is a program called Caring Dads. It is a 17-week program working with men where it has been identified that they have been abusive or violent towards their children but still have ongoing contact. We are working with those men, perhaps at a slower rate, particularly around their fathering and around their parenting. I guess it is a program specifically for men who are engaging in abusive behaviours who are also fathers and are having ongoing contact with their children.

The CHAIR: And you also provide services to women who are experiencing family and domestic violence?

Mr WEST: Yes.

The CHAIR: How do you go around separating the service provision?

Mr WEST: We do not cross over staff. Staff on the men's behaviour-change program do not work with the women or the partners of those men. The staff who are engaged in the partner contact, the men's behaviour change program staff similarly do not work with the men. We keep the two programs separate and the clients separated.

The CHAIR: With your men's behaviour change program, have you had any independent evaluation or any other way of measuring its effectiveness?

Mr WEST: No, we have not. We are largely left to work on that outside of the agreed objectives set in the agreement contract. That is something that I think I can see has come up in discussions here. It is incredibly hard to measure and it does need further work. We have looked at a number of

overseas programs like Respect—people might have mentioned it—in Scotland. We have utilised some of their tools, as I mentioned. While the facilitators assess the men who are engaged in the program, we are also undertaking a similar assessment with the partners or ex-partners to try to understand what their experience is in terms of assessing what the true level of change is in these men.

[11.30 am]

The CHAIR: Are you able to provide us with some sort of a breakdown or some sort of flowchart of the nature of the program?

Mr WEST: Yes, I would be happy to do that.

The CHAIR: Thank you; we will take that as supplementary information.

Mr WEST: A broad outline of the program?

The CHAIR: Yes, on outline of the program, the steps it involves or whatever you have that can be provided to us. We do not want to give up your intellectual property or anything like that.

Mr WEST: No, I am more than happy to do that.

The CHAIR: The submission that Centrecare made, I think by Adjunct Professor Tony Pietropiccolo, covered broader areas in relation to our inquiry. It is actually quite helpful and useful. We will not traverse that ground today, but in closing, is there anything you think that would be worthwhile?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: You mentioned earlier that in your assessment of the behavioural change in men, you seek feedback from partners and ex-partners. Would the existence of a family violence restraining order chop that off in terms of the source of feedback?

Mr WEST: No. In terms of the family violence restraining order —

Mr D.T. PUNCH: It allows no contact.

Mr WEST: Yes, so there is no contact from the man but we are contacting purely as a support service for the women.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: But they would not be able to comment on any changes in the man's behaviour.

Mr WEST: Potentially, if the violence restraining order has restricted contact to the children.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: It is pretty limited.

Mr WEST: It can be. What we do find is that many of the women do report ongoing contact and breaches of the violence restraining order. In that case, that assists us to report back to the necessary authorities, yes.

Ms L. METTAM: I have a final question. In the submission, it mentions that you were providing or have been the contracted provider for victim support services in Geraldton.

Mr WEST: I hope not! I think it might have been someone else's submission.

Ms L. METTAM: Could you then outline what services you provide in terms of support to regional WA?

Mr WEST: Similar to the metro area. Centrecare receives both federal and state funding through the Department of Communities to provide similar services in the goldfields. I do not manage those services but they do operate in a relatively similar manner. It is approximately the same level of funding. They offer both a women's support group for victims and a men's behaviour change program.

The CHAIR: Is there anything you want to say in closing about how you think we can improve things that happen through the Magistrates Court and family and domestic violence more generally, and perhaps around the behaviour change programs as well?

Mr WEST: Just from reading some of the other transcripts, I probably do not appreciate how busy and overwhelmed the courts are with these sorts of cases. However, I do think it would be of value to consider an additional level of training for magistrates. I know that stopping family violence, the Department of Communities is taking on a model developed by David Mandel in the United States called Safe and Together, which I believe is relatively highly regarded and certainly makes a lot of sense in the work we do in considering not just the physical acts of abuse that occur, but the broader impact of the man's behaviour on both the ability of the victim to parent and the impact on the children when considering a family violence restraining order.

In regard to the men's behaviour change programs, I guess some of the discussion that I have provided may seem bleak in terms of their ability to be successful or to provide really positive outcomes, but I believe they are an essential part of that service system around engaging men and having services that will consistently go out and continue to try and engage with these men who may be at risk to themselves and to their family members. The more people who are willing and able to engage with those men—even if it is sporadic and even if they may not be successfully engaging in a program, it is still, I believe, worthwhile given the risk that they potentially pose.

The CHAIR: The risk factor is going both ways there, obviously, so I hear you.

Mr WEST: Yes. I am more than happy to send through some information—I do not want to give you too much—on things like our intake assessment tool. Would that be of interest or of benefit?

The CHAIR: Yes, that would be helpful. We will send you some correspondence requesting it. Whatever you think is valuable to us, feel free to send it. There is no such thing as too much information, so yes, please do; we would welcome that.

Thank you for your evidence before the committee today. We will send you a transcript of the hearing for correction. You can return that transcript within 10 working days. If you do not, we will simply assume that you deem it to be correct. You cannot use the corrections process to change the nature of your evidence but if you want to send us any additional material, please feel free to send it as a supplementary submission. We are going to write to you requesting the information we have talked about today. Thanks for your evidence. We appreciate the time that you have taken to talk to us. Keep up your good work and we will conclude today's hearing.

Hearing concluded at 11.37 am
