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Implementation Options and Evaluation of Integrated Service Model Responses to Address Family Violence in Remote Aboriginal And Torres Strait Islander Communities

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Introduction

Evaluative studies on the effectiveness and outcomes of integrated models responding to Domestic and Family Violence (DFV) remain limited (Productivity Commission 2020). Despite this, most jurisdictions see integrated models as best practice for effectively responding to DFV. This research brief describes how these models are broadly conceived, how they have been applied in Australia, where improvements have been made, and how they require further changes to support Indigenous victims particularly those in remote and rural settings. Similarly, this research brief highlights best practice to facilitate the improvement of practices, processes, and evaluation strategies for ensuring Indigenous families and communities remain at the 'centre' of future developments in this space.

Prevalence of DFV

In settler colonial countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States Indigenous people remain over-represented in the criminal justice system (CJS) as both victims and perpetrators of DFV (Cunneen 2009). Family Violence within Indigenous contexts refers to 'a wide range of physical, emotional, sexual, spiritual, cultural, psychological and economic abuses that occur within families, intimate relationships, extended families, kinship networks and communities' (Victorian Indigenous Family Violence Task Force 2003: 123). Indigenous DFV arises as Cripps & Adams (2014: 400) describe when 'people in positions of powerlessness, covertly or overtly direct their dissatisfaction inward toward each other, toward themselves, and toward those less powerful'.

Indigenous DFV has been influenced and shaped by the impacts of colonisation, dislocation and intergenerational trauma (Cripps & Adams 2014) with family members, especially women and children, most at risk of victimisation (Langton 2008). For example:

- In Australia in 2017-18, 92 percent of Indigenous homicide victims were killed by people known to them, compared with 72 percent of non-Indigenous victims. Indigenous female victims in 89% of cases and Indigenous men in 64.7% of cases were killed by intimate partners. In the non-Indigenous context just under half of females and only 8 percent of males were killed by intimate partners (Bricknell 2020: 12);
- In the 2014-15 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey, 2 in 3 Indigenous women and 1 in 3 Indigenous men reported that they had experienced physical violence and that the perpetrator of the most recent incident was a family member (AIHW 2019: 108);
- Indigenous women remain 32 times more likely to be hospitalised due to DFV than non-Indigenous women (AIHW 2019: ix); and
- Indigenous children were the subject of State/Territory child protection substantiations of abuse and/or neglect at 6 times the rate of non-Indigenous children (AIHW 2020: 27). Emotional abuse, which includes exposure to DFV, represented the most common type of substantiated harm for all Indigenous children in 2018-19 (AIHW 2020: Table S3.10).

It is unsurprising based on the above statistics that Indigenous offenders are also over-represented in the CJS including for DFV-related offences (ALRC 2018).

The above data speaks volumes to the need for responses to DFV that can keep victims safe; hold perpetrators accountable; and that can also effect sustainable attitudinal change to prevent DFV in the future in culturally appropriate and trauma informed ways.

DFV responses to date and the calls for holistic responses

Since the 1970s, responses to DFV have relied heavily on law and the CJS (Hunter 2006). Law reforms in the 1980s and 1990s focused on protecting victims through civil protection orders, also known as Protection Orders (POs) (Hunter 2006). POs prescribe that the DFV offender cannot assault or threaten; stalk, harass or intimidate; or deliberately or recklessly destroy or damage anything that belongs to the victim. Courts or police may also decide to impose conditions that prevent the offender from residing at the family home, contacting, or going near the victim. POs represent the most common legal response to DFV with 10,000s of orders issued each year across Australia (Douglas & Fitzgerald 2018: 41). They are further supported by a system of enforcement in which any contravention to the orders is likely to result in a criminal charge (Douglas & Fitzgerald 2018).

More recent DFV law reforms have extended police powers to take 'effective and immediate action to prevent the escalation of violence when they attend DFV incidents by enabling police to issue on the spot POs to protect victims (Larsen & Guggisberg 2009: 2, Douglas & Fitzgerald 2018; Nancarrow 2019). This has been positive for many but is not flexible enough to suit all victims experiences or needs with evidence suggesting that for some population groups the reforms have heightened their vulnerability and produced unintended consequences (Douglas & Fitzgerald 2018; Nancarrow 2019). The most significant of these is the criminalising of victims who have facilitated their partners to breach POs in circumstances that have prioritised their families (e.g. by allowing access to children in contravention to POs, or giving their partner a place to stay when no other housing options exist) over the law (Nancarrow 2019). There has also been a growing discontent toward this type

of response as it implies that the response to DFV should be the separation of the parties (i.e. victims and offenders) and it uses legal mechanisms to enforce separation.

The combined weight of the legal and separation focus of DFV responses assumes a universal DFV experience (Coker & Macquoid 2015: 169; Toki 2009) and fails to appreciate the ways in which structural inequalities increase risks and frame responses (i.e. individual and societal). The impact of DFV is maintained in these circumstances by limiting the choices of victims who inevitably are expected to trade one relationship of power and control with their intimate partner and/or other family members for another with the State (Coker & Macquoid 2015: 169; Cripps & Habibis 2019). The latter while guised as safe, inevitably presents increased practical risks for victims, such as vulnerability to homelessness, poverty, and the loss of their children to child protection systems (Cripps & Habibis 2019).

Indigenous women as victims of DFV have expressed for many years their concerns about the criminal justice response to DFV (Jeffries & Bond 2014; Marchetti 2019; Nancarrow 2019). Primarily that the CJS response is irrelevant to their lives and contexts; and that it more often than not, escalates violence against them and 'perpetuates violence against men' (Nancarrow 2009: 17). Indigenous women have also identified that CJS responses separate families and offer no resolution to the DFV or the broader contexts that contribute to the violence (Nancarrow 2009: 17). The need for an alternative approach to the CJS response has been advocated for by Indigenous groups emphasising in its place a holistic response that supports victims, holds offenders accountable through engagement with men's groups and behaviour change programs, and that is also focused on the healing of families and communities in the aftermath of DFV (Robertson 2000; Wild & Anderson 2007). The latter is particularly important given the significance of intergenerational trauma and its interrelationship with the occurrence of DFV.

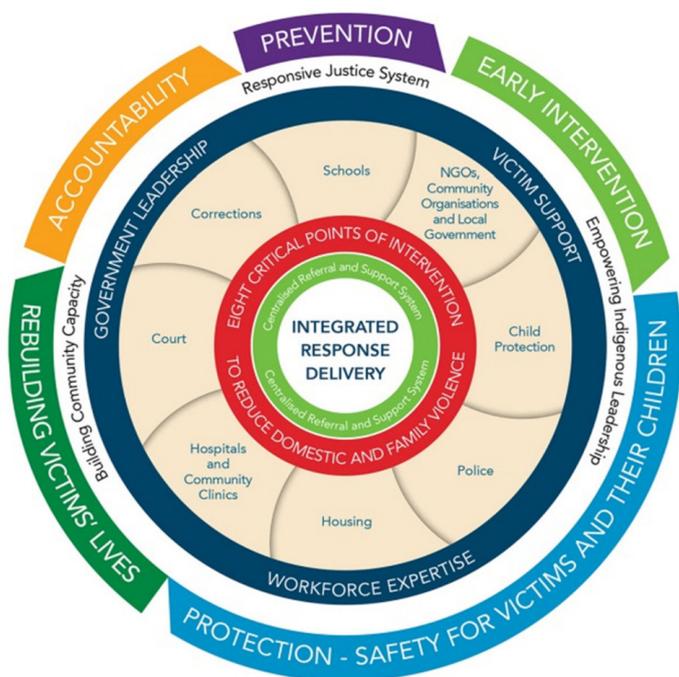
The integrated service model framework

To address these concerns and the increase in reported DFV more generally, for all populations, governments in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States have focused attention on integrating responses to DFV. These

responses seek to provide support to women and children in the aftermath of violence, to hold perpetrators accountable usually through CJS processes, and to build community knowledge and awareness around these issues to prevent future DFV (ARTD Consultancy 2019; Flanagan et al 2019; Joint Ventures 2019; Putt et al 2017a).

The theoretical underpinnings of integrated DFV models are also worth examining. The literature highlights that while these models have more diverse reach, they are still heavily influenced by law and legal agencies and have consequently been referred to as an ‘integrated criminal justice response’ (Success Works 2009: 10). This critique recognises that CJS responses on their own are unable to meet the multiple, differing and often competing needs of victims, perpetrators, their children, and broader family and kinship groups impacted by DFV. An integrated framework attempts to fill this gap, bringing together government and non-government sectors to identify and then shape holistic care and trauma informed supports tailored to meet the needs of individuals and families experiencing DFV. One example is the Safety is Everyone’s Right Integrated Framework implemented by the Northern Territory Government (see Figure 1 below)

Figure 1: Safety is Everyone’s Right Integrated Framework



(Territory Families 2018: 6)

Figure 1 identifies eight key stakeholders that victims and their families will typically engage in the aftermath of DFV. These stakeholders work collaboratively together to provide early intervention, safety and protection, support to rebuild lives in the aftermath of violence, accountability of offenders largely through legal means, and prevention to stop the cycle from repeating. They achieve this by using common risk assessments, increased information sharing, and improved coordination of responses. Central to this effort is building the capacity of frontline workers, and strengthening partnerships between government agencies and non-government services (NGOs) to ensure that care is consistent across the sectors (ARTD Consultancy 2019, Flanagan et al 2019, Joint Ventures 2019, Putt et al 2017 & 2017a, Territory Families 2018). This general approach is consistent across Australian and New Zealand jurisdictions. It should be noted however, that this type of approach is difficult to evaluate given its multiple components and the extended timeframe required to establish more than immediate outcomes for victims, for offenders, for extended family members and also for the services involved.

The challenges of integration

While the theoretical, policy and legal mechanisms for integrated DFV service models are clearly articulated by governments, available evidence suggests that the practice of operationalising the models can be both complex and problematic. In part this is because the meaning and consequential practice of ‘integration’ is open to interpretation and as Flanagan et al (2019: 26) argue ‘integration is less about specific initiatives or programs and more about the maintenance of productive, mutually-supportive working relationships between agencies and/or workers’ (Breckenridge et al 2016; Zmudski et al 2018). Typically, these are agencies that operate in a highly competitive environment, on short term (maximum 3 year) State funded contracts. Achieving effective integration in this environment is challenging, in part because organisations considered ‘new’ and/or ‘niche’ (serving a specific population or location) may be (un)intentionally excluded from DFV integrated service models. Power dynamics may also be at play within the models such that an imbalance (real or perceived) can influence how organisations participate and interact, which can undermine their impact (Cripps & Habibis 2019). Further,

it is recognised that effective integrated models requires both time and effort to establish and sustain, yet little attention is paid to the administrative burden this creates on organisations, much of which is not funded or accounted for in the implementation of the models (Breckenridge et al 2016; Putt et al 2017). These are important observations as they can undermine the productivity of the integrated DFV models and may be detrimental to their long-term effectiveness (Cripps & Davis 2012; Cripps 2007; Cripps & Habibis 2019).

Evaluations of integrated DFV service models to date have established that generally, women and children have benefited from the models with services more attuned to identifying and meeting their needs in a timely manner, particularly for those classified at high risk (Breckenridge et al 2016, Zmudski et al 2018). However, there has been some critique, suggesting that the models overwhelmingly target generic populations, and fail to account for or adapt to the considerable socio-economic and cultural variability within DFV populations (Cripps & Habibis 2019; Flanagan et al 2019). Initiatives often assume a universal experience of DFV and hence adopt a 'one size fits all' model of delivery (Fotheringham et al. 2020). The use of, for example, common risk assessment tools reinforces this, because whilst they intend to promote shared understandings, it is likely that they 'only succeed in reducing the complexity of practice on paper, while simultaneously inhibiting the exercise of professional judgment' (Stewart 2020). This creates a need for workforce training and support to build confidence in professional judgment.

The failure of DFV Integrated Service models to adopt an intersectionality lens to their operation also runs the risk of failing to meet the needs of women and children who experience violence whilst also experiencing at the same time oppression at the sites of their other identities (e.g. race, disability, sexual orientation). Understanding their experiences through this lens is to understand how their experiences may be compounded and highlights the need for a model that is able to adapt to the nuances of individual circumstances (Cripps & Habibis 2019, Fotheringham et al. 2020). This is particularly the case for Indigenous women, especially those living in rural and remote areas as they are often contending with intergenerational experiences of disadvantage, compounded by covert and overt racism. As

well as living in tight knit communities with long memories, such that if your family name is associated with someone with a bad tenancy history, you are judged as being the 'same', resulting in being denied or having their access to services and supports further, limited (Cripps & Habibis 2019).

Literature also highlights that Indigenous (organisation/worker) participation in integrated DFV service models remains lacking and that models may not be culturally aware or safe for Indigenous families (Putt et al 2017a; Fotheringham et al 2020). The issue of conscious/unconscious bias was also raised in respect of the instruments used by the models, for example, risk assessments - as these are not culturally specific nor are they able to account for the particular characteristics of cultural groups (Putt, Holder & O'Leary 2016; Fotheringham et al 2020). Integrated DFV models are therefore likely to be ineffective for Indigenous individuals and families particularly if they do not seek to incorporate Indigenous participation or worldviews in their practice (Cripps & Habibis 2019; Putt et al 2017a; Fotheringham et al 2020).

A common practice of DFV Integrated Service models includes the sharing of information with and sometimes without the consent in at-risk situations of victims, offenders and their broader family and kinship group. Putt et al. (2017a) note that sharing of information is not in itself protective or helpful rather 'it is what is done with information that can make a difference'. Given that most evaluations of DFV Integrated Service models have to date focused on the models' processes and not on their specific outcomes, little is known as to the risks and benefits of information sharing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in DFV situations. Indeed, Cripps & Habibis (2019) argue that integrated service models can judge Indigenous victims harshly depending on the nature and exchange of selected personal information amongst organisations and may inadvertently place a victim in a more precarious position. They gave the example of a family safety meeting whose purpose is to protect a victim considered high-risk from further harm, where Police shared 'the RAP sheet' of the victim, Department of Housing shared that the victim was homeless and unable to be housed at the present time. This situation was complicated further by child protection being present querying whether the children were safe and whether the victim could make safe choices. The meeting became a

place of judgment rather than a place offering protection and support to the victim (Cripps & Habibis 2019, Hinton 2018). Indigenous victims in rural and remote areas where cultural bias may be prevalent and where DFV services that would normally advocate on their behalf are limited will be at an elevated risk for these adverse outcomes (Cripps & Habibis 2019).

International models of best practice

While it has been noted that solutions to DFV should be informed by an ‘understanding of history, trauma and place’ and that the involvement of Indigenous people in the design, delivery and evaluation of responses and services to address DFV is vital to ensuring their success, there is little evidence this is occurring in Australia (COAG 2016: 98; Productivity Commission 2020). The opposite may be said for a New Zealand model, the DFV Integrated Service Response (ISR), which commenced as a pilot in July 2016 in Christchurch. Like the Australian models discussed, ISR focuses on triaging new episodes of DFV; holding perpetrators accountable whilst securing the safety of the victim and children; strongly influenced by case management and informed by information sharing amongst organisations involved in the model.

The first evaluation of ISR found that families were generally feeling safer, and organisations reported improved processes, better resourcing, and improved workforce capability (Mossman et al 2017). However, the evaluation found that ISR failed to effectively engage and respond to Maori community members (Mossman et al 2017). Maori services felt their concerns were not heard in meetings, that their expertise was not valued, and that their relationships with members of ISR were breaking down such that they were considering withdrawing from the ISR model (Mossman et al 2017). ISR designers not wanting this outcome, employed Maori evaluators to assess the responsiveness of the ISR Model for Maori stakeholders and to determine whether whānau-centred approaches were integrated within ISR. Whānau translated refers to ‘family’ inclusive of immediate and extended family as well as broader kin and community members (Wehipeihana 2019). The Maori evaluation report, published in 2019 identified five core elements that would support an ISR with a Whānau Centred Delivery Model:

1. **Effective relationships** – that benefit whānau by having effective and supportive relationships between Maori organisations and ISR agencies and that also engages with local Maori people.
2. **Whānau rangatiratanga (leadership)** – whereby ISR supports whānau to be self-managing, exerting more control over their lives. Enabling whānau to achieve increased independence and autonomy.
3. **Capable workforce** – a culturally competent workforce that employs a holistic approach and that is culturally grounded to support whānau aspirations.
4. **Whānau-centred services and programs** – whilst acknowledging that ISR is not a Kaupapa Maori program, it makes the effort to connect whānau to Kaupapa Maori partners.
5. **Supportive environment** – in practical terms via funding, contracting and policy arrangements to enable Maori participation and representation in the ISR model. (Wehipeihana 2019)

The whānau-centred practice is key to the ISR model engaging effectively with Maori families. It provides for victim safety by supporting victims to (re)connect in a culturally meaningful way to their whānau. It also supports them to identify their own goals for healing and enables them to make their own decisions (Wehipeihana 2019: 59, Mossman et al 2019). The remodelling of ISR to account for Maori cultural practices and worldviews can be defined as best practice, as in doing so it rebuts the many practice-related challenges discussed (Wehipeihana 2019). Whilst further evaluations are needed to demonstrate the outcomes of the reformed ISR model, this early acknowledgement, the practice of critical and ongoing reflection, and the readiness to adapt the ISR model to the specific contexts of Maori populations will likely be integral to its future predicted success (Mossman et al 2019). New Zealand’s approach to this situation, employing Maori evaluators to assess the status of ISR on Maori terms also provides a model of best practice for other jurisdictions as it enabled a cultural lens to be applied to the evaluation findings. This practice is also being advocated in the Productivity Commission’s Indigenous Evaluation Strategy (2020).

The need for further evaluations

This research brief has provided a review of DFV responses to date and examined the value and usefulness of integrated DFV service models to attend to the multiple and intersecting needs of Indigenous victims and their families in the aftermath of DFV. It is clear, that in theory such models could be beneficial and are framed with good intent, however, the implementation and practice of the models requires not only support in workforce development but also most importantly evaluation to ensure that there is a consistency of outcomes for those families interacting with the models. This brief was unable to demonstrate the effectiveness of integrated DFV service models as they are currently conceived and practiced in Indigenous contexts and settings (e.g. urban, rural, or remote regions) largely due to the lack of evaluative data at the present time. It did however, find that the response by New Zealand to evaluation and reforming Integrated DFV models, ensuring that they are responsive to Indigenous populations is a good starting point for other jurisdictions as they reflect on how they too can improve their existing models. Indigenous DFV has long been a problem responded to in crisis driven ways that have torn families apart, integrated DFV models have the potential to lift up and support families in ways that can strengthen and support them in their time of need, it is imperative that we continue to reflect on and improve such models so that families can live safely free from DFV.

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¹The term Indigenous is used, respectfully, in this Brief to refer to First Nations peoples of both Australia and New Zealand, recognising the considerable diversity that exists both within and between different groups.

²For example, the Reintegration Puzzle is an annual conference which rotates across Australia and New Zealand to provide opportunities to hear the latest information concerning programs and services which aim to assist people to successfully reintegrate back into the community after prison. See <http://www.reintegrationpuzzle.com.au>

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