

verbals



New response to domestic violence at Waverley and Orange Courts

ERLEY COURT HOUSE - 1

“Achieving things that we couldn't have dreamed of achieving.”

Let's talk

Susan Smith, Coordinator of the Sydney Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service (WDVCAS), tells a story about a terrible episode that occurred in South Australia. It concerns a family with two young children – a two-year-old and a baby just seven weeks old.

"The husband had been seeing maybe 12 different services but no-one understood the risk to this little family was escalating," she says. The husband's mental health was deteriorating: he had come to the attention of police and different mental health services; his partner knew that things weren't very good but she was preoccupied by caring for her new baby and toddler. "What happened was he stabbed the small baby, he stabbed the two-year-old, he stabbed his wife and he killed himself," Smith says. The wife and baby survived but the toddler did not.

"What the coroner said was if all these services had been exchanging information about what was happening for this family, then perhaps what happened in the end might not have happened," says Smith.

"I guess that's just a stark example of what can happen when you're not sharing information."

Another one is provided by domestic violence campaigner and Victorian Australian of the Year Rosie Batty, whose 11-year-old son Luke was killed by his father. "She wanted police and probably the family and community services to take some action," says Smith. "She couldn't take it herself; she wanted others that could to take it. But nobody was talking to one another

Right The Orange LCP team l-r: Teagan Schatz, Penny Dordoy and Erin Beadman.

Proof of the power of sharing information can be seen in NSW domestic and family violence reforms

about what needed to be done and nothing happened."

There has long been recognition of the need for a more coordinated response to incidents of domestic violence – one that encourages all the government and non-government services who may have involvement with a victim and/or perpetrator to work together. As Central West WDVCAS Coordinator Penny Dordoy says: "You can talk to anyone who works in domestic violence and they'll tell you we've been crying out for a coordinated all-of-government approach to the response to domestic violence for such a long time."

"We know pretty much every person on the court list before the court list comes out. So it's great – we're already one step ahead and we can really help the person."

Penny Dordoy

Now, with the launch in September of the NSW government's new *Safer Pathway* strategy – one element of a broader framework for reform, *It Stops Here: Standing together to end domestic and family violence* – that coordinated response is finally being implemented.

Playing a central role are the 28 Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Services (WDVCASs) funded by Legal Aid, of which two – Waverley (hosted by Sydney WDVCAS) and Orange (hosted by Central West WDVCAS) – are launch sites for the new strategy. Several months into delivering the revised model, the two service coordinators, Susan Smith in Sydney and Penny Dordoy in Orange, are enthusiastic about what is being achieved.

In particular, amendments to the *Crimes (Domestic and Personal Violence) Act 2007* that enable information sharing to reduce the serious threat to someone's life, health or safety and mechanisms to ensure that such information sharing does actually occur, are making an enormous difference.

"Before this everyone was working in their own silos, I guess you could say," Smith explains. "But now under this new model and in certain circumstances we can share information. If a victim is deemed to be at serious threat we can share some information about that victim in order to try to ensure her safety."

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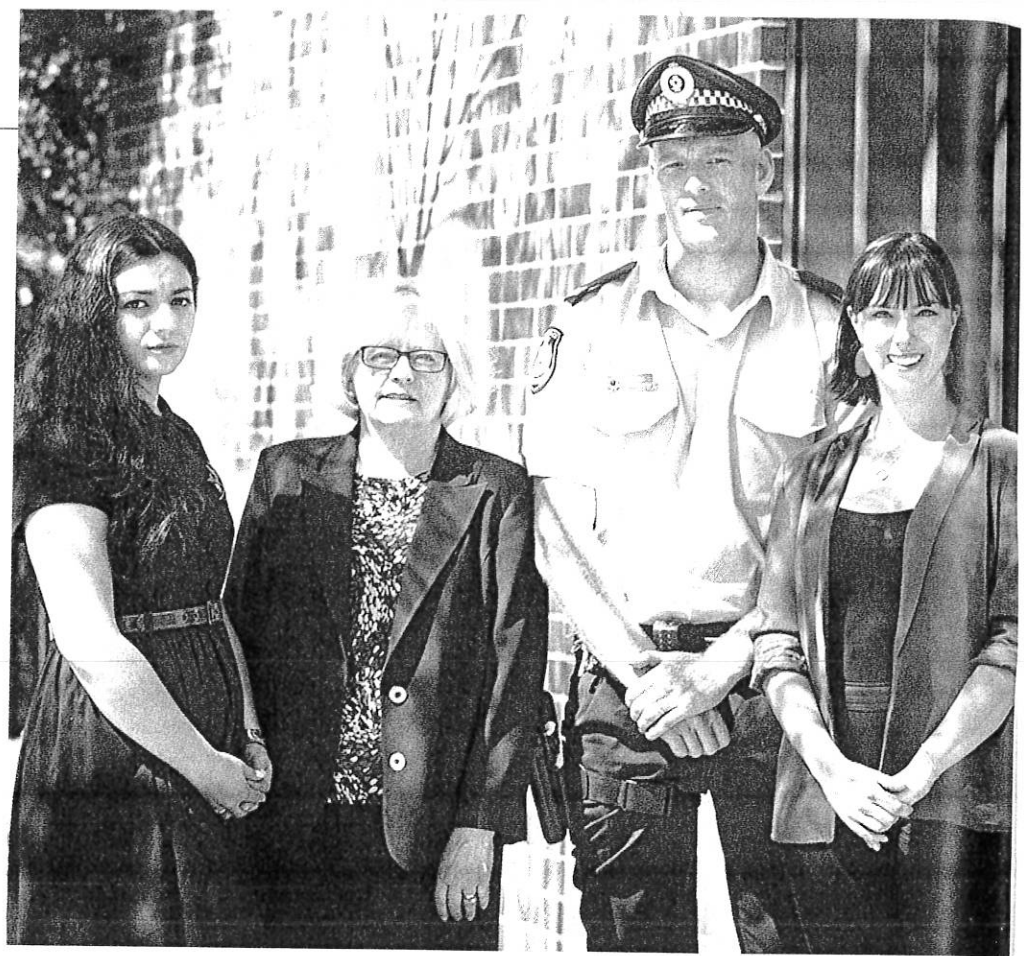
Right At Waverley Court I-r: Rochelle Zats (Information and Referral Officer, Local Coordination Point), Susan Smith (Coordinator, Sydney WDV CAS), Tom Sands (Domestic Violence Liaison Officer, Eastern Suburbs Local Area Command) and Sophie Farrell (Coordinator, Safety Action Meetings).

Assessing the level of threat so women don't slip through the system

There are several steps to this new way of doing things. The first the innovation in the process is the use of the Domestic Violence Safety Assessment Tool (DVSAT), essentially a questionnaire, which police officers called to the scene of any domestic violence incident are required to complete with the victim. It replaces a 'yellow card' system where police officers at the scene of an incident would ask the victim if she wanted to sign a card in order to gain access to services – which in Orange, says Penny Dordoy, only 30% of women said yes to. "It was riddled with problems," she says.

The new DVSAT is designed specifically for police speaking to victims of intimate partner violence. It asks questions such as 'Have you and your partner separated in the last 12 months?' and others relating to risk indicators such as violence and threats of violence, unemployment, and drug and alcohol use. "So it goes on for a number of questions and depending on the number of yes answers to those questions they would be deemed to be either at threat or at serious threat," Smith says.

It is also designed specifically for sharing: on returning to the police station the officer enters the information collected in the questionnaire into the computer and dispatches it to a central point from where it's then sent on to the relevant Local Coordination Point (LCP). LCPs are also new, and throughout the long process of developing the *Safer Pathway* strategy, the Women's



"I feel like we're achieving things that we couldn't have dreamed of achieving." Susan Smith

Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Program within Legal Aid advocated very strongly for WDV CASs to be tasked with managing them.

Selection criteria were developed to decide which service provider should take on the role and the final choice, made by the Domestic and Family Violence Reforms Delivery Board, reflected the WDV CASs strengths in relation to spread of services, relationships with government and non-government agencies and governance infrastructure.

The WDV CAS at Waverley has created two new fulltime positions to meet the responsibilities of hosting the LCP, and in Orange there is one full-time and one part-time position.

The workers' first job in the process is to contact the client referred to them and, if the client agrees, to use the DVSAT to assess the level of threat they face. "It's our role to talk to every single person," Dordoy says.

Gaining consent is the first step – often easier for a WDV CAS worker than a police officer – and then in the course of the conversation that follows to help with whatever issue might come up. Money problems, for instance – 'we can refer you to somewhere for help with that'. So there's a whole lot of ways that we're able to engage that person," Dordoy says.

The WDV CAS in Orange is now seeing people who slipped through the previous yellow card system, didn't turn up at court and therefore had no contact with support services, Dordoy says. "We know that we've been able to pick up a lot of those people and offer them great help, even if it's not directly related to the violence; it might be just something else we can help them with that allows them to make a connection so that if they experience violence again we'll already have that connection with them."

"Legal Aid is very proud of this initiative and thanks all the key partners involved, including NSW Police Force, the Department of Justice and the Department of Family and Community Services."

CEO of Legal Aid, Bill Grant

Keeping one step ahead

For clients assessed as at serious threat, the next step is referral to a safety action meeting (SAM). Held fortnightly, the purpose of SAMs is to bring together representatives from all relevant agencies and services – Police, Housing, Corrective Services, Education, Health and more – in a forum for sharing information and getting things done. Both Dordoy and Smith are extremely positive about how well these are working.

"I feel like we're achieving things that we couldn't have dreamed of achieving", Smith says. Previously, for example, the WDV CAS might refer a client for housing and that referral would just disappear into the system—but now in the Waverley court area there's someone who's been appointed as the NSW Housing officer that we speak with and she is able to make decisions around what can happen with housing – for example she's been absolutely wonderful in identifying housing or letting us know whether somebody's on the priority housing list and so on. Things that would have taken 20 phone calls and then we still wouldn't have been speaking to a manager before this. So these are the things that we're now able to do."

Dordoy, too, says it's been a great thing. "Obviously we would normally see all the people who have AVO matters listed, and we'd be getting referrals," she says – now however, the service has contact with the victim very soon after the incident and is able to build a detailed picture of their situation through dialogue with the different agencies. 'By the time the court case

comes up we've got a really good understanding of the matter ... We know pretty much every person on the court list before the court list comes out. So it's great – we're already one step ahead and we can really help the person."

She's also very positive about the strong relationships the WDV CAS is developing with other service providers, which she says is an unexpected benefit: "Some people have just been amazing the way they've been really proactive in helping us and taking on clients, alerting us to issues – that's a whole other side to this that really we hadn't given too much thought to, I guess."

Police are making more referrals

Just a month after opening its doors as an LCP for the *Safer Pathway* strategy, the WDV CAS in Orange had received 136 referrals. In Waverley, where the strategy was launched a week later, 138 referrals had been received by the same date and several weeks later more than 200 had been received.

Both Smith and Dordoy see these numbers as a mark of success – more incidents of domestic violence are being reported and police are making more referrals than they previously did. How the services will manage over time is a work in progress, with assessments and fine-tuning already underway.

"We're just on top of it all at the moment," Dordoy says, "and I think as we go we'll be a bit faster and we'll also streamline some of those processes." She gives as an example the first phone call to victims, which currently can

take anywhere from five to 55 minutes; another issue being looked at is how many people are reached on the first call, and how they should be called, and how many times – young people respond better if a mobile rather than landline is called but it has to be done in a way that doesn't expose the phone number of the service, and this has now been organised ... "So we're kind of mucking around with a few things at the moment," she says.

As the strategy rolls out across the state, extra staff will be needed at the 28 WDV CASs hosting the LCPs and also at some of the other agencies involved. But it is not overly expensive, Smith says. "I don't think anyone would be saying that this is too costly. Ultimately if we're keeping victims safe, if they don't have to keep coming back to court, if they don't have to be admitted to hospital – there are so many other ways in which they can be a cost that this is mitigating."

So overall—and to understate—the news is good.

"When we were writing our Law Reform submissions over the years and talking about a coordinated response I couldn't have dreamed that it could be as good as this coordinated response that we've come up with," Smith says. "It's wonderful."

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Penny Dordoy