

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

There's No Pride in Domestic Violence: The Same Sex Domestic Violence Interagency, Sydney, Australia

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Introduction

This chapter considers an Australian interagency of government and non-government agencies working in partnership to reduce the incidence of domestic violence in same sex relationships. A key strength of the “Same Sex Domestic Violence Interagency” (the interagency) is its longevity due to the commitment by its members and the diversity of agencies that they represent. The interagency has representatives from many fields of expertise working to provide services to respond to domestic violence. From police to health care workers, community organizations to private practitioners, each member is committed to creating awareness of same sex domestic violence (SSDV) in the wider community and working towards the provision of adequate services for people experiencing this violence. The interagency is unfunded and relies on the kind support and volunteer hours supplied by participating individuals and agencies.

The interagency has always based itself in the inner city suburbs of Darlinghurst and Surry Hills in Sydney, and consequently, much of the work done has centered on the local area. This area is historically and culturally

linked to the gay community. While much of the work of the interagency is Sydney-focused, it operates across the state of New South Wales. This chapter will examine the work of the interagency between 2001 and 2009.

The Interagency

Made up of a variety of representatives from government and non-government agencies in Sydney including members of women's groups and queer advocates, the purpose of the interagency is to monitor and review patterns in SSDV and to advocate for improvement in data collection practices. Other functions of the interagency include: collecting and distributing current research and knowledge on SSDV; identifying and applying for sources of funding to support the strategies of the interagency; developing prevention and social support strategies to address the issues identified; increasing the community's awareness of SSDV, the resources available and encouraging reporting; providing an educative and advisory role to key agencies and services; sharing information by organizing and hosting SSDV Education Forums and encouraging best clinical practice; making recommendations regarding allocation of resources to various strategies; advocating for policy development around SSDV; maintaining and further developing, when required, campaigns on SSDV; and actively engaging with individuals and organizations working in the area of SSDV.

Now in its tenth year, the interagency meets monthly, and with little to no money, has developed and implemented a number of projects and

campaigns, promoted awareness and improved the response of service providers dealing with SSDV. Some of these initiatives have included: developing the state wide community awareness campaign *There's No Pride in Domestic Violence*; publishing an informative resource for people experiencing same sex domestic violence titled *Another Closet*; and conducting a data collection exercise which led to the production of a research report titled *Fair's Fair*.

The interagency was born out of a lack of specialist services specifically for gay men experiencing domestic violence. Ten years later there are still no specialist services for gay men. This has been the biggest challenge for the interagency and one that remains unresolved. Other challenges which will be explored in this chapter include: the fear of enhancing homophobic attitudes in the community by creating an awareness of SSDV; defining SSDV as different from heterosexual domestic violence; the ongoing struggle to source funding for various initiatives; the inadequacy of data collection systems and practices; the challenges of reaching the gay and lesbian community - particularly in rural, regional and remote areas; the backlash from the community particularly surrounding the effects of drug use and domestic violence; and the question of mutual abuse and working with perpetrators.

Despite the multiple challenges, the interagency boasts a number of achievements largely due to the strong commitment and diversity of the individuals and agencies involved, which have provided significant support

and many volunteer hours. As a result of the strategic relationships formed by the interagency, New South Wales has seen the beginning of funded specialist SSDV services. ACON (formerly the AIDS Council of NSW - a gay and lesbian health promotion organization) received funding for the SSDV Officer role and the Inner City Legal Centre received funding to develop a SSDV court assistance scheme now known as the Safe Relationships Project. A new SSDV interagency – Speak Out Against Relationship Abuse (SOAR) has recently been established to service the greater Sydney area. Finally, perhaps the biggest achievement of the interagency has been the innovative nature of its projects, which have helped to create a dialogue on SSDV within the gay and lesbian community, and beyond. Before exploring the initiatives, challenges and strengths of the interagency in more detail, it is important to place the interagency, and the context of SSDV, in an Australian context.

The Australian Context

Gay and Lesbian Inequality in Australia

A major contextual feature of the work of the interagency has been the unequal status of gay men and lesbians under Australian law. In NSW, for example, male homosexual sex was considered a criminal act until 1984, and same sex relationships were only recognized by the law as recently as 1999. The unequal legal status of gay men and lesbians individually, and in same sex relationships, has been a focal point for many gay and lesbian community

initiatives, which have been directed at portraying the positive aspects of gay and lesbian lifestyles. As a result, community organizations have been reluctant to engage in initiatives which portray the gay and lesbian community in a negative light.

These fears have, in part, been realized by those critical of gay and lesbian individuals. Relationship violence is often used to lend credence to the notion that same sex relationships are “immoral,” “unhealthy” and “deviant.” Conservative Christian groups have publicly used *Fair’s Fair* data (a report developed by the interagency, which will be discussed further below) to argue against equality for same sex relationships. For example, during the 2009 Australian Senate inquiries into equal marriage and the NSW Government inquiry into making adoption available to same sex couples, *Fair’s Fair* was quoted as evidence that lesbian couples were more violent toward each other than heterosexual couples, and therefore should not be allowed to raise children (Salt Shakers n.d.). Consequently, with very little community dialogue about SSDV and only recent legal acknowledgment and recognition of same sex relationships, it has been difficult for some government agencies to acknowledge and identify SSDV. This is the context in which the interagency has had to work.

Changes in Australian law to recognize same sex relationships

In 2008, both the NSW and federal governments amended a large number of laws in an attempt to give greater recognition to all relationships. While same

sex couples continue to be denied access to adoption, and under federal law, are unable to get married, same sex couples are more recognized and closer to gaining equality than ever before. One area of significant development is that non-biological parents in same sex relationships will now have equal standing to biological parents under family law if any disputes arise about children after separation. While it remains to be seen how these changes to the law will impact the work of the interagency, a move towards legislative equality is an important step in ensuring that SSDV issues are included in future legislative and policy discussions on domestic violence.

Defining SSDV

Same sex domestic violence can be very difficult for the gay and lesbian communities to understand. Often the first challenge is communicating that SSDV really does exist - the concept of a woman hitting another woman or a man being a victim can be very provoking for some people, and can require a significant shift in thinking.

The next challenge has been distinguishing SSDV from heterosexual domestic violence. Although there are similarities, SSDV has unique aspects that require explanation and understanding. Homophobia, both internalized and external, can be particularly important in the experience of SSDV. For some victims of SSDV, homophobia can prevent them from telling their friends and family that they are in an abusive relationship because they may fear an inappropriate response. It may stop them from seeking help from

counseling and medical services. There is also the fear of being outed and the fear of discrimination from the police and legal system (Cruz 2003; Merrill and Wolfe 2000).

Compounded by the historical lack of recognition and discrimination experienced by gay men and lesbians, and the gendered language that dominates most work on domestic violence, definitional issues have also exacerbated attempts to educate the wider community about domestic violence in same sex relationships (Ball and Hayes 2010; Letellier 1994). As wider community education is one of the key aims of the interagency, clarifying the definition of SSDV and drawing out its unique aspects have been integral to the work of the interagency. This is the framework in which the interagency has operated.

The Beginnings

In 2001, domestic violence service providers in the Surry Hills and Darlinghurst area noticed an increase in referrals for counselling and practical assistance for gay men experiencing the effects of domestic violence. In April 2001, a forum was organized at the St Vincent's Community Health Service's Darlinghurst Centre, to discuss this increase as well as the lack of services available for gay men affected by domestic violence. Over forty representatives including a range of government departments (Health, Housing, Police, the Attorney General's department, and Centrelink-Australia's welfare government department), as well as several non-

governmental organizations, including gay and lesbian community organizations, legal centers and a homeless brokerage service, attended. A range of issues were canvassed at the forum and, as a direct result, the Same Sex Domestic Violence Interagency was formed to act to address the issue of domestic violence in gay and lesbian relationships.

During these early years the interagency produced comprehensive reading resources and a website, and was also successful in convincing the state's Department of Housing that someone escaping SSDV should be considered eligible for emergency housing. Although this amounted to three nights accommodation in a hotel (clearly not an ideal situation for victims of SSDV), it was a better alternative to what had previously been available.

The interagency also developed a report detailing the findings of an audit of 484 files at ACON counseling, a primary counseling service for gay men and lesbians in Sydney. The report was significant as it was the first substantive document demonstrating the incidence of SSDV. The files were examined for references to abuse and violence in same sex relationships, and it was found that violence was occurring in 11% of the files examined. The interagency also began a trial volunteer court support scheme for victims of SSDV at Waverley Local Court in Sydney. The court support service received some media attention by the local gay press, however it was discontinued shortly after its inception as it was not sustainable without funding.

In 2003, the interagency held a roundtable discussion that targeted service providers and government department representatives beyond the

interagency membership. The aim of the roundtable was to ensure that these key services were aware that an SSDV community awareness campaign was being launched and that they were prepared for any increase in calls for service by people experiencing SSDV. This was a significant step on the road to addressing SSDV, as it was attended by about eighty people, representing a wide range of agencies including women's refuges, the police, counseling and support services, gay and lesbian services, health agencies, education services and legal services. Although, the response to the roundtable was mainly positive, there were some concerns from a group of women who objected to gay male inclusion in SSDV. The roundtable also received coverage in the gay and lesbian media, further increasing the awareness of the issue in the community.

Initiatives

In February 2004 the interagency launched the *There's No Pride In Domestic Violence Campaign*. This campaign emerged as a result of several years of work by the interagency to raise awareness of domestic violence in gay and lesbian relationships, and has been one of the interagency's most sustained and successful campaigns. As such, it warrants an in-depth discussion.

Campaign considerations

In 2003 the interagency received \$50,000, from the Attorney General's Department (AGD) to produce an SSDV community awareness campaign.

Four broad considerations fed into the development process and ultimately shaped the final campaign. First, the interagency was determined not to develop a campaign that portrayed all gay and lesbian relationships in a negative light or that reinforced negative stereotypes. The interagency wanted to acknowledge that most gay and lesbian relationships are based upon love and respect. This would have the effect of reinforcing healthy relationships and encouraging individuals to reflect on the basis of their own relationships.

Second, as specialist services for lesbians were limited and they were practically non-existent for gay men, the interagency sought to strengthen the services available for victims. Without sufficient services to help people wishing to escape domestic violence, it was considered unethical (and possibly damaging) to develop a campaign that specifically encouraged people to escape their abusive relationships.

Third, the interagency sought to increase awareness of SSDV, as those agencies working with victims reported that their clients had a limited understanding of domestic violence. As there had never been a large scale, community wide campaign in the gay and lesbian community, the interagency made the assessment that the overall understanding of domestic violence was low.

Finally, the funding for the campaign specified that it target both gay men and lesbians, so the resources needed to represent both genders. Based on these considerations the aim of the campaign became to “increase community knowledge and understanding of domestic violence as a gay and lesbian

issue.” The majority of resources targeted the entire gay and lesbian community about the issue of same sex domestic violence rather than solely addressing individuals in abusive relationships.

Messages and resources

The campaign title *There’s No Pride In Domestic Violence* was decided on after extensive focus testing, as it juxtaposed the concept of community “pride” with “domestic violence,” and stated that the two were mutually exclusive. The opening line in the main text stated that “most gay and lesbian relationships are based on love and respect. Some are based on abuse and control.” This aimed to show that while the majority of relationships were healthy and positive, some were not. To further reinforce this message, the campaign artwork showed one lone black heart amongst a field of colored hearts. The final line of the poster stated: “Domestic violence exists in our community.” This was followed by a number of referral details including the contact information for the NSW Domestic Violence Line.

A range of resources were produced including: posters for gay and lesbian venues as well as materials for mainstream locations like police stations, doctors’ offices, counselors’ offices, youth centers and so on; print advertisements for the lesbian and gay press media; a pamphlet that described what domestic violence was, how it manifested itself in gay and lesbian relationships, and referral options; stories from six survivors of same sex domestic violence; and a website.

Campaign launch

The campaign launched in February 2004 at the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Fair Day, a major gay and lesbian community event with up to 40,000 community members attending, and was a fun, high profile affair. In support of the aim to reinforce positive relationships, 10,000 heart-shaped, red, glitter-covered stickers printed with the phrase “Our Relationships” followed by “Love & Respect,” “Long & Strong,” “Unique & Equal,” “Single & Happy” or “Single & Looking” were produced. The campaign was officially launched to an audience of thousands on the Fair Day main stage by drag performer Mitzi Mackintosh and ACON Board Member, David Buchanan SC. Prominent lesbian performer Shauna Jensen sang “Respect.”

Another closet: Resources for people experiencing domestic violence and their friends and family

In February 2005, the second phase of the campaign was launched. This phase, entitled *Another Closet*, included a thirty-six page booklet, a business-card-sized information card and an upgraded website (www.anothercloset.com.au). The website was essentially an online version of the booklet, while the information card contained an abridged version of the information with a particular focus on contact details for services, and was designed specifically so it could easily be concealed.

These resources, unlike those for the *There's No Pride in Domestic Violence* campaign, were written for people experiencing domestic violence

as well as their friends and family. For someone experiencing domestic violence, the resources included a relationship checklist for identifying abusive behaviors, descriptions of the different forms of abuse, safety planning suggestions, and strategies for recovering from abuse and violence. For friends and family, the resources outlined why a victim might stay in an abusive relationship, and strategies for helping them. Six survivors of SSDV were also asked to write their stories, and extracts from these stories were used to illustrate points throughout the *Another Closet* resources. Feedback from readers often focused on the strength of these extracts in encouraging them to seek help.

As a testament to the success of the campaign in getting the message out into the community, about 2,500 booklets and 10,000 information cards were produced using the original grant, while a further 10,000 booklets and 10,000 z-cards were printed in 2005 with \$14,000 from the AGD NSW Victims of Crime Grant.

Fair's Fair report: A snapshot of violence and abuse in Sydney LGBT relationships 2006

Building upon the success of the *There's No Pride in Domestic Violence* campaign, the interagency began developing a two-paged self-completed survey to be conducted at the 2006 Mardi Gras Fair Day. The aim of the survey was to get a snapshot of the experiences of people in Sydney's gay and lesbian community in relation to domestic violence. Although the interagency

predominantly works with violence in gay and lesbian same-sex relationships, this report also sought responses from transgendered individuals. A convenience or accidental sampling strategy was used to recruit respondents. The survey aimed to gather information about the experience of domestic violence in same sex relationships as well as the help-seeking behaviors of those respondents who reported experiencing abuse or violence within their relationship.

The survey found a range of important issues, providing the first significant picture of SSDV (Farrell and Cerise 2006). In all, the total sample of 308 Australian respondents demonstrated significant levels of violence and abuse in same sex relationships. Overall, it found that similar patterns of violence and abuse occurred across all genders in the sample. For participants of all genders (and referring to both previous and current relationships), it found that the forms of violence included: controlling/jealous behavior (in 48% of relationships); humiliation (45%); physical abuse (34%); social isolation (31%); financial control (18%); sexual abuse (17%); and outing (17%). In particular, young people between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five recorded high levels of some form of abuse, especially humiliation, outing and controlling or jealous behaviour. Additionally, those who reported that they experienced abuse in a previous relationship were more likely to have entered into another abusive relationship. Finally, the survey found that children were a factor when violent relationships. A number of respondents (14%) who reported abuse in their current relationship had children under the age of

sixteen in their care (this was more common for women (27%) than men (5%)), while 16% of respondents who reported one or more forms of abuse in a previous relationship indicated that they had children in their care during the relationship.

With regard to the help-seeking of victims and other support issues, the survey found that the majority of respondents who reported any abuse in a current or previous relationship (58%) did not seek any support in relation to the abuse. In particular, 67% of male respondents reporting one or more forms of abuse in a current or previous relationship did not seek any support. For those respondents that *did* seek help, the most common form of assistance was informal support from family and friends (33%), and the most common type of formal assistance sought was from counselors, psychologists, or social workers (19%).

Overcoming challenges

Throughout its existence, the interagency has encountered a number of limitations and challenges in achieving the aims of reducing SSDV, increasing awareness, and helping victims. This section will discuss these challenges so that others hoping to establish a campaign against SSDV are aware of some of the potential hurdles they might face.

Funding

The capacity of the interagency to undertake projects to respond to SSDV is in many ways limited by the lack of financial support. Considerable work has gone into writing grant applications and applying for funding. These grant applications, when successful, have enabled the interagency to implement many of the projects described earlier; however, without reliable and ongoing funds, the interagency is continuously redirected to look for financial support.

Support arrangements from members of the interagency are common and directly impact the ability of the interagency to continue to function. For example, ACON has consistently hosted meetings of the interagency and administered any funding received. Without this type of support from member agencies, the interagency would not have the capacity to implement these types of strategies to address SSDV.

Lack of specialist services

Lack of funding has been a constant challenge to the work of the interagency, as well as to the delivery of services to gay men who are experiencing domestic violence. The funding available to address domestic violence almost exclusively follows a gendered language and is offered either by organizations that support women or for projects addressing domestic violence in the traditional context – that is with women as victims and men as perpetrators. There are currently no services for gay male victims of domestic violence in NSW. At present, if a gay man is in need of crisis accommodation as a result of escaping a domestic violence situation, he has nowhere to turn to

for housing other than homeless shelters, which are often inappropriate and may present a risk for gay men. Gay men frequently resort to asking friends or family for a place to stay, or alternatively pay for a hostel or hotel. The lack of crisis accommodation for gay men was a standing agenda item at the interagency meetings during 2004-2007, and it remains an issue to address in future work plans.

Rural / regional / remote areas

For people in same sex relationships living in rural, regional or remote (RRR) areas, the distances and isolation further exacerbate the problems they may be facing in their relationships. When both the abuser and the victim live in the same town, their options are often limited when it comes to social and community activities and support services.

The experiences of lesbians and gay men who live in RRR areas are extremely different to the experiences of lesbians and gay men who live in the city. There is certainly a belief that people living outside the metropolitan “melting pots” of larger cities like Sydney are less accepting of difference. The expectation is that people living in RRR areas are more likely to be conservative and homophobic. This is a generalization and is not always the case, but in some instances a “small town mentality” applies, where everyone knows everyone and no one’s business is private. Those that are experiencing SSDV are more likely to be closeted for fear of homophobic responses from neighbors and the community. The lack of services in RRR areas also mean

that it is harder for people to access the support they need when experiencing domestic violence. The interagency has found it difficult to ensure that the various campaigns reach those people living in RRR areas. Gay newspapers and magazines (in which the interagency campaigns are featured) do not get distributed to RRR areas, or if they do, they are not freely available.

Additionally, some community members believe that those magazines do not represent the lives of lesbians and gay men living in RRR areas. The distance from the cities and the conservative and homophobic attitudes that occur in RRR areas will continue to be a great challenge for the interagency.

Data recording

The lack of acknowledgement of SSDV in the community and amongst service providers suggests that SSDV is under-reported. This is supported by research evidence within Australia and beyond (see Ball and Hayes 2010; Jeffries and Ball 2008). The lack of reliable data on SSDV means a greater reliance on anecdotal reports and personal stories to measure and describe the problem of SSDV within the community. The need for more rigorous data is vital for any funding application. Despite some successful attempts at data collection, such issues continue to pose a challenge for the interagency in its quest to successfully apply for funding from government and other sources.

The issue of under-reporting is compounded by the fear of a negative response from authorities such as police and inaccurate recording of the event. A domestic violence incident between two men in a same sex relationship for

example, is often viewed as a “fist fight” between two roommates. If it *is* recorded correctly as domestic violence on the Computerized Operational Policing Reports System (COPS) – the database used by the NSW Police Force - the system does not specifically record incidents of “same sex domestic violence.” Consequently, to ascertain whether certain incidents are SSDV, one would have to manually examine individual records on the database to determine the gender of parties involved and the nature of the relationship, if known. This process is quite labor intensive and impractical.

In relation to court data, most domestic violence matters, including applications for apprehended violence orders (AVOs) are heard in local courts. The only way to identify SSDV matters is to examine the court lists—read through the facts of the application and look at the names and gender of the “person in need of protection” and the defendant in order to determine if there is an intimate relationship.

Community backlash to *Fair’s Fair*

Lesbian Domestic Violence

There has been some criticism of the results of *Fair’s Fair*. In particular, one survey question asked about the experience of abuse in previous relationships. The results of this question showed that approximately 40% of the female respondents said they had been in a previous abusive relationship, however, there was no follow up question that asked whether this previous abusive

relationship was with a woman or a man. It is therefore unknown if the abuse reported in the survey is wholly SSDV, or if it included heterosexual domestic violence. The *Fair's Fair* report thus shows that lesbian domestic violence occurs at a greater rate than heterosexual couples, which may or may not be entirely accurate.

Drug Use and Domestic Violence

Another issue that arose after the release of *Fair's Fair* and the data collected was a backlash from the community about differentiating domestic violence and the impact of violent “come downs” from drug use. One community member, Steven Easy, wrote in an article called “Fighting Fit” in the *Sydney Star Observer* on June 14, 2007:

My frustration with the *Fair's Fair* report is the way alarming statistics and statements about gay men are being used in an apparent attempt to secure government funding. If this is a problem that's more prevalent among lesbians than gay men, I think we should say that. And if this is a problem that's actually more about violent drug comedowns and substance abuse issues (particularly ice) than partners hitting each other, I think we should say that, too.

The impact of drugs on SSDV is relatively unknown. The challenge that remains is addressing the issue without taking responsibility away from the perpetrator. The interagency has since resolved to consider violence targeted against the victim, despite drug use, as domestic violence.

In response to the above article, Brad Gray from the interagency, in the June 21st 2007 issue of the *Sydney Star Observer* wrote that:

While it's true that drugs can make some people violent it's also true that in most cases people who are violent towards their partner when they are on drugs are also emotionally abusive to, and controlling of, their partner when they are not on drugs. This is well understood in the broader health, legal and welfare sectors. By excusing DV as a result of drugs (including alcohol), we, as individuals and a community, allow the perpetrators to abrogate responsibility for their action.

Perpetrators and Service Provision

Determining who the victim and who the perpetrator of an SSDV incident is remains an issue for domestic violence service providers. The interagency, made up of various domestic violence service providers, has to address this question on a daily basis, particularly by deciding who the primary aggressor is and who is deserving of the service. An original goal of the interagency was to serve both perpetrators and victims because at times mutual abuse may be present, or it may be too unclear to recognize one clear victim and one clear perpetrator. However, the group diverted from this focus in favor of assisting victims, largely due to member agencies from health organizations being unable to deal with perpetrators because of their workplace policies and guidelines. The interagency, however, has seen the benefit of including issues

of perpetration, holding forums for clinicians on this subject, as well as addressing it in conferences and workshops.

Strengths

Beyond the limitations outlined above, there are a number of important strengths of the interagency. These are outlined further below, and may also be useful for those seeking to establish and maintain a successful collaborative program devoted to addressing the issue of SSDV.

Diversity of interagency members and commitment

Domestic violence is an area that crosses all boundaries, and therefore government and non government agencies acting together in partnership for the community is imperative. The interagency is one of the longest running and most productive interagency meetings in Sydney, and has greatly benefited from the collaborative approach of its members.

Strategic relationships

Auspiced by ACON

A key element in the success of interagency projects has been its partnership with ACON. The interagency is not a formal organization, and when it was successful in receiving funding from the Attorney General's Department in 2002, one of its member agencies had to auspice the interagency to receive

the funding. ACON was chosen and having the support of the nation's largest LGBT health organization in this capacity meant interagency campaigns could become widespread and the resources of ACON were accessible for the interagency to use.

The interagency also paved the way for ACON to integrate SSDV into their health awareness campaigns. Beginning in 2005, SSDV joined gay and lesbian sexual health, homophobic violence and drug use as one of the key areas of focus in ACON's health campaigns. The SSDV message was injected into party theme campaigns and included in press advertisements. In 2006 and 2007, ACON continued to include domestic violence elements in their community campaigns.

NSW Police Force

The partnership with the NSW Police Force has been invaluable in raising awareness of SSDV amongst police officers and in effectively training police to respond appropriately to SSDV situations. As the police are often the first point of contact for victims of SSDV, particularly when there has been physical assault, the response of police impacts significantly on the experience of victims. SSDV has been incorporated into the Gay and Lesbian Liaison Officer training as well as training for specialist police Domestic Violence Liaison Officers, and since 2005, an interagency representative has been included in all SSDV training being conducted for members of the police force.

An ongoing issue in training police officers is to clearly define SSDV by drawing out the similarities and differences to heterosexual domestic violence. Police officers are trained to respond to all incidents of domestic violence in a consistent fashion, as law enforcement officers, in the interests of protecting the victims from harm. However, they are also encouraged to examine each situation and all aspects of diversity to enable an appropriate response. This may appear contradictory at times, reinforcing the need for good quality training and policy direction.

Media

When the interagency first approached the gay press media in Sydney, the media wanted to speak to someone who had personal experience with SSDV. Finding a person who is able and willing to talk about their experiences in a public arena is incredibly difficult on many levels. The *There's No Pride in Domestic Violence* campaign allowed the interagency to form better relationships with the media in outlining a language to discuss the issue of SSDV. There is now a greater understanding in, and more cooperation with, the media in highlighting the issue of SSDV, as it is clear that media exposure is important for a campaign to be successful.

ACON's Anti Violence Project SSDV Officer

After the launch of the *Fair's Fair* Report, ACON applied for funding from the NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet Office for Women's Policy for

a full time SSDV Officer for twelve months. ACON was successful with this grant and employed an SSDV Officer in October 2008 to undertake initiatives to build the capacity of mainstream services to respond to SSDV.

The role of the SSDV Officer has been invaluable for the interagency. Allocating a full time position to respond to SSDV gave the interagency a “go to” person for project leads. A central component of the twelve month project was to conduct an analysis of existing services available for people experiencing SSDV, identify gaps, and make recommendations for improvements. A key recommendation from the gap analysis is the development of a toolkit to assist mainstream service providers to improve services for people experiencing domestic violence in same sex relationships. The project is waiting for further funding to continue in 2010.

Safe Relationships Project

At the start of 2008, the Inner City Legal Centre (ICLC) - a member agency of the interagency - applied to the Public Purpose Fund (a non-government fund that collects interest from law firm trust accounts) for additional funding to establish services that address the legal needs of specific groups of disadvantaged people in NSW. ICLC was successful in its application and received funding for a project for a three year period. ICLC decided to put the money towards developing what is now the Safe Relationships Project (SRP).

The SRP is a new court assistance scheme for people in same sex relationships, transgender and transsexual people, and intersex people who are

experiencing domestic violence. It is the first of its kind in Australia (and quite possibly the world). The aim of the SRP is to assist clients in accessing legal representation and applying for Apprehended Violence Orders as well as to provide support, advocacy, referrals and information. This is to ensure that a person's right to safety is protected through the legal process, regardless of their sex, gender or sexual orientation. The SRP can also assist victims of domestic violence in related legal matters, including support during criminal proceedings, family law matters, disputes over children and property and victims compensation. The SRP was launched in July, 2009 and has been assisting clients since that time. The SRP is still working hard to develop its profile in the community and is working very closely with the interagency to respond to and prevent SSDV.

Speak Out Against Relationship Abuse (SOAR) Interagency

SOAR is a Community Education Project initiated in February 2009 by Wimlah, a Blue Mountains Specialist Domestic Violence Service in NSW. SOAR seeks to address specific service barriers for lesbian victims of domestic violence in rural areas including increased isolation, fewer services, more intense experiences of community homophobia, minimization, and silencing attitudes. As a newly formed pilot interagency, SOAR held its first meeting in November, 2009. Ten agencies were present who are committed to strengthening the greater Sydney service response to SSDV by promoting

inclusive, collaborative, anti-homophobia domestic violence resources, service directories, training, on-going community forums and consultations. SOAR aims to raise awareness about the hidden nature of lesbian domestic violence within our communities. It also seeks to source, research, educate and assist in the creation of best practice SSDV models for government services in this region, which will increase appropriate and safe referral pathways for lesbians accessing mainstream domestic violence and other health, legal or welfare services.

Conclusion

The projects led by the interagency have been groundbreaking in bringing SSDV out of the closet and making the community aware that domestic violence does exist in our communities. By no means have these initiatives been able to help all victims, or highlight all forms of domestic violence in the gay community – the continuing invisibility of transgender and intersex people is a clear example of this. However, the interagency has been somewhat effective and will continue to build towards overcoming the unique challenges that SSDV work entails in order to provide an effective response and prevent domestic violence in same sex relationships. The interagency is hopeful that funding for specialized SSDV services and SSDV training, and for mainstream domestic violence services, will become more regular and secure in the future.

Notes

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