

**Feature:**

# On the fast track to a specialist career

Recent reforms outlined by the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence have highlighted the urgent demand for specialist practitioners with the requisite knowledge and skills to take up senior level leadership positions in specialist family violence and sexual assault services. DVRCV's Fast Track pilot aims to address this demand.

The specialist family violence workforce is small and specialist practitioners are keenly aware that, as the sector grows, there is increasing demand for managers and leaders who have a history in the family violence sector and the expertise to lead teams of practitioners and run specialist services. The Fast Track program was created to increase the available pool of senior level specialist workers with formal training in management and leadership within a family violence context.

Specialist practitioners have a vast store of knowledge in working with children, young people or women who are living with family violence or in working with perpetrators of family violence. However, the family violence sector is a high-risk environment where organisations face significant management, leadership, funding, service delivery and operational challenges that are unique to our sector. To be the most effective, managers and organisational leaders in our field need a balance of traditional management and leadership skills and specialist family violence leadership expertise. The recent policy reforms have created speedy and significant change to which sector leaders and managers need to respond, balancing the needs of their staff, their organisation and the significant opportunity the reform context provides to create better outcomes for women and children living with family violence. As such, the specialist family violence sector needs leaders and managers who not only have a sound understanding of family violence and of the service system, but who have a keen sense of the advocacy role staff and agencies play and a strong understanding of those unique organisational dynamics that make leadership in a family violence context so important – and so complex.

Fast Track offers specialised, rather than generic, leadership and senior management training that is specifically informed by the senior level capabilities outlined in the Responding to Family Violence Capability Framework. Capabilities such as

understanding the governance structures of the family violence and sexual assault systems and how to advocate within these structures; the policy-making process and framing of recommendations arising from direct service provision; and providing input into the development of frameworks and tools to underpin work with victim survivors or perpetrators of family violence and supervising others in the application of these

frameworks and tools are all core elements of Fast Track.

This pilot program will test whether an intensive exposure to, and skill development around, these senior level capabilities will equip participants – who have expertise in direct service but not necessarily significant leadership expertise – with the deep understanding required to address the demand for managers and leaders in the



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## The program aims to fast track the supply of senior level practitioners who have the knowledge and skills to take up specialist family violence management and leadership roles.

family violence sector to support the current growth and reform.

DVRCV rolled out the Fast Track pilot program in September which aims to increase the supply of specialist family violence practitioners with the skills to lead in senior roles. The program is designed to ‘fast track’ their acquisition of the required knowledge and skills by addressing each of the fifteen ‘senior level’ capabilities identified in the 2017 Responding to Family Violence Workforce Capability Framework – the benchmark for senior staff working in the family violence sector. Sixteen practitioners from across Victoria were selected to participate in this unique multi-mode capability building program. They were required to allocate five hours per week over a three-month period and participate in all activities, which included:

- Weekly 4 hour workshop sessions
- Individual coaching support and mentoring sessions
- Community of practice engagement
- Workplace experience and reflection
- Delivery of a conference presentation at the conclusion of the program

The multiple modes of learning ensure there is enough space to acquire knowledge and skills as well as engage in self-reflection, practice new skills in a workplace context and network, all critical components of successful adult education. The participants work together as a group over this period to build skills and relationships by learning from one another and from expert facilitators and guest presenters at each workshop. The content of the workshops is based on subject areas that are important for senior level practitioners such as developing systems to support evidence-based practice, working with others to make legislative and policy reforms and making recommendations to government. This content is reinforced by intensive work with sector experts. Sector experts attend each of the weekly workshops offering their ‘fire-side reflections’ on the current challenges and opportunities in the

sector based on decades of experience in working in the family violence sector.

### Key challenges

We believe this program targets one of the key challenges facing the family violence sector and is, to our knowledge, the only program that aims to address the leadership and management skills required in the family violence sector within a time frame that will provide a more immediate solution to the supply gaps in our workforce.

Participants suggest the challenges they face during the current reform process result from:

1. A central focus being placed on child protection rather than effort being made to bring the needs of children into a family violence frame
2. A broadened definition of family violence that could result in women’s support being undermined
3. As part of the system change, replacing some of the current systems and structures that incorporate strong multidisciplinary approaches with new systems that are not yet fully developed

These insights have provided an opportunity to reflect on broader policy concerns and to discuss their role as emerging leaders in working to ensure that the sector can retain feminist informed, client-centered practice in this changing environment.

### Findings to date

The application process highlighted a demand for training across populations in Melbourne CBD, regional areas and in services supporting sub-populations.

The process also highlighted a large and complex workforce development gap: all applicants, who ranged from entry to senior level, perceived there to be a lack of formal sector-specific leadership and management training available to them.

Pre-course surveys showed that, despite this shortage of specialised leadership resources, participants felt highly capable in direct service delivery work with clients.

At the same time, they indicated they would like to learn more about their potential role in advocacy and future policy reform, and as such the course content was heavily geared towards these areas.

In-session evaluations have shown that participants value the presence and input of expert guests, all participants rated visiting experts as either ‘very useful’ or ‘extremely useful’ for stimulating workshop discussion. They valued that ‘the presenters were open and honest’. One participant suggested further improvement by including a broader range of guest speakers, ‘We have had lots of senior CEO-level speakers. It would be good to have speakers in middle management who can show the transitional stages from where we are now, to the CEO stage.’

Each participant is assigned a mentor and over 90% rated this experience as ‘very positive’ or ‘extremely positive’, with one participant noting that ‘the mentoring is great. We can talk about anything and it challenges the way I think.’

Post-course surveys show 100% of participants would be ‘very likely’ or ‘extremely likely’ to recommend the program to colleagues. Participants described experiencing a personal shift from focusing on direct practice to a broader, more strategic perspective which involved understanding the history of the sector to inform and influence the future. We asked for one word to describe each session, and the standouts were clear: ‘inclusive, inspirational, empowering, stimulating and challenging’ were all used to describe the Fast Track program.

Overall, feedback indicates that participants are benefitting highly from what the program has to offer. Fast Track has delineated the workforce development gap for leadership within the sector. The evaluation results of DVRCV’s Fast Track program pilot will be made available in early 2019 and we hope to make this innovative program available to more practitioners across Victoria in the near future. ■