

Profile:

Putting victim survivors at the heart of reform

Tim Cartwright APM was Victoria's inaugural Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor (FVRIM). We spoke to Tim about his vast career, including his reflections and observations about how reform implementation will enable real systemic change and better outcomes for victim survivors.

Tell us about your professional background.

I was with Victorian Police for forty-one years, with the last six months as acting Chief Commissioner. Like everyone else there, you start at the bottom and work your way up. I got into a policy area as a young inspector in 1991, then I became the police spokesperson on family violence. In 2016, I was officially appointed as Victoria's first Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor.

Looking back, what reflections do you have as a police officer working on family violence?

I often reflect on the way we dealt with or didn't deal with family violence. You realise how unsatisfactory the police response was in terms of how we worked and didn't work, how little we knew, how little we wanted to know and how few mechanisms were in place. Now Victoria Police has an Assistant Commissioner for Family Violence, so the profile in those thirty years has increased enormously.

What has motivated your career choices?

I've always been motivated by equal opportunity and justice, particularly in the multicultural and family violence spaces. Victim survivors don't have that fairness, that gender equality. This imbalance is seen with the gender pay gap, the conversations we get exposed to about men behaving badly, the #metoo movement – all that reflects gender inequality. Having an opportunity to do something about that is what drives me. As an ex police officer, I'm also driven by community safety in the broader sense. Family violence is an enormous community safety issue. Ensuring children have the opportunity to live a happy life and to contribute in whatever way they can is close to my heart.

Can you describe your leadership style and approach?

Victim survivors have been at the forefront of all my leadership roles. Hearing their stories and the impact of their trauma shapes my approach.

I always think about the collective and system as a whole. It's complex. There's no point investing more in crisis intervention if we don't have crisis accommodation in place. And then you need strategies in place to help victim survivors get back to a normal life. How, for example, do we support their long-term financial independence? How do we ensure victim survivors get the support they need for a better life? So, my approach is about putting people first as well as looking at the bigger picture.

The Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor (FVRIM) role was newly established. What benefits has it brought to the reform journey?

The role brings a lot of benefits. It demonstrates the government's commitment to being open and transparent about ending family violence. Often, people who've been delivering work on the ground have an experience that might not be positive and think: 'is it me or is it a broader issue?' My role has enabled people to be heard and to have a voice. That's a real benefit.

What do you think is unique about the FVRIM role?

The role has a unique opportunity to observe things as they progress, to talk to people as recommendations are implemented and influence for effectiveness along the way. The whole reason I'm here is about influencing for the better, so we have a system that works, that's better for victim survivors. The role also offers a good amount of transparency. There is an opportunity to question people so it leads to constructive development.

What are the main challenges of the reforms?

The most challenging aspect is the bureaucracy. Historically, the sector has been organised so workers can focus on specific areas. In family violence terms that challenges the effectiveness of the reforms. You need to see the whole system rather than one piece of it.

Another challenge is the need to balance the urgency of pushing through the reforms

versus the need to step back, consider and plan carefully.

We still have a long way to go in addressing the needs of diverse communities and those living in rural and regional communities. We've focused on the majority of the victim cohort at this stage, but more work is needed to ensure the system can support people who face additional challenges.

The impact of the reforms will take time. We always knew it would take about ten years to see the initial impacts, but we are still losing a woman a week and it doesn't look like declining soon. This is distressing and a big challenge.

What are some key lessons you've learnt through this role?

It is about people - it 'is' the job. We can talk about systems and statistics but, at the heart of it, are victim survivors – the women, the children, even the men who are victims. A key question we've used to guide our work is: 'what is best for current and future victim survivors?' So, whenever we are in a position to decide or choose a path, we come back to that question to guide us.

What do you see as offering the greatest opportunities and impacts of the reform?

We have an enormous opportunity that we thought would never exist. Primary prevention provides the greatest opportunity to create a community where there is gender equality and everyone is treated with respect. There's no point doing crisis intervention and recovery fantastically if we don't get prevention right. We always need to think: 'how can we make crisis intervention less necessary?' This can only be done by addressing the drivers of violence, so real cultural change is created.

The Orange Doors offer potential to be a huge game changer. If we get the Orange Doors right, it will be much easier for victim survivors to access the services they need, to not have to retell their story, or travel from one service to another to get the support they need.

We are now witnessing a change in the discourse on family violence. We are having

conversations we've never had before and that's an important part of the reform journey. We can see this in the Victorian Police who are now framing acts of violence against women with, 'what are the men doing?' instead of 'what was the victim doing?' That shift from victim blaming reflects enormous change. But we still have a lot of work to do.

What would you like to say to family violence workers?

I'm enormously impressed by people who work on the frontline. Victim survivors tell me time and again: 'it is the support from workers that sustains and gives us strength.' So, I'd say: 'thank you for the work you do. You do a great job. Please continue.'

What advice would you have for your successor?

Don't ever lose sight of the fact that it's about people in the most challenging of circumstances. Victim survivor's trauma is real. There are wounds that won't ever heal. Don't ever lose sight of that personal touch. Encourage communication. I've talked about victim survivors, but it extends to all relationships and the people who come to you, and those you're trying to influence. Always use your people skills.

It will be challenging, especially to your sense of integrity. It's not always clear what path you need to take in being a critical friend to government but always remain true to yourself. That's easy to say but can be challenging to put into practice. ■



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