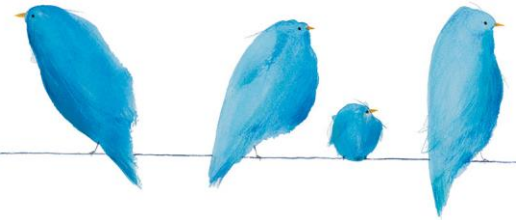


Working with family violence survivor advocates



The SHRFV initiative acknowledges that all people can experience family violence across the lifespan. It is well understood and supported by evidence, that family violence is also a gendered issue. Research demonstrated that in Australia, women are at least three times more likely than men to experience violence from an intimate partner, are five times more likely than men to require medical attention or hospitalisation as a result of intimate partner violence, and around 95% of all victims of violence in Australia report a male perpetrator (whether the victim themselves is male or female). In contrast, men are more likely to experience violence outside the home, often perpetrated by someone previously unknown to them.¹ The language used in this document and throughout this toolkit reflects that the most common form of family violence is committed by men against women.

Why listen to survivors of family violence?

Survivors of family violence have a unique skill set of experience that cannot be taught. Their voices and insight can often be a key to unlocking the doors surrounding the nuances of family violence. Their perspective is unique. Their involvement should be considered in certain circumstances.

“As a community we don’t expect to hear victims’ voices and we aren’t accustomed to taking them seriously. Advocacy offers us a way to change this. When we listen to rape survivors tell their stories we see where the problem lies. Gender inequality, the power gap between perpetrator and victim and the abuse of trust to create a situation where exploitation and abuse can be enacted become all too clear. To hear from survivors of sexual violence, to really hear what we have to say, is to recognise that things need to change. It is to learn where we have gone wrong, as individuals, as families, as communities and cultures and systems. It is to accept that we are not doing enough and that it is time all of us stepped up to take responsibility for creating a culture of equality, respect and safety for all. If... we can honour and respect the voices and stories of women then we will also, as a community, learn to do so in our courts, in our police stations, in our homes, in our workplaces, in public and in our parliaments”.

Kate Ravenscroft, Media Advocate, cited in *Voices for Change: A Media Advocacy Program for the Prevention of Violence Against Women*, Our Watch & Women’s Health East, 2016²

“Hearing the experiences of others creates a bond and a community of people who have come out the other side of violence against women. In doing so, we are standing up against the isolation and the silence which once ruled our lives.”

Tracey, safe steps Survivor Advocate

Why do we need to talk about engagement with Survivor Advocates?

Incorporating the voices of women who are survivors of family violence (referred to herein as Survivor Advocates) is key to any work to effect social change in response to family violence. However in order to ensure women’s voices are not used in a tokenistic fashion, it involves building relationships of safety, respect and mutuality between survivor advocates and your organisations. The philosophy “nothing about us, without us” is well-established in working with consumer advocates in other areas such as mental health, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public advocacy programs. This is also essential when considering engaging survivors of family violence in any organisational change process. Sharing their story and experiences can





be a powerful and deeply positive experience for a Survivor Advocate. It can give them an opportunity to own their own narrative and to reconstruct their experience in a way that can help and support others on their journey. It is important to remember that this can also be painful and retraumatising. The experience of every victim-survivor is different.

How should health services within the SHRFV initiative engage with Survivor Advocates?

When engaging with Survivor Advocates within the SHRFV initiative it is essential to consider their autonomy, safety and wellbeing. The Women's project team has engaged with Survivor Advocates in a number of ways since we began implementing the SHRFV approach in 2015. Our learnings are presented here:

- Survivor advocates have powerful personal stories and these are most often utilised within the SHRFV initiative for launch events or on special occasions. Some Survivor Advocates require support to share their story publicly. Preparing survivor advocates for public speaking can be supported by external support agencies that run programs for Survivor Advocates (e.g. safe steps, Women's Health East).
- Survivor Advocates willing to talk openly about their lived experiences are scarce. As a result organisations need to be mindful of how they are engaged and be attentive to the specific purpose of the engagement.
- Survivor advocates are different from consumer advocates commonly involved in hospital projects. Survivor advocates often require special consideration and support. They are always best sourced from an organisation that offers this specialist support.
- Survivor Advocates are not required to sit on individual SHRFV hospital reference/implementation groups. We have survivor advocate feedback within the state-wide SHRFV Project Advisory Group (chaired by the Women's). Survivor Advocates and groups that work closely with them continue to be involved with the content and ongoing development of the SHRFV toolkit of resources.
- The SHRFV Toolkit Project Management guide provides guidance regarding the membership of SHRFV implementation groups. These should include a range of staff at different levels from across the hospital to provide diverse and multidisciplinary perspectives. Clinical representation on the group is essential along with representation from human resources. Representatives from external family violence agencies could also be considered to help build working relationships and increase community awareness about work going on at the hospital. Such agencies can also bring valuable consumer insight to discussions.
- The engagement of a survivor advocate requires attention and thought. It is vital to allocate adequate resources to support their engagement. This includes considerations of payment for costs incurred (e.g. parking, petrol, meals, travel time, childcare) or as a paid consultant or expert advisor (e.g. hourly or agreed rate). Please carefully consider and reflect on the support your organisation offers them, work with them to ensure that their work and time is acknowledged and valued appropriately and they are not just there to 'fill a seat' or 'tick a box'. It is not appropriate to assume or expect them to provide their time and experience for free.
- Most importantly, by sharing their experience, insight and knowledge, they are and should be considered as a Family Violence subject expert.



Where can we get further information?

The joint 2016 Our Watch and Women's Health East project "Voices for Change: A Media Advocacy Program for the Prevention of Violence Against Women" (http://whe.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2014/12/WHE_ImplementationGuide_WithResources.pdf) is an important report to help guide this work. It advises that nuanced project planning must be undertaken in order for survivor advocate voices to be heard, supported and respected.

The "Voices for Change" project provides the following guidance in regard to working with survivor/advocates:

- The safety and wellbeing of the advocates is the most important consideration. Risk and safety assessment, establishing guidelines and boundaries for privacy, confidentiality and technology safety are important considerations.
- It is essential to have in place a comprehensive screening process, including ongoing assessment of advocates' safety and wellbeing and trained support workers for media advocate support.
- Working with key media and community stakeholders in training and education is a key part of the work to educate and ensure that advocates are treated respectfully.
- Media and the community need to understand there is a strong focus on violence prevention, rather than just women sharing their stories.
- The advocates need opportunities for support and to come together to share their experiences in advocacy work.

How to find a Survivor/Advocate for an event or meeting?

There are several organisations who provide training and support for survivor advocates, who could assist in sourcing an appropriate person. These are listed below.

safe steps Survivor Advocate Network

The safe steps Survivor Advocate Program is an ongoing initiative designed to empower women who have a lived experience of family violence to safely and effectively share their personal stories and raise awareness of family violence with a range of community and media audiences.

<https://www.safesteps.org.au/our-advocacy/survivor-advocate-program/>

Women's Health in the East Media Advocacy

The Speaking Out program, run by Women's Health in the East, ensures that the voices of women who have experienced family violence and sexual assault are heard through the media and at public events. Led by Women's Health East, in partnership with the Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault (ECASA) and the Eastern Domestic Violence Service (EDVOS), the program seeks to influence a change in community attitudes and to promote the prevention of violence against women.

<http://whe.org.au/what-we-do/speaking-out-program-media-advocacy/>

¹ OurWatch (2020) 'Facts and Figures', <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/quick-facts/>

² Women's Health East 2016, Voices for Change: A Media Advocacy Program for the Prevention of Violence Against Women, Women's Health East, Melbourne.