

**Voices of the sector:**

# What's unique about working in a rural setting?

Living and working in regional, rural and remote areas brings particular benefits and challenges. Geography has no influence over certain aspects of women's experiences of family violence – some things are the same no matter where you are – but there are some key differences. We spoke to Mandy Noble and Jan Tracey about their experiences of working in a rural setting.

**Mandy Noble, Principal Strategic Advisor for Wimmera**

**Tell us about your role**

The Wimmera and South West Family Violence Partnership covers 10 local government areas. It's about 21 per cent of the state – that's about 54,000 square kilometres – which is divided into Wimmera and South West regions, and when combined equates to the whole of the DHHS Western District Area. I'm the Principal Strategic Advisor for Wimmera and Kelly Dufty is in the same position in the South West. We connect agencies, programs and initiatives; making sure everyone knows what's happening and aligning effort and work.

We do a lot of work in family violence response but we also have close prevention connections with primary care partnerships and women's health organisations. Our planning groups have representation from local government, women's health services, primary care partnerships, and other services that play a key role in primary prevention.

Another important part of our role is strategic planning and service system design, looking at the service system as a whole and not as individual agencies or programs. Our partnership is focused on interpreting what's happening at a state policy level into what it means for agencies and communities across the Wimmera and South West.

We act as an information conduit as well as providing strong advocacy. We offer a rural and remote lens on initiatives and programs rolling out as part of the reform, which is really important in designing the service system.

**What needs to be considered in regional, rural and remote contexts?**

Geography and population significantly influence service system design and implementation. Our catchment covers hundreds of kilometres made up of tiny towns with less than 200 people and a couple of larger regional centres. The time it takes to travel those distances impacts on the way agencies deliver services.

It's not uncommon for someone to travel two hours, one way, to see a client. Some clients using public transport can't return home the



same day due to a lack of return services. This presents a very real barrier to service access and significantly increases the risk to women attempting to access such services. There are issues around geography, transport, telecommunications, and even the anonymity of people in small rural communities and these things need to be considered when designing service systems and programs. They're real and affect people all across our catchment.

These challenges are not insurmountable; models of service delivery can be designed with place in mind. It's about allowing

us flexibility to make programs fit the environment in which we work.

**What's the most challenging aspect of doing family violence work with that rural lens?**

One of the key challenges is isolation and the associated travel logistics affecting agencies' capacity to respond. For example, there might be a serious incident in a small town and the police have to wait 40 minutes to an hour for workers to get there to support them to facilitate a two person response. Travel time has an impact on how a service

“

## We want to work with those who influence the design of our services to create a place-based not population-based model.

can respond, particularly in incidents of crisis, and is often not adequately considered or funded by centralised service design.

A lot of funding and time is eaten up getting to the person so agencies often work above and beyond to provide a service that all people should be able to access, regardless of where you live. There's almost an assumption that if you work or live in rural and remote Victoria, you should receive less service, and that shouldn't be the case.

It's also really difficult to recruit and retain staff in rural areas. That's not specific to family violence, that's across the board. We have a smaller population to draw from and agencies do a fantastic job with what they have.

### **What have you seen work better in your region than in a metro setting?**

Agencies and people are very adaptable and resilient. Agencies work closely because they rely on each other. The other day someone needed help in a small rural community right in between the Wimmera and the South West. The two sub-regional services talked to each other about who could get there first. There's constant communication about delivering service in the best way possible.

### **If you could do one thing to improve regional, rural and remote family violence response, what would it be?**

We want to work with government and those who influence the design of our services to create a rurally loaded place-based model which does not rely on population-based funding. It's really important to people working in rural communities that we design services to meet the needs of their communities because they're all very different. Service delivery problems would be greatly improved if we had the capacity to work that way. ■

### **Jan Tracey, Health Promotion Training Facilitator, Gippsland Women's Health**

#### **Tell us about your role**

I do capacity building work with communities and training within organisations to prevent violence against women.

#### **What needs to be considered in the regional, rural, and remote areas?**

Distance is distinct to the rural experience. Our organisation delivers across Gippsland and we can travel two hours to attend a two hour meeting. There's value in being there in person, as opposed to using technology, but we do need to travel in pairs because it's safer.

Recently we spoke to women in a remote community about what gender equality means for them. We stayed with a woman who's been involved in local activism and some of the locals aren't happy about it. She told us about being woken by a car racing around her house, shooting guns. We were terrified but she said 'I have a gun beside my bed now, don't worry about it.' These are fiercely independent women; running farms on their own, fighting fires with the blokes during a crisis but when it's over they're told to make the sandwiches.

There are lots of nights away from home and family. Anything we do in Melbourne or remote communities involves an overnight stay and attending training in Melbourne is sometimes not possible. Organisations think that providing training in somewhere like Latrobe Valley makes it accessible. That's true for people in Latrobe Valley, but it's still not easy for people in Orbost who have drive three hours to attend that training. It's a little bit closer but not much more feasible.

#### **What have you seen work better in your region than in a metro setting?**

We can leverage the multiple roles performed by people in rural areas. We deliver the same messaging in different settings so that it's reinforced for people. For example, we delivered bystander train the trainer at a water corporation. One employee from corporate services offered to run it at the local soccer club

where he's the coach. We support people to do that by providing resources and training.

#### **If you could do one thing to improve regional, rural, remote prevention of violence against women, what would it be?**

Funding is often based on population, which doesn't work in the rural context. We got a small grant to run a school support program in four remote schools. Every student we targeted attended, there was an amazing response and feedback. The funder responded to our evaluation noting that our numbers weren't very high. It wasn't very high, but it was 100% of the target population. Population-based funding doesn't take into account the logistics and cost of doing work in places that can be five hours from where you're based.

Short-term projects are another funding problem. One-year contracts just don't work in rural communities. By the time someone gets into a position and travels to meet people and make connections with communities, half of the contract is over. Rural people like to know who you are before they start working with you. You have to prove yourself, get their trust and then you can do it.

Technology is another challenge. We have the same technology we were using 10 years ago. Mobile black spots and poor reception mean that some remote communities use fixed phone lines and mobiles are redundant. In the high country we couldn't use our mobiles. Our work with the neighbourhood house in Orbost was challenging because they don't have technology to enable us to Skype. We can invest in that technology, but the places we're connecting with have to have that technology as well. ■