

# Discussion Paper: Online Perpetrator Interventions



**No to Violence**

Leading the change to end male family violence in Australia

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## Acknowledgment of Country

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No to Violence acknowledges First Nations Peoples across these lands; the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters. We pay respect to all Elders, past, present and emerging. We acknowledge a deep connection with country which has existed over 60,000 years. We acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded, and this was and always will be First Nation's land



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## Executive summary

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This policy discussion paper explores the delivery of Men’s Behaviour Change Programs (MBCPs) via videoconferencing software.<sup>1</sup> This discussion paper offers a view of online MBCPs that reflects the needs, experiences, questions, learning and expertise of the specialist men’s services sector. This paper was developed in consultation with MBCP facilitators who have facilitated face-to-face, hybrid, and VCS/online-only MBCPs to continue services required to be delivered differently, particularly due to COVID-19 health orders.

Online or hybrid MBCPs using videoconferencing software (VCS) could be appropriate across three distinct circumstances: during declared states of emergency, such as natural disasters or pandemics; for specialist, low-density cohorts of men who have mobility and locational challenges, such as men in rural and remote areas or men with physical disabilities; and for specific cohorts that require specialised services, such as gay, bi, trans, or queer (GBTQ+) men or men from specific religious or cultural backgrounds.<sup>2</sup>

No to Violence is of the view, with strict additional safety measures, online or hybrid MBCPs using VCS are appropriate and can maintain best practice standards.

This policy discussion paper represents No to Violence’s latest thinking on online MBCPs. It was informed through interviews with practitioners, through conversations with our members, and through a review of existing literature.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper uses the terminology ‘online MBCP’ and ‘videoconferencing software’ to differentiate from other technologically mediated interventions. No to Violence’s Online Ethical Care training uses ‘technology mediated interventions’ because this encompasses phone counselling, online MBCPs, and other forms of support. This paper is concerned solely with online MBCPs via videoconferencing software.

<sup>2</sup> This paper does not make a determination as to whether online interventions are appropriate for men with intellectual impairments and/or acquired brain injuries. None of the facilitators interviewed nor the literature reviewed offered insight into working with these cohorts.

# Online Men's Behaviour Change Programs

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## Introduction to MBCPs

Men's Behaviour Change Programs (MBCPs) are a common form of intervention for men who use or have used domestic or family violence (DFV). MBCPs operate across all Australian states and territories. MBCPs were developed to promote the importance of men taking responsibility for their violent and controlling behaviours. They are one part of the suite of perpetrator interventions.

In conjunction with a range of other interventions, MBCPs are designed to hold perpetrators accountable for their actions by enabling men to recognise their violent and controlling behaviours and the harm caused by these behaviours. The primary aim of MBCPs is to support the long-term safety of women and children by managing their risk and by keeping perpetrators in view and accountable for their violence.

## Fundamentals of MBCPs

No to Violence recognises the importance of innovative and evidence-based practice; to that end, we reiterate that all MBCPs adhere to relevant jurisdictional guidelines for service and practice standards.<sup>3</sup>

The [FSV Minimum Standards](#) (Family Safety Victoria 2018) outlines the eight fundamental elements for MBCPs operating in Victoria:

1. An understanding of the gendered nature of family violence
2. An integrated approach to family violence interventions
3. Two facilitators—one man and one woman—delivering programs
4. Robust risk assessment and management practices and procedures
5. Victim/survivor family safety contact
6. Program logic
7. Theory of change
8. Evaluation framework

Additionally, Family Safety Victoria released [Service Guidelines](#) for perpetrator interventions during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in September 2020 with considerations for online delivery as part of a multi-intervention service model approach (Family Safety Victoria 2020).

In New South Wales, the [Practice Standards](#) and [Compliance Framework for Men's Behaviour Change Programs](#) govern MBCPs, and the [Compliance Framework for Men's Domestic Violence Behaviour Change Programs—Online Delivery Supplement](#) was introduced in mid-2021 (Justice Strategy and

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<sup>3</sup> No to Violence has included relevant jurisdictional minimum standards. We have not included jurisdictional risk assessment, management, and mitigation frameworks.

Policy 2018; 2018; 2021). These Principles are consistent across the Standards and the Online Delivery Supplement, but the Online Delivery Supplement contains specific requirements for evidence.

1. Principle 1: The safety of victims, including children, must be given the highest priority
2. Principle 2: Victim safety and perpetrator accountability and behaviour change are best achieved through an integrated service response
3. Principle 3: Effective programs must be informed by a sound evidence base and subject to ongoing evaluation
4. Principle 4: Challenging domestic and family violence requires a sustained commitment to professional practice
5. Principle 5: Men responsible for domestic and family violence must be held accountable for their behaviour
6. Principle 6: Programs will respond to the diverse needs of the participants

## Translation from ‘In-Person’ to ‘Online’

The public health orders of the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the rapid move to remote and online service delivery, particularly in Victoria, and later in New South Wales and Queensland.<sup>4</sup> This transition occurred before guidelines or minimum standards could be updated, and providers were unclear as to whether the pre-Covid expectations, especially around contractual targets/key performance indicators for intaking and exiting men, would continue to apply in the online environment.

The men’s specialist service sector had to respond quickly to keep MBCP participants engaged despite the sudden closure of in-person groups in some states. Updated Victorian Government service guidelines were issued in May 2020 and September 2020 and accompanied by a report with recommendations on alternatives to face to face MBCP groupwork and re-updated in late 2020. These guidelines and the accompanying report were invaluable as the pandemic impacted on services.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the interest in conducting MBCPs via Video Conferencing Software (VCS) came from providers working with men in rural areas and men with disabilities, for whom travelling to a central location was difficult for both participants and providers. A 2019 pilot called Pathways for Family Peace was initiated by the US-based non-profit Global Rights for Women, for instance, catered to men in a geographically disparate state who were unable to travel multiple hours each way to attend group (Global Rights for Women 2022; more information below). In 2015, the University of Melbourne undertook a review of an online provider, finding the program was an effective intervention and that it provides a ‘valuable addition’ to the suite of perpetrator interventions (Rutter and O’Connor 2015, 5).

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<sup>4</sup>The majority of practitioners consulted in this paper operate in Victoria. The consultations were conducted in June 2021, before NSW and Queensland went into a period of lockdown.

It is likely that VCS-facilitated specialist men’s family violence programs will remain a more permanent contribution to the sector.

## Online engagement: Reviewing the literature

When the pandemic began there was scant evidence on online behaviour change programs. The extent and effect of the pandemic was unclear to the family violence sector in Australia. Lockdowns meant service delivery needed urgent and immediate change. There is evidence that the safety of women and children is compromised during natural disasters and lockdowns were considered to be likely to have a similar effect (Parkinson 2011).

### Videoconferencing Men’s Behaviour Change Work: Early knowledge

Global Rights for Women, a US-based non-profit that aims to bring justice to women and girls who are survivors of gender-based violence, produced several webinars and adapted guidelines from the Working With European Perpetrators Network (WWPEN) in early 2020 (Petrangelo Scaia 2020; Pauncz 2020; Global Rights for Women 2020a; 2020b). The guides and webinars focused on moving Duluth-based groupwork online in the very early weeks of lockdowns and other restrictions being introduced in the United States.

These guides present insight into the very early thinking around moving programs online and the increased role of crisis management. In a draft adaptation of the European Network Guidelines for Working Responsibly with Perpetrators of Domestic Violence during the COVID-19 pandemic, the viability of moving group programs online using VCS is considered (Petrangelo Scaia 2020, 35). These guidelines note that as ‘life threat’ increases to men as a result of the pandemic and associated lockdowns, program curricula needs to be adapted according to the crisis management needs of the group (Petrangelo Scaia 2020, 35). In the April 2020 webinar associated with these guidelines, the increased role of crisis management in group work was emphasised (Global Rights for Women 2020a).

In an analysis of the opportunities and challenges for VCS MBCPs, Petrangelo Scaia, Heath, and Miller found the following (Petrangelo Scaia, Heath, and Miller 2020, 18–19):

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More facilitators/participant communication between MBC sessions</li> <li>• Increased written documentation</li> <li>• Reduced interruptions to attendance (illness or weather related)</li> <li>• Smaller groups</li> <li>• Men and facilitators can log in from anywhere, reducing facilitator absence</li> <li>• Facilitators can communicate directly using private chat function</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Smaller groups require more capacity from service provider</li> <li>• Men could be AoD affected</li> <li>• Harder to do small group work with men</li> <li>• Videos and audio can have slight delay</li> <li>• Data security and privacy</li> <li>• Men who do not have internet access or necessary hardware required to find external, private location (noting</li> </ul>



	arrangements were made in some US government agencies)
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This guidance is similar to that found in the Australian-based practice guidelines noted above.

**Videoconferencing Men’s Behaviour Change Work: Existing Evidence**

An exploratory study, conducted by University of Durham academics Rosanna Bellini and Nicole Westmarland, evaluated the efficacy of Global Rights for Women’s Pathways to Family Peace program. Pathways to Family Peace was initiated pre-pandemic to support men in the geographically large state of Minnesota, who were unable to drive multiple hours each way to attend groupwork (Global Rights for Women 2022). Bellini and Westmarland evaluated this intervention (called a Batterer Intervention Program or BIP) that was delivered via VCS ([Bellini and Westmarland 2020](#)). Overall, Bellini and Westmarland recommend that VCS should only be used as a secondary option (with the primary choice being in-person, face-to-face MBCPs) and only with perpetrators who have been assessed as appropriate for VCS MBCPs.

Not unexpectedly, Bellini and Westmarland found that perpetrators can only participate in VCS MBCPs when they have the appropriate technological resources (i.e. tablet or computer and Wifi connection) as well as other inputs, such as a private space to participate in the MBCP and the ability to effectively use the required technology ([Bellini and Westmarland 2020, 1](#)).

Their exploratory study also revealed that moving MBCPs online using VCS changed the nature of the relationship between participants and facilitators: Bellini and Westmarland noted that ‘it can be challenging for facilitators to identify and adapt to each other’s style of facilitation online’ ([Bellini and Westmarland 2020, 2](#)). In speaking with facilitators, we found that the relationship between facilitators is equally, if not more important in VCS program delivery than face-to-face.<sup>5</sup>

Bellini and Westmarland recommend that digital delivery via VCS should be part of a coordinated community response rather than a stand-alone intervention, and that introducing VCS as the means for participation brings with it a host of challenges that must be addressed.

**Key practice considerations**

In 2018 No to Violence sought feedback from our members regarding online behaviour change programs and other perpetrator programs. At that time, our members felt that the risks of online programs were significant enough as to outweigh the benefits. For instance, the ability of participants to instantaneously terminate their participation in an online intervention; the importance of face-to-face interaction for understanding body language and non-verbal cues; and the challenge of de-escalating while at home were all concerns for our members.

In our 2018 practice paper on online programs for men who use family violence, No to Violence noted the following key concerns around maintaining MBCP principles in an online space: holding

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<sup>5</sup> No to Violence runs an Online Ethical Care training. This training is aimed at qualified MBCP facilitators who are looking to grow their skills in online facilitation. This is one example of a training program that specifically speaks to the nuances of online MBCP facilitation.

participants accountable; enabling meaningful content engagement; risk assessment and management; pro-social peer support; the modelling of respectful relationships between male and female facilitators; and the motivation of clients towards respectful choices, beliefs and behaviours ([No to Violence 2018](#)). These concerns continue to be relevant and should be carefully considered by practitioners and service providers.

### **Can change happen through video conferencing?**

Further research is required to determine whether MBCPs delivered via video conferencing influences change to the same or a different extent than in-person MBCPs. For instance, the modelling of respectful relationships between male and female facilitators may be more difficult to capture in online MBCPs than in-person. The above research indicates that the pro-social peer support that is crucial to MBCPs may also be likely to be difficult to replicate safely (Petrangelo Scaia, Heath, and Miller 2020; Bellini and Westmarland 2020). Emerging evidence suggest that when VCS is used as an MBCP intervention, participants tend to interact with the facilitator more than they do with one another ([Bellini and Westmarland 2020](#)).

## **Key interview findings**

The following section highlights key issues discussed during interviews with practitioners. Interview participants had varying degrees of experience with online facilitation and facilitated in a variety of contexts: in corrections-based programs; in programs with only mandated men; in programs with voluntary men; and for a number of different providers. The following section is based on their experiences.

### **Setting-up the MBCP environment**

#### ***Facilitators and participants must have the appropriate hardware and software—including 18” screens, interconnectivity, and privacy***

Current service guidelines do not specify the size of screens required for participation. All facilitators strongly recommended that men who participate in online MBCPs have 18” screens, at a minimum. When men use smaller screens, such as an iPhone, they are unable to see all participants and the facilitator’s shared screen simultaneously. Having the ‘gallery view’ throughout the session is critical.

Computer type and hardware availability for facilitators and participants working from home were variable and not always appropriate for the conduct of program sessions. Facilitators need at least one large monitor in addition to their laptops so that they can have all the men in gallery view and, ideally, have the slides or materials visible on a separate, large screen.

Facilitators need privacy when facilitating online programs. One facilitator shared that facilitating from home was particularly challenging because they have a teenage daughter. While this person facilitated from a sound-proof room, facilitating from home—where their daughter was present due to lockdown—was psychologically challenging.

### ***Assessing each man for risk***

Determining whether a perpetrator can participate in an online MBCP requires significant risk assessment and revision. Some facilitators noted that if men were living with their partners or other

affected family members, they were automatically ineligible for online MBCPs and would be offered individual counselling. Other facilitators shared that low-risk men who were living with their partners were able to participate in online MBCPs, but that even when men were assessed as eligible to participate, 'it's like a fluid management system—men in these situations breach intervention orders and could be living with his partner when they said they weren't' and that the inherently low-levels of trust with perpetrators of violence requires ongoing and adaptive risk management practices.

*Online MBCPs at home during Covid-19 lockdown were all taking place in a hyper-crisis setting, so people are generally way more stressed and entering [group sessions] in an aroused state.*

*For men who have chaotic houses, there's no way will they find privacy!*

*Clients are still fully autonomous, independent human beings, so we need to account for that and put structures in place to make sure we're doing our part. But at the end of the day, they can choose to continue using violence whether [MBCPs] are online or face-to-face.*

### **Assessing risk with partners/affected family members**

The importance of obtaining full and informed consent from current and/or former partners, especially when perpetrators were cohabitating with partners, was emphasised throughout each interview.

*We couldn't say to the man 'we need to check with your partner before you can join the program,' because we don't want him blaming her, so we'd ask the partner 'if a spot becomes available, would you be interested in your partner participating?' That way we knew for some men that if a spot came up, their partner wanted them to do it from home, but for others, that they wouldn't want their partner to be asked to join an online MBCP.*

One program found that having an online information session for partners/affected family members at the mid-way point of the group was an appropriate way to address collective stress while enabling women to understand what their current or former partners were learning in group sessions.

In cases where perpetrators are still residing in the home with their current or former partner, it is essential that facilitators understand the extent to which men will be able to engage in their online groupwork confidentially. One interview participant, a research and perpetrator intervention worker, said that in some cases, victim-survivors indicated that they would confront their partners about what they'd said in group, or about what they'd learned in group. In these cases, service providers decided that this was an unacceptable risk and that these men would not be able to participate in online MBCPs.

Other facilitators shared that part of safety planning and risk assessments must be establishing whether a partner is able and willing to leave the home during her partner's online groupwork sessions. Privacy and confidentiality during online MBCPs are of critical importance, and the best way to ensure this is for the partner/victim-survivor to leave the home during groupwork sessions.

In cases where men live with extended family, it is not always possible for them to have the dwelling to themselves. One facilitator shared that

*There was one man who lived in a multi-generational household. He was in a room alone, but, you know, there were five or six other people in the house talking, cooking, making all kinds of noise. Kids would come into the room, pet dogs would run in. There was no way this guy was going to get the house to himself and we tried to tell him he needed to make sure nobody would disturb him but...it's just not possible 100% of the time.*

Facilitating online programs means constantly assessing risk for participants and victim-survivors. In cases where privacy cannot be assured, facilitators must determine whether the privacy risks—be it pets, children, or other adults—are such that the participant needs to leave the online group.

### ***Safety plans are crucial—for men and for their partners***

Safety planning for men who are participating in online MBCPs from their homes is crucial. Facilitators explained that because men no longer have the commute to decompress, there is more work for facilitators in assessing whether men are leaving sessions heightened and ensuring that staff are available to follow-up with men who may seem heightened. Encouragingly, no facilitators reported that men had perpetrated violence following an online session.

*If you want to do a two-hour group session, you need 15 minutes with each man before the sessions to do a check-in, and 15 minutes of wind-down time to chat as a group at the end of the session. You've got to make sure that when he closes the laptop, he's got some sense of being settled.*

Safety planning for partners is similarly crucial. This means knowing which services are available after hours; the accessibility of these services for individual partners (i.e. would they be able to access on foot, do they have unrestricted access to a motor vehicle) and the suitability of available services. One facilitator was particularly concerned about the accessibility and suitability of services in rural areas:

*One of my main concerns is about a man with a partner in a rural farm area. What safety is there for her? The whole point of doing an MBCP is the safety of women and children. If it's difficult to contact her, if he's got control, what risk are we putting her in? Where is she going [after hours], in these little communities where the police are friends with the guy [perpetrator]? A family safety contact call is better than nothing...but not much.*

***Facilitators should contact participants prior to each MBCP session. During these check-ins, it is important that the facilitator work to understand where each man is at and to help him get into the headspace of groupwork.***

All interview participants were very clear that minimising risk and ensuring safety of partners and affected family members is paramount. Facilitators spent roughly 15 minutes on the phone with each MBCP participant prior to the commencement of each session. This short check-in enabled facilitators to assess where each man was at, any specific topics he may want to raise, and remind each man that if they felt uncomfortable with his behaviour or that he was straying from the group contact, that they would notify the police.

***Establishing a trusting and safe environment for group sessions is integral. Without joining together in a physical space, the facilitators must be innovative and adapt to the online environment.***

Facilitators noted that groups that were transitioned online were substantively different from groups that took place entirely online: for some groups, the transition was relatively easy, and the ground rules that had been established in-person easily translated to the online environment. For another facilitator, it was more challenging transitioning a group online because facilitators and men were making comparisons between the original, face-to-face sessions and the online sessions. This facilitator said that the group that took place entirely online had no face-to-face baseline, so they weren't making comparisons to how it could have been better, or how it was previously.

Establishing a trusting environment online necessitates the same processes as in-person. Behavioural ground rules need to be established—and for online MBCPs, this includes where a man can and cannot do the session; whether eating or drinking is allowed; how men will conduct themselves in-group; if, and when, men are allowed to go off-screen; and more.

Facilitators noted that they needed to be creative with multi-modal learning and sharing. This highlights that online facilitation is a separate and additional skill from its to face-to-face counterpart.

### Facilitating MBCPs

#### *Facilitation requires experienced facilitators who have, ideally, worked together in face-to-face facilitation*

In the development of this paper, we spoke with facilitators who had between one and fifteen years of experience with MBCP facilitation. Some had completed the No to Violence graduate certificate, while some had not. The most experienced facilitator said that they believed online MBCPs should be facilitated by experienced facilitators—not by new facilitators. This facilitator felt that having the qualifications to be an MBCP facilitator wasn't enough, and that facilitators of online MBCPs needed some type of additional qualification and training.

*One of my concerns is around newer facilitators and online facilitation. Because [newer employees] might be less familiar with their agencies or comfortable asking for help, I'm worried they might get thrown into [online facilitation] without appropriate training.*

The relationship between facilitators was also incredibly important for group dynamics online. Most facilitators had worked with their co-facilitators previously, and said that having the previous, face-to-face experience of working together made it easier to co-facilitate online. One particularly experienced facilitator shared that they had created a routine including walking their dog before each group session to physically differentiate the rest of the day, and similarly engaged in decompression after each session.

#### *Facilitating online enables some co-facilitators to communicate better, but proves challenging for others*

Facilitators who are experienced co-facilitators were able to communicate relatively easily during online MBCPs. Facilitators made use of texting one another—facilitators did not, importantly, use the chat function on the VCS as this has a high risk of accidentally messaging the group, rather than an individual. During breaks, facilitators would turn off their cameras and call one another via phone to discuss how the group was going and any changes they wanted to make.

Some facilitators felt that because they had a long history of working with their co-facilitator in face-to-face MBCPs, they had a ‘mind meld’ that enabled them to predict what the other person was thinking or the way the conversation should progress.

For newer facilitators or for those who were less familiar with their co-facilitators, the inability of making eye contact via VCS was particularly challenging. It was more difficult for this cohort of facilitators to predict their co-facilitators needs or concerns.

### *Facilitators face higher risk of burn-out in online MBCPs*

There were many findings around facilitator burn-out:

- Harder to enter/exit the headspace of facilitation when you’re at home
- Online MBCPs require a lot more preparatory work than face-to-face sessions
- Online MBCPs require more energy in sessions than face-to-face because there isn’t any energy in the room

One facilitator shared that ‘when you’re in an office, you don’t have your 15-year-old daughter sitting in the next room. You have to be really careful about re-entering the family space.’ Facilitators shared that developing routines to re-enter the family/non-work space was critical when facilitating from home.

As part of the minimum standards, facilitators are required to receive specific clinical supervision as part of their role. This supervision must continue.

*Online facilitation is an extra skill on-top of facilitation. It takes more energy.*

Facilitating online also requires more self-discipline in attending to paperwork immediately after, rather than putting it off for the next day. Several facilitators noted that it can be harder to get into and out of the headspace of facilitation without physical travel time.

### *Online MBCPs provide opportunities to develop complementary, self-paced work for participants to complete between sessions—and more ways to ensure the work gets done*

Some facilitators noted that their programs require self-paced work, while others do not require the work, but do send out readings and supporting materials. In face-to-face MBCPs, men are often given readings and ‘homework’ at the end of a session with the understanding that they will read and/or otherwise complete the work and bring it to the next session. Facilitators were candid, sharing that men do not always do this between-session work.

Going online, however, offers opportunities to ensure that men are getting the work (by using read receipts, for instance) or, for one facilitator, having a self-paced but mandatory online learning portal required to be completed between sessions.

Using a mandatory and self-paced online learning system that complements and embeds the MBCP work is an important opportunity for behaviour change.

Online MBCPs, especially those that have a self-paced but mandatory learning component, may offer additional opportunities for men to engage with their partners if they are living together. One facilitator shared that they had worked with men who had created a ritual of making a cup of tea and going over their work with their partner after groupwork sessions.

### ***Facilitators noted that facilitating online MBCPs required more energy than in-person sessions***

Facilitators shared that they were often exhausted after facilitating online group sessions because:

- it is more difficult to keep everyone engaged online than in face-to-face sessions,
- there are almost always technological challenges;
- running sessions online requires monitoring participation and technology, and
- online sessions do not give off the same energy as face-to-face sessions.

One facilitator shared that they felt

*Much more mentally fatigued at the end of a Zoom group than a physical group. You get a bit of a buzz after an in-person group.*

Technological challenges are a -constant in our online world: Between the fragility and variable reliability of internet connections, freezing screens, live and mute microphones, we face VCS and other technological challenges on a daily basis. This is equally the case for VCS MBCPs. For some interview participants the technological barriers were more frustrating than for others:

*Technology challenges are annoying and disruptive for the whole group.*

*Technology barriers are more an assumed barrier by organisations, but the reality is different.*

### ***Being 'on-screen' provides a built-in accountability mechanism for some men***

Several interview participants noted that for some men, being able to see themselves on-screen acted as a built-in accountability measure.

*The men can see how they communicate and what they look like. Being online, being seen by other men in the group, and speaking into a microphone meant that men were less likely to use humour to break the tension. There was a sense that what was being said really mattered.*

## **Running online MBCPs**

### ***Online MBCPs offer opportunities for men who struggle to access face-to-face MBCPs***

All interview participants readily agreed that online MBCPs enable some men, and provide an opportunity for many men, to access MBCPs more easily than they would face-to-face MBCPs. This includes men who are geographically separated from MBCPs; men who struggle to find MBCPs that are culturally or linguistically appropriate; or for men who do not have a fixed address.

For instance, once facilitator shared the following anecdote:



*We had one man who, when we were face-to-face, was in the program and able to participate, but then he had to enter a rehab facility, so it looked like he wasn't going to finish the program because he couldn't make the group sessions. By the next week, Victoria was back in lockdown, so we went back online. He was able to join the program from his rehab facility. He wouldn't have been able to do that if the program hadn't been online.*

Online MBCPs offer opportunities for men who live in rural, regional, and remote areas, or for men who cannot access an appropriate MBCP in their local area. A staff member from an LGBTIQ+ organisation that runs a voluntary behaviour change program noted that they had participants driving two-and-a-half hours each way to access their MBCPs—and that if the group session were online, not only would it be easier for them to access, but more people would participate.

Facilitators from two separate providers noted that VCS MBCPs enable men whose first language is a language other than English engage more deeply. For instance,

*Men who don't have English as a first language sometimes [become] disengaged in the face-to-face groups, and part of it was that [they have] a hard time understanding and then articulating a thought in the fast-paced conversation... In the online group sessions, we could ask him to look-up specific words, and because only one person can talk at a time, he was able to understand and participate better. He really engaged with the online group.*

### ***Some men may be able to better engage with 'high-shame' topics online than they were in face-to-face groups***

Men participating in an MBCP are asked to reflect on their actions throughout the program. Specific forms of violent abuse, such as violence towards children and sexualised violence, are considered 'higher shame' than others. One facilitator shared that they thought online programs may enable men to better engage with these heavy and high shame topics because

*Shame catches in in-person settings—but it doesn't online. Men come forward quicker to talk about the heavy shame topics online than they do in person.*

When asked why this may be, the facilitator said that because men are in their own spaces while participating in an online MBCP, they may be more comfortable. Feeling physically at ease—sitting in a favourite chair, for instance—means that engaging in uncomfortable topics is easier for some men.

Facilitating the heavy and high shame sessions requires the same level of diligence and care online as it does face-to-face. This means creating space for men to share, but refraining from calling individual men to account.

### ***Deep change may be more challenging in VCS MBCPs than in face-to-face MBCPs***

Throughout the practitioner interviews that informed this paper, facilitators shared that they felt the level of engagement 'is just as good, in some ways better and in other ways worse' when compared to face-to-face MBCPs.

Some interview participants felt that deep change work was just as possible in an online space as in face-to-face, while others felt the opposite. Some literature on online learning or facilitation work



noted that participants in online spaces are more likely to interact with the facilitator than with one another (Bellini and Westmarland 2020). When asked whether this was the case, interview respondents had varied responses, but most agreed that this was *not* the case:

*I felt that men were engaged, and the men were interacting with one another rather than just with us [the facilitators].*

*I think that online programs can be as effective as face-to-face. I've seen men speaking in different ways online than in person, and I'm hopeful that that can continue. I mean, these 20-week programs are trying to un-do forty years of behaviour; are trying to un-do a lot of trauma. Recidivism will always be there. Perpetrators have a lot of trauma, but we can try and prevent recidivism.*

### ***Non-verbal cues are harder to assess during online programs than in face-to-face programs***

Unsurprisingly, interview respondents said that assessing non-verbal cues is harder in an online environment than in a face-to-face environment. Facilitators cannot, for instance, make eye contact with one another or with participants in online group sessions. This makes the 'emotive person that you get in-person' more difficult in an online environment. It isn't just about emotive connection, however. Non-verbal cues are a very real part of the constant re-assessing of risk facilitators undertake throughout groupwork sessions.

This is especially the case with ascertaining whether a man is alcohol or otherwise drug-affected during groupwork.

Facilitating in an online space means removing multiple sensory inputs, including smell and multi-dimensional sight of participants. It is harder to tell, for instance, if a man is alcohol affected without being able to smell his breath or watch the way that he moves through space. One facilitator identified that:

*One of the biggest challenges of online MBCPs is determining if men are presenting AoD affected to group.*

### ***Online MBCPs do not necessarily ease backlog and waitlist challenges***

Current funding levels and the finite number of experienced, qualified facilitators puts significant limitations on the number of men who can attend accredited MBCPs regardless of whether they are online or face-to-face. Moving MBCP group sessions online may exacerbate rather than solve these issues because, according to interview participants, not all facilitators are interested in facilitating online, and not all men have the hardware necessary to take part in online programs.

Face-to-face MBCP group sessions usually have between 12-15 participants; according to the Service Guidelines, online sessions can have a maximum of 10 to ensure all participants are visible on screen. Without increasing the number of programs, this would mean that there are fewer spots available overall. Online MBCPs are not a quick fix for the persistent waitlist challenges in our sector, many of which are caused and perpetuated by ongoing funding and workforce shortages. Notwithstanding, these programs play an important role in increasing the overall accessibility of programs.

## Overall conclusions of interview findings

Overall, interview participants were optimistic about the potential for online MBCPs to be part of the suite of perpetrator interventions.

*I do think there is a really sustainable model here...we just need to start to get some evidence around it.*

*I think there is a real place for this work.*

*Online programs mean we can stay focused on perpetrators. Think back to the start of the pandemic.*

*How many women were locked away with perpetrators? Online programs mean we can guarantee that perpetrators are able to do an MBCP—instead of being afraid of starting programs and unable to finish them because we weren't allowed to exit the men.*

*It's probably better than nothing.*

*Online programs aren't going to be the thing that solves recidivism—but there are some really hopeful learnings. And online programs can be part of it.*

*If you can have an in-person group, have an in-person group.*

*If online MBCPs are well-resourced, they may be able to provide the consistency in men's lives that MBCPs are meant to offer.*

*There is a real role for VCS/online MBCPs in the future—especially in remote areas. I think online programs should be common practice, especially for people with accessibility issues.*

### Applying learnings from COVID-19 to other contexts

These learnings can be applied to other circumstances that prevents people from gathering in a central location, which might be impossible, unfeasible, or undesirable. There are three instances where No to Violence recommends online or hybrid MBCPs:

1. In times of emergency where meeting in-person is either banned or unsafe;
2. for specific cohorts where a group may not be able to convene in a given geographic area (i.e. LGBTQ+ men; for men from specific religious or cultural backgrounds; for men with disabilities or mobility challenges); and
3. for men living in rural or regional areas.

All facilitators who were interviewed for this project agreed that for men who cannot physically travel to a face-to-face group session, online MBCPs are more appropriate and certainly better than nothing. Further, several facilitators (including the most experienced facilitator) were extremely optimistic about the potential for online MBCPs in our sector's future.

## Recommendations

Between June and August 2021, No to Violence carried out a series of targeted interviews with providers who had facilitated online MBCPs during Covid-19. No to Violence recruited participants via member meetings, newsletters, and word-of-mouth. These interviews revealed that while there are substantial challenges in setting-up and running online MBCPs, the learnings have important, positive implications for the future delivery of VCS MBCPs. The following recommendations are based on the experiences shared by facilitators during interviews. This is not an exhaustive list of recommendations or considerations, nor is it meant to take the place of practice guidance.

### *Recommendation 1: Online MBCPs are better than no MBCPs*

While face-to-face MBCPs are preferred, there are circumstances where they are impossible or inaccessible to the men who need them. Men with physical disabilities, LGBTQ+ men, or men in rural, regional, and remote areas and those of a diverse cultural or language background may face significant accessibility barriers. For these cohorts of men, online MBCPs may be the only viable means to engage in behaviour change. Online MBCPs also provide an important opportunity for self-referred men and men who are classified as ‘program ready’ to engage with behaviour change work where they may otherwise be put on a waitlist.

Online MBCPs require equivalent resourcing to face-to-face MBCPs. Online MBCPs require significantly more administrative work to be carried out by administrative staff, facilitators, counsellors, and other family violence professionals involved in risk assessments and partner safety work. Funding bodies ought not regard online MBCPs as a cost-saving venture.

Online MBCPs require substantial investment in equipment and software (such as organisational subscriptions to VCS services like Zoom) or purpose-built software.

For at-home facilitation:

- Each person (two facilitators, one support person where required/possible) requires two monitors and a computer/laptop
- Each person requires a headset and microphone

For in-office facilitation, where co-facilitators and where possible a support person can co-locate:

- Co-facilitators require two monitors
- Support person requires one monitor
- Each person requires a computer/laptop
- Each person requires a headset and microphone

No to Violence recommends additional funding, in the form of long-term, flexible contracts, to accredited MBCP service providers for the evaluation of online MBCPs.

***Recommendation 2: Participants in online MBCPs should be provided the requisite hardware and software***

No to Violence recommends that men who participate in online MBCPs be required to do so from a screen measuring at least 18". This is in line with the DHHS Service Guidelines. Screens smaller than 18"—for instance, iPhones—mean that gallery view in most VCS is impossible. This makes it harder for participants to actively engage with content and means that the important process of understanding non-verbal cues from their fellow participants cannot take place.

No to Violence recommends that the Government provide specific funding to enable MBCP providers to develop the necessary governance arrangements and the assets necessary to loan 18" screens to all online MBCP participants.

***Recommendation 3: Facilitators require additional training—and for sessional staff this training must be compensated***

Many MBCP providers employ sessional MBCP facilitators. Sessional facilitators are fully qualified practitioners who are contracted for a finite number of hours/MBCP cycles. Some facilitators shared that there is inconsistent compensation for professional development that they may undertake. No to Violence heard that a primary concern for online MBCPs is the need for highly qualified practitioners who have specific training in online facilitation. As more programs moved online, some facilitators found it challenging to find the time to train in online facilitation. Facilitators should be compensated for any additional training required to support the delivery of online MBCPs.

No to Violence recommends that specific funding for existing qualified facilitators and other practitioners to upskill in online facilitation and groupwork skill transference be provided; this funding should cover the cost of training as well as the cost of the hours spent in training and/or attending Communities of Practice as part of ongoing professional development.

**Key considerations for Service Providers**

***Consideration 1: Perpetrators and their current/former partners must go through detailed and on-going risk assessment processes to determine if online MBCP participation is appropriate.***

Risk assessments are an important part of all family violence intervention work. Part of the risk assessment includes consulting with, and receiving informed and ongoing consent from, the participant's current or former partner. This is especially the case for online MBCPs. If online MBCPs are to be open to men who are living with their partners or other affected family members, it is of paramount importance that service providers closely scrutinise risk. Just as some men are assessed as ineligible/not ready for face-to-face programs, online MBCPs are not universally appropriate.

Providers need to consider how they will respond should a partner withdraw their consent for a man enrolled in an online MBCP. Consultation should provide partners with a comprehensive overview of the program and any attendant risks, and clarify their options, should they wish to withdraw consent.

Perpetrator risk assessments must consider the following, in line with relevant jurisdictional guidelines/frameworks/standards.

- Risk of alcohol and other drug (AoD) use. This is particularly important as facilitators noted that one of the challenges of online MBCPs is the reduced ability to ascertain whether participants are under the influence of AoD;
- Whether perpetrators are living with their partners/victim-survivors or other people likely to be targeted for violence. If so, men may only participate in online MBCPs if:
  - there is a strong connection established with the family safety contact worker, or another family violence response service with whom the agency has consent to share victim survivor information and coordinate support
  - the family safety contact worker has provided information about the option of telephone or videoconferencing individual work and explores this with the family member explaining any potential impacts for them and any children, identifying all risks and concerns
  - The family safety contact worker has undertaken risk assessments and developed safety plans
  - the family member or other adult person communicates a belief that it is safe for them and their family for him to participate
- Privacy for men participating in MBCPs and for partners engaging in partner safety contact work;
- Suitability of the physical environment;
- Availability of requisite computer equipment (i.e. stable internet connection, 18" screen);
- Understanding of any general risk of escalation or perpetration in accordance with all required risk assessments.

### *Consideration 2: Online MBCPs are better than no MBCPs*

While face-to-face MBCPs are preferred, there are circumstances where these interventions are inaccessible to the men who need them: men with physical disabilities or mobility issues, GBTQ+ men, or men in rural, regional, and remote areas, or those with a diverse language or cultural background face significant accessibility barriers to mainstream behaviour change programming.

For these groups of men, online MBCPs may be the only viable option to engage in behaviour change. Online MBCPs provide an important opportunity for self-referred men and men for whom it is deemed appropriate to engage with behaviour change work where they may otherwise be put on a waitlist.

### *Consideration 3: Online MBCPs should be co-facilitated by highly experienced practitioners who have a history of facilitating together, wherever possible*

One of the strongest recommendations coming out of this research was the need for highly qualified facilitators—and ideally for facilitators who have years of experience co-facilitating in-person sessions. All facilitators should be encouraged and enabled to participate in additional training in online service delivery to ensure the equitable distribution of labour across co-facilitators. Facilitators for online MBCPs must meet all minimum standards for facilitation and should undertake additional training in online facilitation wherever available. Facilitators for online sessions need to be adept at reading non-verbal cues of participants and of their co-facilitators. Online facilitation skills might be considered for inclusion in the next iteration of relevant practice standards.

*Consideration 4: Facilitators need additional support and training to build confidence in online facilitation and ensure they can cope with the additional emotional energy that online facilitation*

Facilitators reported that online MBCPs are more energy intensive and require more set-up and debriefing than in-person MBCPs. Facilitating online program delivery requires specific and different skills than in-person facilitation, including, for example, that lack of ‘residual energy’ described by facilitators from in-person programs. Facilitating online requires more energy from the facilitators and the application of creative and multi-modal engagement strategies. This increases the already heightened risk of burn-out among facilitators. Additional attention may be required to support staff wellbeing including the need for any additional professional development.

*Consideration 5: Cohort-specific online MBCPs must be developed with thematic experts and deployed by expert service providers*

This paper recommends online MBCPs forGBTIQ+ men, men with disabilities, men from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and men living in rural, regional, and remote areas.

It is crucial that online MBCP curricula for these specific cohorts be developed with subject-matter experts. Mainstream MBCPs may not be appropriate forGBTIQ+ men, for example or for men with culturally or faith diverse backgrounds. Men in these cohorts must have access to either a) an online MBCP provided by an expert organisation or an online MBCP that has been developed by an expert organisation, where facilitators have specific training required to meet the needs of participants.

## Conclusion

No to Violence considers that well-resourced, well-facilitated online MBCPs have an important role in perpetrator intervention work.

By incorporating online/VCS-facilitated MBCPs into the suite of perpetrator interventions, more men will be able to access the services they need to stop their violent, coercive, and problematic behaviours, ultimately upholding the safety and wellbeing of victim-survivors. Demand for men’s behaviour change programs far outstrips supply, exacerbated by COVID-19. The flexibility and accessibility of online MBCPs may help alleviate pressure on existing services but cannot take the place of all face-to-face programs. The two types of program delivery ought to be continued.

Online MBCPs have an important role to play in the specialist family and domestic violence services sector. Online MBCPs can be designed for the specific cohorts they are designed to support, and all adhere to the principles enshrined in state and territory- practice standards. Online MBCPs are an important innovation and well-resourced programs, and well-supported, well-trained facilitators, will ensure more men are able to access, participate in, benefit from, and complete, behaviour change work.

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