

Vote Against Violence: 2022 State Election Tour Report

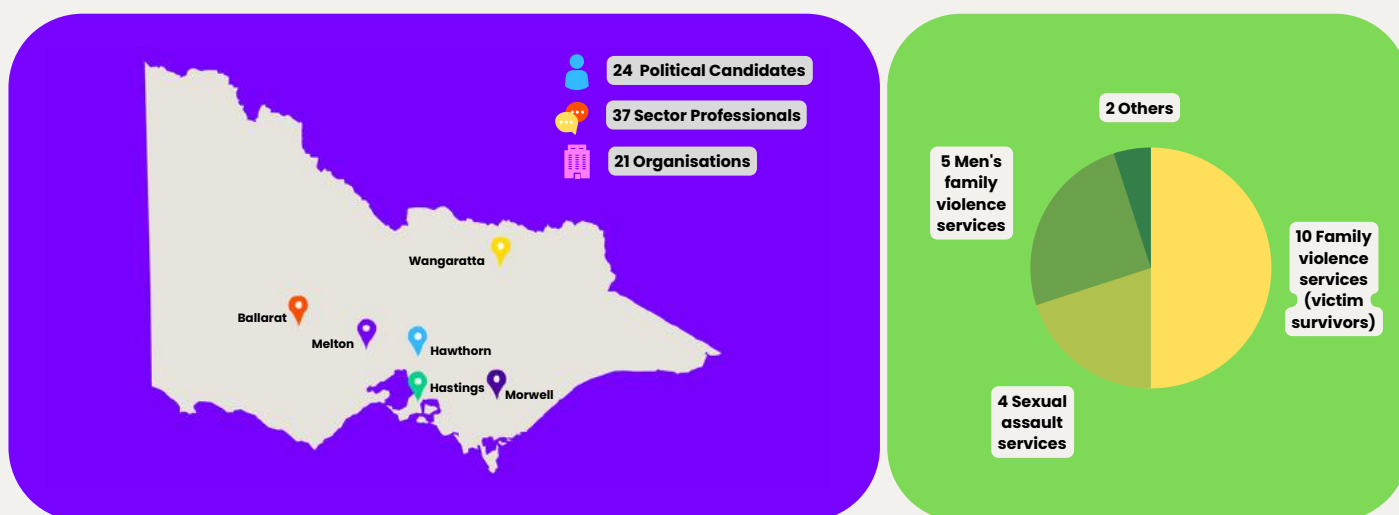
Executive Summary

In the lead up to the 2022 Victorian Election, specialist family violence and sexual assault service providers came together with local political candidates in key electoral districts across the state to discuss issues and priorities for their communities. The issues we discussed need urgent action from everyone. These issues are not party political and affect us and our communities deeply.

Hosted by peak bodies Safe and Equal, Sexual Assault Services Victoria and No to Violence, the Vote Against Violence tour was an opportunity for sector experts to highlight the impacts of increasing demand, workforce challenges, housing shortages and inequitable access to justice and legal support on victim survivors of family violence and sexual assault.

Where we went and who we met

Between October and November, we travelled more than 1,800 kilometers to meet with candidates and services based in Morwell, Hastings, Melton, Hawthorn, Ballarat and Wangaratta electoral districts.



What we heard

Front-line practitioners, team leaders, managers and CEOs provided insights into key issues and priorities for their services across four key areas.

Workforce

Demand

Housing

Law and Justice

Our members shared stories about the challenges they work through on a daily basis. While the stories were unique, the issues were not. We heard again and again that workforce shortages, service demand, housing crises and challenges within the legal and criminal justice systems were barriers to effective family violence and sexual assault service delivery across the state, compounding harm to victim survivors.

We are at a critical juncture in our work to end family and sexual violence. We are calling on Victorian parties and candidates to address these key issues as a priority, so that all Victorians have the chance to live free from violence.

What we're calling for:

- Invest in the specialist workforces who support those affected by violence
- Build a thriving sector that meets the needs of all people affected
- Address housing as a barrier to safety for victim survivors
- Improve justice and legal outcomes for people impacted by family and sexual violence

Themes

Workforce

Short-term funding cycles

“Boost funding [announced in the May 2022 budget] for the sexual assault sector hasn't been released yet – services are still waiting for it. You might get funding for one year that you receive in October – by the time you recruit, it's February and then the funding runs out in June.”

Service providers consistently spoke about the difficulties caused by short-term funding agreements, which perpetuate a cycle of short-term staff contracts, high staff burnout and turnover. Front-line services have less time to focus on what really matters because significant resources must go into recruitment and on-boarding.

“Drip” or “boost” funding – that is, funding that comes in piecemeal packages is also a challenge, especially for rural and regional areas. Attracting qualified staff, many of whom would need to relocate for 6 to 12-month contracts, is often untenable.

Emerging workforce

“We're trying to limit the amount of burnout by not giving young practitioners too many cases”

Our members told candidates that they have seen a mass exit from the workforce; an issue inextricably linked with skyrocketing demand, increasingly severe forms of violence, growing system complexity, short-term funding cycles, and housing shortages in rural and regional areas. Rebuilding teams with staff who may be new to the specialist workforce requires time, training and leadership, with the added challenge of balancing demand and workloads to prevent burnout in an already stretched workforce.

Worker wellbeing

“Our program is exceeding its targets by 300%. It is severely under-resourced”

After years of pandemic lockdowns, existing staff are struggling to meet demanding workloads in a resource-constrained environment. We heard that the violence perpetrators are using is becoming more severe. We also heard that even when they're at capacity, services are reluctant to turn away victim survivors who need support. This leads to frontline workers – many of whom are relatively young and inexperienced – taking on greater caseloads and dealing with complex risk and makes it even harder to prioritise important wellbeing considerations like supervision and professional development. This way of working is unsustainable and often leads to staff burnout and illness.

Call to Action: Invest in the specialist workforces who support those affected by violence. We need strong, sustainable workforces to ensure that every person impacted by family violence and sexual assault receives the support they need.

Themes

Demand

Wait lists and referrals

“If someone has the bravery to ask for help, they deserve support, not to be kept waiting”

While the streamlining of referrals into family violence and sexual violence services is improving, there are still significant gaps in service delivery. Members highlighted the need for investment in family violence specialist case management to be commensurate with funding for intake service delivery and for adequate levels of funding for sexual assault therapeutic counselling and group work. If we do not get this balance right, we will continue to experience system bottlenecks and worker fatigue.

Additionally, the demand creates unacceptable wait lists to access services. This is a chronic issue that is consistent across the state, requiring immediate support and solutions.

Culturally appropriate services

“Why are we not funding prevention and early intervention for culturally and linguistically diverse communities on an ongoing basis? We should be getting ongoing money to do education around women’s rights, intervention orders, police, laws...– this should be ongoing funding.”

Members expressed frustration at the way services for diverse communities are funded on a pilot basis, with funding disappearing after the pilot ends. Working effectively with diverse communities requires time to build relationships, trust, understanding and to trial different approaches. Without long-term and sustainable investment for culturally appropriate and tailored services, we cannot create tangible change.

Reform Agenda

“The reform agenda is excellent – but we’re only 2-3 years into the implementation of the reforms...cultural change has a while to go.”

Members reminded candidates that while the Royal Commission into Family Violence report was published in 2016, significant time went into designing the reforms and we are still in the relatively early stages of implementation. In the sexual assault sector, significant reforms such as the introduction of affirmative consent legislation is very new, and many recommendations of the Victorian Law Reform Commission’s Sexual Offences report have yet to be actioned. The effectiveness of these reforms will largely depend on the extent to which services are empowered to engage in strategy development and planning to achieve long-term goals. This can be achieved, in part, through extending funding cycles and providing services with additional funding for ongoing monitoring and evaluation of their services, and professional development opportunities for workers.

Call to Action: Build a thriving sector that meets the needs of all people affected. We need support to address critical issues such as waitlists, accessibility of services, and monitoring and evaluation for continuous improvement.

Themes

Housing

“People are making a choice between being unsafe at home or being homeless.”

At each location on the tour, services shared disturbing stories about the housing crisis in Victoria. With a critical lack of long-term, affordable housing options, a public housing backlog and a refuge bottleneck, up to 150 victim survivors are being placed in unsuitable motels and hotels across the state every night. Members in regional and rural areas spoke of the added difficulties of safely re-housing women and children in small communities, and the impacts on children forced to stay in unsafe accommodation.

Services were clear that no one should be forced to choose between living with violence and becoming homeless. More social housing and crisis accommodation is urgently needed, to put an end to women and children being placed in motels.

In addition to the impacts of the housing affordability crisis on victim survivors, we also heard how rising rents and a lack of housing stock are impacting recruitment. Rural and regional services will often try to recruit from metropolitan areas, due to a skills shortage in their regions. However, while there may be interest, workers who wish to relocate cannot do find a vacant place to live.

Call to Action: Address housing as a barrier to safety for victim survivors. We need a housing guarantee for victim-survivors and an immediate increase to the capacity of Victoria’s stretched family violence crisis accommodation system, while continuing to expand social housing stock.

Law and Justice

“Court can be a trauma-inducing space.”

Across Victoria, members spoke of the deeply ingrained misconceptions and attitudes toward gendered violence that exist within our justice system. Sexual assault services described the need for more training for staff in the justice system to understand the complexity of these cases and respond in a trauma-informed way. They also highlighted the need for independent advocates to help victim survivors navigate the justice system.

Community legal centres working in sexual assault and family violence also described being under-resourced to meet the demand of case load requests, with short-term contracts and burdensome administrative processes remaining a challenge.

Services pointed to the Victorian Law Reform Commission recent report Improving the Response of the Justice System to Sexual Offences and strongly advocated for implementing the entirety of the landmark report’s recommendations, which they said would make an incredible difference in ensuring that all victim survivors have access to legal help and are not isolated when navigating the court system.

Call to Action: Improve justice and legal outcomes for people impacted by family and sexual violence, including implementing and resourcing the entirety of the Victorian Law Reform Commission’s recommendations.

About us

SAFE+EQUAL

Safe and Equal is the peak body for specialist family violence services in Victoria. We are an independent, non-government organisation that leads, organises, advocates for, and acts on behalf of our members – with a focus across the continuum from primary prevention through to response and recovery. Our vision is a world beyond family and gender-based violence, where women, children and all people from marginalised communities are safe, thriving and respected.



Sexual Assault Services Victoria (SASVic) is the peak body for specialist sexual assault and harmful sexual behaviour services in Victoria. We work to promote rights, recovery and respect for all those impacted by sexual violence and harm. We seek to achieve this by working collectively to change the attitudes, systems and structures that enable sexual violence to occur. Our members provide support for all those impacted by sexual assault and harmful sexual behaviours, including children and young people.



No to Violence (NTV) is the peak body for organisations and individuals who work with men to end family violence. We operate the Men's Referral Service, a national telephone counselling, information and referral service for men who are concerned about their violent behaviour. Our members provide a range of services including Men's Behaviour Change Programs (MBCPs), case management and individual counselling. As the peak, we provide policy development and advocacy, research and evaluation. We also deliver high quality training, building workforce capacity across Victoria.