INTRODUCTION
On 27 June 2008, the Victorian Government launched Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families: Towards a Safer Future for Indigenous Families and Communities — a ten year plan responding to Indigenous family violence. This paper critically reflects on that plan, the players involved in its development and implementation, its contents and the progress made one year since its launch. We again ask the question: will this plan break the silence of acceptance that exists around the issues of family violence, sexual assault, elder abuse, child abuse and neglect?

BACKGROUND
In 2001, the Victorian Government, as part of the Women’s Safety Strategy, commissioned an Indigenous Family Violence Taskforce (‘the Taskforce’), who reported their findings in December 2003. The approach taken by Victoria in response to Indigenous family violence is unique in its ongoing, community-led approach to family violence. The Taskforce defined violence as it occurred in the Victorian context, as:

An issue focused around a wide range of physical, emotional, sexual, social, spiritual, cultural, psychological and economic abuses that occur within families, intimate relationships, extended families, kinship networks and communities. It extends to one-on-one fighting, abuse of Indigenous community workers as well as self-harm, injury and suicide.

Using this broad definition they estimated that ‘1 in 3 Indigenous people are the victim, have a relative who is a victim or witness an act of violence on a daily basis in communities across Victoria’.

The Taskforce also reported that the typical mainstream service response of refuges and criminal justice sanctions do not encompass broad categories of relationships or address the complex fundamental causes of violence as it occurred in Victorian Indigenous communities.

A holistic approach to family violence that factors in the historical and familial contexts in which the violence occurs was considered the most appropriate way forward. The Taskforce recommended that any interventions involving Indigenous community members be community driven, be reflective of priorities and issues identified by communities and empower local people to effectively deal with and address family violence as it occurred in their communities.

Consistent with these recommendations, the Victorian State Government established nine regional Indigenous Family Violence Regional Action Groups (‘regional action groups’). These were designed as a mechanism for ongoing community engagement and are administered by the Department of Human Services (‘DHS’). Regional action groups are not legal entities but consist of elders, women, men, young people and community leaders from local Indigenous communities as well as local Indigenous organisations and service providers.

The regional action group structure engages communities at the local level to encourage them to take ownership of family violence, and to continue the community dialogue necessary to meaningfully address the problem and its associated issues.

The Taskforce further endorsed a whole of government and whole of community response to family violence.
this led to the creation of the Indigenous family violence partnership forum in 2005. Aboriginal Affairs Victoria is the lead agency providing Secretariat support to the Forum. The Forum has overseen and coordinated all State Government activities associated with Indigenous family violence including the development of the ten year plan. Membership of the forum includes the chairs of each regional action group, and government representatives from relevant state and federal departments. In May 2006, the forum expanded to include Indigenous community service providers.

THE PLAN AND ITS CONTENTS

Strong Culture, Strong Peoples, Strong Families: Towards a Safer Future for Indigenous Families and Communities is a 52 page document structured according to vision, guiding principles and values, background, achievements to date, and specific details relating to each strategic objective. There are eight strategic objectives including:

- Cultural safety;
- Healthy families;
- Education, awareness, prevention;
- Safety for victims;
- Accountability;
- Healing;
- Service capability; and
- Research and evaluation.¹

The rationale for each objective is provided, including specific itemised actions. However, the plan provides no timelines, delegation of responsibilities or financial commitments outside of those announced as part of the Victorian Budget 2008. The Budget announced funds for the following specific actions:

- Indigenous Men’s Behaviour Change programs ($1.07m);
- Intensive Case Management for Indigenous Men ($0.75m);
- Indigenous Family Violence Outreach Services ($2.79m);
- Family Violence List and Court Diversion ($1.3m);
- Extension of Local Safety Campaigns ($0.4m);
- Indigenous Prevention Framework and Indigenous prevention projects ($1.2m); and
- Indigenous Workforce Development ($0.56m)²

To date, details have not been released publicly as to when or how these Budget items will be implemented or evaluated. We discussed some of the difficulties involved with the structure the plan in our previous article; it seems that, one year later, it is still missing core elements and crucial details. These include roles and responsibilities, timelines, implementation strategy, procedures for risk management; monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

The plan itself captures principles and priority areas for outcomes, but provides no demonstrable strategy to guide the effort required to achieve those results. Without these details, one must wonder – exactly what will this plan achieve and how? And, equally, for whom?

VICTORIAN FAMILY VIOLENCE POLICY

We note a number of mainstream legislative and initiatives working concurrently with the ten year plan; most relevant is the Victorian Integrated Family Violence Reform Strategy. In 2005, this strategy was funded with an initial investment of $35.1 million over four years. The reform agenda was outlined in the Women’s Safety Strategy, a five-year strategy to address violence against women. Key objectives of the strategy were to better integrate police, courts and support services, to improve the safety of women and children experiencing family violence, and to improve accountability and access to behaviour change services for men who use violence. The reforms collectively aimed to reduce the high levels of recurring victimisation and the broader social and economic impact of family violence. Reform outcomes are monitored to demonstrate how the system is responding to all communities, but particularly Indigenous communities, who are at greater risk.³ The Victorian Budget 2008 announced a further investment of $24.7 million over four years to continue this work; $8 million of these funds were dedicated to initiatives specifically targeted at Indigenous programs associated with the ten year plan as detailed above.³

The Integrated Family Violence Strategy involves a Statewide Steering Committee to Reduce Family Violence; two Forum representatives serve on this committee.⁴ At the regional level, there are regional partnership groups, comprised of people from police, justice and community services. They are responsible for driving and monitoring implementation of the strategy at the local level. The groups meet regularly to develop regional strategic plans that establish clear and consistent referral pathways to facilitate the transition of clients through the legal system, namely referrals between police, courts and family violence services. Their structure and process is similar to that of the regional action groups and the Indigenous Family Violence Partnership Forum. These strategies are required to demonstrate linkages and partnerships with existing services, including services specifically designed for Indigenous clients. A key emphasis is on access, that is, how mainstream service responses to Indigenous people can be improved.⁵
In 2007/2008 reports by regional action groups, chairs stated that they were unaware of the existence of these Integrated Family Violence regional groups. Very few, if any, had been invited to participate in such groups - despite their obvious overlaps and reporting requirements. Over the past year, several attempts have been made by Victorian Government departments to bridge this gap, bringing both parties together to plan appropriate ways forward in partnership to achieve the common goal of reducing violence in local communities.

NEW LEGISLATION

Legislative change has also taken place over the past twelve months to support and build a more integrated response to family violence in Victoria. The Family Violence Protection Act 2008 (Vic) came into effect on 8 December 2008. The Act, as a whole, was welcomed by the sector for the positive changes it makes to existing legislation. This Act clearly commits the state of Victoria to addressing family violence in all communities within its reach. The legislation seeks to maximise the protection and safety of persons who have experienced family violence and promotes the accountability of perpetrators of family violence for their actions.

Important, the Act empowers the police to issue Family Violence Safety Notices (‘safety notices’). These notices can be used outside of court hours and provide police with another tool to ensure that immediate protection is available when they respond to an incident. The Act includes provisions allowing victims of family violence to remain in their homes while the perpetrators (now called respondents) are excluded. In drafting a safety notice, police must consider the accommodation needs of the respondent and any dependent children and take any reasonable steps to ensure those affected have access to temporary accommodation. If the safety notice does not include an exclusion condition, the police member must consider the accommodation needs of the protected person and any dependent children and take any reasonable steps to ensure that those affected have access to temporary accommodation. There is, however, no obligation to provide free accommodation in such circumstances.

These particular initiatives have raised concerns for many Indigenous communities as there are limited services to house men in crisis after a violent event, let alone to provide the care and support they may need to address their violent behaviours. This issue has been raised by members of the Partnership Forum both in the development of the plan and since the implementation of the Act; it is becoming more relevant now that existing service providers are starting to be confronted with Indigenous men in such situations. No formal public document exists that articulates the plan or the Partnership Forum’s position on these situations, or how they ought to be managed. With Indigenous men over-represented in the current Victorian prison system (5.8% of the prison population, whilst representing only 0.6% of the Victorian population) careful consideration of this issue and its possible ramifications is necessary to avoid placing any further stress on existing relationships or systems of care and support.

This legislative change is underpinned by the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 (Vic). The Charter requires the State Government to respect basic human rights when it provides services such as healthcare, education and law enforcement. Further, new policies and laws require Government employees also to observe human rights in the performance of their duties so that people are not treated unfairly. The new Family Violence Protection Act 2008 is specifically focused on ensuring that the human rights of victims of violence are protected.

EMERGING DATA

In addition to these legislative developments, the Victorian Department of Justice has released a report Measuring Violence in Victoria – Victorian Family Violence Database: Seven Year Trend Analysis (1999-2006). This report outlines the findings from the analysis of family violence incidents reported in Victoria between 1999 and 2006. It includes data from Victorian Police family violence incident reports, finalised intervention order applications made to Victorian Magistrates and Children’s courts and the Victorian Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (‘SAAP’). Three new data sets have also been included in this report, including data from Victorian Public Hospital Emergency Departments, initial snapshot data from the Department of Justice Victims of Crime Helpline and the Department of Human Services Integrated Reporting and Information System (‘IRIS’).

The Trend Analysis is an excellent resource, providing snapshot data reflecting local government areas. In this way, communities that are at greater risk can be identified and appropriately resourced to combat family violence and its related issues. Further, the analysis of this data has highlighted population groups requiring targeted interventions. It reports that, in approximately 65% of family violence incidents recorded by police each year, there was at least one child present. In real numbers, this means that 23,451 children were present at family violence incidents reported in 2005-06. These children are
likely to be witnesses, either to the violence itself or to its visible consequences.\textsuperscript{16} Children living in homes in which violence occurs are vulnerable to physical, emotional and psychological abuse.\textsuperscript{17} They are at a greater risk of anxiety, depression and behavioural disorders. Further, the experience of violence in childhood is a risk factor relevant to violence in adulthood, both as a victim and perpetrator.\textsuperscript{18} That is, it is through children that a cycle of violence may take root and become intergenerational. This has been a significant concern for Indigenous communities across the country.

**ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT**

The ten year plan failed to provide for any specific measures aimed at addressing the explicit effects of violence on children. Prevention activities are not enough; more is needed to establish specific services, including culturally appropriate counselling services for children who have witnessed or been the victim of violence.

The Victorian Government may well have other intersecting legislative, policy and program areas, covering these issues for the general population. In this instance it would be in the interest of both the Indigenous community and service providers to provide full details about how other initiatives could be integrated with the ten year plan. These linkages are still absent from any publicly available material related to the plan.

Broadly speaking, the trends analysis is an excellent resource for further policy development. However, it is fundamentally flawed in that it fails to engage or report on Indigenous data. It is clear from the document that, while various data systems may record Indigenous identity, the collection of such information is not mandatory. Further, it is recognised that some people may not feel comfortable disclosing their Aboriginality, or that members of the wider community may feel uncomfortable asking such questions and may instead ‘make assumptions based on physical appearance, which are often incorrect’.\textsuperscript{19}

In the context of broader national campaigns to close the gap, and with increasing reliance on data to overcome Indigenous disadvantage, this haphazard approach to collecting data on Indigenous experiences of family violence is problematic. To prevent violence from becoming intergenerational in Indigenous communities, it is essential that data be collected relating to its occurrence. To ensure that the collected data is reliable, the relevant workforces – police, emergency services and so on – must be appropriately trained. Although the ten year plan included actions to improve data collection, there is still no publicly available material to indicate what actions have been planned or when they will be implemented. We would hope, given the valuable material available in the ‘Trends Analysis’, that some urgency would be placed on getting the data and data systems right before the next report is released.

**PROGRESS AND FUTURE PLANS**

Throughout this article we have provided updates on various actions arising from the ten year plan. The progress has been slow and difficult to track. Not least because it was and is still missing core elements and crucial details including roles and responsibilities, timelines, implementation strategy, procedures for risk management, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. While the plan itself captures principles and priority areas for outcomes, there is no demonstrable strategy to guide the effort. And there remains no identifiable process for implementation or evaluation. We note that the Victorian Government routinely takes this approach to plans relating to Indigenous affairs. In June 2008, a week before the ten year plan was launched, the Victorian Auditor General tabled a report entitled ‘Coordinating Services and Initiatives for Aboriginal People’ in Parliament.\textsuperscript{20} It criticised the Government for its ‘lack of leadership in Indigenous affairs, a poor whole-of-government effort to improve Indigenous outcomes and ineffective coordination and consultation’. Added criticisms include: insufficient coordination and communication between departments; unfocused programs and services; ambiguity in the roles and responsibilities of key participants; incomplete performance monitoring frameworks and limited data, which has made it impossible to undertake robust assessments of progress in Indigenous affairs within the State. The report’s findings only underscore our concerns and the concerns of community and service providers more generally.\textsuperscript{21}

We do not challenge that good will demonstrated by the Victorian Government or Indigenous community in their response to the appalling levels of Indigenous family violence in this state. However, this general support does not compensate for lack of detail in the ten year plan, including or the lack of any identifiable progress in the 12 months since its launch. These shortcomings must urgently be addressed; failure to do so undermines the plan’s effectiveness and may ultimately erode the goodwill of service providers and community members. With nine years left, now is the time to act.

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The authors are uniquely placed to provide this critique as they have been members of the Indigenous Family Violence Partnership Forum. Both authors were also members of the Victorian Indigenous Women’s Ministerial Advisory Committee which in 2007 consulted widely with Victorian Indigenous women about the issues affecting them. Their role on the Partnership Forum was to ensure that Indigenous women were appropriately acknowledged and supported in the ten year plan.

3 Ibid, 4.
5 Ibid, 233.
6 Ibid, 32.
15 Ibid 72.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Victorian Government, Department of Justice, above n14, 103.
20 Ibid.

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