

Identifying the Hidden Disaster Conference

Deputy Commissioner Tim Cartwright: Victoria Police

It's terrific to see a full house here today. It's terrific to see so many people committed to supporting people in family violence - women who are victims of family violence. I've got no doubt in the audience we have lots of policy makers. I know there are representatives here from Victoria Police who have that role, and I look forward to hearing from them about what we might learn and how we can do better in the future. There will be challenges here today, of course. I've got no doubt that some of the people in the audience have experienced this - what we are talking about, family violence first hand.

So, what I want to do today though is to set the scene initially and talk very quickly about the national and international scene, talk about the Victoria police experience recently and then finally wind up issuing you a challenge about what we want to achieve out of today.

You don't need to be a scientist, you don't need to be a researcher to look around the world and see that we are experiencing more natural disasters of greater intensity than we have ever experienced before. We have floods going on around us today, in Victoria. We've had earthquakes in Christchurch. We've had severe flooding in Queensland - which continues. We've had our own fires. Internationally we see tsunamis, earthquakes, all sorts of natural disasters. So whether we like it or not, natural disasters are here to stay.

My notes would suggest to me that in our lifetime, one in six of you will experience a natural disaster of some magnitude. Natural disasters, we tend to think of as things such as Black Saturday but reading the research that goes into forming the heart of today, I can't help but draw parallels with emergency services workers in all sorts of environments. Some of the women recount their partners suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. I only have to look back on my people - the men and women from Victoria Police - who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder to see direct relevance in some of the research already.

We are focusing on natural disasters today, but when I look at some of the recommendations and some of the suggestions, they are equally valid for anyone who suffers from stressful environments.

Of course the other thing we need to talk about is family violence itself. Our research suggests that one in three women in Australia will suffer from family violence at some stage in their lifetime. The sad fact remains that women are safer on our street than they are in their own homes. Which is a dreadful indictment on a society that we would say is advanced.

Over the last five or six years, Victoria police have seen our own figures which suggest a 300% increase in the incidence of family violence reported to police. Parallel, we see a 300% increase in the charges we have actually laid in these circumstances. It's an enormous increase in commitment and it's got flow on impacts, flow on implications, for the support services we rely on and for the Courts themselves. At the same time the actual incidents that we attend has increased by 48%. So, while the charges and the intervention orders that we take out have increased by some 300%, the incidents that we attend have increased by 50%. What that suggests to me, as the police have said very clearly, is that we have learnt a lot. We are a lot better at responding to family violence, but what it also suggests to me is that there is plenty of room for improvement. And that is what the research will suggest today. That while we are good at getting better at responding, whilst we are getting better at reducing recidivism, there is still a lot we haven't thought of, and family violence

implications from natural disasters is one of those.

As a man standing before you here in uniform, it saddens me to think that one of the greatest challenges of dealing with family violence is our own concept of masculinity, and I saw that again and again in the research that I read. This is about men being men, as they see themselves, as we see ourselves, in response to disasters. The implications are that in public we are strong and fearless and not affected, but the implications for many women is when we come home, we don't cope at all. The women, as invariably the closest to these people, suffer. We see increased family violence, we see kids exposed to increased family violence, we see increases in alcohol consumption, in drug consumption, break downs of all sort, reductions in employment. There is much to be seen, much to be learnt from the research, even as small as it is, there is much more we can do to explore this environment.

One of the things that today provides us is an opportunity to speak out loudly against family violence and to challenge people like me. One of my other roles, of course, is being responsible for emergency management across the State. From the first of July, I will be responsible for all the uniformed police in the State, and as part of that, we need to do better about our emergency management planning and response and recovery.

Which leads me finally to the challenges today, later on you will have the opportunity to break out into workshops. The challenge to you is to come up with actions, to come up with things that we can do, and to not restrict yourself to response, what we would call the response phase, but to talk about planning, talk about preparation and to talk about recovery. One of the simple things that is already suggested, is that we might well prepare emergency response workers better to look for family violence indications. For people who provide support after the disasters to be more cognisant of the factors, to look for the symptoms and to be better equipped to deal with them.

One of the challenges of natural disasters is there are calls on many, many people in the community to respond. Typically, we will be seeing people who are attending as support workers, as care workers, who may never have worked in the field of family violence before. We are never going to be able to train all of those, and even if we could train them, we couldn't commit to continue to train them. But what we can do is prepare them. We actually can prepare brief training material so when these people are called to volunteer in the future, so when they have the opportunity to contribute, they actually have some understanding of what it is they are looking for, they actually have the ability and the fortitude to ask the questions and to lift the rock to actually say, "I think I've seen a victim of family violence here." And if they don't know how to deal with it, to make contact with someone who does, or provide the victim with that opportunity. Because this is one of the realities, very often the victims themselves are not going to be able to reach out. Their circumstances will stop them, their relationship will stop them, the consequences will stop them. Then it falls to people like us to take that action on their behalf. So, I challenge you, come up with some actions. I expect when my people come back and talk to me about the conference, they will have some opportunities and some things that we can do better in the future.

So finally, and keeping well and truly within my 15 minutes, Nelly, I'm very pleased to open this first Australian conference on family violence following natural disaster. I look forward very much to hearing the outcome. Thank you very much.