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# Keeping practice fresh: Tailoring solutions for local situations

*Sam Burroughs*

There are times when simple solutions to issues present themselves. The ability to explore innovations and new ways of thinking can help keep your own social work practice fresh and vibrant, while at the same time allowing individuals the opportunity to identify local issues and create tailored solutions. This article explores an example where I was supported to put that theory to test and introduce a variation to practice to see if we could create a more effective and efficient way of working in the area of family violence that better met our local needs.

One of the greatest challenges for children and families living in a rural area is the ability to access agencies that provide a quality service. Nationally affiliated agencies are usually based in larger centres, and while they may designate people to travel to the rural areas several days a week to support clients, their hours of availability are limited. There tend to be few, if any, locally based agencies. Where they do exist, they tend to struggle to recruit people with the expertise and experience to compliment statutory social workers in helping families.

Family violence is a growing concern throughout the country. As it stands, Child, Youth and Family is notified every time the Police attend an incident where children are involved. In 2010, Dr. Marie Connolly (then Chief Social Worker) gave an address at a Supervisors' Conference that challenged the way family violence was being dealt with in the New Zealand context and suggested that Child, Youth and Family was not the appropriate agency to be at the forefront of the work. After reflecting on this address, I came to the conclusion that we could do things differently in our area, specifically addressing how we could get consistent quality service to our rural clients.

This led me to draft a proposal for my local area. In April 2010 I applied for, and received, funding for a three-month project to test a new way to provide a service to families where a family violence notification was received. This article outlines the journey that ensued. It was a great experience running this trial. I really felt connected to my local community as I was able to influence the systems that were helping families. I was also able to see the positive results that the local agencies and the families experienced. This assisted in developing my own practice by giving me the confidence to be creative and innovative in all areas of my work.

## Background

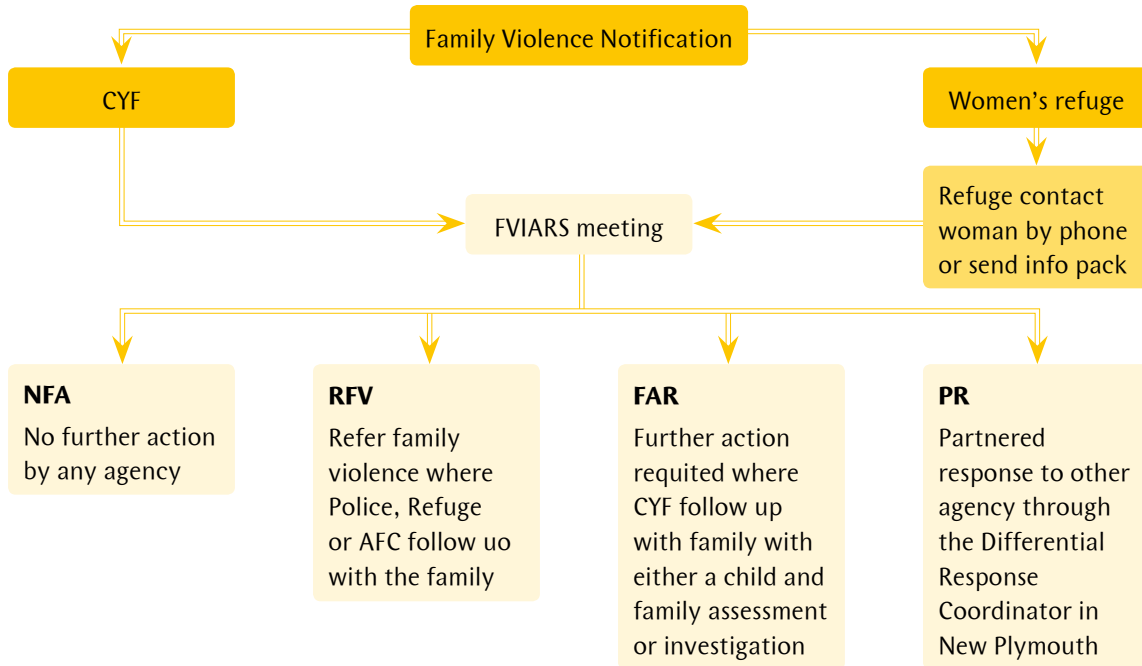
In 2010, the family violence interagency response system (FVIARS) meetings in South Taranaki were attended by representatives from Police, Child, Youth and Family, Women's Refuge, and the Advocates for Children Who Witness Family Violence (AFC). Women's Refuge and the AFC were based in New Plymouth and workers from these organisations travelled an hour each way to attend meetings and visit their clients.

Between September 2009 and April 2010 police family violence referrals constituted over 50% of total Child, Youth and Family notifications for South Taranaki each month (and 72% in October 2009). South Taranaki was receiving approximately 30 family violence notifications from the police each month.

## The trial

The aim of the project was to streamline the meeting process, make more efficient use of the New Plymouth staff's time and get a service to a far wider range of people than we were previously. Our trial ran for 12 weeks between 10 May and 30 July 2010.

**Diagram 1: Pre trial process**



**Diagram 2: New process**



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The general framework adopted for working with police notifications pertaining to family violence remained largely the same. The main changes were that the majority of the work would be completed before the FVIARS meeting rather than after, and the police and Women's Refuge would not attempt to engage clients before the meeting, except in high risk cases where women and children were deemed to be in imminent danger or they were existing Women's Refuge clients.

Diagram One on the previous page shows what the process looked like before the trial started.

All police family violence notifications are brought to the FVIARS meeting where they are discussed by all the attendees and then assigned one of the four pathways above. A large proportion of the family violence notifications from the police resulted in no face-to-face contact with the family or no contact from anyone at all (particularly where the issues seemed minor).

The proposed model inverted the process so that the police family violence notifications came in and were given to a family violence team who visited the families before the family violence meeting was held. The team canvassed the clients regarding their needs and wants and either gave advice directly to them or brought the information back to the meeting so that one of the other agencies could take the case on board or make the appropriate referral. They also directly asked whether the family required the services of Women's Refuge, AFC, or the police family violence co-ordinator.

The new process is shown in Diagram Two on the previous page. Police assign a 'risk score' for every family violence report that they complete. The score reflects the seriousness of the incident and the likelihood of a recurrence, taking into account the issues of the current situation and the history of the participants.

A local agency, with experienced crisis workers, was contracted to be the specialist family violence team. We were also able to have the same two workers conduct the visits consistently for the trial period. The family violence notifications

were delivered to the team the day they were received and the families would be visited before the following FVIARS meeting.

There were several major benefits to doing this:

1. All families were given a service and the opportunity for a face-to-face interaction with a worker. This improved the quality of service to clients, particularly where there were low-level concerns or incidents. These cases often do not receive a response, but frequently come back to our attention. In addition it was thought that face-to-face contact was more likely to get a favourable or meaningful response from the clients.
2. The services that were based in North Taranaki were able to use their time more productively. They did not have to waste time trying to visit or contact people by phone prior to the FVIARS meetings because they knew that they were being seen and assessed by the Family Violence team who would provide more information, including whether they were interested in engaging in a service, at the meeting. Given the vast geographical area we cover, this was hugely beneficial.
3. FVIARS meeting times were cut substantially as we had access to better information about the family's situation and no longer needed to hypothesise what we thought would be useful in helping them. We had information from the family violence team that more accurately portrayed the current situation for the family. This was hugely advantageous when deciding what action to take.

## The results

The family violence team attempted 125 contacts for 77 police family violence notifications involving 152 children or young people. Of those 77 notifications, 56 engaged with the family violence team, 19 were not able to be located, and only 2 refused to engage. The family violence team travelled an average 198 kilometres per week. During the three-month period there were five re-notifications, which was less than I expected

(the average re-notification rate is between 15 and 20% and during the trial it was 8.6%). At the conclusion of the trial all of the families that had come to our attention a second time during the trial had either Child, Youth and Family, or an NGO service working with them.

## Summary

All the agencies that were directly affected agreed that this way of working was more efficient and had far more benefits than disadvantages. We had anticipated a number of impediments, but they did not arise. Clients were, somewhat surprisingly, very frank with the family violence team and overwhelmingly accepted the support that was offered. Initially there were some areas that needed improvement, in particular around communication and role clarity, but as the trial progressed these issues were rectified. By the end of the trial, the process was running smoothly.

Given the inherent diversity in our country, a “one size fits all” approach does not always work. We see this acutely being in a smaller, provincial area. This is exacerbated when we are focused on a complex social problem like family violence. We know from experience that what works in Auckland does not work in Hawera. There is rarely an abundance of services available so the ones that do exist have to be able to provide a high

quality service that is capable of effecting change. This is a struggle for smaller areas, but I believe that in South Taranaki the trial was an example of how existing resources could be maximised to increase the quality of the client experience.

Alongside the benefits to our clients and our community, the opportunity to trial something new in my local area was useful for me as a supervisor in Hawera. I was able to extend myself and add a different element to my day-to-day work. It was exciting to be able to add to my journey as a supervisor and the different aspects, such as collating and analysing the statistics. This was very different from my usual work and I particularly enjoyed it. The project was also valuable for my professional development as it showed that I was able to organise and oversee a systemic change in a structured environment involving multiple agencies.

Since February 2012, this model has been running full-time in South Taranaki, after a local NGO was granted funding for at least a year. This, I believe, is evidence that it worked and will continue to work in our community. ■

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