

[breakthru]

breakthru submission to the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability

To help eliminate how people with disability experience violence and abuse in their home.

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Introduction

This report is a response to the call for submissions from the Australian Government's Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability. In this submission breakthru provides insights about how people with disability experience violence and abuse in their home, highlighting barriers that hinder their community participation.

Dismantling these barriers presents Australia with an opportunity to empower people with disability and enhance their dignity, sense of purpose and social connectedness. This helps to eliminate violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation; allowing Australia to champion the rights of people with disability and nurture greater social prosperity.

About breakthru

breakthru is a national not-for-profit organisation with over 26 years of expertise offering quality programs that benefit the community in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria. Our specialist programs assist those most in-need, helping thousands of customers each year to face challenges associated with intensive mental health illness, a disability or physical health issue, long-term unemployment, unmet education goals or homelessness.

breakthru works with the community to identify and engage vulnerable and marginalised customers to overcome challenges and thrive. breakthru screens its customers for disability in their intake phase, helping us to tailor our services to their unique needs. Key programs that breakthru offers in this area include:

- Dedicated and culturally considered programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) peoples, refugee and migrant populations and other culturally and linguistically diverse groups.
- **Family Mental Health Support Services (FMHSS)**, which works with children aged 0-18 and their parents or caregivers affected by or at-risk of mental health issues. FMHSS is an early intervention service that helps children understand their feelings and emotions from a young age, providing children and their families with the ability to better manage difficult emotions and life challenges.

This service also works in partnership with headspace to deliver parenting support, such as strategies and skills development, to parents or caregivers to better support their children. Key programs that form FMHSS include:

- **Taming the Hulk**, which is a breakthru copyrighted program for customers aged 8-12. The program equips children with better coping strategies to manage their anger. Customers are taught how to identify emotions, what constitutes anger and how to recognise their triggers. Children also learn problem solving techniques and coping strategies.
- **PALS**, which is a social skills program for children aged 3-6. The program teaches children important social skills, including: greeting others; taking turns, talking and listening; sharing; asking for help; identifying feelings; empathy; overcoming fear and anxiety; managing frustration; and, calming down and speaking up.

About breakthru (cont'd)

Other programs that form part of our Family Mental Health Support Services (FMHSS) include:

- **LOVE BiTES**, which is a respectful relationships program that educates customers on what constitutes healthy relationships. The program provides young people aged 12-25 with a safe environment to examine, discuss and explore respectful relationships.

LOVE BiTES uses a strength-based counselling approach that concentrates on the strengths of individuals, families and groups. Focusing on strengths can aid recovery by increasing the confidence and resilience of customers.

The program subsequently views children as active participants who can make independent choices about their relationships when supported with information and opportunity for skill development. The program is focused on three critical areas for learning:

- **Knowledge:** youth-led collaborative learning.
- **Attitudes:** critical thinking and decision-making.
- **Behaviours:** problem solving and communication skills.

- **GLOW**, which is targeted towards young girls aged 10-13. The program increases their confidence and self-esteem by building their resilience, capacity to manage conflict and ability to recognise and nurture healthy relationships.

GLOW creates a comfortable, safe and non-judgemental environment for girls to take risks, learn about their self and strengthen their positive coping strategies. Once better understanding themselves, young girls can help lead others within the program to achieve the same goal.

Lastly, all breakthru FMHSS staff undertake domestic violence training called DV-alert. The training empowers staff to be confident first responders when facing issues of domestic and family violence. DV-alert allows staff to be the first contact point for men, women and children in the community experiencing domestic and family violence, assisting them to seek appropriate help.

We are a social visionary committed to empowering our customers to create their own futures. Customers are assisted to achieve the best possible social and emotional outcomes and meet personal goals. breakthru achieves these objectives by offering person-centred support that is tailored to the customer's needs.

In these supports, we collaborate with the customer and other key stakeholders, such as their families, friends, employers and additional service providers to ensure the customer's necessary supports are received and their efforts maximised.

These supports create strong outcomes that benefit both the customer and community. This is because customers are equipped with the needed skills to manage challenging situations inside the home, strengthening the capacity of the family unit. Customers – including those with disability – are helped to live free from violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation. breakthru, through creating a positive environment, subsequently assists its customers with disability to craft opportunities for advancement and lead their best life.

Response to questions from the Violence and Abuse of People with Disability at Home Issues Paper

How do people with disability experience violence and abuse in the home? What are the impacts across their life?

People with disability are increasingly vulnerable to violence and abuse in the home due to their:

- dependence on others for care;
- reduced support structures;
- heightened social isolation;
- place of residence; and,
- an impaired ability to disclose abuse resulting from their disability.

People with disability experience violence and abuse in the home in numerous ways. The perpetrators are generally the parents, caregivers, a close relative or family friend of people with disability. Characteristics of the violence and abuse people with disability experience in the home include:

- physical, emotional, financial and sexual abuse;
- neglect;
- reduced choice and control in their decision-making;
- restrictive activities or practices; and,
- intimidation.

These practices undermine the natural rights of people with disability. This is because their confidence, self-esteem, dignity, sense of purpose and social connectedness is minimised. Consequently, people with disability experience less meaningful relationships, a greater inability to retain employment and exacerbated mental ill health.

Due to these worse outcomes, people with disability are less likely to trust Australia's system of governance, weakening their faith in the social contract. This cohort is consequently less willing to seek support from mainstream institutions and organisations, such as the police, that provide assistance. Dismantling these abusive practices will increase the community participation of people with disability and nurture Australia's social wealth.

What are the specific experiences of violence and abuse in the home for Women and girls with disability; First Nations people with disability; and, Culturally and linguistically diverse people with disability?

Due to the unique nature of their issues, Women and girls with disability; First Nations people with disability; and, Culturally and linguistically diverse people with disability experience violence and abuse in the home in ways specific to their cohort.

Specific experiences of violence and abuse in the home for Women and girls with disability include:

- heightened likelihood of suffering from sexual and physical abuse; and,
- generally experiencing greater financial pressures, especially in CALD communities. This is because within husband and wife households the assets are normally all or mostly allocated to the husband. Women and girls with disability therefore become increasingly vulnerable due to reduced financial control.

Specific experiences of violence and abuse in the home for First Nations people with disability include:

- ATSI women with disability suffer heightened shame and embarrassment about their domestic and family violence due to a strong feeling of disempowerment. This can be further exacerbated by community shame because there is a reticence to seek support from outside their ATSI community. This is largely due to a mistrust of non-ATSI services. Consequently, this minimises their willingness to disclose information to these services about their experienced violence and abuse.
- Lack of understanding of ATSI culture and kinship by non-ATSI organisations. This misunderstanding means that ATSI people with disability are less likely to receive their needed supports.
- Mandatory reporting creates barriers within the ATSI community due to a mistrust of non-ATSI services. This mistrust leads to ATSI people with disability experiencing further alienation from mainstream society. ATSI people with disability are therefore less inclined to engage mainstream services and articulate and receive their needed supports.

Specific experiences of violence and abuse in the home for Culturally and linguistically diverse people with disability include:

- Unwillingness to initiate contact and receive help from mainstream services. CALD community members can be reticent to seek support from outside their community. This is largely due to shame stemming from their CALD community pressures.
- Language barriers for both parents or carers and/or the CALD person with disability in engaging services and support. This is important because the person with disability within the CALD community is hindered in their ability to express and receive their needed services and support.

How do domestic and family violence services and disability services work to prevent and respond to violence and abuse of people with disability, including children, in their homes? Please describe any gaps as well as promising practices, for example codesigned models or creating communities of practice.

Prevention Services

Domestic and family violence services and disability services perform an important role in preventing and responding to violence and abuse of children with disability. Government and non-government service providers, like breakthru, operate collaboratively in these areas to identify the needs of both the family and children involved. These partnerships help to determine the most appropriate service to best support customers. The programs, which aim to eliminate violence and abuse in the home, are inclusive because families and children with disability are screened for disability during the intake phase. This assists government and non-government service providers, like breakthru, to tailor the support services to the unique needs experienced by the child with disability.

In breakthru's Australian states of operation, there are numerous government services that work to achieve this goal. This is highlighted by the New South Wales Department of Communities and Justice, Victorian Department of Human Health Services and Queensland's Department of Communities, Disability Services and Seniors. These state government departments complete this objective by actioning and investigating reports made by mandatory reporters. Mandatory reporters are required by law to report suspected child abuse and neglect to government authorities. These reporters are people who deliver the following services, wholly or partly, to children as part of their professional work or other paid employment, and those in management positions in:

- Healthcare.
- Welfare.
- Education.
- Children's services.
- Residential services.
- Law enforcement.
- Disability services.
- Religious ministry.
- Registered psychologists.

breakthru is a mandatory reporter. For instance, breakthru reports, and refers self-reports from customers, of suspected family and domestic violence to the relevant government departments. The government authorities take and assess this information and investigate the immediate risk for the child. If the child is deemed at-risk, the case worker from the respective government agency may intervene to provide support or remove the perpetrator or child from the dangerous environment.

This helps to create better outcomes because children with disability are removed from the immediate risk of harm and placed in a safe setting. The families and child's needs are assessed by government and then referred to appropriate non-government services, such as breakthru, which supports them to overcome challenges and flourish.

breakthru's services assist children with disability by:

- providing one-on-one supports;
- providing trauma informed care by responding sensitively to the child's experiences;
- increasing their confidence and self-esteem;
- developing healthier coping mechanisms;
- building trust and resilience;
- supporting the family or carer of the child with disability to better understand the impact of abuse and trauma; and,
- collaborating with the child and other key stakeholders, such as their families, friends, employers and additional service providers to create a strong support network.

How do domestic and family violence services and disability services work to prevent and respond to violence and abuse of people with disability, including children, in their homes? Please describe any gaps as well as promising practices, for example codesigned models or creating communities of practice (cont'd)

Service model gap

breakthru has identified the following service model gaps in how domestic and family violence services and disability services work to prevent and respond to violence and abuse of people with disability, including children, in their homes. For instance:

Limited free early intervention supports for children aged 0-12

There are limited free early intervention supports for children aged 0-12 that have been exposed to trauma, such as domestic violence. This is an issue because children aged 0-12, including those with disability, are unable to receive their needed support.

Children with disability may become more likely to abuse or be abused – perpetuating the cycle of abuse. Consequently, these factors further entrench the disadvantage experienced by children with disability.

Insufficient free supports for children aged 0-12 years

Free services that are available, such as FMHSS, are limited to specific Local Government Areas and have limited funding. This inhibits FMHSS services to reach more customers wherein many families, including those that have children with disability, cannot receive their necessary supports.

breakthru's solution

breakthru believes that introducing, and making widespread, free targeted trauma related programs for parents or carers of children aged 0-12 would address these gaps. These services would be inclusive of children with disability because the program would screen for disability during the intake phase. The program would be tailored to cater for their unique needs, helping the child with disability to flourish. Programs akin to these are currently operated; however, breakthru's proposed program would be unique because its services would:

- exclusively focus on domestic violence and abuse; and,
- be free for customers.

To increase accessibility, breakthru suggests that this program should also operate at:

- various intervals throughout the day, such as evenings; and,
- both different locations and virtually.

These programs would subsequently equip parents or carers, including those with a disability or that have children with a disability, with the requisite knowledge, skills and resources to better support the unique trauma related challenges that children, including those with disabilities, aged 0-12 experience. Better educating and supporting these parents or carers will nurture more respectful and inclusive families.

Parenting programs that are trauma focused and targeted are therefore key to improving outcomes for children, including those with disability, aged 0-12. The style of the program that breakthru proposes could be adapted from other parenting programs currently operating. These evidence-based programs help to upskill the parent or carer and build their emotional connection and relationship with their children. The programs have experienced success in improving parenting, parent or carer relationships with children, and children's emotional competence and behaviour.

breakthru's solution (cont'd)

Furthermore, by increasing the geographical range of the services, this would allow organisations, like breakthru, to reach a wider target group and support more vulnerable families and children, including those with disability. Increasing funding would also enable services to have the appropriate resources to engage vulnerable communities.

Targeting these gaps would allow us to address needs in this cohort earlier and minimise the impacts of intergenerational trauma. These practices will help to break the cycle of abuse and assist in eliminating violence and abuse against people with disability in the home, nurturing better mental health outcomes in children, including those with disability.

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Thank You
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Empowering people with disability to achieve their goals for over 26 years