

FVPLS Victoria's  
**Sisters Day Out**<sup>TM</sup>  
Program

Helping Koori women stand strong

A narrative view of the workshop experience  
and its significance

Family violence can be a hard topic to broach, especially before someone asks for help. But Victoria's Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention and Legal Service (FVPLS Victoria) has come up with an effective, affirming way to bring Koori women together, to empower them to take control in their own lives, and to assist victims/ survivors of family violence, through its Sisters Day Out wellbeing workshops.

Around a dozen women are unloading plastic crates, boxes of decorations and other bits and pieces from open car boots and lugging them into a nearby church hall. They move briskly across the bitumen car park, in and out of the plain brick building. It's a cold, crisp morning in the middle of Melbourne's winter, but each of the women is wearing a bright pink floral lei.

Around once each month, a similar group can be spotted somewhere else in Victoria. It could be anywhere from Hamilton to Echuca to Lakes Entrance, Warrnambool, Mildura or Shepparton – the list is growing. Inside a local hall, community centre or gathering place the women will be preparing for a Sisters Day Out – a day of pampering and relaxation at which FVPLS Victoria will also present some information about its services.



Stepping out of the cold and into the room, the everyday world gives way to an all-embracing warmth. Scented candles glow on the pink-tableclothed trestles, floral decorations adorn the walls and bunches of balloons float at the end of pink and silver ribbons. The sun streams in through high windows, adding to the warmth of cosy gas heating. Aboriginal music plays softly in the background, a box of pink showbags is unpacked, and around the walls, the 'pamperers' set up their stations: hair, nails and make-up, massage, reiki and reflexology.

Everything is ready: all the tables are spread with tidy fans of FVPLS and VOCAT brochures and other leaflets have been placed in the showbags, along with bath bombs and body lotion. A purse-sized 'How to get help' guide in pink card reminds readers that 'any form of abuse is wrong', and lists where and how to access legal advice. Right on 9.30am, the first Aboriginal women start coming through the doors.

By ten o'clock the room is full of movement and chatter as around 50 women settle down to relax with one another. Showbags and handbags have begun to collect in clusters around the place, along with the occasional stroller or walking aid. The pampering stations are already full – a couple of women enjoy the massage while some young ones compare colours at the nail table. By the end of the day, several women will also have taken the important step of consulting with one of FVPLS Victoria's solicitors or legal workers.

The Sisters Day Out workshops began in mid-2007, with initial funding from the Commonwealth Attorney General's Department's Early Intervention and Prevention Program. Aimed specifically at Aboriginal women between 15 and 35, the days attract elders as well – sometimes up to three generations of the same family.

In addition to pampering, relaxation and community connection, the workshops include an important presentation from the FVPLS about what family violence is and how the service can help with Intervention Orders, Child Protection or Victims of Crime Assistance. Organising and planning of the Sisters Day Out is done in conjunction with regional Aboriginal co-ops, and wherever possible, with local services such as health care or victims support agencies.

It's 11am before the mike is turned on – the Sisters Days Out, say organisers, are very much about tuning into the mood and letting the event unfold in its own time. Morning tea has arrived on generous platters, and mothers, elders, Aunties and young women are all helping themselves to heart-shaped jam shortbreads, chunks of fruit and fluffy muffins. Gradually the hubbub settles down and people drift to one end of the room, where rows of chairs line up in front of a projector and portable screen.

A representative of the local Wurrundjerri people of the Kulin Nation is called upon to welcome everyone to Country. She's in the middle of having her feet done – but she comes up and warmly welcomes everyone before heading back to the chair. Staff of the FVPLS give a presentation about the service and the assistance offered, before a legal education worker takes everyone back to basics with a short talk called 'What is family violence?'. It's about the signs that are easy to dismiss: the partner who controls all the money, is suspicious about where you spend your time, demands sex, tells you no one else will want you. It's aimed at shifting the idea that 'he hasn't hit me so it can't be violence'.



Next, a solicitor combines legal information and light relief with a slide-show based on a less-than-perfect meerkat family – Molly, Macho, and their baby, Missy. Short sessions about child protection and victims of crime assistance follow. The whole presentation takes just 45 minutes but is packed with information.

Wanda Braybrook and Kelly Faldon have been coordinating the Sisters Day Out since its early days, and have run 14 of the 18 workshops held to date. They say the mix of pampering, information and worker contact is finely balanced to create a space that is very relaxed and 'up', but also gives women a chance to approach workers if they need help. Wanda describes the process of running the day as being about creating a relaxing place for the women:

"They walk into the room and they immediately think, 'Oh it's absolutely beautiful!' and 'I wonder what this is all about...', and you can see that after a certain time the women begin to relax; in fact the women feel a sense of relief and settle in to enjoy the day."

"Whilst the presentations aim to be gentle, there are some very powerful messages given, which allow the women to go away and reflect on those messages later."

In addition to organising the venue, catering, registration and other practical elements, Kelly, Wanda and the rest of the staff work hard on the day, always ensuring that the mood stays comfortable and fun. They're aware that talking about family violence can bring up a variety of emotions.

Kelly and Wanda have many years' experience working with Indigenous communities throughout the state, and maintain a detailed knowledge of the organisations, alliances, and sometimes conflicts, that exist in different communities. Inclusivity, they say, is essential for a successful event, and this means inviting everyone – both individuals and the different organisations that service the community.

Sisters Day Out is advertised in a variety of ways – through FVPLS Victoria's para legal support workers based at Barwon South West, Mildura and Gippsland, as well as Aboriginal co-ops, local Koori radio, local healing or women's services, and other services that Aboriginal women may be using. Word of mouth is also important, with women telling their friends and organisations passing information along.





After the presentation, the rows of chairs are rearranged into loose clusters as women sit down in pairs or groups and the occasional toddler gets off a lap and starts to wander. A few individuals approach the legal workers to talk privately about issues they face, or simply to chat. If you have a problem to discuss, there's no need to move off elsewhere to do it – the atmosphere is like a chilled-out party, not too crowded or noisy, and not too quiet. A woman may have a lengthy conversation with a solicitor on the day, but in amongst the constantly shifting patterns of seated pairs and groups, those conversations go unnoticed and unquestioned. It's a kind of privacy in the midst of community, and for many it may feel safer and more 'doable' than making that crucial phone call later on.

Lunch arrives almost on the dot of 1pm, delivered to the tables by white-aproned caterers. Party pies, mini-quiches and gourmet sandwiches are among the treats. Before long the room is dotted with women balancing bendy paperplates between spread-out, wet-nailed fingers, while around the walls the pampering continues. Kelly and Wanda have started taking 'glamour shots' in front of the Sisters Day Out banner near the front door. Trios of ladies pose side-on and fling their hair around to the camera on the count of 'One, two, three!'. Between lunch and afternoon tea – the catering seems never to stop – the chatter continues. Elders sit at the tables with cups of tea, younger ones gossip in stand-up groups, and a pile of black, brown and grey hair grows around the hairdressing station. Wanda starts downloading the photos to a laptop, and puts a slide-show onto the screen.

Some 730 women have attended Sisters Days Out since the first one was held in Morwell in July 2007; and wherever the days have been held, participant feedback has stressed the importance of community connection. Elder Auntie Irene Thomas, who attended the Shepparton workshop in mid-2008, says the social aspect of the day was important for her community:

“It was just very good to all bond together, to relax and to enjoy a bit of fellowship – to sit down and talk to one another, listen to the information, think about it, come home and read through it, and know where we can get help when we badly need it. Our community benefits greatly by it.”

Margaret Tang attended the Yarraville Sisters Day Out, and describes the event as a bit like “walking in feeling weighed down, and walking out feeling light”.

“Women, especially Koori women, they put themselves last,” she says. “If emotional stuff’s not wearing them down, it’s physical stuff, they’re always caring for someone else, so it’s very much needed.”

Karen G (not her real name), who has a few young kids, says that the pampering was a rare treat – she can afford to get haircuts for the children, but not for herself.

“I’ve never been pampered like that in all my life, ever,” says Karen of her Yarraville experience. “I couldn’t afford to.” She says she was also surprised to find there were solicitors available on the day.

“I didn’t know they had the legal service there, so I was pretty happy about that. I had a one-on-one conversation with one of the workers, so that’s really helpful.”

The positive feedback extends beyond the individuals who’ve attended the days: several of the service providers who’ve been to a Sisters Day Out have gone away with new ideas for their own organisations’ education and outreach programs.

Around mid-afternoon, the chairs all come together again and the Yarning Circle is formed – it extends almost the whole length of the hall. The ladies join the workers in getting it set up – the big trestles are moved to one side of the room and people start to drift towards the circle and sit down. Every woman in attendance takes her place: workers, participants, Elders, mothers, sisters and daughters.

The Circle is called by a local Community Elder. Wanda explains to everyone that the arrangement of the circle is based on cultural ways – it takes a while to get it right and make sure no one is excluded. The Yarning Circle doesn’t commence until every last woman is there.

This is the time when everyone gets to have a say. It is a time for sharing thoughts; each person introduces herself and says something to the group about her experience of the day. One woman comments: “For once I’ve felt like a woman and a person instead of just a mother.”

People express feelings of love, support, connection and community. Nobody talks about violence today – though at other days there have sometimes been lots of tears. The overriding feeling is one of sharing, warmth and care for one another.

Wanda Braybrook explains that the Yarning Circle fulfils the need for a debrief or plenary session, as is standard practice in most workshops. But in most debrief sessions, she says, you’ll find that certain women will talk and others won’t.

“With the Yarning Circle,” Wanda says, “we’re setting it up in a cultural way, that allows the women to feel comfortable about having a say. It is about doing the right thing in the right way, culturally.”



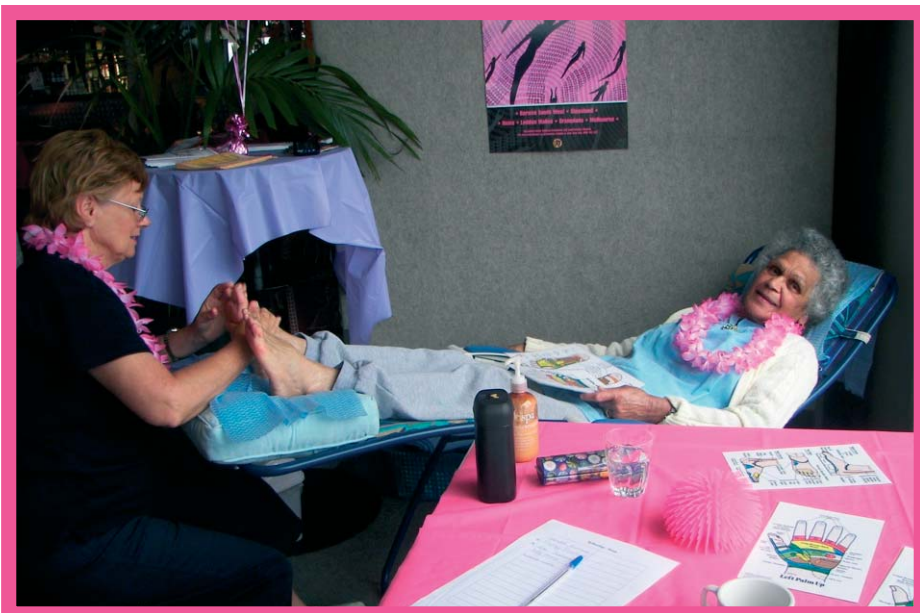
Safety is something FVPLS Victoria takes seriously: as well as ensuring that the atmosphere on the day is cosy and supportive, great care is taken in the planning to ensure confidentiality ahead of time. And while many women needing legal assistance will feel safe about contacting FVPLS Victoria after attending a Sisters Day Out, there are some who will not quite be ready to take that important step. For these women, the Sisters Serenity Retreat can provide a further opportunity to build up the self-confidence and courage needed to take action.

The Sisters Serenity Retreat is a two-day camp available to any woman who has already attended a Sisters Day Out. So far, the camps have been held in the Barwon South West and Gippsland areas (Wathaurong and Gunai/Kurnai country). While they do include a formal presentation session, most of the camp time is devoted to planned activities such as self-defence, creative arts or personal presentation, as well as relaxation and, most importantly, conversation.

Women who have attended a Sisters Day Out or a Sisters Serenity Retreat come from a range of family circumstances. Certainly not all of the women need assistance, but for everyone it is a chance to meet others, take in the message that the program delivers, and support one another in the future.

After the Yarning Circle is formally closed, the pampering continues, as the last few women on the lists get their turn. As a parting gift, each woman receives a small rock, hand-painted with the sister's spirit on it. It will be kept in a special place, as a reminder for the sisters to stay strong. People slowly begin to drift out of the glass doors and into the lengthening afternoon – but not before they've filled out an all-important evaluation form. The FVPLS Victoria staff start to fold and stack chairs as a bus arrives to take one group back to the community centre where they first heard about the day.

The backdrop of music and chatter continues as the bunches of pink balloons are tied to strollers or handed to kids, and women exchange email addresses or phone numbers. The hairdresser starts putting her things back into an oversized shopping bag. The last reiki session finishes and the first of the flower decorations is removed from the wall. The room goes quiet except for the sounds of tidying up, as the sun continues to stream in through those high windows.



In 2007/2008, Sisters Day Out received funding from the following sources: Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department; the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs; the Victorian Department of Human Services; and Department of Justice Indigenous Issues Unit.