LOOKING BACK, MOVING FORWARD:

⬇

LEARNINGS FROM THE TRANSITION TO WORKING ONLINE IN PRIMARY PREVENTION

Contents

About this resource

Many have speculated that, despite the hardships, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented society with an opportunity to create positive new structures, norms, practices and ways of operating. These opportunities exist in all areas of life, including how we work.

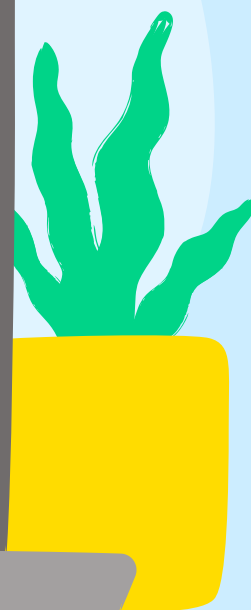*Looking Back, Moving Forward: Learnings from the transition to working online in primary prevention* explores the benefits, challenges and learnings from the Victorian primary prevention workers' move to working online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While this resource looks back at the transition to working online as a result of the pandemic, the prevention sector is still in an ongoing process of change. This resource reflects on what has been learned through this transition to support positive moves forward.

Prevention workers' journeys from face-to-face, to remote and now hybrid working has been both difficult and fruitful, with everyone experiencing this transition in different ways and for different reasons. This resource aims to support prevention workers in the process of looking back and moving forward by highlighting learnings and techniques that can inform ongoing prevention practice in an online context.

This resource draws on the voices of Victorian prevention workers to tell these stories. While the views and experiences outlined in this resource cannot capture all the learnings of the last few years, there are common themes that can support workers now and into the future. Input was gathered through interviews and reflective focus groups led by Safe and Equal, as well as Respect Victoria and the Gender and Disaster Pod's *Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Victoria's family violence primary prevention workforce*.[1]

Who are primary prevention workers?

Primary prevention workers are professionals working towards the long-term goals of preventing family and gender-based violence and building a gender equitable society by addressing the gendered drivers of violence as the key aspect of their roles. Prevention work takes place across a range of settings, from schools to sports clubs and media.

Who is this resource for?

This resource is for Victorian prevention workers and assumes an understanding of the Victorian primary prevention of family and gendered violence sector. While this is the primary audience for this resource, many of the key learnings would be valuable those working in other sectors as well.

What did working online look like for Victorian prevention workers?

Victoria's social distancing measures and extended lockdowns required:

+ A transition to working completely online for extended periods of time.
+ Structural change as organisations reallocated resources to facilitate a remote workforce.
+ Online adaptations of key elements of prevention work that were traditionally delivered face-to-face to be developed and implemented.

Rising to the challenges of a new context

The COVID-19 pandemic, and Victorian state government measures introduced in response to it, had and continue to have a substantial and complex impact on prevention workers and the work they do. Likewise, key prevention settings (such as schools, sporting clubs and workplaces) underwent their own transitions, in turn changing how prevention workers engaged with communities and implemented programs.

At the same time, public discourse in Victoria around family violence and gender equity began to swell as community concerns about increased incidences of family violence during long lockdowns were met by a renewed focus on family violence crisis response both in the media and within most family violence organisations.

COVID-19 presented primary prevention workers with a changed context, one where important conversations about long-term social change were harder to have, due to a focus on immediate family violence and public health response needs, but more important than ever.[2] Nevertheless, primary prevention workers in Victoria shone in their creativity and resilience in meeting these challenges and harnessed the change to elevate prevention work in ways that are innovative and inspiring.

There is much to be learned from those that harnessed the opportunities and used setbacks and challenges as lightning rods for creating new and exciting ways of working.

Increased focus on family violence: an opportunity for prevention

Early in the pandemic, family violence experts and advocates highlighted significant evidence that showed that rates of family violence increase during disasters – including environmental,[3] conflict[4] and health-related.[5] Throughout the pandemic to date, this evidence base has grown to include rates of family violence during lockdowns,[6, 7] as well as rates of family violence during the COVID-19 pandemic specifically.[8] Research has also looked at the increased reliance on gender stereotypes during disasters (such as the feminisation of care) and the inequitable impacts of the pandemic on women.[9]

This brought valid concerns about the 'shadow pandemic' to the attention of the nation[10] and the world and highlighted the need for education around prevention and respectful relationships during times of crisis. Increased media attention presented prevention workers with an opportunity to mobilise the conversation and bring discussions about the drivers of violence, and the actions needed to prevent it, to the fore.

This could have been a galvanising moment for the prevention sector, however at the same time, the increased rates and complexity of family violence[11] meant that, in many cases, prevention initiatives were scaled down, postponed or otherwise de-prioritised to free up resources to meet the pressing needs of the response sector. As a result, COVID-19 brought a need for prevention workers to be more creative and passionate than ever to do their work, while at the same time operating with limited resources and a society functioning in a completely 'unprecedented' way.
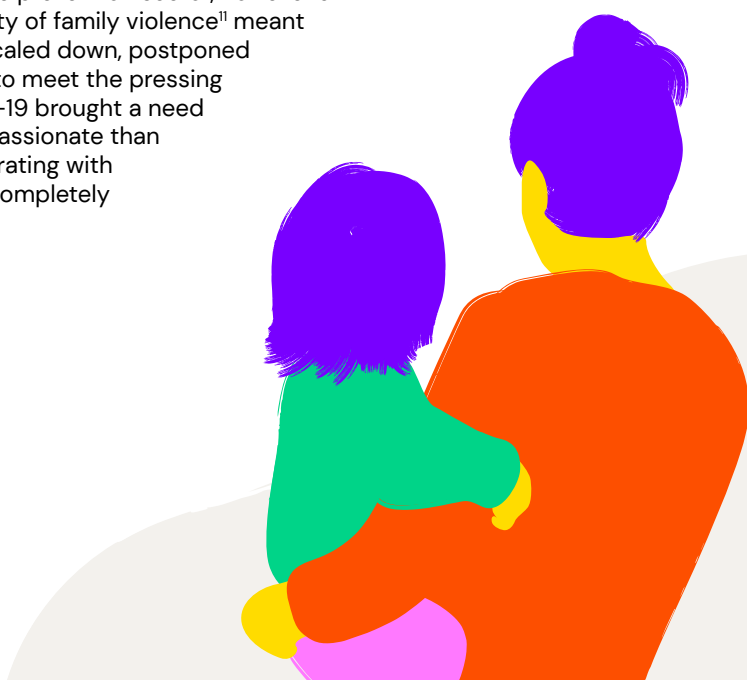
💡 KEY LEARNINGS

➡ LEVERAGING THE INCREASED FOCUS ON FAMILY AND GENDERED VIOLENCE

A focus on family violence rates and crisis response services does not have to impede prevention work – quite the opposite! Many prevention workers found they were able to leverage the increased awareness of family violence in the media to raise awareness of their own prevention activities.

"While the straightforward prevention work has kind of been put on hold, the response work that we've been doing around raising awareness of family violence and the link to gender inequality is a part of a raising awareness of the prevention work that needs to happen"

Quote from a worker in Leonard, W, Parkinson, D & Weiss, C.O., 2020.

### ➡ STRONGER CONNECTIONS ACROSS THE CONTINUUM

Increased attention on family violence and sector commitment to more cohesion across the prevention spectrum/continuum (primary prevention through to response and recovery)[12] presented an opportunity to highlight the links between crisis response and primary prevention in advocacy, communications and program design and delivery.

"[We're] certainly going to have an ongoing relationship into the future that will aid our prevention work because we've worked together on the response side of things. So having that link of both primary prevention and also the response and that – because I feel like there probably has always been a bit of a disconnect"

Quote from a worker in Leonard, W, Parkinson, D & Weiss, C.O., 2020.

➡ BUILDING NEW RELATIONSHIPS ACROSS SECTORS

Many prevention workers supporting or delivering response programs during the pandemic found unexpected benefits in doing this work, including developing new skills sets and establishing valuable new relationships. Response programs intersect with other essential and community services on a daily basis; prevention workers found the relationships gained from working more closely with crisis response to be valuable in ongoing efforts to engage a diversity of sectors in prevention, as well as learn from their expertise and experience.
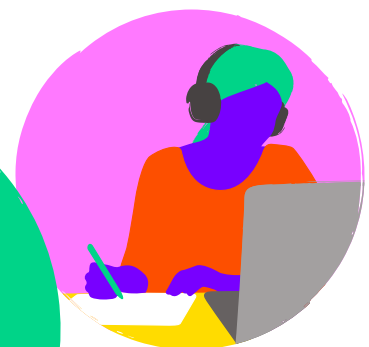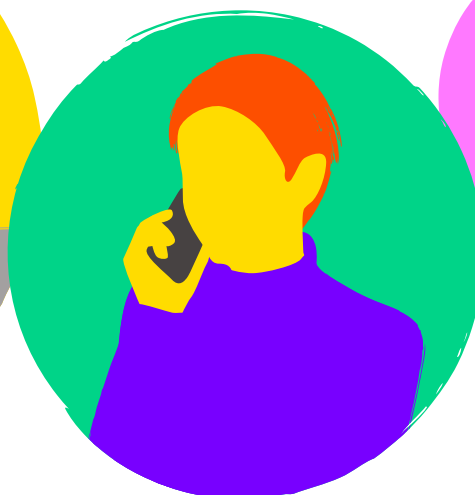
Shifts arising from working at home

The adjustment to working from home was not unique to the primary prevention sector, however the specialised nature of prevention work did create distinct challenges and opportunities for the sector. While the transition certainly introduced difficulties and obstacles, there were some benefits to working remotely including:

+ The opportunity to work more flexibly, both in terms of rostering and work style.
+ For some, increased ability to tailor work to accommodate work–life balance.
+ Improvements to efficiency.

However, such benefits were largely dependent upon a worker's living situation. The gendered nature of domestic work and care-giving responsibilities meant that, in a workforce consisting largely of women,[13] many prevention workers were expected to maintain the same professional workload while also taking on additional childcare responsibilities, home schooling and the like. For some, a lack of space, privacy and appropriate resources also posed serious challenges.

Working together, but apart

Prevention traditionally relies on community engagement and face–to–face networking, all of which was moved online. Many workers reported feeling a sense of isolation, made worse in cases where they were the sole prevention worker at their organisation.

Conversely, working online meant increased access to colleagues and partners for prevention workers living in rural or regional areas, or those who had previously faced barriers to in–person prevention work and networking such as workers with disabilities.

Navigating structural changes to work

In addition to these changes, organisations were also introducing new technologies, policies and programs to facilitate remote working. While this form of structural change can be disruptive, many prevention workers also identified ways in which structural change supported them in their work, such as more uniform decision–making processes, increased structure to meetings and the opportunity to upskill by using more online platforms and programs.

"We still love the work we do. But we're definitely working harder"

Chelsea Sofra – Goulburn Valley Centre Against Sexual Assault, Trauma Informed Services, GV Health

"At the moment, women continue to do housework, look after the children. Usually, given the choice most women will continue to work from home and men will go back to the office as soon as they can. It is going to create some inequalities because men will tend to be given more opportunities to network with colleagues and maybe create new opportunities for implementing partnerships while the women, if they work from home for too long, they might be excluded from these opportunities"

Safe and Equal focus group participant

KEY LEARNINGS

➡ MANAGING WORKLOADS THROUGH OPENNESS

When facing the challenge of managing not only their own, but also their colleagues' workloads in a remote context, workers found that increased openness helped. By being more upfront with each other about their capacity, limits and personal life contexts, colleagues had greater understanding and could adjust work to support one another. This helped to ensure healthy and realistic team expectations and boundaries. Importantly, this is *only possible* when those in leadership enable and are committed to openness, trust and flexibility.

➡ INCREASED ACCESSIBILITY

Prevention workers expressed a commitment to accessibility. Many shared that the transition to online removed barriers to access and inclusion – often as an unanticipated bonus. For example, the removal of travel and on-site working requirements and updates to out-of-date or inadequate accessibility technology. Many of these changes have become permanent.

"I wouldn't have been able to take the role had it not been online, because I was coming off parental leave... It's been achievable for me to work as a mum of two... that ability for me to be able to do a job that I want to do, and that I love doing, because of that shift is good"

Hannah Dwyer – Primary Prevention Unit, Safe and Equal

➡ REFLECTING ON WORK, AND MAKING IT WORK

The changes precipitated by the transition to working online caused workers to reflect on how they do their job, and what they think would work best. Considering we are still in a period of transition, it is a critical time for workplaces and those in leadership to engage their staff in open and honest conversations about ways of working.

"I'm going to make sure that I've got my workplan sorted so I'm collaborating on the days where I'm with people – gaining all those ideas and using other people's brilliant minds – and use the days at home for doing really task based, kind of menial things. Working from home has really taught me the difference"

Hannah Dwyer – Primary Prevention Unit, Safe and Equal

➡ INCREASED SCOPE TO CHECK-IN ACROSS THE SECTOR

Some workers found the 'slow-down' in some elements of their jobs enabled them to schedule meetings with colleagues in the sector to chat about future planning or projects that had been on the back burner.

"Working from home at the beginning of a pandemic, that I think there was a lot more opportunity for those of us that are in prevention roles where you're normally out in the community all the time going to meetings, all the time that you got to slow down, and actually meet one on one with those services because those people were the same, all of their stuff was cancelled. You're both sitting at home, it's like, 'Well, why don't we jump on (Teams) and collaborate?'"

Chelsea Sofra – Goulburn Valley Centre Against Sexual Assault, Trauma Informed Services, GV Health

Working with communities in a complex and changing context

The transition to online has not only impacted prevention workers individually and organisationally, but also how they work with communities. Prevention activities are delivered in a diverse range of settings and communities, all of which have been changed by the pandemic. In the same way that prevention workers had to readjust their priorities within their own organisations, many also faced increased challenges from the communities they were working with for a range of reasons, particularly resourcing and capacity issues.

For organisations that were able to continue to implement prevention initiatives, workers were faced with difficult questions around how to manage disclosures and the other sensitive issues that arise when talking about the prevention of family and gender-based violence.

In terms of reaching communities, the transition to online had its challenges and opportunities. For those without internet access or for whom technology is a barrier, the move to online increased isolation and decreased reach. For other communities, the move to online created an opportunity to strengthen prevention messaging in online spaces. For example, the transition made it easier for some to engage with those from migrant communities that are highly experienced using online technology for communicating with family overseas.[14] The need to balance accessibility while still leveraging opportunities for online connection is an ongoing issue.

"I think what I found most challenging was that capacity was ever changing... As we were emerging out of a lockdown to start gearing up for our community projects – whether that was working with kindergartens or schools or other groups – we would kind of have to re-plan, restructure, regroup, because we're going back towards another lockdown"

Safe and Equal focus group participant

"We engage people [that] live in quite remote areas so if you put [programs] online, then people will have no traveling issue... So, they value and they treasure this kind of platform"

Safe and Equal focus group participant

INCREASING CONNECTION TO COMMUNITY THROUGH NEW MODES OF COMMUNICATION

Prior to the pandemic, phone-based service delivery was not considered good practice for family violence services. However, the transition to phone-based client contact presents opportunities for prevention workers. Some workers found that engagement levels increased when working with the community either over the phone or via video technologies due to convenience – especially in rural and regional settings. Virtual meetings are now common practice for many prevention initiatives. The same principle can be applied to any new or adapted methods of service delivery.

"The biggest change for us was actually starting to offer what we really didn't do a lot of, like phone counselling, and we definitely didn't do telehealth pre COVID. And historically, it wasn't seen as being a best practice way to work with people that have experienced violence or sexual assault. But we now know, and we've done quite a bit of I suppose internal, and not like super structured research, but research, anecdotal evidence, that sort of stuff around the responses and how they worked. And it's something we will 110% keep on-going... it's been really successful"

Chelsea Sofra – Goulburn Valley Centre Against Sexual Assault, Trauma Informed Services, GV Health

FINDING WAYS TO MAKE THE WORK MORE 'FUN'

Programs that employed unique or creative ways of engaging with the community – especially considering 'screen fatigue' - received positive feedback. Examples include respectful relationship education delivered to school-aged children through a puppet show on Zoom, reframing online meeting spaces as 'cafes' or 'parties', or using games as icebreakers for meetings or workshops.

INCREASED CONSIDERATION OF HOW TO CREATE SAFE SPACES ONLINE

Working online has highlighted the increased need to find new and creative ways to ensure these online spaces are space. This has led to innovative and effective ways of working safely with clients and the community, such as updated group agreements and online safety checklists, opportunities for virtual debriefing, movement breaks and, at an organisational level, investment in accessibility technology (such as Auslan interpreters and closed-captioning for virtual events) and forward planning to ensure these services can be retained.

"[Working in a health service, sometimes] we can't allow people to come in. So, we have to find other safe ways to access those people and still deliver the service that they need"

Wendy Blanch – Nurse practitioner, Maryborough District Health Service

INCREASED KNOWLEDGE AND IMPROVED USE OF TECHNOLOGY

Many workers found that having to adapt their programs for online delivery created two positive, ongoing outcomes. Firstly, many feel that they increased their IT confidence and ability, especially relating to communications technology such as Zoom, PowerPoint and video, sound and image editing programs. Secondly, digitising their work unintentionally created several online resources for their organisations to use, promote and share well beyond the pandemic.

New approaches to worker wellbeing

Working in the family and gender-based violence sector is not easy. It means engaging with impactful, often upsetting and complex subject matter while facing systemic and institutional challenges. Having a strong support network and leadership is essential to maintaining wellbeing, a sense of purpose and safety while working. The prevention sector is no exception to this.

The pandemic changed support networks and supervision processes. Many workers reported that virtual spaces were not as conducive for debriefing, relationship building, and creating meaningful connections. Many felt disconnected not only from each other, but from the community members they were working with, leading to a sense of helplessness for some.[15]

Conversations about 'self-care' began to shift towards a call for collective care – where the onus for worker wellbeing is shared by the group and increased responsibility is placed on workplaces to ensure safe working environments for employees as a matter of course. Organisations and individuals developed their own methods of maintaining the wellbeing of their teams and new and valuable ways of working safely online became a mainstay across the workforce.

"It's this balance of trying to protect the young people that we work with, sometimes at the expense of worker safety, and sometimes we're protecting worker safety and promoting wellbeing at the expense of the safety of the young people that we're working with"

Ana Fried – Sexual health nurse educator

"With this collective care thing… instead of the onus being on you, the onus is on your colleagues to support you. So, what can we do as a team to support the person that is having a rough time?"

Ana Fried – Sexual health nurse educator

KEY LEARNINGS

➡ CONNECTING ON A HUMAN LEVEL

Carving out time to virtually catch up with team members in a purely social capacity is a very valuable way for workers to build collegiality, foster team wellbeing and help fill the gaps in workplace culture that arise from working remotely. Examples from workers include regular team-wide participation in online quizzes, Monday morning meetings aimed at updating each other about their weekends and organising face-to-face gatherings when restrictions allowed.

➡ TAKING PART IN NETWORKING OPPORTUNITIES

The social isolation of remote working was the impetus for many to take part in more sector-based events and activities, such as conferences, training sessions or communities of practice. This provided the benefit of not only allowing workers to build their capacity, but also the opportunity to meet and make connections with each other.

➡ ESTABLISHING REGULAR AND MEANINGFUL MANAGEMENT MEETINGS

Workers expressed the importance of establishing consistent meetings with their managers to workshop problems, debrief and build rapport. Consistent scheduling of these meetings is key for many workers.

"It's the first time I've ever had a job where I meet with my supervisor every month, and on our supervision list there's a space for professional development, there's a space for work items, and then there's a space for like, how are you doing? Do you need something? Sometimes, you need someone to ask you that question"

Ana Fried – Sexual health nurse educator

Making 'COVID normal' work

The changes to how we work are ongoing. Many of us are now moving to a hybrid working model where staff and resources will be split between continued remote working and a return to onsite work.

For some workers, returning to their office and workmates or getting back out into the community is an exciting prospect, and one that's long overdue. For others it's more daunting, for any number of reasons. For many, it's a bit of both.

The workers that Safe and Equal spoke with expressed a range of responses toward hybrid working, including:

+ An eagerness to meet and work with their colleagues again in person.
+ Relief at being able to re-introduce some home and work boundaries.
+ Concerns about a return to old, inflexible ways of working (such as rigid hours and rostering).
+ Legitimate worries from workers with disabilities and those in rural and regional areas about the security of their roles if work to returns entirely to the office without options to work online.
+ Apprehension that workplaces may go through similar struggles implementing return to work policies and integrating new technologies into their work as they did during the initial transition to online work back in 2020.

After spending the last few years adjusting, adapting and often thriving in an online environment, the concerns and frustrations about on site and hybrid work models across the prevention sector are valid.

However, this new change presents an opportunity. Many have speculated that COVID-19 could be a catalyst for new norms, systems and values, if harnessed correctly.[16, 17, 18] For the prevention sector, this represents a real opportunity to fully embed the learnings of workers from the last few years into prevention practice, systems, and policies.

Offering remote working arrangements for employees with disabilities, those with care-giving responsibilities, or those who live regionally can become part of the fabric of primary prevention in our state. Ensuring flexible working hours can be a natural part of rostering and human resource management. Continuing to invest in new technologies and upskilling staff to fortify the accessibility of prevention practice and programs can be a part of prevention agencies' business models and human resources policies. Practices that created safe online spaces can continue to be celebrated, promoted and common place.

While the desire for things to 'return to normal' is understandable, the unexpected benefits of working online do not need to be lost. As a sector that strives for long-term systemic and cultural transformation, we are perfectly placed to continue advocating for positive changes in the way we work, as well as through the work we do.

"The pandemic has highlighted that we all have different ways of working, different styles. Some people really love remote working and allowing that flexibility to be retained, because that worked for them, is important. For some, they were able to flourish in remote working. While there are challenges, no doubt, there are aspects of working remotely that were enabling, so retaining that flexibility is a really cool part [of hybrid working]."

Meghan Cooper – Primary Prevention Unit, Safe and Equal
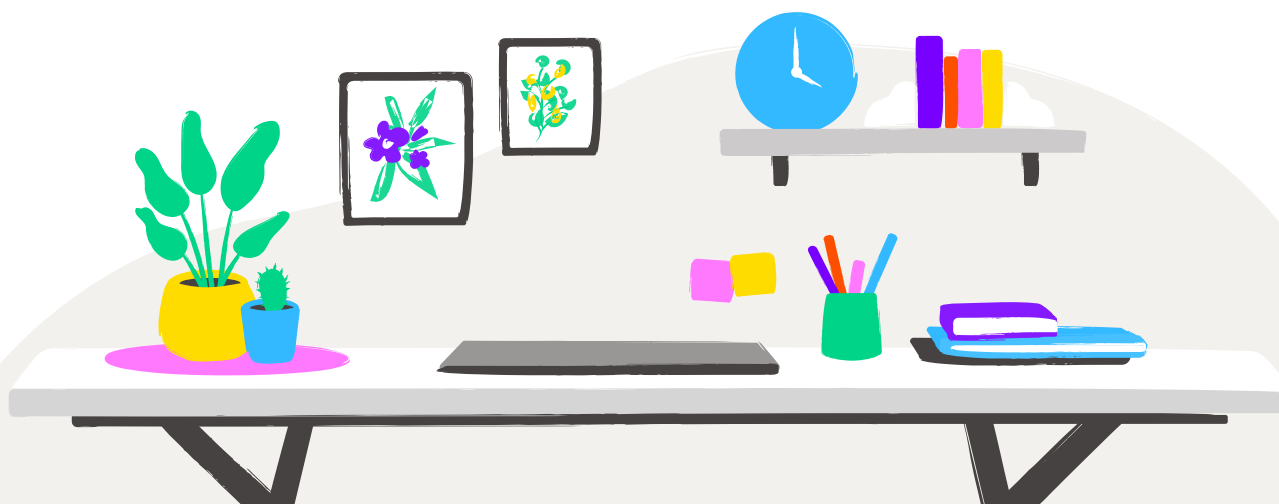
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Page 12 | Looking back, moving forward: Learnings from the transition to working online in primary prevention

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