

**Media Report**  
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## **Empowering parish communities to deepen understanding and response to family and domestic violence, new report**

Victorian Minister for Prevention of Family Violence, Ms Vicki Ward MP, has shown her support for the work conducted by Catholic Social Services Victoria (CSSV) and the Catholic Diocese of Sale in helping to educate, inform and equip parish communities to address domestic and family violence. Together with Bishop Greg Bennet of the Diocese of Sale, Minister Ward launched the report, [Shining a Light: A collaborative project working to build capacity for a whole-of-Church response to domestic and family violence](#) last Friday in Warragul.

The report outlines the findings of a pilot program, 'Shining a Light', which took place between March and July last year in the Catholic Diocese of Sale, in partnership with Catholic Social Services Victoria, the peak body for Catholic social and community service organisations across the state, and Sr Nicole Rotaru, a Mercy Sister, social worker and counsellor with many years' experience of working with victims and survivors of family and domestic violence, including children.

A total of 127 people (89 women and 38 men) participated in the pilot program, which assisted participants to recognise the signs of domestic and family violence and the impacts on women and children; to be more confident in starting a 'careful conversation'; and to know some domestic and family violence resources in the local community and beyond. Participants included Church clergy, parish staff, members of Religious congregations, Diocesan safeguarding staff and other organisation volunteers and staff, including those from across local social service agencies, schools, and healthcare.

In addressing the report, Minister Ward noted its message that 'the prevention of domestic and family violence is contingent on strong, local communities'. She said, 'This is a conversation that has to happen across communities and the work that you have done, with your 127 participants and conversations is really important, because those conversations will ripple out and will lead to other conversations.

'We know that up to 50% of people in Victoria, and nationwide, still think that it happens "somewhere else", that it "doesn't happen" in their community, in their street, or in their schools, or in their churches. And it does. So, to continue to have those conversations, to plant those seeds of openness is really important. It's also what develops a strong community because a safe community is a strong community.

'Every home should be safe, and these conversations are part of the way of delivering that.' Bishop Greg Bennet expressed his commitment in 'sharing those efforts to address the terror of domestic and family violence and violence of any kind'. He said, 'We are constantly reminded of the turmoil, violence, injury, and deaths of those victims of such terror, darkness, and silence.

The evaluation report highlights that no community is free from domestic family violence ... We cannot fool ourselves. It is a matter of pastoral care that we create within our parish communities, pools of safety, where people will find the courage to speak to clergy and pastoral leaders, and that our parishes will be well equipped and available to know what resources are available to support, accompany, and ensure people are safe.'

The report outlines six recommendations that aim to enhance the Catholic community's role in responding to and preventing domestic and family violence in light of the learnings from this pilot program. Among these, there is an emphasis on the importance of providing ongoing support for the workshop participants, and a need to secure resources for further work. It is recommended that follow-up workshops making clear specifically on what constitutes effective approaches to violence prevention be rolled out across every diocese in Australia with the intent to open space for conversation and build general knowledge about drivers and prevalence of domestic and family violence in Australia.

The recommendations also propose the development of communities of practice and broader organisational training initiatives. Collaborative partnerships with social service organisations and ongoing training for personnel in areas such as health and education will strengthen the overall response to domestic and family violence.

Sr Nicole Rotaru RSM, workshop facilitator, and a member of the CSSV council and CSSV Domestic Violence Working Group commended the participants of the pilot program, and for their insightful feedback, which has informed the evaluation report. She said, 'Implementing these recommendations is vital for the Catholic community to proactively contribute to preventing and addressing domestic and family violence in Victoria and beyond.

'While violence against women is a problem of epidemic proportions in Australia and children suffer the consequences intensely, it is not inevitable. It is preventable.

'The lid must come off. The silence must be broken, so that children, women and men can be safe,' said Sr Nicole. 'The Sale Diocese has made a clear commitment to addressing domestic and family violence and to working towards prevention. Such resolute commitment needs to go beyond Sale, to the whole of Victoria and to all dioceses across Australia.'

Bishop Greg made a similar call: 'The evaluation report highlighted that there is a real need to form and educate people in their awareness and their confidence to even speak about domestic violence. So, if there is a challenge for the church, it's that other dioceses can learn from this report, and similarly, through their networks begin a similar project to educate clergy, to educate pastoral leaders, religious and those within their parishes.

'We need to create environments where people feel safe. And if we can help by such a project to develop people's confidence to speak about domestic violence and to make sure parishes are well resourced, then I would encourage my brother bishops, where possible, to begin to move in this direction.'

As a result of the pilot program and evaluation, a further step is planned—Spreading the Light—which will involve inviting safeguarding volunteers and pastoral workers to train as workshop facilitators. The volunteers will be supported by staff from CatholicCare Victoria, and members of the Sale Diocese will be invited to participate in a workshop.

Speaking on behalf of CSSV, Felicity Rorke, Executive Director of The Good Samaritan Inn, and Chair of the CSSV Domestic Violence Working Group said, 'Catholic Social Services is committed to being a platform for collaboration in the awareness raising and prevention of family and domestic violence. The Shining a Light program is an example of such collaboration with parishes and organisations working together to create momentum on this significant social problem.

'No-one can do this work alone. It takes a village—organisations, schools, parishes, faith communities, and guidance and an authorising environment established by government. This is what can bring about the change we need to see, if we want a community that is free from violence. We are convinced that we need to work together in a collaborative and authentic way.'

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**For further information or quotes about the pilot program and/or [the evaluation report](#), please contact:**

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