

**CASA Conference Paper**  
**“Speaking Out Against Sexual Assault”**

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## **1. Acknowledgements**

“Speaking Out Against Sexual Assault” is part of a larger project called the Eastern Media Advocacy Project (EMAP), which also incorporates a family violence component.

Project partners of “Speaking Out Against Sexual Assault”;

- Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault (ECASA)
- Women’s Domestic Violence Crisis Service (WDVCS)
- Women’s Health East (WHE)

An EMAP Steering Committee was formed; members include the project partners as well as the Eastern Domestic Violence Service for the family violence component.

The project focuses on women who have experienced sexual assault. One in five women experience sexual violence in their lifetime, with most violence against women taking place in the home (Commonwealth of Australia 2010).

## **2. Introduction**

“Speaking Out Against Sexual Assault” is a primary prevention initiative which seeks to influence a change in community attitudes to prevent violence against women. Through media and public speaking opportunities, the project aims to challenge commonly held beliefs and stereotypes around the issue of sexual assault. Senior staff and victim/survivors of sexual assault have been trained to understand how the media works and how to effectively respond to the media. This training has produced proactive and effective media advocates who can speak out against sexual assault. It is hoped that repeated exposure of the issue through various media outlets, and the informal education of journalists, starts to impact on community attitudes to sexual assault.

The project also encourages positive accurate reporting of sexual assault by the media, with the inclusion of service provider details, statistics and the voices of victim/survivors. It also has the potential to enhance the recovery of victim/survivors and impact on the reduction of sexual assault incidences in the longer term.

This project targets the Eastern Metropolitan Region (EMR) of Melbourne. The EMR comprises the seven Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Boroondara, Knox, Maroondah, Manningham, Monash, Whitehorse and Yarra Ranges. As at 30 June 2009, the population was estimated to be 1,029,533.

The project objectives are;

- Ensuring that consistent and correct language is used when reporting, or speaking about sexual assault
- Empowering victim/survivors to come forward and disclose
- Educating the wider community about sexual assault in order for them to better support victim/survivors locate responsibility with perpetrators
- Supporting and promoting good Police practice and response
- Informing perpetrators that they will be held accountable
- Providing opportunities for women, who have experienced sexual assault, to take on advocacy roles in the region
- Supporting and promoting local, State and National initiatives around the prevention of and the response to sexual assault

### **3. Background**

While similar projects have been conducted in other regions around Prevention of Violence Against Women, this project incorporates the prevention of sexual assault, which has never been done before. A similar project was the PVAW Advocacy Project conducted by WDVCS over the last four years, which has been a resounding success, securing 58 media and public speaking opportunities for the participating survivor advocates throughout 2010.

Involving women advocates provides the media with the opportunity to give the human side to the story, engage the reader, break down stereotypes and highlight the key messages around long and short term impacts on victims, their families and the wider community.

CASAs are regularly contacted by the media who are seeking to speak to women who have been sexually assaulted so having trained advocates available, enables these agencies to be more proactive and strategic when media opportunities arise.

Many articles reporting sexual assault are not based on empirical research, but are based on statements made during a court case, bystander speculation, celebrity “experts”, and the often commonly held beliefs of the journalists themselves, often reflecting the journalists own background and gender.

### **4. Method**

The project has three phases (*see flowchart*). The first two phases occurred in late 2011 with the project currently in phase 3 with ongoing activities.



## Phase One

### *Promotion*

There were a number of methods used to promote the project. The aim was to receive as much interest in the project as possible. It was advertised across the following avenues;

- 7 local EMR Leader Newspapers (including online website)
- There were numerous media releases sent out which resulted in 5 articles being written about the project
- Among current ECASA clients and via CASA forum
- Across Community radio (3RR station)

### *Recruitment Process*

WHE was responsible for managing the expressions of interest. 32 women contacted and were asked to complete a written 'Expressions of Interest' which provided ECASA with more information about the women and their experiences. This information assisted ECASA in the screening process. In total, 20 women submitted formal expressions of interest.

It was important to conduct a screening interview with each of the women in order to establish whether they were in a safe enough place in their recovery in order to participate. It was important to have a sense of time frames, whether women were involved in current legal proceedings, what current supports they had.

11 women continued to participate in the project, with some women opting out when they realised they may not be in the best space right now, either before or after the screening interview. By chance, the sexual assault experiences among the women were varied as well as their demographics. The age range within the group was between 20-63 years.

## Phase Two

### *Training*

- *Advocate Training*

The training ensured that women were not re-traumatised, by encouraging them to speak generally about their own experiences rather than go into detail. The main focus was identifying commonly held beliefs and stereotypes about sexual assault and developing key messages to challenge these, followed by the skills to deliver the messages to the media/public.

The training was over three days and covered

1. Project Introduction and Sexual Assault
2. Media Training
3. Public Speaking Training

The first day began with an introduction to the project by Jane Ashton from WDVCS. The remainder of the first day was delivered by two ECASA staff. This workshop covered key aspects around sexual assault including; what sexual assault is, key issues, values clarification (challenging misconceptions), impacts, speaking out, reporting to police, what CASAs can offer and self care. As this was the first time this workshop had been delivered to sexual assault victim/survivors, there was a lot of thought put in to tailoring it to suit the audience.

The following two days of training were delivered by Veronica McGowan from PRHelp. Veronica, the director, has 25 years experience as a public relations professional. Veronica developed great rapport with the women and made them feel confident and comfortable throughout the training. Content covered included how the media work, how to protect yourself when working with the media, the process of interviews and how to handle them, how to deliver key messages, and how to deflect intrusive questions. The two days incorporated many activities where the women practised media skills by role playing.

Overall, there was very positive feedback from the participants about the training. Many reflected that their learning needs were met during the training and that it had exceeded their expectations. All participants were hopeful that the project would have a positive impact on preventing sexual assault in the community. All the women felt that they had increased their knowledge of the media and how it works. All participants felt that their public speaking skills had improved during the training and with more practice they would continue to improve.

*An advocate said, "As part of the training, I learnt how pervasive and entrenched sexual violence and violence against women is, and this learning has enabled me to see not just my own personal tragedy but the wide-scale tragedy that is occurring everyday, in people's homes, on the streets, in their workplaces. Understanding the culture of violence that facilitates and perpetuates this violence helped me to put my own assault into perspective and gave me a fierce determination and courage which I continue to draw upon today as I prepare to face my attacker in court. Without the solid training I received from the project, the process of going to court and providing testimony and victim impact statements would be a far more intimidating and far less possible undertaking (Kate).*

- *Staff Training*

Senior staff and project workers from WHE and ECASA were trained to respond effectively to media. The main focus of the training was the process of interviews including how to

prepare, how to deflect difficult questions, how to strategically respond to questions and how to deliver key messages.

The training was delivered by Lina Caneva who has over 30 years experience as a journalist and is also a producer, director and writer. Lina was brilliant in bringing her expertise and the reality of journalism to the level of the participants. Most participants acknowledged that the training increased their confidence when dealing with the media, though they felt their skills needed strengthening.

### *Advertising the advocates*

Promotional materials for the project have been developed to inform media outlets and organisations in the region that victim/survivors of sexual assault are available.

The project worker from WHE is responsible for managing the media and event opportunities.

It is important to be proactive and strategic with media and public event opportunities. WHE continually sends out media releases and flyers in order to attract more opportunities. WHE and ECASA increase the promotion of advocates around specific events and themes such as “Week without Violence” and “16 Days of Activism”.

### **Phase Three**

- *Advocates*

The media training for WHE and ECASA staff enabled both organisations to prepare and support women advocates to work with media, and provide debriefing afterwards.

The WHE project worker prepares and supports the advocates. . This includes; assisting the advocate through the speech writing phase, practising the speech, attending the event/opportunity with the advocate, providing informal debriefing post the event etc. ECASA staff are also involved in this process. After each opportunity the advocates are also offered a formal debrief session with staff from ECASA.

- *Project Worker*

ECASA provided supervision and support to WHE's project worker. This is a crucial part of the project as the project worker did not have a background in counselling. Even though the project worker did not provide counselling to the advocates she became their support person prior, during and post the opportunities. The support to the project worker will continue throughout the duration of the project.

## **5. Resources**

The partner organisations have provided this project with numerous in kind resources, including staff time, facilitation of sexual assault training, catering etc. The project also includes an ongoing expense which incorporates travel costs for advocates (to/from opportunities) and administration. The bulk of the resources went to media training for both the advocates and the staff which cost \$3,000.

## **6. Outcomes**

The media and advocacy opportunities are used to improve the community's understanding of the impact of sexual assault and the range of prevention strategies. The number of

requests for the EMAP advocates has increased dramatically since the project began.

There have been 66 advocacy, media and PR opportunities. The project has also had input into many White Ribbon Campaign events, Local Government primary prevention initiatives, State Government Enough Campaign events and input into National, State and local print and electronic media.

The majority of opportunities have been family violence focused. From, the 66 opportunities, 25 have been requested from the sexual assault advocate pool. It seems the stigma around sexual assault is far greater than family violence. The steering committee are currently working out ways to increase the sexual assault advocate requests.

Relationships with the media have strengthened and the partners involved have been able to play a proactive rather than reactive role when working with the media. Through building relationships with media personnel, it is hoped that reporting practices can be influenced.

Comments from advocates'

*"It's so empowering to be able to be part of a project where I have been given skills and opportunities to be able to break the silence of violence against women". "This project has given me an incredible gift. Meeting women who have been through such horrifying ordeals and are not only courageous enough to still want to be part of society but are driven enough to actually try and challenge it – is incredibly inspirational". (Tammy)*

*"It's time no woman felt too frightened to speak up or too intimidated to risk being heard. This is why the Eastern Media Advocacy Project is so vital, so valuable. It's why I jumped at the chance to be a part of it"... "To think that in some small way, my words, my presence, my story might contribute to that change is the return of the hope and optimism that rape stole from me so brutally. Being part of the project has changed my life - it has been instrumental in replacing some of the grief and fear and trauma of sexual assault with the determination, strength and confidence of a survivor". (Kate)*

*“Being involved in this project has been an empowering experience for me. Apart from equipping me with a tool kit to help facilitate concerns to the community about SA, it helped me to understand the nature of SA and that my experiences were and sadly remain common. In helping to change prevailing community attitudes and behaviours, I hope that others are prevented from suffering the impact, confusion and alienation that SA has had on me. I acquired a renewed sense of self along with knowledge and skills to voice an anti SA message in a structured, factual and meaningful way. This is important, because, like many others I was silenced for many years. By raising SA in the public’s consciousness to improve awareness and education, I believe that this project can only impact positively on our society”. (Rosie)*

## **7. Recommendations**

*Violence against women is prevalent, serious and preventable. This project uses media as a setting for the primary prevention of violence against women, which has been highlighted as a successful setting in both Federal and State Primary Prevention Plans. This project uses the media as a setting to change attitudes around sexual assault and family violence. The media can be a powerful primary prevention tool and may contribute to longer term reduction in incidents. Media coverage of violence against women offers an important contribution to public understanding of the social issue.*

*In recent VicHealth research, it has been highlighted that there was a lack of violence against women advocates and experts who could be used as resources in the media. It is evident from the research that building the capacity of experts and leaders to undertake media activity will increase the likelihood that media content will portray violence against women as a significant and preventable community issue (VicHealth, 2012).*

*Some recommendations include;*

- *Further build the capacity of experts and leaders in the PVAW sector through training, resourcing and supporting (WHE is currently in the process of developing further training for the EMR)*
- *Develop compulsory training for journalists*
- *Lobby for the development of Media Codes of Practice for reporting family violence and Sexual Assault*
- *Promoting the Eliminating Violent Against Women Awards (EVA's)*
- *Increase advocate pool*
- *Further training for advocates*

## **8. References**

Commonwealth of Australia 2010, *National Women's Health Policy 2010*, Australian Government, Canberra.

VicHealth 2012, *Victorian Print Media Coverage of Violence Against Women*, VicHealth, Melbourne.

Judy Flanagan- ECASA

Loren Imbriano- Women's Health East