

**COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO QUEENSLAND POLICE SERVICE RESPONSES TO DOMESTIC
AND FAMILY VIOLENCE**

Commissions of Inquiry Act 1950

Section 5(1)(d)

STATEMENT OF ANITA WHARTON

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| Name of Witness: | Anita Wharton |
| Date of birth: | [REDACTED] |
| Current address: | [REDACTED] |
| Occupation: | Co-ordinator, Far West Indigenous Family Violence Service |
| Contact details (phone/email): | [REDACTED] |
| Statement taken by: | Samantha Guinta |

I, Anita Wharton, make oath and state as follows:

1. I am the Co-ordinator of the Far West Indigenous Family Violence Service (FWIFVS) and the Chairperson of the Strong Families Strong Communities Committee (SFSC) in Cunnamulla. I have been in the role of Co-ordinator of FWIFVS since May 2019. Both FWIFVS and SFSC are under the auspice of the Cunnamulla Aboriginal Corporation for Health (CACH). Having the connection to and the support of the Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services (ACCHS) is very important to the success of our services and programs. This is due to the ability to refer clients to the ACCHS and other programs in a holistic care model and reduces any stigma which might be attached to any programs if they were to be run from a police station which might be a barrier to meaningful engagement with community and prevent participation.
2. FWIFVS provides a range of services that offer support, advice, and advocacy to individuals and families that have or are currently experiencing domestic and family violence in Cunnamulla and surrounding areas. The services offered by FWIFVS include crisis intervention, court support, housing assistance, referral assistance, legal aid referral pathway, services assistance like form filling and document gathering, domestic violence applications, community and education awareness, women's groups, healthy relationship

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community education, events coordination around DV month and International Women's Day, mediation coordination and any other needs identified by the client. We don't have 24 hr/7 day a week funding but given that Cunnamulla is a small community, we can be contacted after hours if required. FWIFVS is based in Cunnamulla and has four core staff, that consists of a support worker and myself who are based in Cunnamulla, a support worker in Charleville and a support worker in St George.

3. FWIFVS are working closely with the South West Hospital Health Service to help establish a training module on how to culturally appropriately respond to domestic and family violence with First Nations families. This will include an introduction to local services available, triaging practices and will be mandatory.
4. The SFSC Program offers holistic perpetrator intervention programs that aim to reduce family violence in Cunnamulla and surrounding areas. Some of the programs include the Men on Country program (weekly), the Women's Circle Program (weekly), arts and crafts workshops, community education, connecting to culture workshops, providing safe space in women's and men's business in a culturally appropriate way, healing circles and any other programs identified by clients or communities. Strong Families consists of 3 employees, an operations coordinator, the male cultural coordinator and a support worker who manages the women's group.
5. The committee that manages the SFSC program contains a representative from each service. This includes QPS, Cunnamulla P-12 State School, Sacred Heart Parish School, Paroo Sire Council, Hope Project, Lifeline, Resq Employment Agency, CACH, FWIFVS, SFSC and Queensland Health.

Relationship with the QPS generally

6. Over the past two year the FWIFVS and SFSC and the QPS have developed a really good working relationship. The police have a strong community approach to their police work and they spend a lot of time engaging with the community and running programs throughout the community.
7. Examples of the community programs that are run by the police in Cunnamulla are:
 - (a) **Blue Edge Program** – Blue Edge (Educate, Develop, Grow and Empower) is a program of physical activity training designed to extend a young person's mind and physical capability. The program runs for eight weeks, with two training sessions per week to build routine. It finishes after the 8th week with a graduation day named "The final EDGE", each participant will engage in physical activities as an individual and as a team member, and celebrate their completion of the program and each participant is presented with a Certificate and a new pair of joggers.



- (b) **Learner Licence Program** – the police and Police Liaison Officers (PLOs) sourced a vehicle and arranged for it to be painted by the learner drivers to add a touch of personalisation. QPS and PLO Officers assist learner drivers to complete required driving hours needed to apply for their licence.
 - (c) **Mentoring Program** – this is an internal program run within the local school where services come in on a Wednesday to run workshops based on feedback from the students. These sessions are around education and awareness and run by the mentors. This includes QPS, FWIFVS, Lifeline, Deadly Choices and SFSC. These sessions have included Love Bites and Water Rock Program and tailored sessions.
8. Over the past few months, The OIC at the Cunnamulla Police Station has been on leave. During the period that there has been no OIC on the ground, QPS community engagement has been driven by other officers at the station such as Sergeant Matthew Costello and Sergeant Ellysha Geddes. We also have a specialist DFV police officer who is also very good. The positive relationship with the current police is not limited to these officers. There are usually around 16 police officers stationed at Cunnamulla but at the moment I think that there are around 8. My staff and I have a positive relationship with all the current police at Cunnamulla.

High Turnover and New Officers

9. I would say that the biggest challenge that we face in our relationship with the QPS is the high turnover of staff. It takes time to build relationships and it is difficult when there is such a high turnover of staff.
10. However, when the new officers arrive at Cunnamulla they are taken around town and introduced to the staff at the support services such as FWIFVS and SFSC as well as being introduced to community elders and other stakeholders. New police officers are encouraged from the start to take part in community events that are run by the police and collaborative stakeholders.

Specific collaboration with the QPS in relation to domestic and family violence matters

11. The police and the DFV support sector in Cunnamulla also specifically work together in a collaborative way in relation to domestic and family violence matters.
12. There is a Terms of Reference for SFSC which includes working collaboratively with Queensland Police Service and ensuring there is a representative from QPS on the Management Committee.

Police Referrals

13. Police referrals come through Redbourne, I am the contact for the portal for FWIFVS and SFSC. These are based on data entered by the QPS. These referrals are sent to support workers in each organisation. This means referrals come to me for the identified victim



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and identified perpetrator and are pushed out to my support workers for follow up. It allows us to work collaboratively with the family unit as two separate organisations in a unified way.

There is also place to send feedback to police to indicate whether the clients have been contacted/level of engagement etc.

14. The police will also make more informal referrals to FWIFVS where needed. Although we are not funded to be a 24-hour service the police will call me after hours if urgent crisis support is needed overnight or outside of normal business hours.

SFSC

15. This program is managed by a Management committee who meet monthly. A representative from QPS is on the Committee. There is information sharing around statistics of DFV in the community and this provides an opportunity for all services gathered at the table to comment on current community trends, ways of responding and provide feedback on the programs. An example of this is being able to organise QPS to attend one of the men's yarning circles to help strengthen relationships between community and the police.

STYMIE – Anonymous Reporting Program

16. Stymie is an online platform which empowers people to ask for help when they need support, or if they are seeing or experiencing harm. Encrypted, anonymous notifications are delivered within seconds to authorised recipients, who respond accordingly to their wellbeing framework. The notification provides the option to include screenshots and or images to validate the notification. Some of the reports to date received through Stymie are: Suicide Ideation, discrimination, anxiety, depression, bullying, self-harm, physical fights, family violence and illegal activity.
The purpose of implementing Stymie is to support psychological safety by empowering all Community members with the self-belief that they can say something on behalf of themselves or as a bystander for someone else. Stymie is used mainly within the school environment, however it has been implemented as a Community approach for Cunnamulla.

Community Response Group

17. FWIFVS, SFSC, the QPS and Lifeline are involved in building a community response group. We anticipate expanding this to capture other community stakeholders such as Education Queensland. We are in the process of trying to expand the collaborative approach that has been adopted in relation to domestic and family violence occurrences to work together in relation to all police occurrences through the establishment of a Community Response Group. This group is still in its planning stages but we are hoping to implement a model based on the principles of the Maranguka Justice Reinvestment Model from Bourke, NSW. The intention is for all the relevant agencies to triage all the overnight police occurrences on a daily basis and work out why they are occurring and what can be

done to assist and prevent further offending, in addition to ensure relevant support is in place for all involved. QPS have just organised the group email contact for the response group, it is currently on hold due to the recruitment process of vacant positions at Cunnamulla QPS.

How the positive relationships with the police have improved outcomes in domestic and family violence matters

18. Over the last 2 years QPS have become involved in a number of community groups, collaborative responses and tried to strengthen community relationships by actively targeting community events, visiting local services and building relationships with community members.
19. Drug and alcohol has the biggest impact on escalating DFV. Programs are run locally to try to assist addressing these issues and police can make referrals to the support services such as Drug Arm and Mental Health. Intervention at an early stage with victims and perpetrators is having a positive impact on reducing the escalation of violence and involvement in the women's group and men's group allows people to work in a culturally safe way. Repeat offending is often at its highest during Sorry Business.
20. Because the police are aware of the work that is being done with both victims and perpetrators the support services and the police work together and if people are doing well with their programs, then variations to the domestic orders are more often agreed to by the police. This also leads to less breaching offences.

The Role of PLO's

21. The role of PLO's in community assist breaking the barriers between police and the clients in a small community. People are more likely to go to the PLO in the first instance rather than police.
PLO's often help people in custody connect to support services, they are well respected in community, they assist running local sports and events and plays a critical role in connecting community to the formal institution of Queensland Police.



OATHS ACT 1867 (DECLARATION)

I Anita Wharton do solemnly and sincerely declare that:

- (1) This written statement by me is true to the best of my knowledge and belief: and
- (2) I make this statement knowing that if it were admitted as evidence, I may be liable to prosecution for stating in it anything I know to be false.

And I make this solemn declaration conscientiously believing the same to be true and by virtue of the provisions of the *Oaths Act 1867*.

Signature

Taken and declared before me at CUNNAMULLA this 29th day of JULY 2022.

Taken By

Justice of the Peace / Commissioner for Declarations / Lawyer

Reg. No.

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