



Issues Paper
Updated September 2020

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on inTouch and its clients

About us and introduction

inTouch provides integrated, culturally responsive services to migrant and refugee communities in Victoria. Over the past 35 years, we have helped over 20,000 women experiencing family violence. In the 2019-20 financial year, inTouch provided services to 1311 women from 98 different countries. This included providing support to the client's 1277 children.

inTouch works across the family violence continuum, from prevention and early intervention, to crisis intervention, post-crisis support and recovery. We provide assistance to women who are victim-survivors of family violence. The majority of whom have experienced family violence perpetrated by their male partner and/or other family members. The issues that we have identified and the recommendations that we make in this document are based on the experiences of these women and their children.

At the time of writing this paper, Melbourne has been in "lockdown" as a result of public health measures to stop the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic for a number of months. inTouch recognises and supports the Victorian Government's public health restrictions and understands the necessity of these measures. Furthermore, inTouch acknowledges and thanks the Victorian Government for its continued support of our clients. During the pandemic, the Victorian Government increased its brokerage funding to further assist some of our most disadvantaged clients – those who are on temporary visas who do not have access to Centrelink payments or any of the stimulus initiatives implemented in response to COVID-19.

Whilst being effective in suppressing COVID-19, the public health restrictions have had profound impacts on our clients and our organisation. This paper has been written as a follow up to the first issues paper that our organisation published in April 2020 during the initial wave of COVID-19 in Victoria.¹ In this document, we will highlight the ongoing impacts of the pandemic and the most recent restrictions on our clients and organisation.

Increased referrals and contact with clients

As outlined in Table 1 below, inTouch has recorded an increased number of clients referred to our service for case management during COVID-19. Along with an increase in the number of referrals during the pandemic, our case managers also report increases in the complexity of client cases and the need for more contacts with individual clients.

inTouch case managers report that clients are feeling anxious and isolated, and do not want to cease contact with our service or have their cases closed. The clients have few other supports and they perceive the support provided from inTouch as essential to their wellbeing in this uncertain time.

¹ inTouch Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence (2020), Issues paper: The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on inTouch clients. Found here: <https://intouch.org.au/issues-paper-the-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-intouch-clients/>



Table 1: Number of clients and contacts per month from January – September 2020

	Jan	Feb	March	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept
No. of new clients	63	95	110	98	94	112	139	131	102
Total no. of ALL clients	361	378	412	419	449	488	522	516	476
No. of contacts made with ALL clients	1931	1955	2301	2486	2627	3328	3641	3726	3208
Contact time (hours)	391 hrs	389 hrs	447 hrs	466 hrs	530 hrs	578 hrs	699 hrs	716 hrs	552 hrs
Lockdown phase in Melbourne	No lockdown	No lockdown	16 March State of Emergency	Stay at home restrictions	Restrictions eased	20 June restrictions tightened	Stage three lockdown	Stage four lockdown	Stage four lockdown

Poverty and economic insecurity

Many inTouch clients have lost their jobs or had their hours of employment cut back as a result of the pandemic and the public health restrictions. Many of our clients worked in factories, warehouses, as well as the hospitality and beauty industries. These industries have been severely impacted in Victoria.

A significant portion of our clients at inTouch are also temporary visa holders. Many of these clients are ineligible for government supports. For example, clients on student visas or certain bridging visas, are ineligible for the JobKeeper payments that have provided some security for Australians during COVID-19. Our case managers have reported that these clients are experiencing significant financial hardship during this time.

Whilst these issues have been highlighted through our daily case management work, we have also become more aware of the needs of our clients during this time through our Flexible Support Packages (FSP) program. inTouch has had an increase of more than 40 percent for FSP applications during the second wave of COVID-19 in Victoria. The overwhelming majority of these applications have been for food and housing insecurity – reflecting the need for day-to-day necessities during this time.

In the past few months, inTouch has also developed an emergency relief program through our inSpire initiative, delivering fresh food and pantry items to clients. In collaboration with Melbourne-based social enterprise Sibling by Kinfolk, inTouch volunteers have been delivering essentials to clients across the city. During stage four restrictions, we have seen a 113 percent increase in the number of new clients referred for food aid, and the average number of deliveries required each week has increased by 40 percent. Of the clients we have provided food aid to during stage four restrictions in Melbourne:

- a third had lost their jobs or had their hours reduced as a result of COVID-19
- a third were unable to find work
- the majority (approximately 70 percent), were ineligible for Centrelink support.

No safe time to call

Maintaining our engagement with clients continues to be a challenge. Many clients are in stage four lockdown with their abusive partner and our case managers have had to come up with creative ways to safely connect with them. This may be when the client goes to the supermarket or for a walk, or when the



abusive partner has stepped out of the house. Maintaining our ability to support these clients is crucial, but it has been challenging finding safe ways and times to do so.

Extended waiting times to resolve legal matters

One particular issue that has come up during COVID-19 through our in-house community legal centre, is the adjournment of final intervention order hearings by the courts for some clients. We have many clients who have applied for the family violence provisions through the Migration Regulations, and are awaiting the outcomes of their applications for permanent residency. To be eligible for the family violence provisions, evidence of family violence must be provided and the Department of Home Affairs requires that a final intervention order has been granted. Without a final intervention order, an applicant is required to present other evidence of family violence such as documentation from professionals such as a doctor, social worker, or psychologist who can confirm that violence took place during the relationship. This can prove to be very costly and some of our clients cannot afford these.

The adjournment and backlog of final intervention order hearings have left many of our clients waiting and on bridging visas ineligible to access financial support during this period.

Housing insecurity and homelessness

The ongoing financial instability and poverty faced by many of our clients, and for some the lack of resolution or delay of their permanent residency applications, is contributing to housing insecurity. Due to physical distancing requirements, some refuges have had to reduce the number of clients they can accept, reducing an already limited service. Our clients who have lost their jobs and income sources are finding themselves in extremely precarious situations where they are unable to secure stable or long-term housing. Many are staying with friends or relatives. Many are borrowing money or seeking assistance from charities to pay rent. This hardship and housing insecurity has led some of our clients to return to the perpetrator of family violence.

Keeping men in view

inTouch's Motivation for Change (MFC) program has undergone significant changes over the past few months as a result of COVID-19 and subsequent restrictions. inTouch suspended the group work elements of the MFC program between April and August 2020. Our MFC case managers continued to provide case management remotely to the participants and encouraged their ex or current partners to continue to engage with our main Direct Services Team to provide support and monitor their safety. During this challenging period, many of the men in the program expressed their frustration with not being able to continue with the group program. Similarly, men on waitlists expressed their frustrations with being unable to join the program. Mainstream men's behaviour change programs ceased and so we were unable to make any referrals.

MFC case managers continue to work with these men despite the challenges and uncertainty of COVID-19 and restrictions in place. They continue to provide intensive case management to keep the men and their behaviour in view, and also take measures to ensure that the clients understand the public health restrictions, and ways to mitigate their risk or exposure to COVID-19. Despite group work being suspended for a number of months, all of the men remain engaged with the program, and since the beginning of September 2020 group work sessions have recommenced online.

A side effect of using masks: Communication barriers for clients and staff

Clients and staff have advised us of the difficulties they have had whilst communicating with masks on. People from migrant and refugee communities who may have an accent when speaking English are reporting that they are asked to repeat what they say many times, and often feel they are not being



understood. This has also been the case in formal settings such as in the courts. Everyone who attends court must wear a mask as per the public health directions. Our lawyers have reported that this is causing miscommunications and misunderstandings in the court room as Magistrates and Judges are at times having trouble understanding our staff and our clients who may have accents.

Socially isolated and unable to return home

Alongside the immense financial and housing stress COVID-19 has caused or exacerbated for our clients, we are also aware that for many of our clients, returning to their home country is not an option. There are many reasons for this including the lack of flights and the closure of some borders. For our clients who are on student visas, returning home after investing so much in their education, is not a viable option. Many women on partner visas who have experienced family violence do not have the option to return to their home country due to the stigma of having had her relationship break down. In many communities, this stigma can generate further danger for the woman – she may be ostracised by her own community, there may be conflict regarding the dowry, and there may be threats of retaliation towards her and her family from the perpetrator and his family.

inTouch team: Supporting clients through a pandemic

As is the case for many others in our sector, inTouch case managers are providing services to clients whilst also managing their own experiences of living through a pandemic. We have provided continuous care and support to our clients remotely without disruption during this time. As our team work from home, they are also managing their personal needs such as obligations and care for family members and their children. Our team have revealed the challenges they experience by not being able to see their colleagues in person, where they would normally debrief and balance the intensity of their work with collegial relations. The increase in case load and complexity of client needs has also added pressure on our case managers. Some case managers have reported their own feelings of “helplessness” working with clients who are ineligible for Centrelink support, stable housing or other forms of assistance.

Conclusion

COVID-19 has significantly impacted all of our lives in some way. Since the end of March 2020, our organisation has worked to adapt to the changing and uncertain climate created by the pandemic and the public health restrictions. We have proudly continued to provide crucial services to our clients, recognising that the global pandemic has a particularly negative impact on those who are most at-risk and disadvantaged in our community.

Our clients face numerous barriers to accessing safety and support, particularly those who are on temporary visas, and the pandemic has exacerbated these. It has highlighted the vulnerabilities that our clients experience, and the urgent need for culturally responsive service provision and long-term support systems.