

Relationships Australia

NATIONAL OFFICE

14 March 2006

Mr Jonathan Curtis
Secretary
Senate
Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Mr Curtis

Response to Questions taken on Notice from the Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs Inquiry into the *Family Law Amendment (Shared Parental Responsibility) Bill 2005*

Thank you for inviting Relationships Australia to respond to a further question on the draft legislation of the Family Law Amendment (Shared Parental Responsibility) Bill 2005. Relationships Australia's response to the questions appears below.

Senator Scullion: What percentage of assaults on mediation staff by clients are reported to authorities? Do you have figures on the levels of incidents?

As we discussed, the original question has been expanded to include:

What percentage of assaults on staff (in particular mediation, children's contact services and contact orders program) by clients are reported to authorities? Do you have figures on the levels of incidents?

There are two broad categories of assaults that Relationships Australia staff have identified specially for Mediation and Children's Contact Services.

The first category of assaults involves physical violence which have been reported to police. Approximately 10 such incidents have occurred over the last five years. It is estimated that less than 1% of assault incidents are reported to police or other authorities (Department of Community Services or legal representation). Those reported involve significant risk of or actual violence to Relationships Australia staff, family members or Relationships Australia property. Male clients are responsible for 90% of incidences reported to the police. Mental illness and alcohol abuse were noted as being primary factors. In Children's Contact Services cases it is worth noting that fixing breakages is a cost burden for organisations.

The enhancement of relationships and family life in their various forms, through counselling, mediation, education, professional training and the foundation of social policy

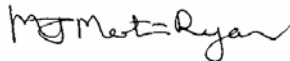
The second category go unreported and include the day to day management of a continuum of incidents from those handled over the phone to those handled by staff skilled in intervention strategies. Aggressive behaviours include threats of violence by clients to self, their ex-partners, other clients and Relationships Australia employees (counsellors and reception staff) or property. One member noted that minor incidents may occur weekly and require skilled intervention by trained staff.

Each Relationships Australia State and Territory organisation has in place risk management policies and procedures for Relationships Australia service providers which include safety plans and copies of these can be made available if required. The safety plans are followed to ensure the safety of all Relationships Australia staff, clients and property. Building infrastructure includes duress alarms and other safety measures to protect staff from harm.

Relationships Australia staff are highly trained in dealing with critical incidents which are handled in house, using good assessment skills, clear policy and procedures and well developed skills in diffusing escalating situations. However, diffusing potentially dangerous situations is time consuming and the impact of regular incidences of threat and assault is stressful for staff.

If you have any questions about the submission or require additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me on (02) 6285 4466 or via email mmertin-ryan@relationships.com.au.

Yours sincerely



Mary Mertin-Ryan
National Director
Relationships Australia Inc.

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