

## When a Phone Line Becomes a Lifeline

For two out of every six weeks, Debra Vincent spends her day reading police reports about family violence; it's not the way most people would choose to spend their day.

Debra joined Aviva at the start of 2015, and a focus of her Family Support Worker role here is to follow up on the police reports ('POLs') Aviva receives on a roster. During our two-week POLs period, Debra attempts to respond to approximately 300 reports, calling the women who required that Police intervention and, if phone contact is not possible, sending them letters to offer Aviva's support. For many, that contact can change their life; for some, it might even save it.

The POLs are ranked by Police as high, medium, low risk based on a range of factors including the issuing of a Police Safety Order; whether there have been other occurrences of violence in the family; the presence of weapons; gang connections; whether there are children who might be at risk; or pregnancy.

Police tell women that an agency will be calling them after an incident. "Just getting them on the other end of phone is hard" she says. "Often the number is wrong and you're chasing numbers. I'm constantly talking to voicemail as people avoid the call. When you do get through, at first people can be defensive - I have to talk quickly to get my spiel across. I tell them 'I'm only here to offer you this' – and then it's fine. Often they don't want support\* but they are interested in what Aviva is and does. It's not easy, but I do enjoy it - every story is different and the women appreciate that someone is there and concerned about them."

Debra has to balance her workload carefully to ensure that she is available to focus on POLs for two out of six weeks. She ensures that she sees all of her clients prior to the POL period, and then takes a break from face-to-face client work (where feasible) in that time. After the POL period, she continues to follow up on any outstanding reports and resumes seeing clients, providing them with family violence education, support and advocacy with other organisations or services, such as lawyers.

Debra has been involved in family violence work for five years, volunteering at Otautahi Women's Refuge at first, then eventually working there. It can be tough, but it has a personal resonance for Debra which makes her passionate about her work. "I am a survivor of family violence, from a relationship long ago, but I never knew about women's refuges and domestic violence then – I thought it was a normal thing. To know that there are women, and men, who want to help, educate others and stop family violence overwhelmed me. I believe very strongly in keeping a family together if you can do that safely and that's what I love about Aviva – it's about family, not just about women. I'm not here to 'save' anybody but if there is even one person that I've talked to and it has helped them, then I'm happy with that."

\* Approximately 25% of women contacted via POLs become full agency clients.