



STORIES OF CHANGE

Nicola Woodward, CEO

Aviva Family Violence Services





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Christchurch Women's Refuge was started in 1973, the first refuge in New Zealand and the third in the world. For 40 years we operated under this banner, helping thousands of women and children escape unsafe homes. On our 40th anniversary in 2013, we launched our new brand, Aviva, which we believe better reflects our evolving approach and services.

While there was attachment to the name Christchurch Women's Refuge, and a lot of name-recognition, it no longer reflected everything we are. We work throughout Canterbury, not just Christchurch; we work with men and children, not only women; and offering refuge is now one of the smaller parts of our service.

We realised that not only was our old name not appealing to the men we're now trying to reach, it wasn't always even appealing to women. Many women told us they'd resisted coming to Refuge, because they had a certain perception of what that implied about them, and they were worried it would mean leaving their home, leaving their partner, and living in a safe house.

We wanted our name to be bright and positive, and not label people who walked in our door.

We also wanted it to be contemporary, because family violence is a cross-generational problem, and everything we do needs to be as engaging for young men and women as it is for anyone older.

Our new name is Aviva, which is an abstract word. The A comes from arise, and viva is Latin for life. And that's what we are about – supporting the journey to a new life, free from violence.

Long before I arrived as CEO in 2011, there'd been recognition here that while we'd helped very many people, we remained an ambulance at the bottom of the cliff. We weren't doing what we fundamentally wanted to, which is to break the inter-generational cycle of family violence, and start to see community-wide reductions. We realised we needed to be working with the whole family, and be taking a far more holistic approach.



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The earthquakes changed our sector in a lot of ways. We got a temporary increase in funding to help with the expected increase in family violence following such an event. But funding agencies, including government, were looking for organisations to do things differently. We couldn't be change-shy, and we weren't. It may sound strange, but when you've lived through the aftermath of that disaster, you start to think, "What's the worse that could happen?" Well, the worst that can happen is we fail to learn.

I believe the earthquakes created an important window of opportunity, and gave us an enormous amount of permission to do things differently. In the aftermath there was both a decrease in police reports of domestic violence incidents, but a significant increase – 50% – in the number of calls to our support line. People were remaining at home, in highly volatile family situations – in homes that were literally shaking, weren't weatherproof, and were increasingly overcrowded. Our fundamental refuge model wasn't going to work.



What was needed was action that aligned with one of our core goals: creating safer homes. We believe it's unfair for people to be re-traumatised by having to leave their homes, leave their schools, and face homelessness to become safe from violence. So we formed our partnership with Shine to deliver their safe@home service to families throughout Canterbury.

In 2012 we also piloted ReachOut, a community outreach service for men who have committed, or are likely to commit, family violence. Another new service we've introduced in 2014 is the No Interest Loans Scheme. The people who come to us face enormous financial challenges, so we now offer loans as well as broader financial education, to help people move to greater independence.

When I first came to Christchurch Women's Refuge, I felt that while we were talking about empowerment, we'd actually positioned ourselves as the spokespeople for victims of domestic abuse. I think this was due to the belief that speaking for yourself increases risk, because it increases visibility; that may make sense when you're focused on immediate safety but not when your goal is total wellbeing.

Not speaking for yourself works to sustain stigma and shame, and prevents people from seeking help, keeping them socially isolated and vulnerable.



And that is equally relevant for the people using violence. As long as we're using the language of 'victims' and 'perpetrators', we're not seeing whole people. We have to see whole people in order to engage with that part of self that is good, that's hopeful, and that wants to experience life in a positive way.

Sharing lived experience of overcoming adversity and trauma is a vital source of inspiration and hope. It makes a huge difference when you're talking to someone who has been through something similar, and can say, "I know what that's like," and it is believable. Canterbury people understand this because of our shared earthquake experiences. In the past, even staff members with experience of domestic violence weren't encouraged to see it as something they could use with their clients. With our specialist peer support programme, we wanted to change this whole way of thinking.

Coming from a career in the mental health and AOD sectors, I was surprised that no intentional, peer-based models were being practiced in the family violence sector. There might have been people with lived experience, providing good individual service, but it hadn't been systemised. That's why we've gone to great lengths to make our specialist peer support service high-quality, safe, effective, and responsible.

There are more things we'd do if we had the money, but our priority now is to consolidate the services we've already established, and that's a big challenge. We're significantly under-funded and under-resourced to do what we do. We're already looking into corporate sponsorship, social enterprise, and microfinancing.

Everyone's finding it financially tough, and everyone's having to adapt and change. Since the earthquakes, we've allied with five other like-minded NGOs to develop a more integrated service model. We share a philosophy that change must be embraced if we want to improve what we do, and we each offer something that is uniquely important for families affected by violence. The sector has already diversified in this way: women have more choice than they've ever had, and that's better for everyone. ■



April Green *Peer Support Specialist*

I support women who have had an experience with domestic violence. I help them to help themselves and move forward. I had many years going through refuges myself. That's why I have empathy for women who are in this situation. There are things they don't need to say to me, I already know. When I went through the cycle of abuse, I felt very stuck and ashamed.

Now I realise that my shame was my resume. I went to Christchurch Polytech, got a qualification and found a passion for working in this area. I love supporting other women to become violence-free. I tell the women that I've been in their shoes and I give them hope. My message to women is 'take back the power. Don't give it to the perpetrators, they've had too much'. I tell women that you don't have to hit rock bottom, if you reach out for support you can get it. I think of Aviva as the ambulance at the top of the cliff.

