|  |
| --- |
| December 2020 |
| Independent facilitator trial  Summary and implementation resources |

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| To receive this publication in an accessible format phone  03 9096 1384, using the National Relay Service 13 36 77 if required, or email Safer Care Victoria [info@safercare.vic.gov.au](mailto:info@safercare.vic.gov.au) | Authorised and published by the Victorian Government, 1 Treasury Place, Melbourne.  © State of Victoria, Australia, Safer Care Victoria, December 2020  ISBN 978-1-76096-304-0 (pdf/online/MS word)  Available at Safer Care Victoria [www.safercare.vic.gov.au](http://www.safercare.vic.gov.au) |  |



# About this report

This report provides an overview of the independent facilitator trial that was conducted by Safer Care Victoria (SCV) in two metropolitan Victorian health services from March 2019 to October 2020.

The independent facilitator role provided healthcare staff with an independent, neutral, confidential and informal resource who could help and support them with workplace bullying, harassment and other work-related concerns. Evaluation survey data from the trial showed the independent facilitator role provided benefits for both healthcare staff and the health services.

In addition to sharing the outcomes of the trial, this report includes key learnings and resources from the trial that health services may find useful when considering implementing a similar model in their own organisation.

## Background

In March 2016, the [Bullying and Harassment in the Health Sector audit](https://www.audit.vic.gov.au/report/bullying-and-harassment-health-sector) conducted by the Victorian Auditor-General’s Office revealed that complaints were being poorly managed in Victorian health services, and that staff did not trust or feared using the complaints process. This resulted in significant under-reporting of inappropriate behaviour, including bullying and harassment.

In response to these findings, the Bullying and Harassment in Healthcare Advisory Group identified initiatives to strengthen the grievance processes and support for Victorian healthcare staff. One initiative was to trial an independent facilitator (IF) role in Victorian health services.

SCV trialled the IF role at two acute health services in metropolitan Melbourne – The Royal Women’s Hospital and Melbourne Health – for 19 months from March 2019 to October 2020, with one IF allocated to operate across both health services. The trial also operated in four regional health services from March to August 2019.

This report focuses on the outcomes from the metropolitan health services, where a longer trial period provided more data to measure impacts and benefits of this innovative and new approach to addressing bullying and harassment.

## what is an independent facilitator?

An IF is an independent, neutral, confidential and informal resource for health service staff.

The role complements, without replacing, the function of the human resources department, line management, employee relations, health and wellbeing, the employee assistance program, unions, and/or other channels of support and complaint available to staff at health services.

The IF offers staff:

* an independent avenue for support and helps them to clarify their concerns
* access to information, resources and tools
* information about the options available to address their concerns
* help navigating the existing internal and external complaints processes and pathways available to them
* support to learn new ways to address issues and concerns themselves, including having difficult conversations
* help to facilitate informal conversations between staff, independently and impartially, with the agreement of all parties, including the IF.

Other IF responsibilities during the trial included:

* providing health service senior management and Safer Care Victoria (SCV) with aggregated and de-identified information about the use of the service, systemic issues, and opportunities for improvement, with the aim of supporting the health services' work to provide safe, fair, positive and respectful workplaces
* supporting the work of the health services, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), and SCV to prevent, respond to, and better manage inappropriate workplace behaviours, including bullying, sexual harassment and discrimination within health services.

The IF role has been implemented locally and internationally as an effective resource to address bullying and harassment and support early resolution of conflict and disputes before they escalate to formal processes.

Similar models exist in DHHS and the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, in multinational corporations, and in international organisations including the United Nations and its agencies, the International Red Cross, the World Bank, and universities in the US under the [International Ombudsman Association framework](https://www.ombudsassociation.org/standards-of-practice-code-of-ethics).

However, the IF role is new to the Victorian healthcare sector.

# Trial outcomes

The IF model delivered benefits for the healthcare staff who used the service and for the health services.

During the 19-month trial, 207 healthcare staff visited the IF over more than 600 visits. The majority of staff accessing the service were nurses and management/administration/corporate staff.

Of the 104 staff who responded to an anonymous and voluntary survey:

* 99 per cent felt the IF was independent
* 98 per cent agreed the IF helped them clarify their concern(s)
* 96 per cent were satisfied with the information, resources and tools provided by the IF
* 85 per cent agreed the IF helped them to navigate internal and external complaints processes and explore available options (if applicable)
* 85 per cent felt more confident in managing their workplace concern(s) after meeting with the IF.

Staff reported the IF had made a real difference; they felt empowered and equipped to more constructively manage their workplace concern(s). For some, the IF’s support enabled them to remain at the health service and develop valuable conflict management skills.

The health services also reported that quarterly meetings and reports with SCV and the IF supported their efforts to provide a safe, fair, positive, and respectful workplace for staff. De-identified information gathered by the IF helped them to address staff concerns, enabled them to improve policies and procedures, and supported training for staff and managers on conflict management and raising awareness of the importance of speaking up.

By supporting staff in a safe and confidential setting and supporting staff to explore their options, the IF can build capacity across the organisation for early intervention by promoting and supporting informal resolution of workplace conflict and preventing escalation to more formal channels.

Staff feedback

‘It was nice to be able to raise a concern without having to involve management. The advice was very neutral and follow up resources were provided.’

‘I came away feeling empowered ... and now feel I can go forward and support others in approaching negative behaviours in a way that may make a positive difference.’

‘The IF is an asset to the organisation for assisting staff to discuss … issues [and] maintain a neutral position that also reflects … the possible perception of the other person.’

‘[The IF] has been incredibly supportive and professional and really made a very challenging experience much easier to manage and understand. I think without her help I probably would have strongly considered resigning from my job and may have withdrawn my complaint purely because of the stress and confusion of the process.’

**Health service feedback**

‘The feedback we have had is that the staff who have used the IF have found her to be a fantastic independent voice.’

‘[The IF] has given us specific opportunities for training and identified other options.’

‘[The IF helps] staff self-clarify what their issue is and [explains] their options. This helps staff make the choice that feels right for them and reinforces that there are avenues of redress. This helps [our health service] in providing a psychologically safe environment for conflict resolution and this enhances patient safety.’

Some key learnings and resources from the trial are listed below. Health services may find these useful when considering implementing an IF model in their own organisation.

# Implementation resources

## key learnings

* **How the role can strengthen the grievance processes and support for Victorian healthcare staff** – The role is unique in its confidential and independent support for staff who fear retribution, lack confidence in formal complaints mechanisms and may otherwise stay silent about inappropriate behaviour, bullying and harassment in their workplace. The role adds a significant resource for organisations seeking to promote and support early resolution of workplace issues and concerns.
* **Be clear on the role and purpose of the IF from the outset –** Misperceptions about the IF are common. For example, it is important to address any misperception that the IF provides staff with ‘advice’ or ‘advocates’ for them and does not act independently. Misperceptions can be mitigated by being transparent about how the IF upholds the four core principles of independence, neutrality, confidentiality and informality with all stakeholders. Continuous promotion to raise staff and management awareness and understanding of the role is best supported by establishing a charter, operating guidelines and a staff information sheet that explains these principles (see examples below).
* **The IF role takes time to become embedded within an organisation and demonstrate results –** Although the trial showed benefits, the short duration of 19 months and the relatively low number of staff using the service made it difficult to fully realise its potential. The number of staff visiting the IF increased as awareness of the service grew over the course of the trial due to promotional activities and word-of-mouth referrals. Similar roles internationally and in Victorian Government suggest at least two years is needed to fully establish awareness of the role and for the IF to identify systemic issues and deliver longer term organisational benefits.

## Resources

**Disclaimer:** The following resourceswere used during the trial and as such, some of the information may no longer be current or applicable.

[**Charter**](https://www.bettersafercare.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-06/Charter%20of%20the%20Independent%20facilitator%202020.pdf)– Outlines the role and responsibilities of the IF, including their core guiding principles of being independent, neutral, confidential and informal.

[**Operating guidelines**](https://www.bettersafercare.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-06/Independent%20facilitator%20operating%20guidelines%202020.pdf) – Outlines the purpose and scope of the IF role and how the IF trial operated during the trial.

[**Staff information sheet**](https://www.bettersafercare.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-06/Independent%20facilitator%20Staff%20information%20sheet%202020.pdf) – Explains the role of the IF in a handout that can be given to staff.

[**Frequently asked questions**](https://www.bettersafercare.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-12/Independent%20facilitator%20FAQs.docx) **–** Addresses common questions about the IF role and trial.

