# MARAM Practice Guide – Practice Note Update: Specialist perpetrator behaviour change services minimum response to perpetrators during coronavirus (COVID-19) period

For latest public health advice, visit the [Department of Health and Human Services website](https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus).

**This is a minimum response guide for specialist perpetrator services (voluntary/active engagement and mandated) under MARAM during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic – other MARAM Practice Notes are available** [**here**](https://www.vic.gov.au/maram-practice-guides-and-resources#maram-victim-survivor-practice-guides)**. Services should implement relevant guidance in their service contexts.**

Perpetrators’ violence towards adult and child victim survivors has been shown to increase during disasters, such as the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

*No matter the stressors, violence is never excusable.*   
*A person using violence is responsible for their actions and the consequences of those actions.*

**As soon as possible, revise risk assessment and management plans (including safety plans) for all current and new clients (person using violence/perpetrator, family members, including children) in response to coronavirus (COVID-19).** Safety plans for victim survivors and children, may be undertaken by the family safety contact practitioner or through information sharing with other support services.

**This applies for service users who are currently/voluntarily or mandated to engage with your service.** Prioritise reviews as follows:

* Perpetrators identified as serious risk through programs’ risk assessment, police involvement or assessed by other services working with perpetrator or victim survivor
* Perpetrators on remand, if release is imminent, or if release through coronavirus (COVID-19) corrections planning
* Recently separated (particularly if FVSN or FVIO with exclusion order)
* Clients with children or soon-to-be parents; clients and/or their children with complex needs
* Perpetrator is residing with the victim survivor
* Court mandated
* All clients currently engaged or referred to a specialist family violence service.

Separate guidance responding to adolescents using violence in the home is under development.

## Key service responses during coronavirus (COVID-19)

* Clarify requirements to engage and continue participation in services during coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, including mode and frequency to remain compliant with requirements (as applicable)
* Specialist perpetrator responses, including men’s behaviour change programs and case management responses are essential services and continue to operate through interventions tailored to their risk and need, to reduce family violence and risk of coronavirus (COVID-19) infection.
* **Perpetrator interventions monitoring guidance for will be available soon.** Perpetrators interventions, including family safety contact functions should continue, where possible.
* Legal Help[[1]](#footnote-1), Courts, Corrections and Victoria Police continue to operate. Family violence criminal offences (including IVO breaches) and IVO matters continue to be heard as a high priority.
* Family Violence Intervention Orders (FVIOs) are available to victim survivors and remain enforceable during coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. See link for information [here](https://mcv.vic.gov.au/intervention-orders/family-violence-intervention-orders/applying-intervention-order-fvio). Police can still apply for a   
  14-day Family Violence Safety Notice (FVSN). See link for information [here](https://mcv.vic.gov.au/intervention-orders/family-violence-intervention-orders/understanding-police-applications-fvio).
* Child Protection is continuing to respond to reports of risk to children’s safety or wellbeing.

## Recognising change to behaviour or risk during coronavirus (COVID-19)

If you are working with perpetrators, in response to current circumstances, be aware they may change or escalate their use of violence or control and controlling behaviours, escalate or vary emotional, physical and sexual violence. Perpetrators may also increase risk of suicide or self-harm to themselves.

Required working from home, physical distancing and isolation measures increases the opportunity for perpetrators to monitor and control victim survivors. Other contributors include new coronavirus (COVID-19) pressures everyone is experiencing, and risk factors like financial stress from loss of employment and/or heightened housing instability. This may relate to variation of IVOs excluding perpetrators from the home. Access to formal support services are also reduced due to cope with increased demand and capacity restrictions.

**They may exploit coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic measures**, by:

* monitoring and controlling behaviours; controlling communication, movement, social and services connections and household functioning, finances and assets
* using misinformation to increase control or fear, like claiming “police will not respond” or that the victim survivor will get in trouble for calling police
* increased control of access to telecommunication devices, movement and connection to friends, family, community and services
* limiting access or increasing the victim survivor’s fear around help-seeking, such as counselling and/or mandated services or use coronavirus (COVID-19) as a reason to restrict access to health services, or to justify escalation in family violence risk behaviours
* exacerbating victim survivors risk related to mental health issues, such as anxiety or depression (new or pre-existing)
* threats to cause the victim survivor, adult or child, to contract coronavirus (COVID-19)
* disengaging with therapeutic or mandated services, escalating use of AOD or causing withdrawal (such as limited access to substances or pharmacotherapy, contributing to withdrawal), contributing to escalated mental health issues, gambling or other behaviours.
* interfering with the victim survivors’ access to health, counselling and support services.

During the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, it is likely some perpetrators:

* may escalate their demands for changed parenting orders/increased access to children
* may make unreasonable demands and expectations of children and young people who are in the home 24/7, or attack parenting by an adult victim survivor
* who are ‘essential workers’ may escalate their violence during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, exploiting changed power dynamics or using their position to further control victim survivor/s.

There has been an increase in perpetrators voluntarily contacting professional services, including mental health, alcohol and drug, behaviour change and other counselling supports. This creates opportunity to engage and support people using violence. This can be to respond to a range of presenting issues, including use of violence, increased mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, escalation in threats to suicide or self-harm or expressions of hopelessness, for example, statements like ‘*you don’t know what I’m going through*’. All service users should be actively responded to through risk management and safety planning (including responding to presenting needs). Perpetrators who disclose increased risk of suicide or self-harm should also to be considered as serious risk and requiring immediate protection for victim survivor/s.

## Review all risk assessments as soon as possible

**Professionals providing Family Safety Contact services** – use MARAM Practice Note Minimum response to victim survivors during coronavirus (COVID-19) period available [here](https://www.vic.gov.au/maram-practice-guides-and-resources).

**Professionals working directly with perpetrators (mandated and voluntarily engaged)** – See Screening for Immediate Family Violence and Perpetrator Suicide or self-harm Risk at **Attachment 1**. Revise risk management and use Safety and Perpetrator Violence Prevention Plan in **Attachment 2**.

These tools supplement services’ existing perpetrator-focussed guidance and tools during coronavirus (COVID-19) period to respond to immediate family violence risk. Be aware of heightened or new mental health issues for all victim survivors and perpetrators. Each MARAM Practice Note provides new questions and safety planning on suicide or self-harm risk.

**Table 1** outlines required client contact frequency according to risk level. ‘Contact’ is defined in the interventions monitoring guidance on safe online work practices (available soon).

**Table 1 Required contact for determined level of risk**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Risk-level[[2]](#footnote-2) | Frequency of contact with perpetrator | Frequency of family contact |
| **Serious risk**  or  **Serious risk and requires immediate protection** | **Every 2-3 days** at minimum. High intensity contact with services including police and justice. Provide immediate risk management to reduce risk level or prevent a serious outcome from the perpetrator.  **Following all contact with serious risk perpetrators – professionals should proactively share any changes to risk relevant information with family contact and/or victim survivor specialist services. Where there are children, this should include information sharing and collaborative practice with family services and/or Child Protection, as appropriate.**  Enact formal structured coordination of statutory and non-statutory services. | Initial contact to assess/reassess risk and/or update safety plan/s. Based on assessed level of perpetrators risk offer increased support for weekly contact or as requested.  Assure and encourage clients they can initiate contact for support at any time – this includes working collaboratively with other services also engaged.  Services must collaborate to respond to children’s risk and wellbeing. |
| **Elevated risk** | **Minimum weekly**. Ongoing contact with other services as required.  Following all contact with Perpetrators who pose an elevated risk – professionals should proactively share risk relevant information with family contact and/or victim survivor specialist support services – particularly if this reflects increased/serious risk. | Initial contact to assess/reassess risk and update safety plan. Offer additional support for fortnightly contact or as requested.  Assure and encourage clients they can initiate contact for support at any time this includes working collaboratively with other services also engaged.  Services supporting children should be engaged, as needed. |
| **At risk** | **Minimum fortnightly**. Ongoing contact with other services as required. |

**Request or share information about risk or safety with specialist family violence services and other relevant services, as authorised**, to support engagement, monitoring and intervention. Share information on any risk escalation, and activate risk management interventions.

As per standard practice – assessment should be for the purpose of establishing and monitoring:

* the level of family violence risk based on your application of structured professional judgement
* the needs and circumstances of the perpetrator
* the most appropriate interventions required to reduce risk, enhance safety (for victim survivor, children and the perpetrator), maintain engagement and encourage behaviour change
* A point of contact with victim survivor/s, including children.

Due to increased risk during the coronavirus (COVID-19) period, perpetrators – who are engaged either voluntarily or mandated – should remain a client with the provider until the end of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and/or the case can be safely closed. Referral into health/community services can also occur in order to keep the perpetrator in view and engaged. Capacity to undertake this level of engagement will depend on organisations’ business continuity plans and confirmation with their funder.

**Continue to plan tailored risk management strategies for people using violence**, including for people who are Aboriginal or from a diverse community or are an older person, or using violence against people identifying as belonging to these communities.

## Communicating with a perpetrator during coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

**Plan in advance** for the method and frequency of communication in line with service or program requirements. Identify and prioritise perpetrators known to pose serious risk and with mandated program requirements. **Always state**:

*“Help is still available – how can we help you to continue to access support and engage with services?”*

*“Justice, courts and police will continue to operate. Your responsibilities and requirements to respond and comply with court orders continues. Your responsibility to sustain non-violent behaviours continues also”*

**Confirm communication methods** and **when and how to call** – such as weekly/fortnightly. Clarify process if a break is needed during a call, or if the call is disrupted or cut off.

**Confirm phone is available for contact** as per agreement on service engagement. Be clear on expectations for engagement with services, particularly for mandated clients (e.g. daily check in text).

**Reassure them they can ask for help** any time you call, or they can contact MRS on 1300 766 491.

**Reducing technology abuse** – many perpetrators will escalate technology use to monitor, stalk and control victim survivors’ movement and communication. Discuss safe communication reiterate what is appropriate or inappropriate contact with victim survivors, particularly around parenting matters.

Refer to your service’s coronavirus (COVID-19) policies on appropriate technology and contact expectations.

**Using technology to support engagement** - Consider whether video communication is available and/or appropriate for the service needs and circumstances, including the safety of victim survivors living with the perpetrator. Take steps to ensure perpetrators have technology and other requirements for service engagement. Private space is necessary for perpetrators to speak openly and to reduce the risk for victim survivors.

**Plan when to safely contact perpetrators** **who pose serious risk** to the victim survivor/s they live with. Coordinate with victim survivor support services to schedule concurrent appointments to limit the opportunity for perpetrators to monitor victim sessions. If a victim survivor or perpetrator does not respond to Family Safety Contact, refer to the most recent risk assessments and apply your professional judgement to determine if you need to call police.

## Requirements for working with perpetrators during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

All work should be linked to assessing and managing risk during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. See perpetrator interventions monitoring guidance on safe online work practices (available soon). Risk management with a perpetrator includes:

* discuss current situational challenges and anxieties, how they are attempting to manage themselves, be safe towards family members, and practice emotional regulation strategies.
* minimum requirements are 1:1 session to assess and monitor risk, with frequency determined by risk level and mandated requirements, until face to face group work can resume.
* all perpetrator interventions must not issue ‘letters of equivalency’ for behaviour change counselling orders until authorised by the court. Prioritise perpetrator engagement over completion, preventing disengagement wherever possible.

Based on emerging research the following forms of work are not appropriate at this time:

* virtual ‘behaviour change work’ if the perpetrator is living with the victim survivor
* group work can be provided under certain circumstances in consultation with your funder
* videos, webinars and group discussions

Due to the unknown time frame of coronavirus (COVID-19) restrictions, all perpetrators who still pose a risk of using violence **should not be exited** and should continue to have engagement with either a family violence service or other community-based response to assess and monitor family violence risk.

## Court Mandated Clients – advice summarised from MCV issued CMCOP practice guidance

*A respondent will breach the counselling order by failing, without reasonable excuse, to attend at the time and place specified in the order or the written notice they were provided.*

*If the order or notice to the respondent specifies attendance of counselling by telephone, including intake, non-attendance by telephone will fall within a contravention of the order by failing to attend*

*The respondent may decide to notify the Court that there has been a change in circumstances that significantly impacts their ability to attend counselling. During coronavirus (COVID-19) period, not having access to a telephone, or being unwell, will likely constitute a reasonable excuse for non-attendance.*

*The Court may consider making an order on the respondent’s application, or on its own motion to vary or revoke the counselling order. A copy of that order must be served on the respondent personally pursuant to FVPA s202, and on the service provider.*

Provide service users with Legal Help referral details (below) if they need assistance to vary orders.

## Attachment 1: Screening for Immediate Family Violence Risk and Risk of Perpetrator Suicide or Self harm

[Template presumes personal/demographic information collected separately for each person, or can be when safe to do so]

| Questions | Response | Comments (or not known) |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **(not asked directly of perpetrator)** |  |  |
| Has the perpetrator had **contact with the victim survivor** (adult or child), or plans to, during the coronavirus (COVID-19) period? | Yes  No | (provide details): |
| * Has there been any change to the victim survivors assessed **level of risk**, or relevant circumstances?   Request and/or share risk relevant information with services the perpetrator or victim survivor is engaged with. e.g. family safety contact or specialist family violence service. See [MARAM](https://www.vic.gov.au/maram-practice-guides-and-resources) Responsibility 5-6 and [Family Violence Information Sharing Scheme Guidelines](https://www.vic.gov.au/guides-templates-tools-for-information-sharing). | Yes  No | (provide details): |
| **Questions you can ask directly of a perpetrator** | | |
| * Have your **circumstances changed** recently? Is this due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) situation? * Do you have any immediate housing issues? | Yes  No | (provide details): |
| * Have you or anyone in your household lost employment, or have your **financial circumstances changed**, due to coronavirus?   What financial impact would this have? (be conscious that these questions could escalate risk)   * Have you found yourself **drinking, gambling or using drug**s more, or has you use changed? * How has this impacted you? | Yes  No | (provide details): |
| * [if applicable] Are there any **parenting arrangements** in place?   Consider if there is current or a history of Child Protection? (report/s made, investigation or case) Did this relate to child abuse and/or neglect?  If a perpetrator wants to change parenting or housing arrangements, consider if these changes has or is likely to impact their risk behaviour to attain the change desired. For example, abuse, harassment, monitoring and stalking behaviours for the victim survivor, including any children.  Build on previous conversations and disclosures to check-in with them about any current issues or concerns which are impacting their circumstances, relationships or behaviour   * Are you concerned about any changes to when or how you see your children? | Yes  No | (provide details): |
| * [if not already known] Are there any **orders** in place? * Could you tell me about the **conditions**?   Legal issues may include mandated attendance at a perpetrator program, in circumstances where it is unable to be delivered face to face.   * Are you concerned about any current or varied intervention order? Or other court orders? * Do you have any **court hearings** coming up? (intervention order, family law, criminal, other) * Have you received **legal advice** about these matters?   Provide Legal Help referral for information and advice about intervention and parenting orders, as needed.   * Are you aware of changes to court attendance requirements? | Yes  No | Date and document and report breaches (provide details): |
| * Has any **violence occurred** in the last week? * What do you notice in yourself before you use violence? * How have you been managing your thoughts or feelings that have led to violence in the past? * How have these changed recently? * How are you continuing to focus on your own and your family’s safety? * How are you considering your children’s needs? * What was your child’s experience of your [specific] behavior? What impact do you think your behavior has on your relationship with your child? Do you think this reflects your goal of being a positive father/parent? | Yes  No | Date and document any violence to family members or self. Report any increased/escalation in risk to police, or as appropriate. |
| * **How have you been** **feeling** in general? * How are you managing your mood or emotions? * How are you going managing mental wellbeing?  Are you feeling stressed?  Can you name your feelings? Are you feeling overwhelmed, sad or hopeless?  What does this relate to?   [See suicide risk questions below and safety planning in Attachment 2]   * Do you have increased feelings of frustration or anger? Are these feelings increasing? How often/intensely? | Yes  No | Document if emotional dysregulation increasing, or if issues relate to parenting orders or childcare arrangements: (provide details) |
| * Do you have any **thoughts of self-harm** or **suicide**?  Have you told your [ex/partner/child or other family member]? Have you told anyone?   Consider:   * Frequency and context of suicidal thoughts * If the person describes a plan (method and likely lethality of method) * Intent (passive or active?) * What do you normally do when you feel sad or hopeless? * Do you have any thoughts about harming or killing your ex/partner, children or anyone else in your family? * Do you know how to ask for or access support if you need it? What are your coping strategies? * What helps you to feel or shift your mood? Feel distracted from problems and helps you to feel calm? * Can you continue to use these distractions/strategies now? | Yes  No | Date and document any threats to any family members (ex/partner, child or any other family member), or self. Report any increased/escalation in risk to police, or as appropriate.    **Refer to Safety and Violence Prevention Plan for guidance on support services for suicide risk.** |
| * Do you have any immediate concerns about your behaviour or safety of your family? | Yes  No | If immediate risk, call **000** or see emergency and referral details below |

## Attachment 2: Safety and Perpetrator Violence Prevention Plan

### Coronavirus (COVID-19) Safety and Perpetrator Violence Prevention Plan

| Plan detail and questions to support planning | Checklist and detail |
| --- | --- |
| **Emergency contacts:** | |
| Call 000 in an emergency | |
| Who are your personal emergency contacts? (plan for them to be a point of contact) | Name, relationship, contact details: (provide details) |
| Call Men’s Referral Service **1300 766 491** for support about behaviour | |
| **System intervention** | |
| * How have the coronavirus (COVID-19) restrictions affected your relationship with family members? How?   **If the perpetrator or victim survivor is in quarantine – explain continued requirements for engagement and help available**  Are they at home? Are they confined to a smaller space? Are they in hospital? If at home they are likely to have regular contact from health or designated services who can also assist to monitor risk.  **Health or designated monitoring services should be contacted so they are aware of the family violence risk and to support monitoring if serious risk is present.** | Yes  No  N/A  (provide details) |
| * Are you still in contact with your ex/partner? | Yes  No  N/A |
| * Are you living with them?   If the perpetrator is unable to leave the home and live separately during this period (which may also be because the partner or family member does not want them to leave), **it is important to** **develop a safety plan.**  Ask additional questions that may help the perpetrator refocus on their behaviour and family’s safety. **Use language that is engaging and not challenging/ confrontational:**   * Are they aware of the impact of their behaviour towards the victim survivor? Including any children? * Would they be open to agree on a designated space in the house as a ‘safe zone’ to allow the victim survivor and the children to go when he becomes ‘angry’ ‘frustrated’ or thinks ‘they’re losing it’ that they agree not to breach. * Would they agree to take a walk or leave the room when they feel they are feeling frustrated, angry or out of control? * Would they call services for support if things were getting too much for them to manage? | Yes  No  N/A  (provide details) |
| * Have you recently returned to the home or are you there more due to job or housing loss? * Have additional people moved into the home recently? * Are there more people working, studying or otherwise living in the home than usual? | Yes  No  N/A  (provide details) |
| * Do you have other options for accommodation?   **Explore *why* if they are reluctant to use other available options.** **Identify if this would breach an IVO.**  If perpetrator has returned to the home due to housing or employment stress ask:  *Are you planning on staying with them during this coronavirus (COVID-19) period?*  Some people may feel they don’t have any other choices or are reluctant due to parenting, financial or other reasons – including reduced or lost income, care needs etc.  Increased financial stress may limit perceived choices where available support not known.  Discuss alternative housing options for perpetrator to increase safety and ensure exclusion order complied with, if subject to court order.  **Note coronavirus (COVID-19) accommodation options**  If the victim survivor is not residing with the perpetrator – the perpetrator will likely increase their use of controlling behaviours towards victim survivors who they believe are more vulnerable as they don’t know where they are at all times. | Yes  No  N/A  (provide details) |
| * Is an IVO in place (and children named)? Are there any other orders in place (e.g. Community Corrections, Family Court Order?) * Are there any pending court matters or hearings? * Do you have legal support? Can we share your details with legal services to contact you to provide support?   See Legal Help – 1300 792 387 – For: Family Violence Intervention Orders; Child Protection; Parenting issues (Family Law); Criminal law; Tenancy; Migration; Social security (Centrelink). Available in a range of languages and for people who are deaf or hearing/speech impaired.  Court duty lawyer services can provide support for IVO matters, even if applicant or respondent are not attending court, ideally ahead of Court date. Provide Legal Help referral to all applicants or respondents. | Yes  No  N/A  (provide details) |
| Has the intervention order recently been varied to exclude person using violence from home?   * Check expiry and share information if it needs variation to cover coronavirus (COVID-19) period | Yes  No  N/A  (provide details) |
| If an IVO is in place, is it being adhered to?  Report any breaches, list/describe, seek or share information if needed | Yes  No  N/A  (provide details) |
| **Protective Factors** |  |
| Explore factors supporting stabilisation and violence de-escalation, which may include:   * Positive support of family, friends or community * Connection to culture or identity * Stable housing * Stable employment or financial security * Engagement with professional or therapeutic services: * related to needs or wellbeing of any children * counselling services for alcohol and other drug, gambling, problematic sexual behaviours * financial counselling * legal services * migration services * housing or homelessness, tenancy or private rental services * Centrelink or employment services * medical or mental health services — consider any medications that may be relevant * peer support services. | Document referral information: |
| **Personal emotional supports**  If you are feeling frustrated, angry, out of control - what strategies can you use to manage your feelings or behaviour?   * What are your early signs for feeling out of control? * Can you spend time in different rooms? * Can you do exercise at home or close to home? * What relaxation strategies have you used previously? Can you contact friends of family for distraction?   If you feel like hurting yourself or someone else or suicidal, enact your safety plan:   * What are my warning signs? * Who can I talk to? Who can I ask for help? * What professionals can I contact for help? * How can I make my environment safer? * What activities can I do until the feelings pass? | Who can I contact?   * In an emergency always **call 000** * Lifeline 13 11 14 (24/7) / Beyond Blue 1300 22 4636 * Suicide Call Back Service  1300 659 467 (24/7) * MRS 1300 766 491 (24/7) * My GP:  (provide details)   See referral options below, as needed. |

**Referral options:**

* **Men’s Referral Service** – 1300 766 491 7 days a week.
* **Men’s Line** – 1800 457 870
* **Legal Help** for assistance understanding conditions of intervention orders, parenting orders, or pending court hearings – including for duty lawyer services, even if not attending court. Legal Help operates (9am to 5pm, Mon-Fri) by phone (1300 792 387) or webchat at <http://www.legalaid.vic.gov.au/>.
* **Crisis Assessment and Treatment Teams** (CATT): Call if a service user is showing acute signs of mental ill health, but may or may not be a threat to themselves and/or others.
* **Beyond Blue** or **Lifeline** 13 11 14 if risk of self-harm or suicide is present, or increased mental health issues that are not at crisis point.
* **Suicide call back service** 1300 659 467 if risk of self-harm or suicide is present, or increased mental health issues that are not at crisis point.
* **Child Protection**: to share information where children are involved or to obtain information about the level of risk a service user may pose to children
* **Specialist Family Violence Service**: to share information and collaborate on safety planning if a victim survivor is currently engaged in their service.
* **Crisis accommodation**: where excluded from the home and no alternative accommodation available with other family or friends Homeless or risk of homelessness – 1800 015 188
* **local police** for welfare checks
* **Nurse on call** – 1300 60 60 24
* **Kids Helpline** – 1800 55 1800
* **Alcohol and other drug use** – Direct line – 1800 888 236
* **Gay and Lesbian Switchboard** – 1800 184 527
* **Gambler’s Help** – 1800 858 858, 24/7
* **Bush support line** – people in rural and remote areas – 1800 805 391
* **Brokerage** for other needs-based interventions that could reduce risk.

1. See referral details below [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See MARAM Responsibility 3 or 7: Levels of family violence risk [↑](#footnote-ref-2)