



Hunter Valley lawyer Joplin Higgins is heading to the United States to review rehabilitation programs. Picture: Brock Perks

Rethink urged over violence

By PETA DOHERTY

A SINGLETON family law solicitor is campaigning to make rehabilitation programs mandatory for all family violence offenders.

"It's a terrible thought to think that children are in a home where there has been violence against their mother," said Joplin Higgins, whose legal practice specialises in helping women escape violence.

"You have to engage with men to reduce violence against women.

"The victims won't be helped until we look at what is happening with these perpetrators.

"Funding has to be made available for these programs."

Ms Higgins is going to the United States to look at programs in Kansas and Colorado that have become mandatory for abusers.

The Batterers Intervention Programs engage offenders for up to 52 weeks and examine issues that underpin family violence, such as

drug dependency, childhood violence and beliefs that lead to gender inequality.

"We just don't have anything like that here in Australia," Ms Higgins said.

She plans to use the research to campaign for an overhaul on how domestic violence is sentenced through the criminal justice system.

Her comments come as the Victorian Children's and Magistrate courts called for a dedicated family violence court and men's behaviour change programs in a submission to the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence.

A campaign started by Ms Higgin's family friend, who lost a daughter to domestic violence, has been instrumental in making the US program effective.

Jana's Campaign was started in honour of Jana Mackey, a women's rights advocate and sexual assault victims volunteer, who was killed by a former partner in 2008.

"This [program] needs to

come back to the Hunter Valley to help the victims of domestic violence here," Ms Higgins said.

"It's a sad thing to deal with on a daily basis."

According to the US experience, the length of the course is crucial.

Internal studies of the batterers programs revealed men who completed 26 weeks were significantly less likely to be violent than those who did a standard eight-week course.

A combined study of the batterers programs in Kansas and Colorado showed participants reduced their risk of reoffending by 46 to 66 per cent, and the success rate was growing.

Ms Higgins will discuss the US experience with program facilitators and attorneys-general in both states during a seven-day study trip in January, and hopes to establish a similar program in the Upper Hunter.

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