



LEGAL AFFAIRS AND SAFETY COMMITTEE

Members present:

Mr PS Russo MP—Chair
Mrs LJ Gerber MP
Ms SL Bolton MP (virtual)
Ms JM Bush MP
Mr JM Krause MP
Mr LA Walker MP

Staff present:

Mrs K O'Sullivan—Committee Secretary

PUBLIC HEARING—INQUIRY INTO THE SUPPORT PROVIDED TO VICTIMS OF CRIME

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

Thursday, 27 April 2023

Townsville

THURSDAY, 27 APRIL 2023

The committee met at 11.02 am.

CHAIR: Good morning. I declare open this public hearing for the committee's inquiry into the support provided to victims of crime. My name is Peter Russo. I am the member for Toohey and the chair of the committee. I would like to respectfully acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today and pay our respects to elders past and present. We are very fortunate to live in a country with two of the oldest continuing cultures in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples whose lands, winds and waters we all share.

With me here today are: Laura Gerber, the member for Currumbin and deputy chair; Jonty Bush, the member for Cooper; Jon Krause, the member for Scenic Rim; Les Walker, the member for Mundingburra; and Sandy Bolton, the member for Noosa, is here via teleconference. This hearing is a proceeding of the Queensland parliament and is subject to the parliament's standing rules and orders. Only the committee and invited witnesses may participate in the proceedings. Witnesses are not required to give evidence under oath or affirmation but I remind witnesses that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence. I also remind members of the public that they may be excluded from the hearing at the discretion of the committee.

These proceedings are being recorded and a transcript will be available on the parliament's website in the future. Media may be present and are subject to the committee's media rules and my direction at all times. You may be filmed or photographed during the proceedings and images may also appear on the parliament's website or social media pages. I ask people attending today to turn their mobile phones either off or to silent mode.

I would like to raise a couple of matters before we proceed. Today's hearing is an opportunity to hear from victims of crime and the services working with them. The focus of this inquiry is on how services and responses can be improved for victims of crime. There have been a number of inquiries and parliamentary debates on the broader issues regarding crime and justice, but this is the first inquiry, in my memory, in recent times dedicated solely to improving victim responses. I ask that all parties remain focused on these issues so that we can ensure the needs of victims are heard and so that we can consider what recommendations we can make to reform the process for victims.

I would also like to remind submitters that this is a public hearing and what you say will be recorded and on the public record. I encourage all submitters to consider whether their submission might impact on issues regarding defamation or, if their case is before the courts, whether it might impact on the prosecution of that case. If in doubt I encourage people to keep their submissions general and not to identify individuals.

For the benefit of Hansard, I have two requests: the first is that when you first speak you announce your name and your position. After that you do not have to do it for the remainder of the hearing. For the benefit of everyone, but mainly for Hansard because they have to record the hearing, only one person is to speak at a time. That will make the recording better. I now welcome representatives from selectability.

BAWDEN, Ms Sally, General Manager, selectability

INWOOD, Ms Jacqueline, Mental Health Hub Coordinator, selectability

CHAIR: Good morning and thank you for being here. I invite you to make an opening statement. Because of the way that the time is allocated I ask that the opening statement be as close to five minutes as possible. Then the committee will have some questions for you.

Ms Bawden: I represent selectability as an organisation. Selectability is a not-for-profit charity that exists to provide mental wellbeing and suicide prevention to regional Queenslanders. We are a merger of SOLAS and MIFNQ in 2017. We have delivered a number of services and supports across Townsville and regional Queensland to support the mental wellbeing of our community in a number of services. Can I go into victims of crime?

CHAIR: You can go anywhere you want to go, Sally.

Ms Bawden: We were providing a victims of crime support program and we changed the name to Recovery Support Program purely around language and how people in the community feel about that. A lot of people do not want to be identified as a victim. We want to make sure that we support them along their journey. We feel early intervention is critical and key to success for them to survive and thrive, not just trying to survive.

Our Recovery Support Program was designed to build a community of resilient people with good mental wellbeing. We work closely with the QPS, the Queensland Police Service. They send a referral through to us through a portal. When they go out to visit somebody who has been a witness to a critical incident or is a victim of crime, they are given a magnet that they can pop on their fridge with a QR code. That would be a self-referral straight through to us. As we know, people do not often feel the impact of a shock straightaway; it can be a week or two down the road. We want to give them the opportunity to reach out. Also, the police will then give us a referral through to say that they have met with this person and it might be ideal to reach out to them. Later, as I said, people can reach out for a self-referral. The police leave the magnet with them and it is a good option as people can then reassess their needs and supports as things come up.

The Recovery Support Program is specifically for victims of property related crime and witnesses to critical incidents, for example, fatal crashes, break and enter, unlawful use of a motor vehicle and burglary. The program is not for victims of domestic violence or sexual assault. Once we receive that referral, it is actioned within a 48-hour period. Selectability staff will make up to three attempts to contact that referred person and the staff member will discuss support options.

The program is delivered in two parts. A person can choose one or both of the following options. They can choose a four-week structured program covering topics such as safety awareness, which is delivered by the Queensland police themselves. The next three sessions are: recognising the signs of post-traumatic stress, looking after yourself and self-care, and where to next, and linking them with support services within the community that are appropriate to their support needs. They are all delivered by one of our counsellors at selectability. They can also be offered individual counselling—that is, one-on-one sessions with our qualified counsellor to improve their mental health.

There is evidence to show that the sooner we can provide psychosocial care to the person impacted then there is a lower chance of incidents of post-traumatic stress disorder and it also increases their ability to thrive and not just survive. We also have data showing the interactions of referrals. This covers Cairns, Townsville and Mackay. The largest of those referral bases is Cairns with 362 referrals; Townsville, 222 referrals; and Mackay, 62 referrals. They have all had a very quick turnaround with contact from one of our staff members within 48 hours.

I would like to hand over to Jackie now so that she can give you a good news story around how that program has been very positive. The reason we want to bring up that good news story is because we were self-funding this program. It is actually on pause at the moment due to funding. We would love to see, as a solution, a source of funding for, at a bare minimum, three to five sessions of counselling, which we could stand up immediately but the funding restrictions keep us at bay with that. We do have a large range of other supports and services, not specifically for victims of crime but other things that they could attend or be supported with. It is just keeping them included in the community because we know how they can feel like they do not want to go outside their homes or they feel restricted as they do not feel safe. We have a number of other programs like the BikeShed, which has improved the wellbeing of people in our community. It is not just those suffering with mental health; community members are taking this on board and embracing it.

Our Mental Health Hub in Denham Street and our clubhouse on Kings Road provide a safe place for people to come. They can come in there and self-refer. There is no cost for those programs. If there is any way that we can work towards gaining further funding for the Recovery Support Program—specifically for people wanting to get that counselling as soon as they possibly can to have early intervention.

Ms Inwood: I work in the Mental Health Hub and I am going to speak about a good news story. This person was in her mid-40s and attended the Mental Health Hub as a referral to get help as she was a victim of being held up. She could no longer work. She was unable to go to the shops by herself and was sleeping poorly. She was not finding any enjoyment in life. In her words, she had isolated herself and was just going through the motions.

She first started with selectability at the recovery group session facilitated by a trained counsellor. It was at the first session where she learnt that there are normal stressors and responses to trauma straight after an incident that, if prolonged, could have a very negative impact on her wellbeing. At the session she was encouraged to see her doctor and discuss the lack of sleep and the

mental health decline she had experienced at the time. At the next session she reported feeling completely different, clearer headed and able to think straight again, with a sense of hope. She completed the group session and began one-on-one therapy.

After two sessions this is what she had to say—

The core centre therapy were worth doing. Everyone is worth finding the better version of themselves. With the support of the counsellor, I have been able to do that. I am no longer stuck, and everyone at selectability was amazing.

Thank you.

CHAIR: Thank you, Jacqueline and Sally. Sally, you were reading from a document. Did you have a document in front of you that you are reading from? It is not a criticism. I am just trying to identify that information you are reading out.

Ms Bawden: I was reading an overview of the program that we were delivering at the time.

CHAIR: Are you able to provide that document to the secretariat?

Ms Bawden: Yes, I can do that.

CHAIR: Also, Jacqueline, could we have what you were reading from?

Ms Inwood: Yes.

CHAIR: You do not have to do it now, but we will organise it.

Mrs GERBER: I have a couple of questions around the types of support that your organisation provides to victims of crime. Before I get there, I want to better understand how you are funded. How do you fund the programs you just spoke about?

Ms Bawden: The Recovery Support Program was self-funded initially, but due to other critical services that we needed to stand up, that was put on pause for a time because of new locations that we had to move to and a number of staff changes. We needed to make sure that we had those systems in place. However, we are able to stand that up as soon as we have the funding secured again. Other services and supports that we provide, like our Mental Health Hub, are funded through the PHN and also an NDIS model. We also have our clubhouse funded through Queensland Health, and our BikeSheds are half self-funded as well. We find that is being extremely successful in supporting people, especially around being quite isolated in their homes and not feeling the strength to come out.

Mrs GERBER: In terms of the support that your organisation can provide to victims of crime, do you interact with the victims of crime financial act to enable victims of crime to get the financial assistance that is available to victims of crime? Do you support them in that process?

Ms Bawden: No, ours is purely counselling to be able to get them through that initial part of the trauma that they have experienced. We do not support them with accessing victims of crime funding or going down that line.

Mrs GERBER: Do you use the victims of crime funding to pay for the counselling? Do they make the application to be able to—

Ms Bawden: No, we self-fund that.

Mrs GERBER: In terms of the counselling assistance that you provide to victims of crime, can they get that assistance from you at any point in their journey? We heard from other submitters, for instance in Cairns, that sometimes they do not want to talk about it until the perpetrator has been sentenced or incarcerated or even out of their lives completely, and that can sometimes be years down the track. Are there any limitations around time in terms of the support that you provide?

Ms Bawden: Once we receive the referral, we make three attempts to contact that person and then if they are ready to engage, we then engage the counsellors or that support for them. However, I cannot answer the other question.

Mrs GERBER: If they are not ready to engage—say you contact them three times and they say, 'I can't deal with this right now. I can't do anything'?

Ms Bawden: We respect their decision and just put that on notice.

Ms BOLTON: Good morning, Sally and Jacqueline. As you know, we have had hearings previously. One of the most common subjects brought up is the need for a one-stop shop for victims, very similar to the homicide support group where the referrals can be done and right from the very beginning there is assistance. How do you believe this would work? In the role you are doing, from my understanding, and with the program and counselling, have you had any thoughts that this would work or what is really needed, from your experience?

Ms Bawden: I am not quite sure I can answer that one right now, but from our perspective, the group sessions did not have as many uptakes as the one-on-one counselling. People would opt to do the counselling more so than in a group setting.

Ms BOLTON: To clarify, in your role, have you seen where the gaps are? Did that result for victims (inaudible) what has been termed a one-stop shop where straightaway someone who has been perpetrated against is given access to somebody (inaudible) to trap more cases, make referrals (inaudible) Do you think that is needed for victims?

Ms Bawden: Yes, I do. We have a Service Navigator who does a role similar to this which has worked in linking the person into appropriate support in the community. We have had a lot of positive outcomes from that. That person is like a connector, a conduit between the initial stages and then making sure that they have follow-up support and connected into those certain areas where they can have ongoing support.

Ms BUSH: Thanks for that, Sally and Jacqueline. To clarify, your focus is on supporting victims of property crimes specifically, not personal acts of violence?

Ms Bawden: Yes, anyone who has witnessed a critical incident. Domestic violence and sexual assault is not in our scope at this time.

Ms BUSH: Is there any evaluation of the program's success rate, pre and post data of how people are feeling at the end of the intervention of your program?

Ms Bawden: I would have to get that information for you.

Ms BUSH: Yes, if you have it. I am sure we would love to see it at some point.

Ms Bawden: I do have some data on interactions—how many referrals we have had and how many outcomes there were. Yes, I can definitely give you that.

Ms BUSH: Thank you. Do you have a sense of the referrals success rate? When police become involved in a person's life, mention you, get their consent to make a referral—do you know the percentage who say yes to that referral initially?

Ms Bawden: We have had a good uptake of people being referred in and then the connections. As I said, in Cairns we have had 362; Townsville, we had 222; and Mackay, 62. I have that data there which I am sure I can share with you as well.

Ms BUSH: It would be good to know what that means in terms of the whole population. If there were 500 people affected by that crime, 300 would say yes, that kind of thing, to see what the uptake would be like, if you can give that. I love the idea of the magnet with the QR code that you mentioned. I think we have all heard how victims come to support services at different times in their journey. Do you have any sense of the delay between the initial referral to when they might engage with you?

Ms Bawden: From the uptake that we have had, most people we have contacted within 48 hours and we have had either a response of going onto that service or linking them into a service, or doing one-on-one counselling. As I said before, the one-on-one counselling was more of a support that they felt they needed rather than a group setting.

Ms BUSH: You mentioned as well the first program was a four-week program run through police, or worked with police; is that right? Can you explain that to us very briefly?

Ms Bawden: The first week was delivered by a Queensland police member and that is around their safety awareness. Then recognising the signs of post-trauma stress would be delivered by one of our counsellors, along with looking after yourself, where to next and supporting into those services in the community. The last three would be delivered by our services.

Ms BUSH: Sorry to put you on the spot—you may not be able to answer this—but we have heard from Jacqueline on one example, but can you speak to some of the shifts that you saw afterwards with people who engaged in your program, some of the changes you saw in people?

Ms Bawden: I would have to get you that data, but I believe that of the people who attended the groups, there was a very small number who found it very helpful and were able to then go back to their daily lives a lot sooner than what they would have normally done.

Ms BUSH: Thanks for the work that you are doing. It is fantastic.

Mr WALKER: Chair, Sally and I have worked together previously. I am a big supporter of selectability in relation to what they do in many areas. One of the interesting areas, Sally, is the Townsville

BikeShed that you mentioned earlier. There was \$25,000 seed funding from the state which is a very small budget amount but has big outcomes, as we have seen recently. Just recently you received another \$25,000-odd from the Police Commissioner because she likes the program that your team is doing. We have the formal setting of the victims of crime; then we have the more informal. There is a longevity of people wanting to belong to community, to have an interaction of a normal nature. Do you find that is important overall and is that a big role for the BikeShed?

Ms Bawden: Yes, we are finding the BikeShed has had a massive positive impact on the community and the individuals who go there for support—being part of something, as you said before, belonging to something. It is giving them something to do, something to look forward to and something to love. It is getting them together for a purpose. They are giving back to the community. They are restoring pushbikes. They are also working with restorative youth justice. We are working with other state schools around keeping children in school and giving them an incentive rather than going on the streets to commit more crime. BikeShed is having a great, positive impact, right across a broad spectrum of ages and dynamics.

Mr WALKER: Can you explain in a bit of detail how BikeShed works? You do the work on the bikes, but there is that informal conversation and there are role models. Can you explain how that works in a bit more detail?

Ms Bawden: We have a BikeShed coordinator and one of his workers who work together with those community members who come in to support each other. We are finding that they are doing projects that are very meaningful to the community, and whilst they are doing the maintenance on the bikes, pulling the bikes apart, rebuilding them, a number of conversations start to be had, and there is the absolute positive impact that it is making on some people who ordinarily would not have a conversation before but are now conversing. They are feeling safe. They are coming there on a very regular basis. We used to have a couple of people come through a week. Now we are getting over 40, 50 a week through there. People are finding that they can now socialise; they can feel part of something. The conversations and the unpacking of what is going on in their lives, whilst they are doing maintenance on bikes, when they are unknowingly having that conversation, is making a huge difference. We have had people coming out of BikeShed now getting jobs and being proactive in their own lives and giving themselves self-care. It has improved their quality of life.

Mr KRAUSE: Thank you for your submission here today. Forgive me if you have said it previously, but for how long has the work you have been doing been going on at selectability?

Ms Bawden: For all the programs? Selectability merged with SOLAS back in 2017. In the last five to six years we have been really making sure that we identify the gaps in the community in terms of areas of need and making sure we stand those services up as soon as we can because we need the community as a whole living the best life that they possibly can. We find services that will improve the mental wellbeing of people from all walks of life in our community. They do not necessarily have to have a mental illness. As we know, we can all feel some sense of mental ill health at some point in our lives. One in five experience it. It could be a very short-term thing, but it is making sure that we have the provision of those services to the community so that they are feeling welcomed and part of a community.

Mr KRAUSE: In terms of the work you do in supporting people who have been victims of property crime, do you think there has been an upward trend in people coming to see you?

Ms Bawden: Specifically, in the BikeShed we have seen a large number of people coming through—and not necessarily victims of crime—who do feel a sense of belonging there. They feel that that is a safe place, along with the Mental Health Hub in the city and also the clubhouse on King's Road. They have all created such a warm, open and inviting space that they feel very welcome and safe there.

Mr KRAUSE: Do you have any suggestions for us from your perspective about how the entire system could be improved to support victims of crime in a better way?

Ms Bawden: I think the earlier the intervention and the sooner people have that information to hand in terms of what is available, then in their own time they can reach out to get support. We were innovative in getting that magnet out to the Queensland police who have been proactive in getting that magnet on to the fridges of people when they come and visit. It is not like a business card where they can lose it; it is on a fridge. It has a QR code and it just gives them the opportunity when they are ready to reach out for that support. It is imperative that they get that intervention as early as they possibly can, but it also respects the time it takes to go through that impact.

CHAIR: Could I ask that you have that information to which you and Jacqui were referring to the secretariat by Thursday, 4 May so that we can include it in our deliberations? You just mentioned a fridge magnet. I do not want to cut into your supply, but could we have one just for our reference? It is a great idea.

Ms Bawden: Yes.

CHAIR: That brings to a conclusion this part of the hearing. Thank you for your attendance. Thank you for forwarding that information on in the future and good luck with your good work.

COSTELLO, Ms Erin, Team Leader, Women’s Centre and Sexual Assault Support Service

CHAIR: Welcome, Erin. Would you like to start with a five-minute opening statement, and after that the committee will have some questions for you?

Ms Costello: Thank you. I thank you for the opportunity to participate. I would like to start by acknowledging that we are on Aboriginal land and acknowledge the Wulgurukaba and Bindal people. I acknowledge all First Nations people and their elders past, present and emerging. I acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded. Always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

As a representative from the Women’s Centre and the Townsville Sexual Assault Support Service, I am here to speak from the perspective of a non-government organisation providing support services to victims of crime. Whilst our service provides support to many women who are victims of any numbers of crimes, most of our work is supporting sexual assault survivors who have experienced sexual assault. In terms of our specialised trauma informed support to victim-survivors, I want to tell you today about our service and highlight their voices in that.

The Townsville Sexual Assault Support Service is part of the Townsville Sexual Assault Response Team, SART. SART is a multiagency, holistic and wraparound response to victim-survivors of sexual crime. We work in partnership with the Queensland Police Service, the Townsville Hospital and Health Service, the Clinical Forensic Medicine Unit and the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions. This collaborative and integrated model supports individual organisations to remain focused on their unique role in supporting victim-survivors and prevents the retraumatisation and revictimisation of victim-survivors. We advocate that this framework and multiagency response is the best practice in responding to sexual crimes.

As a trauma informed service, we work to uphold the principles of trauma informed practice including rights, safety, choice and control. The trauma and violence informed framework underpinning SART provides a timely and collaborative response to victim-survivors of sexual crimes at the time of reporting. This means that SART is able to provide accurate and precise information about rights and options according to individual circumstances so that victim-survivors are able to maintain as much control as possible in this space. They are empowered to make informed choices based on what is right for them. This response is key to developing safety and trust when working with victim-survivors.

The Townsville Sexual Assault Support Service holds a unique role within SART. While other SART members’ involvement with victim-survivors might be time limited, the Sexual Assault Support Service remain involved in the process from the time of reporting right through legal processes and beyond which can sometimes involve supporting the victim-survivor through the processes involved in the District Court. This can include providing support to victim-survivors when giving evidence in a trial. This work is incredibly important to a trauma informed response to victim-survivors; however, it is also incredibly time intensive for support workers and certainly insufficiently funded across sexual assault services.

The unique role held by our specialist sexual assault support workers means that they hear and see firsthand the impact that these legal processes have on victim-survivors and their mental health and wellbeing. It is not uncommon for victim-survivors to describe the legal processes, particularly court processes, as a compounding trauma on top of the trauma already experienced from the sexual assault. One survivor shared with us the various victim blaming messages she received from professionals throughout the legal process—from the time of reporting right through to trial. She says that over the many years it took for the report to reach the stage of the District Court she received the following implicit and explicit messages from professionals along the way—

Just get over it. The process is extremely difficult, it takes many years and he may not even get in trouble. I think you should just be happy with the five-year no contact order. If you want money from him, this is not the way to do it. We should forgive. It’s a historical case. He’s no longer a danger to her. This is your time to tell your story. You can’t talk about the previous domestic violence or other crimes he’s committed. We’re not your lawyer. You’re just a witness. We can’t include that evidence. You can’t mention his drinking or drug use. You can’t talk about those other times he was violent towards you. No adult takes 15 months to report a sexual assault. She’s just an angry ex. Not guilty.

Victim-survivors report that, without the support of the collaborative wraparound response of SART, these messages would remain uninterrupted, the common experience of self-blame would fester, individuals’ mental health and wellbeing would wane and the effects of trauma continue to infiltrate the lives of victim-survivors. Victim-survivors consistently feed back to our service that without SART and the trauma informed wraparound support they received from this model, they would not have continued with the reporting process. The work of SART has been able to respond and disrupt

many of the complex and difficult processes involved for victim-survivors when reporting sexual crimes that can perpetuate these victim blaming messages.

Since the time SART was established in 2016, we have seen: an increase in victim-survivors reporting sexual crimes to police; an increase in completed forensic medical examinations; and an increase of referrals into the Sexual Assault Support Service. We have also seen: a decrease in response times to victim-survivors at the time of reporting; a decrease in the withdrawal of complaints; and a decrease in reports of dissatisfaction of the reporting processes. We have also seen encouraging responses from other professionals both within and external to SART relating to the efficiency and streamlined processes which in turn supports the work of all other relevant professionals in this space. The Townsville Sexual Assault Support Service advocates that this framework and multiagency response is best practice when responding to sexual crimes.

CHAIR: Can you provide that document to the secretariat at a later time?

Ms Costello: Yes, no problem.

Mrs GERBER: Thank you for your oral submission. I am interested to understand from your organisation's perspective where the deficiencies are in the system in relation to victims of crime—I guess you are talking about victims of a sexual assault crime—where the system can be improved for victims of sexual assault crime and any gaps that your organisation is seeing right now in the support that needs to be provided specifically to victims of sexual assault crime?

Ms Costello: We do respond to other crimes in our Women's Health Service, but our Sexual Assault Support Service is such a key part of the Townsville Sexual Assault Response Team. As I said, we have been able to disrupt a lot of that locally in terms of direct responses from police and direct experiences within that court process. The sooner a trauma informed response happens, the better. But I guess that involves a lot of training of other professionals outside of just the support services—police, hospital, forensic nurses, the DPP.

Mrs GERBER: I guess you touched on it in the example that you gave to the committee around some of the words, language and responses that the victim was given by various organisations throughout the prosecution and investigation process. Am I correct in saying that part of your submission is that the agencies engaged throughout the investigation process and then the prosecution process need to ensure that they are conducting it in a more trauma informed way, that that is perhaps a gap right now and a challenge that needs to be addressed and that this committee might be able to address it through this process?

Ms Costello: Yes.

Ms BOLTON: Good morning, Erin. For clarity, from my understanding of how you have described the services, would you say it is the same as the Homicide Victims Support Group in that it provides the same service as in it could be considered in itself a one-stop shop for those who have been sexually abused or are the victim of sexual offences?

Ms Costello: I am not really familiar with how that is set up, but SART is an organised group of agencies that come together in partnership. We have a terms of reference that we work to. We have interagency meetings once a month where we come together and reflect on the work that we have been doing together. If there have been issues in feedback from victim-survivors or from the workers involved, we respond to that and make sure we are lining up with the terms of reference.

Ms BOLTON: Again for clarity, from the time the victim of the perpetrator comes to you, you are able to act as the connector, including finding out about court appearances et cetera so that they are not needing to hunt around for that information; they can just come to you?

Ms Costello: Yes.

Ms BOLTON: Within that you mentioned other clients referred through the Women's Health Service. What types of clients are they and how do some of them access you? Is that a referral from the police?

Ms Costello: Yes. We receive an electronic referral through the Redbourne service; that comes directly through to our service. We have one worker who responds to those for consistency. We see lots of different crimes there in that space—a lot of domestic violence, a lot of grief and loss, shocking or unexpected deaths. We respond with grief and loss counselling. There are lots of things—break and enter, it could be anything.

Ms BOLTON: So basically everything could come to you.

Ms Costello: Yes. If a woman has been affected by a crime, then they will send a referral through to us.

Ms BOLTON: Thank you.

Mr WALKER: What are your thoughts on expanding the eligible victims category to include home invasion, and why?

Ms Costello: I am not sure I can answer that.

Mr WALKER: I have another question, if I could. What do you think would improve the support for victims of crime when dealing with the Queensland Police Service and the legal system?

Ms Costello: As I said earlier, I think trauma informed training for everyone involved in working with these sorts of crimes particularly.

Mrs GERBER: I want to understand the scope of the services that you provide. Would you say that you hold the victim of crime's hand through the whole journey—as in, you will go to court with them, you will find the documents they need to be able to make an application for financial assistance if they are eligible under the Victims of Crime Assistance Act?

Ms Costello: For sexual assault survivors, that is certainly the level of support we would provide for them because we have the specialised Sexual Assault Support Service. However, because our Women's Health Service is really quite broad, we cannot offer that same sort of support for other crimes. For a survivor of sexual assault, we would attend an immediate referral from police or hospital. That person might be at the hospital and have disclosed a sexual assault, so we attend the hospital and support them through that process of deciding whether they are even going to report to police and go through that process. We then continue that support right through until court. That might involve linking them up with Victim Assist to do applications for financial assistance. We would provide all sorts of case management support.

Mrs GERBER: This is not a criticism, just for the sake of clarity: it is only for women. A male who has been sexually assaulted—

Ms Costello: Through our SART service, we do respond to men in that space. If the hospital calls and says, 'There's a male survivor here needing support,' we respond initially in that space and we would provide support at court as well. However, because we work out of a women's centre, we just provide some initial trauma informed support to them and then make sure there is a warm referral to another trauma informed service to provide therapeutic work with them. We recognise that that is a massive gap in this local community—that there are not a lot of referral options for men.

Mrs GERBER: It is a huge gap, yes.

Ms BOLTON: I have a question around your experience with restorative practice (inaudible) and justice (inaudible). Is it something that is of great benefit or can it be problematic?

Ms Costello: You cut out a bit there but I think the question was about restorative justice processes. Mostly our experience, particularly around responding to sexual assault, has been with youth justice for restorative processes. For the nature of the crime of sexual assault, restorative justice processes can be really challenging for victim-survivors. On paper it looks like their voices are really highlighted in that space, but I think in practice it can be difficult to have them feel really heard, that the nature and level of the crime and hurt that they feel has been acknowledged.

CHAIR: Sandy, did you hear that answer?

Ms BOLTON: Chair, it seems we have a streaming problem and I cannot (inaudible).

CHAIR: We will move to other questions.

Ms BUSH: Erin, I really appreciate the multiagency approach that you bring. I think it is fantastic. Can you tell me how it was initiated?

Ms Costello: I was working as a counsellor at that time so I do remember when it was initiated. We decided to do that unfunded for about a year because our coordinator at the time and the officer in charge with the Queensland Police Service, the CPIU, came together and recognised the need for the service. We worked together for about a year unfunded, scraping together philanthropic funds, donations and things to fund that service to respond on a 24-hour roster. We did that for about 12 months. After that, our coordinator fought really hard for some funding around that. It got temporary funding for about two years, from memory, and it has just been permanently funded in the last couple of years. We are looking at funding through until 2025 now. That has been really useful. The temporary funding created a lot of instability in the space so we lost a lot of qualified and wonderful counsellors and support workers through that time.

Ms BUSH: Are you co-located? Is this a permanent full-time arrangement, or is it that you meet to discuss cases?

Ms Costello: We have a purpose-built Women's Centre. We have a space in the Women's Centre that we have set up specifically for our sexual assault response teams so victim-survivors can provide statements from our service if the police station is not feeling okay for them. We do not co-locate so much as we just have the 24/7 roster so as soon as we are contacted we provide that immediate response, whether that be to the hospital, the police station, the Women's Centre, the forensic unit. Occasionally, we will be called to the victim's home or the place of the crime.

Ms BUSH: In relation to the multiagency approach, is there a formal information sharing arrangement in place and how did you get to that point?

Ms Costello: We set up the interagency meetings once a month. I think that was happening quite regularly before we got established. That is a core part of our practice, and core to the practice is our reflective practice to come back and make sure we are really staying true to our terms of reference and the trauma and violence informed framework.

Ms BUSH: One of the issues that has come up is victims having to retell their stories to different agencies, so there is this idea of how do we get those information sharing provisions so that victims can give consent to share information across the different agencies.

Ms Costello: This might be a bit separate from that, but it has just triggered in my mind how survivors give their evidence even initially with police is pretty inconsistent. They might go to the police station and provide a statement and the police will do a typed written statement which can take many hours, depending on how big the story is. There are times when that is done through a video recording and police will type that up and have the victim-survivor sign the statement at a later date, but that is purely because those video recordings are not admissible evidence in court at the moment. I think that could be a key and important change to have victim-survivors not have to repeat their story many times. To be able to do that through video would be amazing and it would cause much less harm to the victim-survivor.

Ms BUSH: In relation to the story you gave around the comments that were made to the survivor you were supporting, does your agency play a role in helping victims make a complaint against the charter of rights for victims?

Ms Costello: Yes.

Ms BUSH: How effective have you found that process? That is obviously one of the issues around dignified treatment—that those types of comments would be suitable for a complaint.

Ms Costello: Yes. I think it is a lengthy process and it is another time they have to go through telling something all over again. It is difficult to do and I think a lot of victim-survivors probably feel at some point, 'I've had enough and I just can't be bothered to do this now. I've been through too much.' I think that is quite common. When victim-survivors decide to do that, it has been a long process. In the experiences that I have had, it has not felt like an acknowledging response back.

Ms BUSH: Do you know whether you as an agency can make a complaint? If you are aware of a comment that has been made and the survivor says, 'I don't have the energy to make a complaint,' can you as an agency make a formal complaint?

Ms Costello: If it is someone internally within our process, we would respond to that in our interagency reflective practices. If it is outside of that, we would first of all encourage victim-survivors to have their voice heard in that, but if they are wanting us to do that for them we would be definitely open to doing that.

Ms BUSH: You deal with it at a local level so it might not then get recorded as an official complaint against the charter there with the department, which is interesting. It helps me understand.

Mrs GERBER: This may be not a question, but I want to pick up on one of the points you made around video evidence and how that might be a critical step. In the trial that is happening right now in relation to video recorded evidence of victim-survivors of domestic violence, one of the things that has cropped up is that, to ensure that evidence is able to be used in the prosecution and results in a successful prosecution, the officer or the prosecutor who is taking the video evidence needs to be trauma informed; they need to have specific training around how to take the video evidence. One of the advantages of a recording and then going back and crafting a statement is that the victim-survivor can ensure that the evidence is given in the way that they truly do recollect it. Sometimes if a video is taken, the victim-survivor might skip between accounts and then inconsistencies might be able to be drawn which otherwise may not be there if they are given the time to reflect on their statement. I want to give you the opportunity to reflect on that and whether, if that is something that is rolled out, the people taking the evidence absolutely need to be trained in taking video evidence and be trauma informed.

Ms Costello: Yes, and that is the nature of trauma—that memories come out not in a chronological way.

CHAIR: Thank you, Erin. Could you provide the document that you were reading from to the secretariat by Thursday, 4 May so we can include it in our deliberations?

Ms Costello: Yes.

CHAIR: Thank you for your time and your input, and good luck with the great work that you do.

Ms Costello: Thank you for the opportunity.

CHAIR: Sandy, I understand that you can hear us but you cannot see us. Is that right?

Ms BOLTON: Correct, and I will not be able to turn my camera back on because (inaudible).

IEVERS, Ms Samantha, Deputy Principal Solicitor, North Queensland Women’s Legal Service

CHAIR: I now welcome Ms Samantha Ievers.

Ms Ievers: Thank you for the opportunity to speak with the committee today in relation to the inquiry into support provided to victims of crime. Firstly, I also take a moment to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land upon which we meet today and recognise their continuing connection to land, sea and culture. I pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging.

The North Queensland Women’s Legal Service is a community legal service that assists women in North Queensland and Far North Queensland. We have offices in Townsville and Cairns. We primarily provide advice and assistance to women in the areas of domestic and family violence, family law and child protection. We provide duty lawyer services in the Townsville and Cairns domestic violence courts, the federal circuit and the Family Court of Australia. In addition to our legal staff, we employ client support workers who work closely with our clients to ensure that their non-legal and support needs are met.

We have significant experience assisting and supporting victim-survivors. Although we do not practice in the criminal jurisdiction, we have contact with women who are navigating or who have previously navigated the criminal justice system. I note that this committee is tasked with considering how the criminal justice system currently supports victims and how victims are kept informed throughout the process. Sadly, it is our experience that the criminal justice system is not a safe place for victim-survivors. There is often very little thought given to the needs or the rights of victims.

The Queensland Police Service, in our experience, routinely fail to keep victims informed after they make a criminal complaint, both in relation to the investigation and any prosecution. Our clients are often left without any idea about where the matter is at, including whether a charge has been laid, the purpose of court events and whether the defendant is granted or refused bail. We hear from clients about the treatment they receive from police officers when attempting to report domestic violence or a crime. Women can be turned away or told they will be unsuccessful prior to a proper investigation being conducted. Likewise, we hear about the traumatic experiences of victims who are subjected to cross-examination, a process that is focused solely on disproving allegations with little focus on the needs or the dignity of the victim. However, that said, I received significant positive feedback about the victim liaison officers both in Townsville and Cairns, and we also have many positive experiences with specialist units in the Queensland Police Service such as the vulnerable persons unit.

I also note that the committee is inquiring into the operation of the Victims of Crime Assistance Act 2009. Firstly, we support a review into the financial assistance scheme. Any review must consider how we can improve the average time frame for determining applications to ensure that victims can receive timely assistance to support and recover. In our experience, the time to process an application is varied but can take up to two years, which is far too long given that the objective of the scheme is to assist the victim to recover. On the assumption that the reason for the delay is a lack of resources, we would support an injection of resources into Victim Assist Queensland.

Turning to the Charter of Victims’ Rights, whilst the charter is embedded in the act the experience of many of our clients is that those rights exist only in written form and not in practice. We support the recommendation of the Women’s Safety and Justice Taskforce that consideration be given to the inclusion of additional rights or the expansion of existing rights. For example, we ought to consider including a right to be consulted about certain decisions made by the QPS or the DPP—for example, to substantially change or modify a charge, to discontinue prosecution of a charge or to accept a plea of guilty to a lesser charge. We also support the calls made to include the rights of victims in the Human Rights Act. A revised Charter of Victims’ Rights should be the subject of regular training for QPS and DPP staff, court staff, legal professionals and the judiciary. The charter should be more readily and publicly available, with copies given to victims by the QPS and a summarised version perhaps displayed at key locations such as police stations, courts and DPP offices.

We support the calls for a victim support legal service. Such services could be readily established within women’s legal services, with appropriate funding. We must provide equality to victims and ensure that they have access to legal assistance from services that will empower victims and ensure that their rights are upheld. In closing, I thank you for the opportunity to address the committee today and thank you for your important work in relation to this topic.

CHAIR: Samantha, would you be able to provide the document that you were reading from to the committee?

Ms Ievers: Yes, of course.

Mr KRAUSE: Samantha, how is your legal service funded at the moment? Is there anything in there about victims of crime specifically or is it just another bucket?

Ms levers: Not from memory. Our director might be best placed to answer that. Our funding sources come from a variety of streams, including the Commonwealth and state governments.

Mr KRAUSE: So Legal Aid funding sort of thing?

Ms levers: We receive funding through Legal Aid for the duty lawyer services in particular.

Mr KRAUSE: In terms of trying to assist victims of crime to be more consulted in the system, you said there are a lot of rights set out in the Charter of Victims' Rights but that it is your experience that they are not reflected throughout the process. How would you see that needing to change? Is it a cultural thing or is it just that there is not enough emphasis put on the charter of rights now? What needs to change to make sure they are reflected more in practice?

Ms levers: I suspect, without knowing definitively what the answer is, that there is probably not enough emphasis or knowledge about the charter. We would certainly support increased training, as I think I mentioned in my opening statement, once we perhaps review and revise the charter.

Ms BOLTON: Since we started this inquiry, we have heard about client support workers and liaison officers and we have spoken with amazing organisations. On the other side, we are hearing about the enormous gaps that exist. In your experience, where are those gaps?

Ms levers: I think potentially there is a lack of cohesion in that there are certain services, as you say, out there—client support workers and the like. Perhaps we need to consider how we can better coordinate to provide a more trauma informed process and increase that sharing of information between services.

Ms BOLTON: Do you have any suggestions because it has been brought up that there is a lack of communication between the QPS, the DPP and all the different agencies involved? We have heard suggestions that there needs to be a one-stop shop that is the connector. Would you see that as a solution?

Ms levers: Yes, in principle I would certainly think so. I would certainly advocate for the inclusion of legal assistance in that, in some shape or form.

Mr WALKER: Samantha, can you tell us about the support services you provide and who are the primary users of your service, please?

Ms levers: Of course, we provide services solely to women in North and Far North Queensland so from Mackay in the south up to the tip of Queensland and out to the Northern Territory border. As I think I mentioned, we have offices in Townsville and Cairns so you will see a large portion of our clients residing in those areas. However, we do have established relationships with services and stakeholders in regional and remote communities. We are currently working to re-establish some of our outreach clinics, which were temporarily suspended upon COVID in 2020.

We see women from a wide variety of backgrounds, race, language, income brackets. It is certainly not uncommon for women to present with domestic violence as a problem type. In fact, if I recall correctly, 100 per cent of the women who presented or who we assisted in the last financial year had domestic violence as a factor or were affected by domestic violence.

Mr WALKER: As a supplementary question, I think this is very important and you may have touched on it: are you a first point of contact; do you receive referrals or both?

Ms levers: We can be both. Yes, sometimes a women's legal service can be the first point of contact. On other occasions we receive referrals from the likes of the police, from support services such as the women's centres, the domestic violence resource services—the list goes on and on. It very much varies. Of course, sometimes women simply reach out on their own initiative. Perhaps it may be some time after they were referred to the service when they are ready, as the committee heard earlier.

Mrs GERBER: In relation to the financial support that is available for victims of crime, does your organisation directly help victims in relation to obtaining financial support under the financial assistance act?

Ms levers: Yes, we can and we do.

Mrs GERBER: In terms of the timeliness of payouts, we have heard submissions from victims of crime and other organisations that it is important that victims access the financial support early so that they can get the intervention and support that they need early, but that it is taking an inordinate amount of time at the moment to get financial assistance. I am keen on your organisation's perspective.

Ms levers: Yes, absolutely. The feedback that I have received across the board from staff is that the time frame can be quite varied. Yes, there are certainly positive experiences or quicker turnaround times, but it could be up to two years to receive that final payout. An interim payout might take, say, up to three months, which is too long in itself as well given that the purpose of the scheme is to assist victims to recover and to access the support and assistance that they need.

Ms BOLTON: In your experience in the legal service—

CHAIR: We can hear you, Sandy.

Ms BOLTON: I am sorry, we have a bit of a delay happening here.

CHAIR: We are going okay.

Ms BOLTON: My question relates to restorative practices.

CHAIR: Give us a minute, Sandy. Samantha, are you right with that question?

Ms levers: I think the question was around restorative practices. Unfortunately, I do not have any comment to offer the committee. I have not received any feedback from staff about that, I am sorry.

CHAIR: That is okay.

Ms BUSH: Samantha, one of the values that I see in working in a regional area is that ability for cross-agency collaboration and we have just heard about the SART program. I am interested in your views on how that across-agency work is happening locally. How effective is it?

Ms levers: I would certainly say it happens very well in the regions, as you have alluded to. I think there are amazing connections here in Townsville, which are longstanding and well-established by what we now call the Domestic Violence Action Group, formerly known as Dovetail. It is our integrated collective response to domestic violence locally. I think the referral pathways between local services are working quite well. Of course, there can always be improvements, as with anything, but I think we are very lucky to work in a small regional community.

Ms BUSH: One of the issues that I know can happen is the further you get away from where the decisions are sometimes made in Brisbane when policy is updated or legislation is changed, that information does not always make it out to where it needs to be. That cross-agency collaboration can help in making sure that any policy changes are communicated to all the agencies. Would that be something that you agree with?

Ms levers: Yes, certainly. I cannot think of any particular examples offhand, but absolutely.

Ms BUSH: When it comes to supporting victims of crime, your primary network would be QPS, DPP, Victim Assist. Are there still local Victim Assist staff here? Is there one FTE? Can you give us a sense of how many staff Victim Assist have up here?

Ms levers: I know for certain there is one. There may well be a second but I am not confident on that, I am sorry.

Ms BUSH: Are you able to pass back some of the feedback? Are you having those conversations locally about some of the issues that you have identified?

Ms levers: I cannot recall having those conversations any time recently, but we certainly have the sort of relationship with the contact person in Townsville where we can openly provide feedback and have those discussions.

Mrs GERBER: We have heard from a number of specialised services—for instance, your organisation that deals solely with women, other organisations that deal solely with women or solely with sexual assault and another organisation that deals solely with counselling. I note that submitting to us today after the lunch break are grandparents whose grandchild was murdered. One of the submissions that we have heard regularly throughout this process is that we desperately need a centralised port for victims of crime in general so that any victim of crime, whether or not they are a direct victim of a crime or a grandparent for instance, can access it. Does your organisation think that would be of value for North Queensland?

Ms levers: Yes, I do. I am not sure that I have too much to add in terms of any client examples or the like, but, yes, absolutely.

Mr KRAUSE: In terms of victims who do end up accessing victims of crime assistance funds under the act, do any of those funds need to be utilised for your services? It comes from a separate stream all together?

Ms levers: No, we do not claim the funds for the legal assistance provided. We simply provide those services or that work under our general funding.

Mr KRAUSE: You might not know, but do you know of any other services where if there is support provided and then grants given under the Victims of Crime Assistance Act there is reimbursement?

Ms levers: No, I am not aware.

Mr KRAUSE: That is okay. I just thought I would ask.

Ms BUSH: I am getting into the reeds a little bit, but one of the ideas that has been put forward is having dedicated liaison officers to help victims navigate through the process and whether you would put those employees into a centralised agency or allocate them out into already established agencies in the regions to pick up that role. I am interested in your views on that.

Ms levers: I do not have a view offhand. I certainly do have a view, though, that we need dedicated victim liaison officers. As I mentioned earlier, we have received quite a lot of positive feedback about the VLOs situated within the DPP offices. Of course, unfortunately we receive much negative feedback about, for example, the experience that victims have with QPS in terms of obtaining information. The key point is that we need someone appointed to ensure that we have that connection between the victim and the prosecuting authorities.

Ms BUSH: I guess also one of the other issues coming up is victims do not really know the lay of the land, what is coming next, whether information—a really clear piece of information—or person can help guide them through that process.

Ms levers: Yes, absolutely. Certainly in terms of the way that we practice within our areas of law, we are constantly discussing what is next and considering what we can do to ensure that this experience is as safe and empowering as possible. Translating that over to the criminal justice system, I think that is equally as important.

Ms BUSH: You might not be able to answer this, but do you find sometimes there is the risk—I am trying to be delicate—of misinformation being circulated because navigating the criminal justice system is a complex area. In some of the hearings we have had it is clear that people have not received the right information from the right sources and that has led them down some paths that have been a bit futile. Is that something you have observed at all?

Ms levers: I am not sure that I can answer, but certainly I think those experiences of why we need a range of services and support workers from services that can provide emotional supports and practical supports to legal supports and assistance, all working together as one.

CHAIR: I am conscious of time. We have about three minutes left in this session. Would anyone like to ask a question before I close the session? Sandy, would you like the opportunity to ask one more question?

Ms BOLTON: No, Chair, because I have a bad lag here. I have confused everyone.

CHAIR: I am sorry about that, Sandy. Ms levers, would you be able to provide that information to the secretariat by Thursday, 4 May 2023? Thank you for coming today and thank you for your valuable input into our deliberations.

Proceedings suspended from 12.20 pm to 12.51 pm.

SANDEMAN, Mr John, Private capacity

SANDEMAN, Mrs Susan, Private capacity

CHAIR: Good afternoon and thank you for being here. I need to indicate that Sandy Bolton, the member for Noosa, who is coming in via video is having some technical issues but she has told us to start and she will log in when she can. I also acknowledge Scott Stewart, the member for Townsville and Minister for Resources, who has joined us for this session. Thank you for coming along. Susan, do you want to start?

Mrs Sandeman: Thank you, Chair, for giving us the opportunity to share our experience and indulge in some possible solutions. We are the grandparents of Mason John Parker who at 18 months of age was tortured over several months before his murder in April 2011. We had a mistrial in Townsville which resulted in a second trial in Cairns. During the first court hearing, John and I found a major loophole in the Queensland mandatory reporting legislation. We fought the government for five years for all Queensland childcare centres and services to be included as mandatory reporters of suspected child abuse and/or neglect. Had this been in place in 2011, we are certain our grandson would still be alive. This amendment is known as Mason's Law and was officially introduced in Queensland in 2017. John and I are also volunteers for the Queensland Homicide Victims Support Group, child safety advocates and victim advocates.

Our first issue that we need to expand on is the definition of 'victim'. We the grandparents were not recognised as victims when Mason was murdered. We were not privileged to any information and knew nothing about support and what was available. We hounded the police for information and were finally invited to the local station. It was then we were officially told it was a murder investigation and only two people could have done it. We not only had to navigate through a maze of the unknown but also the sudden death of our grandson. Mason had two separate funerals: the first with Mason's mother and her then partner—the convicted murderer—who also had the audacity to do a performance reading of a poem at Mason's funeral. Even at that stage we had suspicions he killed Mason, but composed ourselves throughout. I sat two seats away from him and John was directly behind him. The second funeral was immediately afterwards. Mason's father, family and friends were then allowed to enter the cleared area with the little white coffin predominantly the central focus. We graciously accepted Mason's father's invitation to join them. We felt ashamed that we let Mason's father down. We felt responsible in a way even though months leading up to the murder we saw less of Mason and had no idea of what was happening to him. All family members need support to be able to help and comfort each other. In our case, financial assistance would have helped with travel and accommodation to attend the second trial in Cairns.

Our second issue is the need to improve support to Townsville victims. These ideas are still a work in progress but, with government collaboration, we can achieve positive changes. This issue is very pertinent to our region and in fact Queensland at large. It is youth crime and the cost of living. We need a no-interest loan for victims to get a replacement vehicle for which the perpetrator or perpetrators repay the government. We know that the government provides \$10,000 to family members helping them with funeral costs of their murdered loved ones; the same can apply to replace a victim's stolen car. With no measure to date has the government reduced the crime rate; in fact, it continues to climb. A vehicle is perhaps an essential part of today's lifestyle and is a prerequisite to gaining and maintaining employment. Support in this way will eliminate hardship and financial burden. Replacing a stolen vehicle in a timely manner will give comfort and a quick turnaround for victims to get back into their normal life and routines. It is essential for mental wellbeing and overall stability that life has returned to as close as they once knew.

This no-interest loan scheme would ensure that a perpetrator or perpetrators take responsibility to repay the government according to an agreed time frame and amount per payment. Juvenile offenders' repayment could be deferred until coming of age, when they commence employment or qualify for government support. Repayments for the loan could be deducted from their income. Alternatively, family or friends may help make the repayments or part thereof. This makes those who are responsible for the crime accountable.

Court support for victims and family members was once available at the Townsville District Court with a designated space for workers and volunteers. We did utilise this service when we were at court; however, government funding was withdrawn and now there is no support available. Victims need support not only by phone or an email from an unknown voice from Brisbane but essential, real human interaction and go to the local place where victims have a choice to make contact either in person or by phone and, importantly, when they are ready and know who and where to access these services in a timely manner.

Not many people know that in 1995 the Queensland Victims' Homicide Support Group was started by five families in Townsville. In 2012 the head office was relocated and is now based in Brisbane. Townsville people have good ideas and solutions, so great that Brisbane and the south of Queensland seem to benefit the most. By government relocating services and centralising support networks it leaves North Queenslanders to fend for themselves. Townsville deserves equitable funding to build a community support system to help ourselves—not to be totally governed and directed by those based in Brisbane. Thank you. I hope these ideas will be seriously considered.

Mrs GERBER: Susan and John, thank you so much for your courage and for continuing to advocate for victims of crime. What you have been through is unimaginable, but, in terms of what you are doing today by continuing to advocate, I just want to put on the record my sincere thanks. In Cairns we heard from another grandparent whose grandson was brutally attacked. She spoke about how there was absolutely no support for her either financially or emotionally through the process of that. Listening to your oral testimony just then, I wanted to ask you: as grandparents of a murdered grandson, did you receive any support at all financially or throughout the process? Was anyone there to help you through the court process? It is one of the gaps in the system that we are trying to tease out today.

Mr Sandeman: No-one. No-one supported us at all until the trial. Once the trial started, we had the police support from the child protection unit and the prosecutor helped us. They explained things to us. Apart from that, no-one. When the trial was in Cairns, we had the police from the child protection unit fight to get financial support for us but they got knocked back. There was no support whatsoever during the trial.

We did not really want support. We wanted to know what was going on. That was our biggest problem, especially for my wife. For me, I wanted justice. A lot of victims in Townsville I know of do not need a lot of support. They want justice. Justice, to me, is not sentenced to life because the next sentence the judge says is, 'Twenty years, 15 years parole.' That is not life. Whoever in the government, whether it was Liberal, National—I do not know—years ago, said 'life', they are liars because it is 20 years to 15 years. We want the truth. Victims want truth and they want justice.

Mrs GERBER: John, you have touched on the second part that I wanted to talk to you about, which is the court process. Again, the grandparent we heard from in Cairns said that not only did she not receive any support; she was not informed of when the court case was happening. She was completely left out and not really considered a victim of crime at all. Is that your experience as well? Is that one way the system could be improved?

Mr Sandeman: Could you imagine walking into a courtroom, sitting there and the second photo that was put up was a picture of my grandson with 50 bruises on him. That was taken by the day care centre. We did not know. The only people who knew or had seen the photos were my grandson's mother and the father. We sat there. Before they put it up the prosecutor and the police and the department came up to us and said, 'You'd better leave because what you're going to see will devastate you.' And it did because we had never seen it before because we were not allowed to.

When the guy was charged, the police had to get permission from my grandson's mother and father to tell us that he had been charged. That was on the Sunday night before it was put in the paper on the Monday morning. If they had not given permission then we would have picked up the paper on Monday morning and found out that the guy had been charged. We got nothing. We were not entitled to know anything. In fact, you might say we were treated like mushrooms: kept in the dark and fed on BS—not even to ask a general question.

One of the detectives, Ben Hunter, is a fantastic guy. To this day he gives me a phone call at least once a month to ask how we are going. We do not get support like that. While we have been sitting here, a friend—a person we have been supporting for the past 12 months because his little baby was left in the car; she died and the mother was charged with manslaughter—texted me and said, 'She pleaded guilty.' I should not be here fighting like hell for justice for victims; I should have been with that guy. He has two teenage daughters. He cannot get support for his two teenage daughters. The little baby was their sister. He cannot get support.

I will tell you another story. This is how bad it is. They got divorced. The mother wanted custody of the children. Every three months he had to go to court to keep custody of his children. The mother was charged with manslaughter, but he had to go to court to fight. It cost him \$13,000 every time he went to court. The mother who was charged got Legal Aid. Where is the justice?

Mrs GERBER: I am hearing that victims of crime need to be prioritised over perpetrators.

Mr Sandeman: Sure.

Mrs GERBER: I also want to touch on the property crime aspect that you spoke about in your opening statement. One of the considerations that has been put to the committee is to expand the financial assistance so that it is available for people who are victims of property crime. I will give you a case scenario. If your home is broken into and the perpetrator walks past your kids' bedrooms, takes the keys from your nightstand and steals your car but there is no physical harm to your body then you are not eligible for the same assistance as someone who is physically harmed in that circumstance. Expanding the definition so that you are eligible for financial assistance and greater assistance is one of the proposals put to the committee. I think you have taken it one step further. Are you able to expand on what you have just told the committee in relation to the proposal?

Mrs Sandeman: That is replacing a stolen vehicle?

Mrs GERBER: Yes.

Mrs Sandeman: We have actually put in a petition which at the moment is with the Clerk in Brisbane. Hopefully it will be on the government website today or tomorrow. It is to do with the government having a no-interest loan scheme for perpetrators to repay the government and allow the victims to purchase a car. We suggest no less than \$10,000. The amount that I have taken is from the fact that you get \$10,000 for funeral expenses. That is how we came up with that. Also the fact that you cannot really get a decent car for under \$10,000. It would have to be a government issue to negotiate and refine that. However, the no-interest loan scheme would be through the government. The perpetrators would then have to repay that through their wage or government support. That would be organised in terms of time frames and the amount taken per week or whatever. That is what we are doing at the moment. We have just put that idea forward because at this stage nothing has been done to actually support the victims in this case. It is a big issue here in Townsville.

Mrs GERBER: Finally, in relation to this inquiry, in Cairns we heard from a number of victims of crime who said they did not know that the inquiry was on, but they saw it on the news and that was the only reason they were there. The time line for this inquiry is really short. I note, for example, that the mental health inquiry was given six months. For this inquiry we have around six weeks. How did you hear about this and do you think that victims of crime have had an appropriate opportunity to be able to share their stories and their perspectives with the committee?

Mr Sandeman: We heard about it through the Queensland Homicide Victims' Support Group. We got an email about it. I rang up Channel 7. Channel 7 knew nothing about it so we decided to do a bit of a story. I rang up the chair's office to find out where it was going to be. I got the flog around. Channel 7 rang up to try to find out where it was going to be. There were no places nominated in Queensland where it was going to be apart from Brisbane, I was told. The next day it was put up on the website that it was going to be here. From the story that we did on Channel 7 I have had a few people get in contact with me. In fact, there is a gentleman sitting here who I spoke to yesterday. He is a victim of crime. He knew nothing about it at all.

Mrs GERBER: Do you think if there was more time for this inquiry that we would be able to hear more from victims of crime?

Mr Sandeman: If people knew, if it was advertised on TV, this room would be full. Unfortunately, I cannot ask Wayne to come up and speak because I am not allowed to, but I know his story. He does not have any help at all. As far as the inquiry goes, the reason we did the petition is the pure fact that we know or we believe that this inquiry will be put under the table. You will ask your questions and you will do your submissions and all that sort of thing. We know that because we have been through it, not just with the government we have now but with Campbell Newman. We went through the whole lot. We know it is going to be put on the backburner. I was told by a member of parliament, when we did our last petition, that it is not a vote winner. I believe that this one will end up exactly the same. That is why we have done the petition, to keep it in the people's eye, to keep it in the politician's eye, whether it is Liberal, National, Independent—I do not care. I could go into politics but I do not want to. Whatever party is in power, please, please, help the victims.

We have a gentleman here who has taken a day off work. He had his ute stolen. He paid to get another ute, not the perpetrator. To be honest with you, I am sick and tired for the poor victim. What we want is the poor victim; not the poor person who robbed you or broke into your car or broke into your house or burnt our car out. It is not fair.

Mr WALKER: Thank you, Susan and John, for your time today. Your journey has been a big one. I have been tracking it for some time as a member of the local council and now as the state member. There is no doubt it has been very emotional. You have put a lot of hard work in to where you have got

to in your journey. In your submission you state that victims ‘need professionals from the Mental Health Sector included in the process to guide and evaluate situations in a timely manner’. From your lived experience, can you please explain to the committee how you would see professionals from the mental health sector helping victims of crime?

Mrs Sandeman: Like I mentioned in the introduction, there is nothing at the court. The court seems to be the first place where everyone comes together so it would be ideal to have a mental health worker onsite and other professionals to help and guide through the whole process of the court system. Also, for mental health workers to be in the court, especially if the victim is a witness, to constantly try to work out the signs of whether they are being retraumatised through the process. They could intervene and say to the judge, ‘Can we take a few moments or a brief moment to recompose ourselves?’

Mr WALKER: As a supplementary question, we have spoken prior to the meeting and I have read your submission. I want to hear some more about what you have mentioned previously, off the record, about your journey. After court, how did you feel? Were you feeling normal? Did you have a sense of déjà vu? Can you explain that? It is not just a moment in time. This has been 10-plus years. Can you share that with us?

Mrs Sandeman: Absolutely. Even today there are triggers. One example—and this was perhaps a few years ago—was just going to the doctors. I was sitting in the waiting room with John and a baby was crying. Being at the doctors of course the cry of a baby is like someone is being hurt. There are different cries. This cry particularly struck me. I felt different. I felt uncontrollable. I said to John. ‘I have to go. I have to get out.’ I had to wait outside rather than inside at reception to see my doctor. I had to sit outside on my own and try to compose myself and try to somehow get back to a normal way of thinking. That is what you do every day.

I have tried professional help and that does not work with me. If you have not been a victim, you truly do not understand what we are going through. A lot of professionals have learnt through textbooks and through speaking to other people. The raw and gut-wrenching feelings—you cannot explain it. You can only feel it. That is what you have to deal with every day.

There are triggers out in the community that you have to deal with. No-one sees that. Only you and your family know. These are some of the issues that I do not think a lot of people take into consideration.

Even with this inquiry, I am really disappointed that there are not more victims here speaking of the real-life situation and feeling they had when the crime was committed on them. I am really disappointed with the government that this inquiry is not extended to give these victims an opportunity.

Even this morning we had organisations speaking first. We need to really listen to the victims. We do not want to listen second hand what the victims went through. We want to hear people like us about how we are surviving day-to-day—mentally, financially, families being torn apart. I have an estranged daughter with three grandchildren that I will never see. I have to live with that. My life has to change. Mentally I have to cope with that and readjust my way of life and my thinking of what a family structure is, and try to be normal. There is no real normal but anyway try to do that. I can go on and on. Until you have been a victim you do not fully understand.

Mr WALKER: You just said ‘what is normal’. I think that is crucial to what we are trying to get to about mental health treatment—what is normal? You are questioning yourself, ‘Am I okay? Am I normal?’ This is part of your lived experience. I think that is what we need to hear more of. I want to thank you for that.

Mrs Sandeman: Thank you for your acknowledgement.

Mr Sandeman: As Sue said, unless you have been through it, you do not understand. As I said, this gentleman text me this morning. I was talking to him the other day on the phone. He did not know what to expect. One of the things that I have found as a victim is if somebody says to you, ‘How’re you going?’ I shrink because I do not know how I am going. When I say something to a victim, I say, ‘G’day.’ Forget asking, ‘How’re you going?’

The other thing is closure. You never get it. Every morning I get out of bed and I light a candle. If it his birthday, he gets 12. You never forget.

CHAIR: Thank you. That brings this part of the hearing to a conclusion. Thank you, Susan and John. We are happy to receive that additional information. Is leave granted to table that? There being no objection, it is so tabled.

PULLEN, Mrs Leanne, private capacity (via teleconference)

CHAIR: I welcome Leanne Pullen. We invite you to make a five-minute opening statement.

Mrs Pullen: Good afternoon. My name is Leanne Pullen. Is the phone echoing?

CHAIR: We can hear you clearly. Can you hear us?

Mrs Pullen: Yes, but it is echoing.

CHAIR: There is a little bit of an echo, but we will be fine.

Mrs Pullen: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon. My name is Leanne Pullen. I am speaking here today as a victim of crime and I would like to give a voice to other victims. (Inaudible).

CHAIR: Leanne, sorry to interrupt. Despite what I said earlier, we are having problems hearing you.

Mrs Pullen: I can hear you fine but it is echoing.

CHAIR: Leanne, could you start again please?

Mrs Pullen: Thank you Chair. Good afternoon to you and your fellow committee members. My name is Leanne Pullen and I am speaking here today as a victim of crime and would like to be a voice for other victims. Before I commence, I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the many lands on which we meet today and pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging.

Is it okay your end?

CHAIR: Yes, it is, Leanne.

Mrs Pullen: Thank you for allowing me to have provided a written submission and for speaking here today and my most sincere thanks for holding this inquiry.

In my written submission I spoke briefly about losing my son to homicide 11 years ago. Apart from being a mum who has lost her only son to tragedy, I also am a Volunteer Peer Support Leader under the QHVSG Peer Support program. In my submission I wrote about my experience with VAQ and said that perhaps VAQ could have something in place to remind victims that their case is closing so as they can apply to be reimbursed before it is too late. Ideally, it would be even more beneficial if VAQ didn't have an end date at all as realistically who can possibly put an end date on grief and trauma. The impact of homicide is ongoing.

Recovery is such a personal journey and each individual has different circumstances and varying needs. I believe it is important that financial assistance does not have an end date as it is critical that specialised support is available for life.

If the pool of money for each case was left open indefinitely, that would surely have to be a huge financial saving to our health system as so many must end up needing mental health care and sadly quite often become suicidal.

Many people go for several years never needing support but something happens to retrigger their trauma and then they need it and quite often it is financially unavailable. In our case our son's remains have never been found, so I truly believe that our family has never properly grieved and we are 11 years into our journey. Are we going to need support at some stage that won't be funded?

There are also endless triggers along the way. In our case we have had multiple perpetrators so that has meant multiple applications for parole, multiple court hearings, multiple appeals et cetera.

For families where their loved one's remains have not been located they are left with the grief and trauma of not knowing, always left wondering. How do you put a time limit on the unknown?

In recent times VAQ has been extremely slow in accessing applications and applicants are left waiting to see if they are going to receive assistance. It would be extremely helpful if this process could be sped up. I appreciate the fact that VAQ must be inundated with applications and I also am extremely appreciative that VAQ exists as it is so crucial for victims.

I have supported victims where they have lost the financial support person in the family and they had to wait 18 months for approval for assistance. I have supported victims who desperately needed psychological care but couldn't afford it as they were waiting for financial assistance.

After a homicide occurs, some victims are left mentally incapacitated, unable to function mentally and physically so are unable to work to support themselves and family. I also wonder about how it is decided who is eligible for assistance from VAQ? I support a young man who witnessed his mate being murdered and then had to run terrified to save his own life. This young man was obviously a key witness at the ensuing trials. His life has been changed irrevocably. He is permanently looking over his shoulder, could not work for many years as he was scared to go out and he has moved far away.

This innocent young man who saw others imprisoned for a heinous crime was denied assistance from VAQ!

I also know of siblings who have had to go to great lengths to prove that they have a relationship with their deceased loved one.

Families are retriggered when their loved one's perpetrators apply for parole whether they are released or not. Just the thought of them being released is so daunting and retriggering. This can be twenty years plus into their journey.

This is the time when many victims may need professional support. I believe that victims should be given the option to speak in person to the Parole Board when the decision to grant parole is being considered. Does the parole board even read the written submissions? Surely having the registered victim speak to them personally would have a greater impact and it also allows that person to be heard and to be a voice for their loved one.

Many victims have no say whatsoever in the whole court process. Some prosecutors say that they will be doing X and the victims aren't consulted or allowed a voice. The court process is intimidating enough and this is very disempowering and stressful for the victim.

When we were ready for trial, we were very fortunate to have a prosecutor who treated us with the utmost respect and who allowed us to make crucial decisions as to go ahead with the trial or accept downgraded pleas and perhaps find our son's remains. Even though we never found our son's remains, at least we were allowed to make that decision.

There are many other subjects that I could touch on, but I would like to finish by saying that victims need to be kept informed throughout the whole legal process, especially from when the homicide takes place until sentencing. Navigating the criminal system can be disconcerting and victims need to feel included in the legal process or at least be kept informed. A short regular phone call either from the QPS or the DPP to keep victims updated, even if there hasn't been any changes. The unknown can be really hard to live with.

Thank you most sincerely for listening.

CHAIR: Thank you, Leanne. I will hand over to the deputy chair to ask the first question.

Mrs GERBER: I heard in your oral submission then that you were talking about assistance for victims of crime in relation to parole hearings. Forgive me, some of your words were really muffled, so I could not get your whole submission there. Are you speaking into a speaker phone?

Mrs Pullen: I am.

Mrs GERBER: Would you be able to take it off speaker phone and put it to your ear so we can hear it clearer? Our line is not great here.

Mrs Pullen: I just cannot hear very well without it being on speaker phone. That is okay.

Mrs GERBER: You do whatever is easiest for you, Leanne.

Mrs Pullen: That is okay.

Mrs GERBER: My question is targeted towards what victims of crime need in terms of support in relation to parole hearings and the Parole Board.

Mrs Pullen: The whole parole process is just so daunting. As I said, victims do not have a voice throughout the whole process so that is why I really believe they should be allowed to attend a parole hearing in person because surely that has to have a greater impact on the Parole Board. A victim can send in a written submission and I am hoping they are read, but are they read? Whereas if you are there in person, they have to hear what you say. As it currently has an end date, there are people with parole that may not come up for 20 years down the track, and victims are totally retriggered and they have to go through that whole process. Some could need psychological help, some could need financial assistance. The no-body no-parole involves multiple hearings, especially if you have multiple perpetrators. The list is endless. I really do believe that if that could be left open there are so many ways that people could be assisted throughout the whole parole process.

Mrs GERBER: That is an element that the committee has not really heard much about. We know that there is a time limitation period in relation to the application that victims of crime can make. Essentially you are suggesting that victims of crime can be retraumatised at the time of a parole hearing and that there should be no time limit on financial assistance or emotional assistance that is given to victims of crime.

Mrs Pullen: That is right. Just receiving that phone call or email saying that a prisoner is applying for parole makes your stomach drop. I feel emotional just thinking about it because as I said we had

multiple perpetrators. Every time you receive that, your whole world crumbles and you have to go through the whole process again of putting in a submission and hoping you will be heard. Sometimes I do really wonder about that. Some people may not wish to speak in person, but I would imagine quite a few people would like to be able to be there and be a voice, especially for their loved ones. It is most definitely retriggering and, as I said, that could be six months down the track or it could be five years or 20 years. There is not really a particular end date to individual cases. That is why I believe it should be open.

Mrs GERBER: Thank you for making the time for us today, given everything you have been through. I really appreciate it.

CHAIR: Leanne, I want to touch on your submission that you sent to the secretariat. You said—

... when I applied to VAQ for assistance I was told that our case had closed five weeks earlier. I realise that was my mistake by not keeping track of the date although I do believe that perhaps to avoid this happening to other applicants that maybe VAQ could have in place some sort of reminder system—

Could you expand on that? Were you able to then reopen your application?

Mrs Pullen: No.

CHAIR: So once you got notification that it was out of time, that was the end of the discussion with—

Mrs Pullen: Yes. I actually still sent in my application and I never heard back from them. That was all during COVID et cetera so I did not follow that any further.

CHAIR: Do you have a copy of that application?

Mrs Pullen: Actually I do not, because I was really angry when the person told me that my case had closed and I thought, 'I'm just going to send it off regardless.' Normally I keep a copy of everything but in that—

CHAIR: You did not in that instance?

Mrs Pullen: I did not, because I thought obviously nothing was going to come of it. The reason I had not applied as it went along was that, as I said, we had multiple perpetrators in our case and we were going through a no-body no-parole hearing. When somebody was denied parole, then they would reapply so we were going backwards and forwards to Brisbane quite often and I thought, 'Why send them in in dribs and drabs? I'll send them in in one hit.' Then when COVID hit I thought I would send in my receipts but our case had closed.

Ms BUSH: Leanne, thank you for the recommendations you have made in your submission. I have heard you on those things around removing the expiration date of the Victim Assist application and greater representation at parole. I think you have some meaningful recommendations there. I want to take a different focus with you, if that is okay. Notwithstanding the horror of what you have gone through, your submission does outline a couple of ways where things actually did work really well. I think it is important for us as a committee to understand what it looks like when it does work well. You mentioned some positive interactions with some police. What was it about their particular approach that was really beneficial for you and your family?

Mrs Pullen: The first two officers treated us really appallingly. Apart from that, we were treated so respectfully by all the police and our son's whole case was treated respectfully. To start off with, I felt like we were criminals. That is how the first two made us feel. I have spoken to a couple of the detectives this morning and they said how it has had such an impact on them; they always remember Tim on his anniversary et cetera. It is just their respectfulness and the way that they treated us and Tim's case. When you find out that you have lost a loved one to homicide, you are very vulnerable so you really need to be treated with a bit of respect and dignity. A bit of compassion and empathy goes a long way. Apart from the first two officers, until this very day the QPS have been compassionate and empathetic towards us. I think that is vitally important because victims are going through enough just getting their head around having lost a loved one under such circumstances.

Ms BUSH: The Queensland Homicide Victims' Support Group were involved in your case and you continue to volunteer with them today. Can you outline for the committee the benefits of peer support? Some people have said that it is great to work with specialists, but it is different actually having someone in your life who has experienced what you have experienced and can connect. Can you talk a bit about the peer support benefits?

Mrs Pullen: Being a peer support volunteer for QHVSG, I do face-to-face telephone support, I run support group meetings and I provide court support. I put on a memorial service once a year for our members, among other activities. For my husband and me, for a long time we could not leave the

house. We got to the stage where we had no groceries, and online shopping was not really a thing that we considered. Every day I would say, 'I'll go and buy groceries tomorrow,' and tomorrow just kept on getting postponed.

Once we started attending support groups, it is just a place where you feel like you can actually be yourself. You are with a group of people who all have some idea what you are going through. We always make sure at our support group meetings that we never leave without having a laugh. Sometimes I think if people see us sitting around and recognise us because we come from a small community, they probably think, 'What have they got to be laughing about?' but you can just let your hair down and be yourself and you can talk to people who have some idea what you are going through. That is really the beauty of it. It is really great talking to specialists, counsellors et cetera and the staff at QHVSG themselves are awesome, but peer support is just something that is unique and a very necessary tool, especially for this journey.

Ms BUSH: Thank you for everything that you do.

Mr KRAUSE: Leanne, thank you for your submission. It was a bit hard to hear some of the things you spoke about earlier. Did you mention that there was a witness in the murder trial you spoke of who took his own life after the fact?

Mrs Pullen: No. He had to run terrified to save his own life.

Mr KRAUSE: I obviously misheard you. I am sorry about that.

Mrs Pullen: He did not receive any assistance, which I could not understand because he was the key witness. I am thinking that without him the trials would not have gone the way they did but he still did not receive assistance.

Mr KRAUSE: And you thought in terms of the Victims of Crime Assistance Act that that person as a witness should have been considered as a victim as well.

Mrs Pullen: Most definitely. He was right there in the same room with the person who was murdered, and then he had to run terrified to save his own life. His life has really been changed irrevocably. It is really sad. He was only a very young man when this happened. He has moved far away. He cannot hold down a relationship. His whole life has changed. He is one person who could most definitely have done with assistance, not just for the financial factor of having some income but for psychological help. He could not afford any of that so he went without and that is really sad, especially when he turned around and had to be a witness and not just once but several times so that was traumatic enough for him as well. Out of so many cases I have seen or heard, I feel he was very deserving but he did not receive it.

Mr KRAUSE: I have been a member of parliament for a few years and I was there when the no-body no-parole laws were passed. I know how hard you worked for them so I want to thank you for that and for your submission today.

Mrs Pullen: Thank you very much, and thank you for listening and thank you most sincerely for the members and the inquiry that is taking place.

CHAIR: That brings to a conclusion this part of the hearing. Leanne, thank you for your written submission. Were you reading from some notes in your opening statement?

Mrs GERBER: This is not a criticism, but we could not hear you properly, Leanne, so if you were reading from something and could give that to the committee, it might help Hansard with transcribing your oral statement.

Mrs Pullen: Some of it I did. I can send it to you.

CHAIR: Did you have a document in front of you that you were reading from?

Mrs Pullen: I looked at some of it but I did have all my notes there. I am happy to send it to you.

CHAIR: Just send us what you think would be helpful. If there is something that you do not send us because it was just notes, that is okay too. You can decide what you send us, but whatever you send us will be greatly received.

Mrs Pullen: I have a pretty good memory for things, so I can type it out.

CHAIR: Leanne, I do not want you to go to any trouble. Whatever you give us we will be grateful for.

Mrs Pullen: Thank you very much.

MITCHELL, Mr Wayne, Private capacity

CHAIR: I now welcome Wayne Mitchell to come and speak to the committee.

Mr Mitchell: I am also the President of the Townsville Action Against Crime Committee. I am Aboriginal, too.

CHAIR: Wayne, you have been here most of the morning, which I thank you for. I do not know how you want to present today, but you are welcome to make an opening statement after which the committee will obviously have some questions for you. If you could keep it to five minutes so we have time to ask questions, we would appreciate it.

Mr Mitchell: When I am on the committee it is not about myself, but today it is. I have been a victim nine times. It includes my kids also. Ten years ago my ute was stolen. Nothing happened there much. The system failed me back then, but in the past five years I have had a break-in and my son got arrested for chasing them down the street at 2.30 in the morning. He was arrested for chasing those who broke into my house. There is a problem there. They were never caught. They had six police cars. That is one example. The other one is a daughter with a DVO—the same thing. She was belted up and was dropped off on my driveway—dropped off, belted up, dragged out of a car. The police came. Nothing was done to that bloke—no charges, nothing. That is another thing.

Another one is my son was attacked at 1.30 in the morning—got grabbed, deprivation of liberty. It hurts because it has affected my whole life. He was put in the car and dragged down the street at 1.30 in the morning. A hand held to his throat: 'If your father doesn't come out, I will break your neck.' This is how it was. The police came. No charges were laid against this bloke in the same street where I lived in Kirwan. It affected my son mentally and emotionally—the same as my daughter. A year and a half ago, my daughter was raped. As a father you say you have to protect your kids. The law has let me down there with my daughter. She has a mental illness. The officer at the city police station said, 'You're the father. You cannot come here and do nothing about it. She is over 18. That is how it goes.' That is wrong. I told him that she had a problem. She was being seen for a mental health issue. Nothing happened there. They are blaming my daughter and they closed the case. I have a lot of anger about that.

I have a lot of anger in a lot of ways. The police have failed. I was nearly run over and killed over 12 months ago when living in a house in Railway Estate. They tried to break in and I chased them. I had a back problem at the time. I am a tradesman—a painter. I chased them at 1.30 in the morning. They were in a stolen vehicle. I went out the front. They drove 50 metres, came back and tried to run me over. I grabbed a bottle of turps; that was the nearest thing I could grab. I was thinking about a shovel, but then I get in trouble. They came back again for a second time. I called the police. No-one comes. My son called the police.

This is how it is in Townsville. In all the years I have been here—I am born and bred here—I have never seen so much stuff in my life. As victims—for my kids and me—it should be prevention before cure. The main thing that should happen for victims is exactly what John was saying. We need justice. That solves a lot of problems. To know that they can go and live in their home and it be a secure place is important—not deadlock everything and feel, 'Well, I have been raped in my own home.' That is what it feels like, because that is what taken away from you. If they are locked up, they should not be let out. When I talk to a lot of people around Townsville, they have the same view—no-one, no politician, is doing anything to save the victims that we are fighting for. I see that every day. I hear people's comments. They are saying the same thing. We have politicians here who do nothing. That is factual. I know Aaron Harper. I used to battle with him years ago. Nothing has ever changed here to help the victims. I want to see change.

With my kids, it is the same thing. There has been no help in that way. They are suicidal. Years ago, my daughter was suicidal because of what happened and more so now after the rape and all this sort of thing. For my son it is the same thing: 'Where is justice, dad?' A few years ago at 12.30 in the day I drove past the Kirwan tavern with my 12-year-old son—he is 17 now—and a stolen car went straight past me and nearly wiped me off the road. I pulled up at the lights. I did not think at the time—I was stupid—the car was full of Aboriginals and I said something, 'Why don't you just drive safe?' Nothing happened. They said, 'Okay.' I let it go and drove on. They chased me up towards the BP at the roundabout. I stopped there. They got out of the car and started belting on the car. My son was so scared.

I followed where these fellas went. I went to Kirwan police station and told them where they went. I waited there for an hour and a half for what? They never did anything. They never left to go and even chase them. My son is 17 next month and it is the same thing for him—this psychology thing that happens to the kids. He is an Aboriginal leader at Heatley High School. I am very proud of him, but he

says, 'Dad, where is justice here?' My other sons, 'Where is justice?' My daughter, 'Where is it?' I am a dad. It comes down to a father saying, 'You protect your kids. Trust the police. Trust this, trust that.' Where is the trust? There is nothing there anymore because they are still doing it. Yesterday, there was a stolen vehicle across from the courthouse with little kids hanging out of it. Where? How can you say that we will get counselling and this and that when no-one is locked up? It is a revolving door. The victims are sick of that. That is all you hear. If you had more time, you would have the stadium filled up right now—I tell you right now—of victims. Do you know what I am saying? That is it. That is all I will say.

CHAIR: I don't want to cut you off, but I am just conscious of time. Laura, do you have a question for Wayne?

Mrs GERBER: Thank you, Wayne, for coming in. I can see that you are very emotional. I am really grateful for your testimony. We have overwhelmingly heard from victims that they have been let down. I really appreciate your coming and sharing your story with us today. In terms of the support that victims of crime need, what might have helped you? I understand what you said around the lack of police resources to be able to come out and attend to the instances that you have spoken about, but what would have helped you as a victim?

Mr Mitchell: First of all, if they catch them, lock them up. That is it. Cleveland is just a stepping stone. They live in luxury over there. They have to be disciplined in the right way. This is the whole thing. I would be happy to know that these ones are not getting mobile phones and PlayStations. It is a holiday camp. You will hear the same from all the victims around Townsville. That is all they talk about—being on Facebook and everything else. They are living it up. It is a holiday camp. Everywhere you go the victims like me say, 'Where is the justice?' Even the kids say, 'Where is the justice?'

I am so proud of the schools that have the Clontarf and Stars programs. My daughter excelled last year. Even though there are things going on, you see all the Indigenous kids—the white and Indigenous kids, the same thing—doing those programs. Seeing all that brings you so much satisfaction because you know that these kids are doing something positive at school. It is good because they are off the street and are not doing the wrong thing. You see progress in that way. This should be both ways. The kids are changing and we see progress in that way. What I would like to see is kids getting taught a trade by a tradesman in a special place somewhere. It can happen. It can work.

Mrs GERBER: Did you say that if this inquiry was given a more appropriate amount of time we would be able to hear from more victims of crime?

Mr Mitchell: Yes, definitely. You would have half a stadium filled up, I can guarantee you. If there was more time, then you would appreciate what is going on. You are from down south, is that right? You do not understand what goes on up here, believe me. You are coming up here and hearing what we are saying. You see it on the news, but if you go in amongst the people here you will hear something different. People are leaving and selling their houses. You will hear a lot of truthful things about the victims.

CHAIR: Thank you, Wayne, for attending and thank you for giving your evidence today.

NIXON, Mr Geoff, Private capacity

NIXON, Ms Kym, Private capacity

Ms Nixon: I am here—help me out Jonty—as my brother passed away two weeks ago in an accident. We as a family have not been respected. We as a family have not been given the time to grieve. As a family, we have been not been respected by the media. The media just used my brother's death as a money-making expedition. I had one member of the media contact me through Facebook asking if I knew anything about this truck accident. None of us replied. My brother died on 15 April. I was called to the scene because I am his next of kin. He is my best mate. My immediate response was to take care of my family and let my family know what was happening. I contacted my children. I contacted my husband. My next call was to my mum. My mum is of age. My mum is not really that well. I said to my mum as calmly as I could, 'This is what has happened. I will call you when I know more. I will call you when I get him out. We are just trying to get him out. I will call you.' We were standing on the corner around my car. The police had the road cordoned off. Then a scooter rider came through the police cordon and I watched him jump on to the median strip. He took a photo of my brother in his truck and within two minutes it was on social media. The knock-on effect from that was I had my mother on the phone hysterical.

These guys by not contacting me did the wrong thing. They should have asked the family's permission. We understand that they have to report the story, but they need to stop and respect the families. I brought a photo today of my brother. He was my best mate. If only the media respects the family and works with the family and talks with the family then the family would not be hurting as much as we feel today.

I am making a stand. I am going to make a noise because I want the media and anybody who goes against a family's wishes to be held accountable for the pain that they cause these families. The police only ever identified the incident as '45-year-old Deeragun man' and 'truck incident'—short and sweet and to the point. But when they open up the media lines and social media, you get all the trolls, you get all the scammers and you get all the people who do not know.

The photos that were published were not my brother. That is my brother. They just have to stop. From the day dot I have said to anybody who is going to work with me, anybody who is going to help me, I am going to make a call for Willy's rule so that this does not happen to another family.

Mrs GERBER: Kym, if it is too much you do not have to answer, but was your brother a victim of crime? Was he killed by another vehicle in the truck roll?

Ms Nixon: No, there was no other vehicle. It was just an incident that happened.

Ms BUSH: Thanks, Kym and Geoff, for coming in today. To give context, we have been in touch because obviously you have lost your brother and, although at this point there is no allegation of a vehicular homicide or anything like that occurring, this inquiry has been talking about media reporting on traumatic events and that is something that you wanted to come and speak to the committee about.

Ms Nixon: Yes.

Ms BUSH: I think you have done that in a really clear and insightful way. Recognising that the media is going to have pressure to say something, if you could redo those early days in a way that would have felt better for you and allowed you to get your story out and your brother's story out in a more respectful and controlled way, what differences would you have liked to have seen done?

Ms Nixon: It would have made a huge difference because they do not know where my mum lives. We are a private family. If anybody trolls my name on Facebook or my children's names, you will not see this on our pages to gather the clicks. If they only considered what was going on and respected that everybody is hurting here right now. As I said to Nick Dametto when he met with me today, we accept that the public has a right to know that there was an incident. We accept that they have to report this incident. But they should not be making money off people's clicks. That is what it is. People are nasty. Humans are nasty. Their nature is nasty. They do not care. They do it for thrills and kicks, a lot of people. Let us tell you when it is okay to put his photo up.

I contacted the *Townsville Bulletin*. On Monday, Channel 7 sent the message. I did not respond. He was on Channel 7 news with photos that were taken on my driveway that they obtained from his Instagram account because someone in the comments on the *Townsville Bulletin* site commented and they have gone and run with it: 'Yeah, I know him'. So they have scoped Facebook. You can find anybody on social media. They have scoped him and said, 'We'll just run with this.'

The next day the *Bulletin* put up another story. I contacted them that day. I was calm. I did not lose my bananas. I got through to the chief editor of staff. I calmly said, 'I see your post on Facebook. Can you tell me that you asked the family? Did you ask the family for permission to release that photo?' The lady said, 'No.' She asked me who I was. I said, 'I'm the sister of that gentleman that you posted the photo of. That was not my brother. I would like you to take that photo down because it is not. Just take it down.' She hung up on me. She said, 'I don't need to talk to you.'

My son, because he is being a protective kid looking after his mum, rang the *Townsville Bulletin*. He spoke to the first lady and the first lady worked with him and said, 'Yes, I will do my best to take it down.' Then they put him through to the same lady I spoke to. He identified himself and as soon as he said his last name she did not even say anything; she just hung up. The next day it was actually in the physical press. There is no respect.

Ms BUSH: I am really sorry that experience has happened. I would like to ask you a really specific question, if that is okay?

Ms Nixon: Yes.

Ms BUSH: I am trying to think of solutions as well. Some people have said that it might be beneficial to get police to work with families to identify a nominated contact person in that family to liaise with authorities and media and different people in those really early days when there is a lot going on. Can I get your views on how that would have felt if that had happened?

Ms Nixon: The police knew my stance. The police knew I was it. The police let the *Bulletin* in. They stopped everybody else going through but they let that scooter go through. Then that opened it up for my mum. It is not cool. Give us time to grieve. Two weeks ago you would not have got this photo but today you have this photo, as much as it hurts me because I am still jumping through other things. His kids did not know. He was estranged from his kids. I needed to tell those kids, as the family member. They just have to stop. I am going to fight this to the end. I want legislation changed because they have to show respect. Report the story and tell the facts, but do not let other people come. That is it.

CHAIR: Thank you for your time, Kym, and for the support you offered, Geoff. That concludes the hearing. Thank you to everyone who has participated today. Thanks to all those who have helped organise today's hearing, including Hansard and the secretariat. A transcript of the proceedings will be available on the committee's webpage in due course. I declare this public hearing closed.

The committee adjourned at 2.07 pm.