



# ***LEGAL AFFAIRS AND SAFETY COMMITTEE***

**Members present:**

Mr PS Russo MP—Chair  
Mrs LJ Gerber MP  
Mr JE Hunt MP  
Mr ST O'Connor MP  
Mr CG Whiting MP (virtual)

**Staff present:**

Mrs K O'Sullivan—Committee Secretary

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

### **TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS**

**Tuesday, 2 May 2023**

**Southport**

## TUESDAY, 2 MAY 2023

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### **The committee met at 2.07 pm.**

**CHAIR:** Good afternoon. I declare open this public hearing for the committee's inquiry into the assistance provided to victims of crime. My name is Peter Russo. I am the member for Toohey and chair of the committee. We 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; Chris Whiting, the member for Bancroft, who is subbing in for Jonty Bush, who has other commitments; Jason Hunt, the member for Caloundra; and Sam O'Connor, the member for Bonney. Sandy Bolton, the member for Noosa, is an apology today as she is unwell.

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 these 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 due course. Media may be present and are subject to the committee's media rules and my directions 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 would ask people to turn their mobile phones off or to silent mode.

### **BERINGER, Ms Mishayla, Program Coordinator, StandBy Gold Coast**

**CHAIR:** Good afternoon. Thank you for being here. I would invite you to make an opening statement of up to five minutes after which the committee may have some questions for you.

**Ms Beringer:** Thank you so much for having me here today. StandBy Support After Suicide is a program that supports anyone who may be impacted or bereaved by suicide. That may include family members, friends, community members, first responders and witnesses—really anybody who may be impacted by a suicide death. We do not have any parameters on when the death occurred until when we can offer our support, and we can support people of all ages. Our support is also free. We are funded by the Department of Health.

Essentially, we are a brief intervention support service, so we provide that sort of immediate support. We facilitate space for people to share their stories, explore their grief and process some of those emotions and their experiences. From there, we connect them with other services and supports for that longer term support and we maintain contact over the phone for the next 24 months, just to check in and ensure the connections we have made are suitable and they are accessing that support. Essentially, that is a little bit about us. We are open to your questions.

**Mrs GERBER:** Thanks for your appearance. Can you tell the committee how you intersect with victims of crime? Does your organisation deal at all with the Victims of Crime Assistance Act in terms of financial support for victims of crime or helping victims of crime obtain financial support under the Victims of Crime Assistance Act? Just give us a bit of background.

**Ms Beringer:** Not at our site. We have not had to yet, but I am not sure about all of the other StandBy sites. StandBy is a national service. Perhaps maybe somewhere else in Queensland, but not on the Gold Coast.

**Mrs GERBER:** In terms of support for victims of crime, does suicide fit in with that?

**Ms Beringer:** In this instance you had questions that referred to victims as the bereaved and the crime as suicide death, even though it is not a crime anymore.

**Mrs GERBER:** There are two limbs to the terms of reference for the victims of crime inquiry, so I will just give you the context to some of our questions. The first limb is really kind of looking at how to better coordinate statewide services for victims of crime when looking at the investigation of a crime, the court process a victim of crime might need to go through when that crime is being prosecuted—by the police, the Commonwealth DPP or the state DPP—and then post that, so bail and parole. It is Southport

victims of crime in that circumstance. That is the first limb. The second term of reference is around the financial assistance that might be available to victims of crime and how that system might be improved. If there is anything your organisation might like to contribute to either of those, we would be keen to hear from you in relation to that.

**Ms Beringer:** When there is a death by suicide, the police do have to go to the scene and it is treated like an investigation until the intention of the person who died is determined, so whether it was suicide or not. I suppose I was just wanting to talk about the support that is offered to families after there has been a suicide death. I do have a little bit of feedback on how the police can improve how they interact with families that are impacted by suicide and the financial assistance that is offered to the bereaved around forensic cleaning after a suicide death. I am not sure if that fits into what you are looking into.

**Mrs GERBER:** Those two probably do, so if you want to start there.

**Ms Beringer:** After a suicide death, as you know, there is no financial assistance, to my knowledge, to help the families with forensic cleaning. I do know of families who have had to raise funds themselves to help. After the death happened in a car accident, they needed to get the car towed because they could not afford those towing fees on their own. I also have heard so many stories of families who have had to clean up blood from carpets in their own homes because they could not afford to get a forensic cleaner to help clean up after a suicide.

Then in terms of the police, I think there needs to be a bit more training to have them more trauma informed. I have heard some really horrible experiences that people have had with the police where they have been given information that adds to the trauma they are already experiencing after having lost a loved one. For example, I heard of a police officer letting a person who lost one of their friends see the deceased—sorry, I do not like to say it—while they were still hanging, which is incredibly traumatic. I have heard another story of police telling the family that their loved one had scratches on their body so perhaps they had changed their mind at the last minute and had not wanted to die. That causes so many questions for the people who are left behind and complicates their grief.

I suppose, as well, it is about having consistent, safe language within the police. Mindframe has guidelines on safe language around communicating about suicide. For example, one of them is not using the word 'committed' when we are talking about suicide because that associates suicide with crime and adds to that stigma of suicide in the community. In the referrals that we get from the police, pretty much all of them say 'committed suicide'. I think it would be really beneficial to have some guidelines for when they are communicating with families and service providers around suicide. Does that answer your question?

**Mrs GERBER:** Yes, it does. It gives a bit more context, thank you.

**CHAIR:** Mishayla, you said that there is a document that sets out, in my words, respectful language that can be spoken when you are dealing with relatives and families. Is that document available on your webpage or anywhere else?

**Ms Beringer:** That is through Mindframe. They have guidelines that they have recently updated, actually, just around preferred language and safe language when talking about mental health and suicide.

**CHAIR:** Is that on the Mindframe webpage?

**Ms Beringer:** I imagine so, but if not I can definitely get a copy and send that through.

**CHAIR:** That would be helpful if you could send it through to the secretariat so that we can use it in our deliberations.

**Ms Beringer:** Yes.

**Mr HUNT:** Mishayla, thank you for taking the time to represent your organisation. I have three questions but they are all quick and easy ones. How many people operate out of the Gold Coast base of your organisation at the moment?

**Ms Beringer:** Just within the StandBy team?

**Mr HUNT:** Yes.

**Ms Beringer:** Two of us work full-time but I have a team of casuals. Off the top of my head, I think there are six or seven of them. We put a message out to see if there is anybody available to go visit a family on this date and at this time. It is like almost an on-call basis for the casuals and we utilise that to go and see families as needed.

**Mr HUNT:** You said initially, I think, that you are funded through Queensland Health?

**Ms Beringer:** Yes.

**Mr HUNT:** Is that a recurrent amount per annum?

**Ms Beringer:** I am not too sure. I think that might be a question for our national office. I can get some more information on that if you need it.

**Mr HUNT:** That is perfectly fine. You have two full-timers and up to six casuals. Do you operate on a case-load basis?

**Ms Beringer:** No, not really. We kind of just respond to any requests that come in as they do come in. Because we do not do case management, we can see people relatively quickly. Pretty much as soon as they are available we will try to organise something then. We do not have a maximum number of people we can support in any year.

**Mr HUNT:** The call for assistance comes in and then whoever happens to be on duty that day goes, or is there someone allocating where the calls go?

**Ms Beringer:** If they are local to Standby, they all come to us—or me. From there we will talk with the bereaved and explain what our support looks like and if they are interested. Then we arrange a time to go and meet them. That might be me or the other full-time employee going out or it could be two of the casuals going out. Then I and the full-time worker manage all of the follow-ups in providing that additional information, making the referrals and all of that side of it.

**Mr HUNT:** How frequently do you touch base with your clients?

**Ms Beringer:** We make the phone call the next day to check in and see how they are doing after we have done that initial visit, and then again at one week, three months, 12 months and 24 months. In between those times, if they want an additional call, say, on an anniversary or a birthday, we can schedule that in and they can call us at any time.

**Mr HUNT:** Are your clients aware of the services? Are they largely aware or is it up to you to make them aware of any other services that they might be able to access? Do you find that at that stage, because of bereavement, grief, shock and loss, they are not really thinking about where they can access services and want agencies such as yours to step in and provide guidance?

**Ms Beringer:** I think it is a bit of a mix. Some people are still so overwhelmed by their grief and in a state of shock that they do not even know where to start or where they would even look for that sort of support. We do support some people who are very aware of what is available in the community. I suppose it varies. It just depends on what they may have already accessed in the past or what they happen to know about and what is available.

**CHAIR:** In relation to the assistance, am I correct in assuming that no assistance comes from Victim Assist in this area?

**Ms Beringer:** Financial assistance for the forensic clean-up and things like that?

**CHAIR:** Yes, for the service and the clean-up.

**Ms Beringer:** It is my understanding that nothing comes from anywhere, really. I had a look on the website and that sort of financial assistance is available for homicide deaths, but people are not eligible for suicide.

**Mrs GERBER:** I think I understand the crux of what you are trying to achieve today, which is that, while this is a victims of crime inquiry, what you are talking about is not a crime anymore so there is a hole there. There is a gap in support for families that have suffered a death as a result of suicide—it is lacking—when other families suffering from a homicide or other victims of crime get a little bit of support. Is that the crux, essentially, of what you are trying to get across to the committee today?

**Ms Beringer:** Yes.

**CHAIR:** There are a couple of minutes left on the clock if members have any questions? If not, I will let Mishayla go about her busy day.

**Ms Beringer:** I will get a copy of those Mindframe guidelines sent through so you can have a look at them.

**CHAIR:** Can you send that to the secretariat by 9 May?

**Ms Beringer:** Yes.

**CHAIR:** They have your contact details so they will reach out.

**Ms Beringer:** That would be great, thank you.

**CHAIR:** Thank you for your time.

## **HARRIS, Mr David, Private capacity**

**CHAIR:** Good afternoon, David. Would you like to make an opening statement and then the panel will have some questions for you, if that is okay?

**Mr Harris:** I have a two-page statement to make. It might take five or six minutes, so do not panic if I am a little over time.

**CHAIR:** We will not panic, David. You have the floor.

**Mr Harris:** My name is David Harris. It is a privilege and an honour to have the opportunity to speak to you today. I have met so many other victims of sexual abuse, some who have attempted suicide, some who work at a brothel to pay their rent. I speak on behalf of them too.

I was a victim of sexual abuse and torture that has destroyed my life. The abuse and torture was so painful and led me to suffer such severe PTSD that I have never been able to have full-time work. I have never been in a relationship. The only person in my whole life who has ever told me 'I love you' was also a victim of domestic violence. I will talk about her later. I had to undergo speech therapy—painful speech therapy—to be able to speak at all. Over the past six years I have had over 500 sessions with counsellors and psychologists, as well as having to call crisis lines on multiple occasions, even as recently as Saturday. At one point I attempted suicide and at another time was driven to the point where, due to the appalling treatment by members of a crisis line, I very nearly attempted suicide again.

On Saturday, while proudly wearing my 'stop domestic violence' running singlet at a local park run, a man approached me and said he was also a victim of domestic violence. We shared stories. We cried together. We said how we both suffered from PTSD and that what people do not understand is that the pain never goes away. It is also as if we have the words 'victim of domestic violence' marked permanently on our faces.

Victims need ongoing support, not temporary measures. When it came to being interrogated by the police, they offered no support and no empathy. They did not care about the impact on me of their questions or of the abuse I suffered. I was regarded as a perpetrator—as a criminal, not a victim. I left the police station feeling, 'Okay, if I meet a lady or a man and rape and bash them then the police will take the word of the criminal or the perpetrator and not the victim.' I was so distressed that it is a wonder I made it home alive. I realised that it is no wonder so few victims have the courage to speak out because when we do we are traumatised by the actions of the police and the attitude of society as a whole.

A couple of years ago I met a lady who I will call Jade, which is not her real name. We talked over time and she told me her story. She was raped by her father. Later on she was married and she became a victim of domestic violence by her husband. She suffers from depression. At one point she turned to drugs but does not now. Due to her being unable to pay her health costs—she is on chemotherapy at the moment—and her bills to look after her children, she has to work as a prostitute. I love Jade and Jade loves me, but because the owners of the brothel where she works do not allow it, she is not even allowed to have coffee with me. It hurts. Jade, through no fault of her own, was let down by the system. I, through no fault of my own, was also let down by the system. Despite all of that, I have fought so hard for justice. At the Q1 Stair Challenge in March, at my prompting, the crowd yelled out, 'Stop domestic violence.' I ran up each of those 1,331 steps not for my sake but to raise domestic violence awareness.

The most important recommendation which needs to be implemented now is that victims such as me and others with a lived experience of violence and abuse be engaged in the training of police. It would be comforting and therapeutic for victims to know we can make a difference to others who have come into contact with the police. Experienced officers could be used who have perhaps gained a bit of perspective over the years and can temper the blunt responses of newer recruits.

Police need the help of victims such as me to help them learn about the huge emotional impact—I stress, emotional impact—of domestic violence. Domestic violence is more than physical; it is emotional and psychological as well. As a victim of sexual abuse and torture and because of its ongoing impact on me, I felt for most of my life that it was a mistake I was born. I think of that every day, especially considering that so many perpetrators—I mean criminals—are full of excuses. There is no excuse for someone to commit an act of domestic violence. There is no excuse for victims to not receive ongoing support.

I have been involved in research with the RMIT led by Elena Campbell, and I have given you details about how to contact her. Writing this statement, helping raise domestic violence awareness through whatever means I can, and begging, pleading and praying that those with lived experience such as me can be involved in changing processes to help victims of domestic violence past, present and future has been distressing at times but it is something I was born to do.

There needs to be interstate cooperation so that different states can learn from each other; what is happening in one state can work in another. There needs to be interparty cooperation—not rivalry. Domestic violence is above politics; it is about victims. What Jade and I do not want is for the outcomes of these hearings to be merely, 'There needs to be better police training and for counsellors to be present at interviews,' with that happening in about six months time. What Jade and I most want and need now is for victims—those with lived experience—to be actively involved in making desperately needed changes to a system which has failed us, time after painful time.

From now on, I do not want to be regarded as a victim of abuse and violence. I want to be regarded as someone who, despite all the pain I have suffered, is so very lucky, blessed, privileged, honoured and proud in my quest to raise domestic violence awareness and to motivate and encourage you—yes, you—to implement desperately needed changes. Together we can make a difference. I was even abused on Saturday; that is why it is a little bit hard for me to say it, and I apologise for that. Before I ask for questions, I would like you please to repeat with me the words 'Together we can make a difference. Together we will make a difference.' Could you please say it with me?

**Honourable members:** Together we can make a difference. Together we will make a difference.

**Mr Harris:** It means so much to me. Do you have any questions for me?

**Mrs GERBER:** Thank you, David, so much for having the courage to come today and share your story with the committee. It means a lot to be able to hear from victims; that is the purpose of the inquiry. I believe that you are the only victim who is presenting to the committee here today, so thank you very much for coming today and sharing your story in the hope that you might be able to make some change.

One of the terms of reference for the inquiry is around how we can better change the system to support victims of crime throughout the judicial process, through the investigation the police do and beyond. I am interested in your perspective. One of the models that has been presented to the committee is a Victorian model. It is volunteer based and, essentially, there is a one-stop hub and the volunteers support victims of crime throughout the investigation, the prosecution, the trial or whatever criminal proceedings happen, the parole hearings sometimes and beyond that point. How do you feel about something like that being put in place? Is Queensland lacking something like that?

**Mr Harris:** When you spoke about that, I noticed you did not mention the interrogation by the police. To me, I feel that step by the police, that interrogation—it should be an interview but it was an interrogation by the police—is the most important element where victims can be involved in the police training. Rather than just, say, a scenario where the police are here and we have someone who I will call Michael Smith and it is, 'Pretend you're a victim here. How would you like it?'—it should be victims such as me actually being involved with the police and going through the process and having a say with, for example, role-plays. They might do something and I would think, 'Okay, but what is missing here is how do you think that was for me? I will let you know how it felt for me.' When the interview or interrogation is finished, rather than just say, 'Okay, that's fine and let's go,' there needs to be making sure I am okay. I stress the need of victims is so important there, not just having a counsellor. To be honest, I have met counsellors with, pardon the expression, the personality of a dead fish and there has been a lack of support from the counsellors. That is where the need of victims is so important.

**Mrs GERBER:** Forgive me for asking—and if it is too painful to talk about you do not need to: as a victim of crime yourself, and I know you are trying to shed that image, did you receive any support throughout the process?

**Mr Harris:** No. I received no support whatsoever in the process. As I said before, it is a miracle I even came out of it alive. When you spoke before in the whole process about that, it is not just a matter of politicians or counsellors or police being involved, but at every level victims need to be regarded as the most important in that process, to be in that part. One of you spoke before about gaps appearing. Well, the gap is that the needs of victims have been disregarded. We need to be regarded as the No. 1 element of that.

**Mrs GERBER:** Put the victims before the criminals.

**Mr Harris:** Yes. How can we make things better? Let's not have victims go away and never be contacted again. You all have my phone numbers. You can all contact me and say, 'Is this okay with you? How does it feel as the victim going through step 1, 2, 3, 4, 5?' If I was going home and if I felt you would not contact me, I would feel basically it was a waste of time and a waste of my life even coming here. I need the comfort and support that you are going to contact me, and people who are willing obviously.

**Mrs GERBER:** It is a good point you make and it is a point other organisations have made at other hearings. I note that VictimConnect, part of DVConnect, said in their written submission that we need to map the full experience of victims of crime throughout the process and that it is not properly mapped yet, both for organisations and for victims of crime. It is a good point you make that the victims need to be consulted in all the steps to fully understand what needs to change and where the gaps are, so thank you for that.

**Mr Harris:** In regard to that, I noticed with some lines such as DVConnect and various other organisations there seems to be one group for men and one for women, and that is what it is like. On the news sometimes, they say, 'If you're a female victim of domestic violence, contact this number.' I have heard this so many times. It hurts and traumatises me each time they say, 'If you're a male who could commit an act of domestic violence, ring this number.' They do not say, 'If you're a female who could commit an act of domestic violence, call this number,' and that makes us feel worse. Again, feel free to contact me in relation to how some organisations—I will not say who they are now—have treated me so badly and even made the situation worse. Do not assume that all of these so-called helplines and domestic services are fantastic, above the law and all that. Some of them have treated me absolutely disgustingly. As I said earlier in my statement, I was nearly driven to the point of suicide by some members of one such organisation.

**Mr HUNT:** David, thank you very much for your written submission and the words you have spoken here. They are very important, very powerful and very moving, so thank you very much. Thank you also for the additional material that you supplied to every one of us too. I congratulate you as well on calling for a non-party political, bipartisan approach. I think that is absolutely vital. I think anyone who attempts to politicise anything like this for a pointscore gain is doing a disservice to Queensland, so I thank you for that and I will be highlighting that too.

You talk in your written submission about the retirement age for police being 60 and the ability to perhaps utilise them after that. When we spoke before the hearing, I was able to let you know that you have actually been very prescient in that because the ability to utilise police now after that age in a capacity called a special constable is currently being enacted because of some amendments moved to the police powers act two weeks ago, in the last sitting week, so well done. You talk about utilising those officers and taking a lead in training. What do you have in mind for those older, more experienced officers? The term 'training' is a little bit all-pervasive and it sometimes gets tossed around too freely and easily without nailing it down to an outcome. What would you have in mind for those older, more experienced police who are now able to come back into the fold and take an active part in policing in Queensland again? What is your perfect scenario for those officers?

**Mr Harris:** My perfect scenario is in regard to when it comes to the interview, which felt like an interrogation. Every other victim of domestic violence I have spoken to has felt that it was not an interview but an interrogation. That is what it felt like—the actual interview/interrogation process. I will never forget when I had two policemen stare me in the eyes and I felt absolutely physically threatened because of the way they treated me. I think in the interview process, let's have the situation in which it is not just a policeman who pretends to be a victim but actually someone who has been a victim. Someone should choose me, for example, to be there and the policeman might have his idea about what questions to ask so they can get a firsthand understanding of what it is like.

For example, they could say 'Take your time. When you are ready, answer the questions. You are under no pressure to answer questions quickly.' You could have the police, say, like you are there and I am here so we are not in each other's faces. When I was interrogated—and I have spoken to others about this as well—they were literally no more than six inches away from my face. That is how intimidating it was to be involved in that interview process. They have to make sure and pay attention not just to what the victim is saying but also to their body language. For example, if the victim moves away the police need to understand what it is like. When the policeman sees that a person is feeling uncomfortable then they could say to them, 'Take a break. Would you like a drink of water or to go to toilet?' They could say things like that. Not only that, at the end of the process—at the end of the interview—the policeman should make sure the victim is okay. As I have said, in my case—and it was the situation for all other victims I have spoken to—they felt 'That was the interview. Now go away—next,' in such a cold-hearted manner. I do not know how I made it home alive—and, again, I am speaking on behalf of others as well.

In terms of the interview process and being involved there, it is about making sure the person is okay. Before the interview they could even say, 'We are going to interview you in a week's time or a few days time. We would like to reassure you that there will be a support person with you.' It needs to

be mandatory to supply a counsellor. They could say, 'You can bring along a friend or somebody like that,' so they have that personal connection with the victim beforehand so the person goes through the interview not feeling threatened.

To answer your question in a long way, that interview process is desperately needed. That is the most important part. It is not just that—and leaving everything else to one side—but, as Laura was saying, being involved in every part of the process and actually being consulted.

**CHAIR:** Excuse me, David. That brings to an end this part of the hearing. Thank you for your time.

**Mr Harris:** Thank you very much. I really appreciate it.



**BAIN, Ms Miranda, Director, Therapy Services, Act for Kids**

**CHAIR:** Good afternoon. Thank you for being here. I invite you to make an opening statement of up to five minutes after which committee members will have some questions for you.

**Ms Bain:** I appreciate the opportunity to come today. Thank you for the invitation. I thought what I would do is talk a little about the services that we provide across Australia. My understanding of victims of crime funding is actually more relevant to some of the other states that we operate in as we have a cost-recovery model in those states.

In Queensland we provide services across the state, primarily funded by Child Safety and Youth Justice. The work we are doing that is relevant to today's hearing is very much related to our support of children who have experienced sexual abuse, children who have been involved in harmful sexual behaviour and kids who have gone through restorative justice practices. Our services in Rockhampton and Gladstone, for example, are funded specifically to provide services to children and young people who have experienced and perhaps initiated harmful sexual abuse against other children.

One of the points I wanted to make in this statement is to affirm what Mr Harris said earlier that the reality for kids coming through is that that initial foray with the police and with their protective parent sets the scene for where things go from there. What we find with our Child Safety funded clients is that if the parent is deemed to be acting protectively, seeking out therapy and those sorts of things, Child Safety often do not continue to be involved, which means that there is not someone who is providing that support alongside the protective parent and the child as the court processes unfold. We know it is regularly the case that child matters do not proceed to court, basically because there is deemed not enough evidence. We often see the children we work with recant, often under the coaching of their parent, particularly if the perpetrator of the abuse is a family member or someone whom the parent may have some level of dependency on financially or emotionally. That is certainly what we see a lot.

I would hope that there would be scope for children to be able to access, throughout their lifetime, support in relation to crimes of sexual abuse because, as we know, sexual development is part of human development. We often see young children who might present in their primary school years. Then they go through puberty and the changes related to that and they may come back in for therapy. Similarly, when they are engaged in dating relationships again they may re-present. Certainly we see situations where women who are going through childbirth and women who are going through menopause feel retraumatised by their feelings of sexual abuse.

Something that I think is important to consider is that when you are talking about something that impacts the development of a person throughout the course of their life and can really shape and mould ongoing behaviour, it is important that people are able to access services that are appropriate, affordable and timely. One of the concerns I have is the time frame for folks to be able to access victims of crime funding in relation to that. What we find with our services in Queensland is: because they are Child Safety funded, our primary referral pathway is Child Safety. Sometimes we are able to, I guess, massage a referral in where we have the situation where a parent has been deemed to be protective and Child Safety are no longer involved. We will seek permission from Child Safety to see that child in the context of the abuse they experienced, even though there is no ongoing involvement with child protection services.

My main opening statement is to talk about the importance of looking at services across the life span and to consider that services do need to be trauma informed. My third point, which I have not yet covered, is that a number of the parents we work with are also victims of either child sexual abuse or rape themselves and that adds a layer of complication in terms of their ability to stand by and support their children as they go through processes. Often they may minimise things that may have occurred because it feels different to what their experience was and often these are untreated people themselves.

**Mrs GERBER:** I might focus my questions on your organisation's area of work around children who are victims of crime. One of the terms of reference of this inquiry is around how we can better coordinate statewide services to ensure they are trauma informed and victim-centric and there is timely support for victims of crime. Looking specifically at how the criminal justice system deals with children who are victims of crime, does your organisation support those children through that process—as in, essentially hold their hand while they are going through the investigation or the criminal justice system—or does your support drop away if they have a supportive parent? Is that what you are saying?

**Ms Bain:** No, we would provide support throughout. There was a situation recently here on the Gold Coast where one of our clients made an additional disclosure of an additional perpetrator of abuse. That was reported by the parent to the police and the parent asked if the therapist could come along and support that child at the police interview and the police refused for that to occur, which I

found very strange. I think that was perhaps an ad hoc decision. Again, it is probably important when we are considering children that having a parent in the room is not always necessarily the best support for that child, depending on the parent's own issues.

**Mrs GERBER:** What does need to happen in the system to be able to better support children who are victims of crime?

**Ms Bain:** Better communication between child protection services and the QPS would be really important.

**Mrs GERBER:** It is a common theme.

**Ms Bain:** We do see a lot of siloed work and it does sometimes mean that our therapists who are funded to do therapeutic work end up spending time coordinating stakeholder discussions between child protection services and the police and often the school, because sometimes we do see that there are behaviours that can be fairly extreme where the schools have concerns about managing them and the safety of other children. I think it would be great to see some level of coordination happening across departments of government rather than that falling on the NGOs when we are not funded specifically to do that work.

**Mrs GERBER:** Better information sharing across the departments?

**Ms Bain:** Yes.

**Mrs GERBER:** One of the solutions for that that has been raised with the committee is a one-stop shop for victims of crime so that one-stop shop can then refer out to the various NGOs and make sure the victim of crime is being supported through the whole process. The other aspect that I wanted to touch on with you is your organisation's role in trying to get financial assistance for child victims of crime. Do you play a role in that? Can you talk to us about what you do there?

**Ms Bain:** Yes, that would probably sit more with our intensive family support services. I am director of therapy services. Within Act for Kids we have a number of government funded programs here in Queensland—Intensive Family Support, Family and Child Connect and Assessment and Service Connect. They are all funded by Child Safety and provide wraparound services to families, including brokerage. Sometimes that does support a family to engage a solicitor if they do not have the means themselves. Certainly regularly family support practitioners are working through applications, whether that is victims of crime, domestic violence protection orders or that sort of thing. It is a core part of their role.

**Mrs GERBER:** That has ongoing funding?

**Ms Bain:** We are funded on five-year contracts.

**Mr HUNT:** You talked about restorative justice practices for—and correct me if I have this wrong because I was madly scribbling notes as you were talking—children involved in harmful sexual practices.

**Ms Bain:** Harmful sexual behaviours.

**Mr HUNT:** I imagine that is incredibly confronting.

**Ms Bain:** It is a core part of our work. Some 50 per cent of children who are sexually abused are sexually abused by other children, but we do not frame that as children are perpetrator against other children. Everybody is a child and then we are working with kids to extinguish those behaviours and redirect and many times help them to understand what the need is that is being met through that behaviour.

**Mr HUNT:** Obviously you find restorative justice practice very effective?

**Ms Bain:** The restorative justice process is an important process for victims to be able to speak about their experience, particularly in family settings where it may be a cousin or a sibling who has initiated the harmful sexual behaviour or even kids at school. It can be a very powerful process, but there are a lot of consent factors and a lot of tricky things along the way. The person going through that process does need to be admitting responsibility for the behaviour for it to be an effective process.

**Mr HUNT:** One of the things we are looking at here is potential gaps in processes. Would you identify this as a gap or would you say that it is an effective measure and it is rolled out effectively and consistently?

**Ms Bain:** I do not know how consistently it is rolled out, especially in regional areas. Our services that specifically work in that space are in Rockhampton and Gladstone and they are funded by Youth Justice. We do see children in our other sexual abuse funded services in Townsville, the Gold Coast and Brisbane where there has been harmful sexual behaviour and it may be there is an opportunity to Southport

provide input in terms of the letter and that sort of thing for the restorative justice process or a reparation process, but it is a bit hit and miss really, I suppose. I think the length of time folks have to wait for those processes can often stretch out as well, particularly if that needs to occur before the family can reunify.

**Mr HUNT:** And that eats into the efficacy of it overall?

**Ms Bain:** And also I think the impact on the wider family.

**Mr HUNT:** You talked about—and thank you for raising it because it never actually occurred to me and I am not sure, some of my committee members might correct me, it has been raised in any of our previous hearings—these offences then re-emerging over the life span. As every physiological sexual milestone is reached these issues then re-emerge, take a different form and morph into something else. I imagine that would be a long-term commitment from an agency to monitor—hypothetically, say, something happened to an 11-year-old child—a person throughout the remainder of their life span?

**Ms Bain:** The needs are different at different points in the life span. It may be that accessing a telephone helpline can be helpful. It may be having resources, just particularly thinking about clinics that relate to pregnancy and support around birthing practices. I think that would be a fantastic place for more information to be provided for folks who may have experienced unwanted sexual contact previously in their lifetime. I would not necessarily say that it needs to be an agency that follows that person through.

Certainly with our sexual abuse counselling service I am aware that we have seen young children who have come back through, to my knowledge, maybe three times, so in that next developmental stage. We are also working a lot with children whose use of pornography has triggered different things for them as well in terms of their sexual abuse and then potentially, I guess, normalising some types of sexual behaviour that they might engage in with other children that is not necessarily consensual.

**Mr HUNT:** With regard to that issue specifically, can you point to either a national or an international jurisdiction that is the gold standard and is getting this right more often than not in terms of the whole-of-life aspect?

**Ms Bain:** No, I cannot point to one. It might be that someone accesses a private psychologist as an adult. They may do that through a mental health plan. That could be one thing. They may have accessed children focused services when they were younger. There is certain value to it being the same therapist throughout, but that is not often possible. People do move around in their lifetimes as well.

What does come to mind—and I cannot speak to how functional it is currently—are the accident compensation arrangements they have in New Zealand. I did work in New Zealand for a period of time and did some work with ACC funded victims of sexual abuse. That was one government approach that I did not quite appreciate in terms of that ability to dip in or out of therapy or supports because of the fact that they had had their sexual abuse recorded through that government process and then being able to dip in and out throughout the lifetime.

**Mr HUNT:** Periodically throughout their life span?

**Ms Bain:** That was many years ago that I worked in that space in New Zealand. I do not know if it is as robust now as it was in its early years. I think what you want is for people to be able to access services when they need them, not necessarily when someone else decides.

**Mrs GERBER:** When the system says to. I wanted to go back to the idea that has consistently been raised which is the one-stop shop non-legal advocate for victims of crime. I note in the *Hear her voice* recommendations that recommendation 9 directly relates to a non-legal victims advocate. That advocate would essentially act as a one-stop shop for the victim of crime. It can consist of volunteers, but it needs to have proper resourcing and it needs to have communication and information sharing in order for it to be effective. One of the complaints that we are consistently hearing is that it is all on the victim to work out where to go, what to find, what to do. Does your organisation think something like that would be of benefit in Queensland?

**Ms Bain:** I am aware of a pilot that was run on the Gold Coast that involved providing a child-friendly space for police to come and do their interviews. What I found was that, in that instance, the person who was tasked with doing the case management and the coordination—the one-stop shop, as you say—was ineffectual. I think if you go down that route there should be standards of training and very clear guidelines in terms of who is doing what so that people who are funded to do therapy can do therapy and people who are funded to provide that one-stop support service can do that.

Sometimes in NGO land there is a bit of buck-passing that goes on. We are all wanting to support the victims. It comes back to that thing: it is going to be quicker for me to help do that form today rather than say, 'Can you wait for your next appointment with your advocate person?' I know I sound very cynical, but I feel that training and clear benchmarks around what the KPIs would be for a service of that nature are important.

**Mrs GERBER:** The other recommendation that has been put forward to this committee is again around the recommendation in *Hear her voice* about a victims of crime commissioner. The commissioner essentially would be advisory in nature to government, so not dealing directly with victims of crime. I am interested in your views on whether or not that is something that you think Queensland needs?

**Ms Bain:** I think it could be helpful. I did not mention this before, but I am not on the national strategic advisory group to the National Office of Child Safety. One of the things that I have noticed federally is that having commissioners who are able to go and speak with parallel people in other states and who have immediate contact with people who can leverage things to happen quickly in government is always a good thing in my mind, because victims are always at the bottom of hierarchy in terms of trying to get things done. I think a commissioner would be highly valuable, personally.

**Mrs GERBER:** In terms of the victims of crime commissioner and then the one-stop non-legal victims advocate, do you think the two need to go hand in hand? One of the criticisms we have heard in relation to the victims commissioner is that it will be another level of bureaucracy when at the moment what we are hearing from the victims is that they really need support on the ground. They need that one-stop shop. They need it not to be all on their shoulders. I am interested in your view on whether or not there is something that needs to go hand in hand with that?

**Ms Bain:** I would not necessarily have thought those two things were linked. I imagined a tender would go and services in different areas would provide that one-stop shop. It is interesting, because you would want someone with a clinical background to be providing some level of support and oversight to the one-stop shop people, whereas the commissioner's skill set needs to be advocacy, partnering and relationships. It could be a big ask to have the two link, but I certainly would imagine a dotted line in terms of expectations of outcomes from the services providing the one-stop shop, which will get overrun. One of the concerns now even with Stop the Stigma and some of the other campaigns that are out there around encouraging people to talk about sexual abuse is that the current system is not adequately resourced to provide services to clients now let alone the volume of people seeking services once they realise that it is safe to do so.

**CHAIR:** Thank you for your evidence today, Miranda. It has been very helpful to our deliberation.

**MACLEOD, Ms Di, Director, Gold Coast Centre Against Sexual Violence Inc.**

**CHAIR:** Good afternoon. We ask that you be kind enough to provide us with up to a five-minute statement, but there are no hard-and-fast rules. If you go over, we will not be pulling you up. After that the committee will have some questions for you.

**Ms Macleod:** First of all, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today and pay my respect to elders past, present and emerging. I welcome the opportunity to participate in this inquiry. My written submission and anything that I say today will be specifically focused on the crime of sexual violence and victim-survivors of sexual violence and the impact of that crime, as my experience has been working with victim-survivors for the past 45 years. I am seeking to elevate and amplify the voices of these women and not to replace their voices and their right to speak out but to complement and acknowledge and be able to do that for those who are not able to speak out.

I certainly concur with Mr Harris, who was speaking before, about victim-centric services. We cannot use that terminology victim-centric if we do not put victims at the centre. It is critically important to the work we do in this space in terms of access to justice, training, education and support. We need to not assume what victims might need. We need to listen to them when they tell us.

That is one of the reasons our service brought a program to Australia four years ago called Start by Believing. In the area of sexual violence, we do need to start by believing. When someone tells us they have been abused, we need to start by believing. When someone reports to the police, the police need to start at that space too. They need to start by believing and then continue their investigation in whatever way they need to do, but it is so important to victim-survivors to get that support right from the start. We know that children who speak out, women who speak out and men who speak out are often not believed. They are dismissed and discounted. That makes them less likely to tell anyone else and that interferes with their whole healing journey, their trajectory in life and their access to justice, which is pertinent to our discussion today.

I am the director of the Gold Coast Centre Against Sexual Violence. We work with young women and older women. It is a specific women's service for women who have experienced sexual violence at any time in their lives. We offer them information, support, crisis counselling and long-term therapy. Our state government funding is around providing therapy and support to those victim-survivors. We also provide support to report to the police and court support at Southport, both in the Magistrates Court and the District Court, when resources permit because we are not funded to do that.

To get a sense of the volume of victim-survivors we are working with, in the past year we have worked with over 6,700 just here in our Gold Coast office. The Griffith University has just analysed some of the QPS statistics from this area. They have come up with a figure that, over the past nine years, rape and attempted rape have increased 108 per cent on the Gold Coast. That is a huge volume and a huge increase. That increase in volume is not reflected in the resources that are available for victims of sexual crimes.

I think the most important thing that we need to look at when we are talking 'trauma informed' and 'victim-centric'—and I was doing training in Brisbane about this last month—is that we cannot just use those terms and not understand what they mean. Previous speakers have given evidence that trauma does not just stop. It does not stop in six years; you are not over it. The trauma does not stop. Often the way that services are funded, they are at the front end of crisis support. There is a limit to sessions for people because of waiting lists and there is a six-year limit for funding through VAQ, but trauma is way beyond that. We are talking lifelong. There needs to be an opportunity for people to access that throughout their lives.

I have been a director here since 1990 so obviously I have had an opportunity to see women come and go through our service at different points in their lives, where they have been triggered by the crime or triggered by where they are at their stage of life. That journey needs to be reflected in the resources. It is a journey with trauma. It is not a destination where you will get there and you no longer need services. People may need services for a big part of their life—not every day and not every week, but there needs to be the ability to go in and out of appropriate services.

I think Miranda Bain said it well: we need to be looking at what is safe, what is timely, what is ethical. If it is safe, timely and ethical then it will be trauma informed but if it is not safe, timely and ethical then we run the risk of those systems doing real harm. Those systems are put in place to support victims, but often we hear about the secondary victimisation that people encounter when they engage with those systems. That was not the intent of the legislation or the intent of those systems, but it has kind of become a by-product. We hear so many people saying that they felt traumatised by engaging with the various systems, whether it be police or whether it be the criminal justice system.

We have to work really hard and listen to what victim-survivors are saying. How can we do that differently? The biggest complaint that we would get as a service around the whole access to criminal justice and resources from the clients who access our service would be communication or lack thereof. It is not hearing back from the police about where things are up to. It is not hearing back from the DPP about where the case is, what charges they might be considering going forward and what charges they might be considering dropping. It is being informed. Sexual violence is about a loss of power and control. We need to ensure that victim-survivors have power and choice in all parts of their journey. It is about what they need when they need it. That is who we should be listen to—not four assessments deep for someone else to say, ‘You don’t need that; you need something else.’

Applying for victim assistance is not timely so that is not trauma informed and it is very inconsistent. We support women to fill out those forms. They are not trauma informed forms. They are not victim-centric. Most victim-survivors are trying to survive every day. They do not have the time and energy to be doing lengthy paperwork to get basic dollars for the life that they need and they may need it quickly. In our space, ‘quickly’ means within that week, not six months later for something that is deemed important like having to leave town. It is just not working the way that it was intended. I was around at the very beginning of Victim Assist Queensland. The cases went through within six weeks at the beginning. Now it has blown out, like the criminal justice system itself. We are waiting years for cases to get to court. People are getting more and more traumatised thinking about, ‘When is this going to happen? When are we getting to court?’ and not always for the outcome that they want.

I talked in my submission about complaints. It is not cause for celebration that so few complaints come under the Charter of Victims’ Rights. There are so few complaints because, let’s face it, who in Queensland knows that there is a Charter of Victims’ Rights, outside of our circle? Go out there and ask the average Queenslanders, ‘Do you know that there’s a Charter of Victims’ Rights in Queensland?’ The majority of them will not know there is even a charter.

A lot of victims do not even know they have rights so you are not going to get people complaining because (a) they do not have the time or energy to enter into those processes; (b) they might not know that they even have rights; and (c) why would they? There is no enforceable complaints mechanism so it is kind a toothless tiger, and we talked about it at the task force. I was a member of the Women’s Safety and Justice Taskforce and we talked about the charter being looked at in the review of the Human Rights Act as well and whether it would be expanded and incorporated somehow into the Human Rights Act.

There are a lot of things that could be improved at different parts of the process. Someone who is a victim of crime has already suffered. It is our duty as a civil society, first of all, to try to put money into prevention so that they are not victims of crime and that people are not offending. Secondly, if they have already been a victim of crime, how can we make that as simple as we can to not traumatise them any further? Trauma is different for everyone. Victim-survivors are not a homogenous group, but they are already vulnerable. They are unlikely to speak out. They are unlikely to complain around not getting respectful interaction with the players in the criminal justice system because they are worried about whether that will affect their case going forward as well. If you are going to complain about the investigating officer, what might then happen to that case going forward? It is really something that people do worry about.

There is a lot to be done. Some of it obviously I have written about in my submission and your questions will be based off that. When we talk about the coordination of statewide services, we have to look at how few services there are and how poorly funded they are before we talk about coordinating them. We are all under the pump. We are all facing increased demand and not much funding. That is the resources. It is not about ‘we want more funding’, ‘we want more funding’, ‘we want to be a bigger organisation’. We are not doing victim safety justice if we cannot provide the support that people need, and that is support at a non-government level and at a government level.

I certainly concur with other speakers that we need a bipartisan approach. On the Gold Coast we always have had support for our service and support for the issue. We need to be funding things that are longer than an election cycle so that things do keep going on. We see lots of pilots and lots of things that have promise, but they go by the wayside after the pilot is finished and the funding is finished. We are seeing that with COVID now. The short-term funding in sexual assault services is coming to an end but the demand is increasing. That is always going to be an issue.

I agree about the training. We have to look at external specialists and external service providers and victim-survivors being involved in training for police, the DPP and other parts of government. There is no point in them training themselves because we are going to get the same result. Our service has

been involved in training in South-East Queensland and up at the academy on and off for some years. There are some changes over time, but we really need to invest in that. If we are going to keep talking trauma informed/victim-centric, we have to not just talk the talk; we have to walk the talk.

**Mrs GERBER:** Thanks, Di, and thank you for your comprehensive written statement as well. It is really great. I think it is going to be a big help to the committee and when the chair is drafting the report. I want to focus on the victims' experiences through the financial assistance application process. You have raised something in your written submission that has not been raised with the committee before, and that is around the inconsistent decision-making and inconsistency of payments. I understand that your organisation helps victims in making that application. I am referring to pages 6 and 7 of your written submission. Your organisation has had experience with the inconsistent payouts that might happen. For example, one woman who was raped was denied financial assistance to have an abortion as a result of the rape yet others are allowed assistance to have clothing replaced. It is inconsistent. Do you have any insight as to why that is? I will put it to DJAG as well so that I can understand it better, but I am interested if you could expand on that for me.

**Ms Macleod:** There are so many different things. As I say, everyone is different. When victim-survivors are asked what is going to contribute to their healing process and what it is that they think they need, the example—the less controversial example—would be around self-defence. Often women feel, 'I need to get confidence back in my body. I need to feel stronger. I need to feel that I can fight back.' That is just in terms of their general health and wellbeing. One person will be told that, yes, they can access a self-defence course but another one is told, 'No, we can't fund that.' Both are intrinsically linked in that they would feel that that would help them build their confidence, self-esteem, strength and confidence back in their body. I cannot see how that could be. Obviously there are different assessors, but you would expect there would be some consistency.

With smart watches and things that would help, women might feel that a smart watch would make a difference to them or that a tracking watch might make a difference to them, but they are not getting those. We will work with other non-government organisations to get that to assist, but it should be something that is coming through Victim Assist.

We are not getting a lot of electronics. People often need new phones and new laptops if they are concerned that someone is tracking them. With any offender who has any clues about technology, there is always a concern that the person may be tracked so they want to get rid of the old devices and they want to start afresh. Ask all of us if we had to go without a phone or a laptop for six months and we would find it very difficult. Those crisis payments and things that people think are really important in their lives might not be important in yours and might not be important in the assessor's life, but if that is what the victim-survivor says they need and how it is going to make a difference then I think we need to be taking that into consideration. We know that no two assaults are the same, but it is—

**Mrs GERBER:** So you think the process probably is not victim-centric because, in the application itself, the assessment process is based maybe on the crime as opposed to the victim's experience and what they might need?

**Ms Macleod:** Yes. We need to be listening to what the victim says is going to make a difference for them, not what I think is going to make a difference. That is the difference between systems focused or assessor focused and victim focused.

**Mrs GERBER:** The other aspect of the Victims of Crime Assistance Act that I wanted to talk to you about is in relation to timeliness. One of the aspects that the committee is considering is expanding the definition to include property crime. I will give you an example. Someone is asleep in their bed. Their kids are asleep in their beds. The criminal walks past their kids' bedrooms, takes the keys from their nightstand and steals their car. They are severely traumatised by that. Their personal space has been invaded but they are not physically harmed as a result of that home invasion. They are not eligible for the same sort of financial assistance that someone who was, say, physically harmed during a home invasion is eligible for, despite the fact that their trauma as a victim might be quite similar or could be even worse, depending on the person. In your submission you say—

GCCASV does not support any increase in the potential pool of applicants before allocation of adequate funding and resources to address the already unacceptable wait time occurs.

In your organisation's perspective, what is that unacceptable wait time and how does that need to be addressed before any kind of expansion is made?

**Ms Macleod:** I think when the applicant pool was extended to domestic violence in 2017, VAQ never really recovered from that. In terms of timeliness, it blew out the number of people applying and suddenly you would get longer and longer wait times.

**Mrs GERBER:** What are those wait times that you are experiencing?

**Ms Macleod:** Sometimes up to three years—two and three years.

**Mrs GERBER:** And we are talking about victims of sexual crime?

**Ms Macleod:** Yes. There is kind of no rhyme or reason. Sometimes something will track quite well. I do not know what the internal processes are. Some go through the system quicker than others, but it is not unusual to wait two to three years.

**Mrs GERBER:** In your view, we should not be adding to the system until the system can cope with what it has?

**Ms Macleod:** If we cannot adequately service what we have then I could not think of a reason to add to it. I am not disregarding the trauma of other crimes.

**Mrs GERBER:** I understand.

**Ms Macleod:** It is not about the trauma; it is about the resources to adequately respond. Trauma is trauma for everyone so if we are talking about trauma informed then that is everyone who has experienced trauma as a victim of crime, at this stage, whatever that interpersonal crime is, but not without the resources to expand it.

**Mrs GERBER:** In previous hearings I have asked what the payout figure would be. If every victim of crime who is currently in the VAQ system had their application for financial assistance paid out, what would be the liability figure for the state? The answer is unclear. They cannot really provide that. Without adequate funding and without knowing that figure, to expand the eligible category seems fraught with difficulties.

**Ms Macleod:** Certainly it is cause for consideration, but not when there are so many people saying that the system is not adequately serving the current applicant pool. It does not make any sense to me to extend it at this point in time.

**Mrs GERBER:** I move to what I call the second limb of the inquiry, which is around how victims of crime might be supported through the investigation, the criminal justice process and beyond. Your organisation also does that for victims of sexual assault. How can the system be improved in that space, do you think, for victims of the crime of sexual assault? One of the recommendations that has been made has come out of the *Hear her voice* report where there is a one-stop non-legal victims advocate, separate to the victims commissioner, essentially to hold the victim's hand through the process and then refer the victim on, whether that be for financial support, therapeutic support or something else. What is your view on a one-stop shop that is adequately resourced to support victims of crime?

**Ms Macleod:** I think there are two things. Individual advocacy and systems navigation is important, because these systems are mostly foreign to people. It is about trying to dialogue with government departments and trying to learn the language. People do not know the difference between a committal and a trial and a conference. We do that as non-legal advocates now for the clients that we have and the DPP will call us to assist those not involved with our service as well, but that is not funded. We are not funded to do that. It is really important because if someone is adequately supported then they will stay engaged with the system. We often see victims of sexual crimes dropping out because it becomes too hard and it is too long: 'I don't want to do this anymore.'

**Mrs GERBER:** 'I don't want to put myself through it anymore.'

**Ms Macleod:** Yes, 'I don't want to do this.' It is more traumatising or as traumatising as the assault itself. The attrition rate is high, not just with victims dropping out but with cases not going forward. For every one of those cases, an offender is getting a free pass. We do need to look at offender accountability alongside victim support. I support the idea of an advocate along the way. If you have a sexual violence service—obviously not all victims of crime—then they can come back and forward at different stages and get the support that they need and then I think the victims commissioner is really important.

I want to say that, in terms of sexual violence or rape victim-survivors, you have to be more than trauma informed; you have to be sexual violence informed as well, because it is a different type of crime. It is an intimate crime that is experienced differently and some may argue that it has a really deep impact. That advocacy is the individual's advocate and, I guess, the victims of crime commissioner is more a systems advocate—up the top. It is different.

**Mr HUNT:** Di, I do not have a question but I wanted to say a special thank you. Your written submission reads as though you have been sitting here for the past five hearings. It is essentially a concentrated distillation of everything that we have heard before, all combined in the one submission. If ever you are seeking testimony to the efficacy of your work, you should really just refer to this *Hansard* because you have absolutely nailed it, if I can use a colloquialism.



**Ms Macleod:** That is what happens when you have been around for 45 years.

**Mr HUNT:** That is experience, yes. Well done, Di. Thank you very much.

**Mr O'CONNOR:** I echo Jason's comments. It was a very good submission. It was very comprehensive. Di, I want to follow up on what Laura was asking about in terms of the payments. You commented in your submission about the fast-tracked payments, particularly for your clients who cannot access some of that crisis support from Centrelink. You said two to three years for some of the historical cases and the longer term situations, but what is the situation you are seeing for urgent payments? Can you give us some more detail on that?

**Ms Macleod:** Urgent is six months or more.

**Mr O'CONNOR:** Six months to get an urgent payment?

**Ms Macleod:** Yes, that is the average. It depends on your definition of 'urgent'.

**Mrs GERBER:** Can you help us with what a definition would be?

**Mr O'CONNOR:** You said that was not released. That is what you are asking to be publicly released?

**Ms Macleod:** If you know through the initial assessment that VAQ is going to be involved in some kind of payout, maybe there is some kind of amount that can be released early. Set an amount that can be released early so that people could do something very quickly, like leave town.

**Mrs GERBER:** Change the locks on their doors.

**Ms Macleod:** Change the locks and do those things. If we change the locks for people—and we do not get funded to do that—then we cannot get the money back off VAQ and they cannot get the money back off VAQ because we have paid for it and it is considered double dipping. But if someone needs the locks changed then it is today that they need the locks changed and not weeks later.

**Mrs GERBER:** Not six months later.

**Ms Macleod:** No. For some of those urgent things, maybe there could be some kind of petty cash pool that people could get an amount out of to do those urgent things. That could be subtracted from the amount they are going to get later.

**Mr O'CONNOR:** You are aware that the department has guidelines around what a fast-tracked payment would need to meet but no-one knows them because they are not publicly released. Do you know why?

**Ms Macleod:** You would have to ask them. We are assisting people to write them. We are trying to look at templates. We suggest that government template some of the communication. Get some trauma informed templates, VAQ. When you are saying someone is getting a payment or not getting a payment, use some trauma informed language; do not add to it. We try to template some of the applications. Where people have got a good response we will try to do that again, but it gets a different result. That is why I am curious about it too, Sam.

**Mr O'CONNOR:** That is interesting.

**CHAIR:** Thanks, Di. That concludes this hearing. Thank you to everyone who has participated today and to all those who have helped organise the hearing. Thank you to our secretariat and our Hansard reporters. A transcript of these proceedings will be available on the committee's webpage in due course. I also express my gratitude to you, Di, for both your evidence and the clarity in your written submission.

**Mrs GERBER:** You are amazing, Di. Thank you for all of your work.

**CHAIR:** I declare this public hearing closed.

**The committee adjourned at 3.44 pm.**