

INQUIRY INTO SUPPORT PROVIDED TO VICTIMS OF CRIME

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DVCONNECT

Be heard. Be safe.



SUBMISSION

**Legal Affairs and Safety Committee
Inquiry Into Support Provided To Victims Of Crime 2023**

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Chief Executive Officer
DVConnect
PO Box 10575 Adelaide Street
Brisbane QLD 4000

Email: [REDACTED]
Phone: [REDACTED]
Website: www.dvconnect.org

DVConnect receives funding from the Queensland Government

DVConnect respectfully acknowledges and celebrates the Traditional Owners/Custodians throughout Australia and pays its respects to Elders, children and young people of past, current and future generations. We are committed to helping anyone experiencing domestic, family and/or sexual violence. This includes the LGBTIQ+ community, people of all ethnicities, religions, ages, abilities and pets.

For information about this Submission, please contact:
Michelle Royes, Research, Compliance, Inclusion Manager. [REDACTED]



About DVConnect

DVConnect provides several national and state responses to people who have experienced violence and offer support and pathways to safety and healing.

Queensland wide:

Domestic, family and sexual violence response services:

- DVConnect Womensline
- DVConnect Mensline
- Sexual Assault Helpline
- Pets in Crisis
- Bella's Sanctuary

Victims of crime service

- VictimConnect

Nationally:

- National Sexual Assault, Domestic & Family Violence Counselling Service, 1800RESPECT

DVConnect's driving ethos is respect and safety, the right of people to live without violence, in the home or in the community. We are a not-for-profit organisation, with primary funding streams from Department of Justice and Attorney General, Office for Women and Violence Prevention (Qld); Department of Justice and Attorney General, Victim Assist Queensland (Qld) and Department of Social Services (Aust)

DVConnect was established in 1980 and is Queensland's state-wide crisis response service for domestic, family and sexual violence. DVConnect helps Queenslanders find pathways to safety 24 hours a day, 7 days per week. Annually, DVConnect takes in excess of 100,000 calls across all lines and provides crisis intervention across a number of key services. Womensline receives one call for help every five minutes (across a 24 hour period). Crisis support is provided in the form of emergency telephone support, emergency crisis accommodation placement and transport for families affected by abusive relationship, counselling for men, women and victims of sexual assault, education and support for men, community education, and care for pets of families experiencing domestic and family violence. DVConnect also operates Bella's Sanctuary a 5-unit medium-term accommodation residence that exists to provide women and children with a safe housing option after leaving a shelter/refuge.

DVConnect provides Australia's national sexual assault, domestic and family violence support service, 1800RESPECT. This service provides information, referral and counselling 24 hours a day, 7 days per week. DVConnect's 1800RESPECT services are delivered in partnership with Telstra Health.

VictimConnect is the state-wide response for victims of crime that fall under the *Victim Of Crime Assistance Act 2019* (Qld). VictimConnect provides a state-wide 24/7 helpline and multi-session counselling and case management support service. Delivering this service expands DVConnect's experience with those who experience domestic, family and sexual



violence to now include those who experience violent and personal crime across Queensland.

DVConnect operates from an intersectional feminist framework, acknowledging that domestic, family and sexual violence (DFSV) is gender-based violence. This gendered analysis is supported by research, evidence and data, and indicates that DFSV is most often perpetrated by men against women, and that perpetrators of this violence are fully responsible for their actions. This framework acknowledges and responds to the intersectional experience of DFSV.

While the experience of those impacted by violent and personal crime is more broad reaching than DFSV, we build upon our intersectional, trauma-informed expertise to offer recovery-based counselling and case management.

The clinical services provided by DVConnect are inclusive and trauma-informed. We are guided by the diverse voices of survivors and recognise our clients as the expert in their own lives. The abilities, strengths, goals and needs of people living with disability are respected, as are individuals from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. DVConnect acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people know best what their communities need and want. Importantly, the intersectional approach of DVConnect considers and responds to how overlapping forms of discrimination may impact a client's experience of DFSV and other violent and personal crime.

DVConnect has a strong ethos of partnership working with other agencies and services to provide programs and responses that meet individual's needs. 54 reasons is one of these key partners. While DVConnect and 54 reasons collaborate on a number of projects, of most relevance to working with victims of crime is the formal partnership between DVConnect and 54 reasons to deliver VictimConnect. Due to this partnership 54 reasons and DVConnect have collaborated on this submission.

Save the Children and 54 reasons

Save the Children is a leading global non-government organisation focused on children's rights that has been active in Australia for over 100 years. 54 reasons is the new name we operate under in Australia in working alongside children and their families and communities, representing the 54 articles in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

Our contribution to this submission is based on our perspective as Australia's leading child rights organisation and our experience in translating children's rights into policy, practice and community-level change. We believe that children have a fundamental right to be protected from all forms of violence. This includes the right to be protected from being hurt or badly treated.



Opening Statement

DVConnect would like to acknowledge this Parliamentary Committee seeking submissions from the community to improve the experience of victims of crime.

Overall victims of crime experience significant trauma not only from the event or series of events but also the justice and legal journey. Therefore, when considering any response to a victims of crime the psychological and physical wellbeing of victims need to be inclusive of how these two elements intersect and overlap. Further the experience of the justice and legal system is complicated by with type of crime and the location of relevant persons across the geographically diverse state of Queensland. The availability and suitability of support and resources also varies, depending on the type of crime, the location of the victim and the accused/offender and the demography of the victim, accused/offender. While the questions the terms of reference poses are more closely responded to below, the overarching comment is that the current system is porous, protracted, with not enough focus on the experience of the victim and with clear deficits for particular cohorts, including children.

In developing our responses to this Parliamentary Inquiry (Inquiry) we have considered a number of pertinent reports which connect to government reforms in overlapping sectors. We call out the below reports as they provide insight and recommendations that are of direct relevance to the Inquiries' terms of reference. To reduce duplication and misrepresentation we encourage the Committee to give due consideration to:

- Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce reports¹,
- Commission of Inquiry into Queensland Police Service responses to domestic and family violence²,
- Commission of Inquiry into Forensic DNA Testing in Queensland³,
- Keeping people safe from domestic and family violence, Queensland Audit Office report⁴,
- The National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032⁵
- Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices): Securing Our Rights, Securing Our Future Report⁶

DVConnect also encourages a focussed, dedicated, well structured framework to create space to hear from people with lived experience and to involve lived experience voices across the exploration develop, design and implementation of any changes to the victims of crime system. While people with lived experience are welcomed to contribute to the Inquiry, the structure, promotion and supports that surround this type of engagement is not conducive to effective and safe co-design and co-production.

¹ Queensland Government. (2021-2022). Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce. [Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce \(womenstaskforce.qld.gov.au\)](https://www.womenstaskforce.qld.gov.au)

² Queensland Government (2022) Commission of Inquiry into Queensland Police Service responses to domestic and family violence: A Call for Change Report www.qpsdfvinquiry.qld.gov.au

³ Sofronoff W. KC (2022) The Commission of Inquiry into Forensic DNA Testing in Queensland <https://www.dnainquiry.qld.gov.au/>

⁴ Queensland Audit Office (2022) Keeping people safe from domestic and family violence Performance Audit Report; Report 5: 2022–23 <https://www.qao.qld.gov.au/reports-resources/reports-parliament/keeping-people-safe-domestic-family-violence>

⁵ Commonwealth of Australia, (Department of Social Services) (2022) The National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032 <https://www.dss.gov.au/women-programs-services-reducing-violence/the-national-plan-to-end-violence-against-women-and-children-2022-2032>

⁶ Australian Human Rights Commission (2020) Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices): Securing Our Rights, Securing Our Future Report <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice/projects/wiyi-yani-u-thangani-women>



Introduction

DVConnect provides four key services that intersect with victims of crime as recognised in this Inquiry. They are VictimConnect, DVConnect Womensline, DVConnect Mensline, Sexual Assault Line. Our experience in providing VictimConnect informs the majority of the commentary for this submission.

As outlined above VictimConnect is a state-wide 24/7 helpline and counselling and case management service response for anyone impacted by a crime that qualifies under the *Victim Of Crime Assistance Act 2019* (VOCAA). This service is delivered in partnership with 54 reasons and uses virtual and in-person modalities to connect with people impacted by violent and personal crime in Queensland.

VictimConnect has received over 3800 calls for service since it commenced in July 2022 and nearly 2000 referrals from police via the Redbourne Police Referral system.

VictimConnect identifies most contact is at, or near, to when the original violent event or incident occurred. It is assumed this is due to both the promotion of VictimConnect at this time as well as this period being highly disruptive for individuals and therefore creating an environment where reaching out for help is more likely. Engagement and service uptake is highest when people directly call VictimConnect for support. The engagement rate when VictimConnect outreaches to people once referred indirectly via the police referral system is low. This is explored further below.

The other key time people reach out to VictimConnect is during post-event crisis. Examples of this include facing imminent homelessness due to having insufficient financial and psychological resources to recover or needing immediate support with statements or preparing for court processes or being notified of offenders being released on parole. Often it is in a point of frustration and/or fear.

VictimConnect does acknowledge that it has been in operation for under one year, and so it is unclear if client engagement patterns will vary as the service builds relationships with individuals and the program continues to be promoted. Current available information suggests that people who have used VictimConnect previously may reach out for support again at other points in their journey.

VictimConnect also notes that it has extensive experience in assisting people to apply for financial assistance through Victim Assist Queensland (VAQ), but due both the program structure and the length of time VictimConnect has been operational, and the extended wait times for applications to be processed, it has limited exposure to the outcomes of those applications. In saying this, VictimConnect is across many cases where people are awaiting previously submitted financial assistant applications.

DVConnect are also connected to victims of crime responses through Womenslines, Mensline and Sexual Assault Line services.

Womensline has received over 22 000 calls for service last financial year. Under VOCAA, it can be estimated the majority of these contacts would be recognised as about a relevant victim of crime matter.



Sexual Assault Line had over 1 500 calls last financial year. Under VOCAA, it can be estimated the majority of these contacts would be recognised as about a relevant victim of crime matter.

Mensline has over 17 000 calls last financial year. Under VOCAA, it can be estimated that approximately ten percent of these contact would be recognised as about a relevant victim of crime matter.

Through these services DVConnect has exposure to victims of DFSV crime at various points of their journey.

People who experience DFSV have a unique journey as a victim of crime. These crimes are often part of a longer pattern of behaviour, have significant trauma impacts and are not linear in the experience of crime or recovery. Further there are often delayed timeframes in reporting crimes resulting in the criminal justice journey having significant and sustained impacts on the individual alongside the unique, traumatic and personal nature of these crimes.

Finally, VictimConnect works closely government victim support services such as the Office of the Director of Public Prosecution Victim Liaison Service, Queensland Health Victim Support Service and VAQ, as well as other specialised victim support services such as 54 reasons Specialist Support Service, PACT, QHVSG, and WWILD. DVConnect would also like to recognise the important role that our fellow DFSV services play in working with victims of crime and refer to any submissions by these agencies as being critical in understanding the journey of victim/survivors.



1. Better coordination of state-wide services to ensure there is trauma informed, victim centric and timely support for victims, from the time of the incident and throughout the subsequent investigation and any prosecution, including:

- a. how the criminal justice system, including the Queensland Police Service, the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions, and court services currently support victims; and how restorative justice conferences and processes may be improved upon
- b. how to ensure victims are kept informed and included in an appropriate and timely way throughout the investigation, prosecution and parole period.

Early support and intervention

As outlined above VictimConnect speaks to many people at the commencement of their journey as a victim of crime. Victims of crime, at this time, are often confused, concerned and feeling overwhelmed. The first and primary point of contact with the system, for most victims of crime at these early stages is Queensland Police Service (QPS or police) and more specifically, the investigating officer.

Many victims of crime are not sure about the criminal justice process, what the next steps for them are, relevant timeframes, or their role in the justice journey. Some have concerns about their interactions with police feeling misrepresented, not believe or as an annoyance to the investigation. Few have an understanding of how the experience of being a victim is distinct to the prosecution of a crime, and how legislation and protocols govern a large part of policing engagement.

Understanding how trauma affects the brain and memory, and not being directly exposed to how police interact with victims of crime, VictimConnect does not have insight as to whether QPS are failing to articulate what will happen in the criminal justice journey for the victim or people are unable to effectively understand, retain and recall the information that is provided at this time. However, it is clear, that the result is people being confused and frustrated.

As the key point of contact for victims, the investigating officer can be challenging to keep in contact with, especially when considering their competing demands and shift work. This can result in no communication, delayed communication or the victim needing to constantly follow up.

"The investigating officer is on maternity leave so there is no one else I can talk to about it".

"I cant get any information because the investigating officer is on holidays"

"I have to wait until the investigating officer is on shift, they sent an email to them but I still have not heard anything"



Further, there are a lot of negative experiences for victims in working with police. The criminal justice process is not centred on a victims of crime lens and therefore can have significant negative impacts on victims of crime. An example of this is when a victim gives a statement. The sense of injustice, fear, harm, anger and violation that victims can feel is often not reflected in this police process. The statements and charges often fail to capture that sense of hurt that is experienced. The concept of lack of evidence is heard as a sense of disbelief of the victim. The importance of evidence and process, applying legislation, and being confident in progressing a case through court can feel dismissive for a person impacted by a violent or personal crime.

Further to the above, it has been clearly identified in recent reports such as the • Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce Reports 1⁷ and 2⁸ (WSJT), Commission of Inquiry into Queensland Police Service responses to domestic and family violence⁹ (COI QPS), that poor policing culture exacerbates the above experiences. Across all DVConnect services there is repeated cases of people feeling disregarded and belittled by police when making complaints, especially complaints related to DFSV.

All of the above can make for an environment where victims of crime do not feel well-informed, are not centred in actions taken and feel unable to request updates and information about their matter.

DVConnect does recognise that following the WSJT and COI QPS recommendations, ensuing reforms should create a better environment for victims of crime to receive a trauma-informed response from the criminal justice system. DVConnect also acknowledges the current work of the QPS in improving its responses to victims. However, DVConnect recommends consideration be given to a separate process to ensure victims of crime are updated with the criminal justice process and what this means for them. This support should reflect on the positive impact of family liaison officers, sexual violence liaison officers and integrated programs like Townsville Sexual Assault Response Team have had for victims of crime. This support should be enduring across the life of a criminal justice matter or until clearly and distinctly handed over to another similar support. DVConnect also suggests that the Committee considers what agency will best provide this support including government or non-government options. DVConnect most strongly recommends that any consideration here includes the voices of those with lived experience.

DVConnect sees the above suggestion as working in tandem with VictimConnect. VictimConnect provides general information and advice to victims of crime. This can include resourcing victims with tools, information and strategies of how to connect with investigating officers, understanding their rights and interpreting how the process will affect them. However, VictimConnect is not resourced nor closely connected enough to each case to be able to provide the clear and necessary types of information and updates that individuals are entitled to under the Charter or to understand the unique legal factors of each case.

⁷ Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce (2022) *Hear her voice. Addressing coercive control and domestic and family violence in Queensland. Report One. Volume 2.* [volume-1-executive-summary-and-introduction.pdf \(womenstaskforce.qld.gov.au\)](https://www.womenstaskforce.qld.gov.au/volume-1-executive-summary-and-introduction.pdf)

⁸ Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce (2022) *Hear her voice. Women and girls' experiences across the criminal justice system. Report Two. Volume 2.* [Hear-her-voice-report-2-volume-2.pdf \(womenstaskforce.qld.gov.au\)](https://www.womenstaskforce.qld.gov.au/hear-her-voice-report-2-volume-2.pdf)

⁹ Queensland Government (2022) Commission of Inquiry into Queensland Police Service responses to domestic and family violence: A *Call for Change Report* www.qpsdfvinquiry.qld.gov.au



In VictimConnect's more intensive service offerings, of case management and counselling, practitioners are able to more closely support victims of crime to engage with investigating officers and understand the criminal justice process. However, the VictimConnect model is not centred on providing this response. Case management is aimed at reducing an individual's barriers in accessing supports and establishing enduring and tailored resources such as finding long term or specialists services, or assisting in complex financial assistance application. Counselling is focused on therapeutic intervention to reduce the impact of trauma and build resilience and recovery. Further these supports are only for 4-6 weeks and often with a lengthy waitlist. Therefore, a complementary response is required that focuses on the provision of case specific, information, advice and advocacy.

DVConnect also directs the Committee to consider how specific cohorts are impacted by the victims of crime service system response and which groups are currently under or poorly serviced and how this can be improved. This includes considering children as victims of crime as individuals and as part of family units.

Police referrals

When police attend an incident, or a person makes a complaint at a police station, police can register a referral to VictimConnect to outreach to that client in the ensuing two days. This conceptually seems helpful and an engaging way to link victims of crime with services, and in principle, DVConnect supports this concept. However, the practical experience of VictimConnect is this has poor uptake with many people being not contactable, refusing support upon outreach or deferring support to a later timeframe (with no clear evidence that this support is ever taken up). While we do not have statistics on this journey and ultimate uptake, the indicative data and anecdotal reporting that we do have show that this client engagement through this pathway is extremely low. This process has significant administrative burden on VictimConnect and can feel invasive for victims of crime.

DVConnect would encourage extensive consultation with people with lived experience to understand the importance and effectiveness of this process and if there are alternatives that may be more powerful.

Proactive and easily accessible information provision

An enduring theme across the life span of the criminal justice journey is the lack of proactive and easily accessible information for victims. There are repeated cases where victims have not been advised of relevant matters or having to engage in protracted follow up to find out information. Any consideration given to improving this process must include reliable, easy and clear opportunities for victims' to be advised or to seek information as per their rights.



Amy had been anxiously awaiting the court date of the accused. With no previous contact from police, Amy phoned the investigating officer on the scheduled court date to find out the court outcome. This was of critical importance to Amy and her children as different outcomes had different impacts on her and her family's safety. It was at this time, that she learned that court had been previously adjourned and the matter would not be heard for two months. It was further identified in this call that Amy had not been made aware of relevant bail conditions. This resulted in a significant trauma response from Amy and required her to enact an immediate, alternative safety plan for her and her children

The provision of relevant information, in a timely fashion, in a manner that is accessible and appropriate for victims of crime needs to be addressed. DVConnect has outlined above the suggestion of a specific service or team that walks across the life of a victims' journey with the criminal justice system. At a minimum consideration needs to be given about how these processes are operationalised currently, and how improvements can be made to protocols and systems to ensure the relevant government agency is acting in line with the Charter of Victim Rights about information made available to victims of crime. An example is the Victims Register. DVConnect believes that an opt-out, rather than an opt-in mechanism for this register may be more appropriate to ensure victims are kept informed.

Responses for children

Children's experiences of DFSV should be recognised and addressed in their own right. This should, of course, include directly addressing the effects of violence on children. All services that may have contact with children who have experienced a serious crime should be appropriately skilled and resourced to identify and understand the effects of violence on a child.

One of the great challenges posed by DFSV is the uncertainty about how pervasive it truly is. We know the problem to be enormous and that it continues to be under-reported, probably significantly so. The result is that the true scale and harm of DFSV remains largely in the shadows, and efforts to prevent and respond to it remain insufficient and inadequately targeted to the damage it causes. This is especially true for children.

According to ABS 2021 Record Crime Statistics, there were around 18,000 sexual assault, kidnapping/abduction, robbery and blackmail/extortion offences against children aged 0-17 nationally. This included around 4000 in Queensland. Sexual assault accounted for the majority of these (around 85%). Queensland data for 'other' assault offences is not available, but likely to be significant in number. Despite these staggering numbers of children experiencing violence, there are still low numbers of children seeking and receiving specialised support services. Since 1 July 2022, through specific victims of crime funding, 54 reasons reports that:

- 17 children experiencing sexual violence (predominantly male), aged between 12-18, were provided by 54 reasons for counselling or information from our Queensland Specialist Team.



- Children as young as five with case management relating to their experience of DFSV were in contact with 54 reasons.

Domestic and family violence directly harms children, and when it exists, other abuse and neglect is likely. In 2021, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs inquiry into DFSV concluded that: 'Children are possibly the group most at risk from the direct and indirect effects of DFSV. Yet the harm done to children by DFSV is largely invisible in policy-making, government budgets, services and public attention'.¹⁰ In Queensland, key issues include (among others):

- Minimal understanding within the sector of the impact of trauma on young adolescent males, specifically those demonstrating violence to others and therefore being considered 'perpetrators' of crime.
- Services appear to be significantly under-resourced, with lengthy wait times for victims to access services, including children accessing therapeutic and counselling for trauma related to crimes of DFSV.
- Whilst there are services that provide specialist support to children under the age of 12, there are significant costs and/or wait times of 6-12 months.
- Regional services providing specialist support to women and children who have experienced violence are holding excessive caseloads of above 50 clients, this not only leads to the possibility of risk but also the potential that children will be overlooked.

High numbers of 'inappropriate' referrals are occurring from police into VictimConnect which likely indicates a lack of understanding or awareness on the program and supports available to victims of crime, specifically children.

Words matter, and the terminology used to describe violence and its effects are important. This includes the term 'special primary victim' vs 'primary victim', 'urgent' vs 'non-urgent' and 'eligible' and 'not eligible'.

We support a focus on supporting the recovery of children experiencing ongoing trauma from DFSV, and highlight the importance of this being implemented with adequate resources and investment:

- Develop shared language and definitions with children about serious crimes, in ways which reflect children's understanding of safety, harm, risk and protective factors in their own contexts.
- Build digitalised systems that allow victim/survivors, including children, to access information on the progress or status of their application.
- Develop age-appropriate, accessible ways for children to understand their rights and opportunities for participation when interacting with services. This would include understanding what happens once they report a crime.
- Build the capacity and capability of specialist and mainstream services engaged with victims of crime to meaningfully engage with children, including enabling children's views to be heard and taken seriously.

¹⁰ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs, 2021, *Inquiry into family, domestic and sexual violence*, Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, Report tabled March 2021, p 170



1. The operation and effectiveness of the Victims of Crime Assistance Act 2009 (the Act) for victims of violence, including:
 - a. expanding the eligible victim's category to include home invasion; and enhancements to provide better, trauma informed and timely assistance and support to victims
 - b. mapping victims' experiences through the financial assistance application process to identify the ways to reduce the burden on applicants
 - c. reviewing the Charter of Victims' Rights to identify common complaint themes from victims to inform future sector training needs
 - d. revising the existing government initiatives in relation to the Act's operation and effectiveness.

Expanding eligible crime categories

People who have experience types of crime outside of the VOCAA do consistently contact VictimConnect seeking support.

DVConnect acknowledge that crimes that fall outside of the VOCAA can have a significant psychological, physical and financial impacts on people. It is also acknowledged the importance of a home being a safe and personal environment and this can be compromised through any home invasion even without violence. DVConnect would not be opposed to the inclusion of home invasion in the VOCAA, as long as the impacts of this inclusion in two domains was duly considered.

Firstly, the exploration of why home invasion would be included to the exclusion of other non-violent crimes. What is informing the inclusion of home invasion without violence as opposed to other non-violent acts of crime. As an illustration, acknowledging the cross jurisdictional nature of cybercrime and fraud, VictimConnect receives a number of calls from highly distressed individuals who have experience fraud through online scams, including romantic scams. The shame and the vulnerability that these individuals feel as well as the loss of financial assets has notable impact on their health and wellbeing. There is a significant gap in response here as they do not fall into the scope of VOCAA.

The second is the fiscal and service system capacity of including this type of crime. VictimConnect alone has extensive waitlists and recognises that many victims of crime within the scope of VOCAA are unable to access suitable and timely responses. Further there are significant gaps in supports for people who already are eligible. For example, responses for children and young people, regional and rural populations, people with disabilities, people with complex trauma histories, First Nations peoples. The recognition that violent crime's impact warrants a government response is already acknowledge through the current legislation and service system. DVConnect would support the



implementation and resourcing of other elements of this review before investment in including home invasion in the VOCAA.

Victims experience of the financial assistance application process

Firstly, DVConnect would like to recognise the dramatic administrative improvements to the financial assistance system that have occurred recently. VAQ has consulted with the sector and individuals and the resulting process has had positive impacts on victims of crime. This review considered the administrative impost on individuals impacted by violent crime and truly evaluated the cost/benefit of some internal mechanisms for assessing suitability for assistance and how they are approved. The outcome is a better system.

However, the system is still far from responsive enough to the journey of a person who has been affected by violent crime.

A person's journey as a victim and with the criminal justice system is not linear. While the process of police investigation, courts and beyond generally map in a sequential way, the impact of each step and the experience of victims does not map in the same way.

The most obvious issue is the timing of payments. The gap between the request and gaining financial assistance is significant with real and enduring impacts. Our practice experience and research highlight that experiencing violence can strip a person's sense of safety and agency. Being unable to resource the things that a person needs for recovery after a violent event only exacerbates the loss of agency and extends the feeling of being unsafe. A practical example is being able to upgrade home safety after a violent break-in. The improved physical security not only practically improves safety, but also psychologically improves that person's sense of safety and ability to rebuild their feeling of autonomy. With delayed financial support, in the worst case, a person is unable to afford such upgrades at all. But even in the scenario where a person can afford such upgrades, this additional cost on the family budget can create other stressors impeding recovery and resilience.

Related to the amount of time involved in processing financial assistance is the use of "urgent" payments. While these payments may be progressed quicker than the general queue, payments still take a significant period of time, and that timing does not align with the general populations understanding of "urgent". There should remain a pathway for some payment to be made within a very quick timeframe, however this timeframe needs to be shortened, or at least indicative advice provided if it is likely to be paid quickly, so victims can make alternative arrangements. Further identifying this pathway with a term other than "urgent" as this creates false hope and further frustration due to how the community see urgency.

DVConnect identifies the pressure that is on VAQ staffing to process financial assistance applications. This is, in part, responding to the number of inquiries that are received about the progress of applications. While VictimConnect does try to support VAQ as extensively as possible in managing or channelling inquiries away from VAQ, many people are directly seeking updates or direct advice on applications. This is demonstrated by VAQ being the most referred service partner for our response and connection team, making up nearly 30% of referrals. This is an area where no other service can respond but VAQ. Many individuals when contacting VictimConnect express frustration at the inability to contact someone in a timely manner and to consistently have to follow up. While victims of crime are currently encouraged not to make contact to follow up on applications, many still do.



These factors need to be given due consideration by the Committee as this system response is not meeting the needs of victims of crime.

Overall, however, DVConnect strongly recommends that the experience of the financial assistance process is fully mapped. To be appropriately and fairly done, this needs to be explicitly inclusive of people with lived experience across the geographic and population diversity of Queensland. It needs to involve feedback loops where not only are people with lived experience consulted initially, but they are able to provide real and valued input into the design and implementation process of any changes. DVConnect expressly highlights the need for this to be done well, with appropriate resourcing and supports for people with lived experience. As with the current financial assistance process there also needs to be responses for unique population groups, such as First Nations peoples and children.



Reviewing the Charter of Victims' Rights to identify common complaint themes from victims

DVConnect, and especially VictimConnect, ensures victims are aware of the Charter and their rights. This is either directly, such as through conversations with victims, or indirectly such as through our website and socials. DVConnect sees all services as playing a role raising awareness of and ensuring these rights are upheld.

DVConnect does not have specific trend information regarding complaint themes for victims regarding their Charter of Victims' Rights. However, there is clear feedback from victims of crime about the Charter and what it means for them in practical terms.

Many individuals when engaging with VictimConnect, were not aware of the Charter. As highlighted in the first section, it is unclear if this is because they were not informed in their initial engagement with the criminal justice process, or it is because they were informed in a way, or at a time, that was not appropriate for them. Either way, there is a systematic issue here that needs to be addressed. Victims need to know there is a Charter of Victims' Rights.

On finding out about the Charter and their rights, a significant proportion identified that many elements of their rights were not upheld and did not know how they could make sure their rights were respected. A common concern was victims of crime not being provided with relevant information at all, or when this information is provided it not being timely or done in an appropriate manner. While this is anecdotally the most common issue raised, this may be more indicative of the potential negative impact the lack of information can have on a victim, especially with regard to safety, than it being the most prevalent issue. Either way, the importance of failing to keep victims updated as outlined under the Charter cannot be overstated.

Through conversations with victims of crime and our sector government and non-government partners, we see there is greater opportunity to look beyond training about victim rights and sector awareness of the charter. Instead focus and resources should be allocated to ensure:

- sector partners have the resources to enact victim's rights;
- victims are aware of these rights;
- victims have pathways to demand their rights are upheld,
- victims know and are supported to make complaints when their rights are not upheld
- complaint management processes are appropriate and focussed on system accountability and improvement.

As part of making sure victims are informed of their rights, dedicated mechanisms and resources need to be created. This includes creating resources where language and culture needs to be considered.

Building on the above, not only should child appropriate language be used when promoting and explain the charter, but consideration needs to be given to creating a specific charter for children as victims of crime.



Revising the existing government initiatives

DVConnect does support the Committee giving due consideration to current government initiatives relating to VOCAA's operation and effectiveness. DVConnect does not have any specific or direct feedback to provide to this area of the Inquiry, but does have a few high-level comments:

There are significant gaps in the victim of crime support sector to meet the demands of Queensland's geographic spread and diversity. Current funding and service models for counselling or case management support do not adequately cover Queensland. This is evident through both waitlists and that some essential victim of crime services cannot provide program responses in some areas across the state.

The impact of domestic, family and sexual violence on the community is complex and wide reaching. The sexual assault and domestic and family violence service sector in responding to the wide-reaching needs of people impacted by these types of violent crime, struggle to respond to the demand. This is especially true for the sexual violence support sector, who play a significant information and support role for people impacted by this major crime. Government initiatives that support VOCAA's application in Queensland, need to consider how DFSV services and programs are core services for specific cohorts of victims of crime.



The benefits, disadvantages and resourcing impacts of any recommendations.

DVConnect defer to the Committee to make these considerations once they have the fullness of response from the community. DVConnect does argue that current resourcing is inadequate for demand. Therefore, this needs to be a major consideration in any additional supports provided to the community or changes in the scope of VOCAA.

DVConnect does believe that improving the capacity of people impacted by violent crime to resource themselves to recover physically and psychologically as quickly as possible will decrease overall cost and impost on the system. Being able to reach out for support when needed and to access that in a timely manner will also reduce current overall demand on the victims of crime system. Giving victims the ability to access clear, accurate and unbiased information in real time is foundational to people's recovery.

Throughout this submission it has been identified that children need to be specifically considered as victims of crime, and responses need to be explicitly mapped to their needs. By supporting children early and appropriately, it is possible to reduce the likelihood that children will engage in violence themselves, as children and, later in life, as adults. This has significant social, economic and developmental benefits for individuals, families and communities, including intergenerationally, as well as fiscal benefits for government and ultimately for the Queensland community as a whole.

This involves contextualising a child's behaviour in responses to trauma and stress and its implications for their cognitive, physical, social and emotional development. Better coordination of state-wide services to ensure trauma-informed and victim-centred support inherently requires a specific focus on children as victims, in their own rights and in the context of their family and home environments.



Other comments and considerations

Seeking input from the community, the sector and people with lived experience

DVConnect thanks the Queensland Parliament for the opportunity for the community to have input on proposed legislative and system changes. However, there are a few systemic concerns about this engagement process that need to be raised. To both understand the limitations to the responses to this Inquiry and as an avenue for change in future funding and Inquiry processes.

Sector partners such as DVConnect are not funded to provide system advocacy. DVConnect, like our partners, do have a lot of information and insight to share. System advocacy is also an important part of our ethos and social mandate. However, lack of resourcing means that our ability to advocate is restrained. Time and resource pressure means this advocacy cannot be fully underpinned by current data and analysis. It also means that we are unable to give full consideration to the specific questions posed or tailor our thinking to the scope of various Inquiries as fully as we would like. Instead, we are limited to giving high level insights pulling on known analytics which may be missing rich insights.

Lack of resourcing and time also limits opportunity for effective and authentic engagement with staff and clients which then informs our system advocacy. Again, good organisational practice means that our submission does reflect on feedback and interactions with staff and victims of crime, but some areas have been unable to be fully explored. For example, giving consideration to the inclusion of home invasion does need much greater analysis than DVConnect can give at this point with information that is to hand.

If the above is true for services, this is amplified for the inclusion of people with lived experience. While the call for input includes the voices of lived experiences, the structure of this Inquiry does not facilitate this engagement. This includes from how this Inquiry has been promoted, the formal nature of the call for submissions, the lack of clarity about the submissions being able to be confidential, and, that verbal submissions will be accepted. There is a lack of consideration of the cost for people with lived experience to participate in such events, financial and psychological, and how the presentation of trauma may be triggered. There appears to be a failure to recognise how the Committee hearing process replicates the criminal justice process in its formality and structure and how this, in and of itself, may be triggering for victims of crime. All these elements also skew toward lack of diversity of lived experience responses as not all voices feel comfortable in such settings. Due to the mismatch of the Inquiry process and the way to truly involved people with lived experience DVConnect calls for this Inquiry to recommend that lived experience is foundational in the development and implementation of any recommendations from this Committee.



Engaging with lived experience

Throughout this submission DVConnect makes reference to engaging with people with lived experience. For this to be meaningful and effective for change then thoughtful and clear structures need to be set up to facilitate this engagement. The expectation that people with lived experience have the time, capacity and awareness to participate in these processes, as they are shaped, is poorly placed and only perpetuates the current systemic problems. Therefore, DVConnect would like to raise the following.

DVConnect recommends that engagement with lived experience to improve the victims of crime system draws upon relevant literature and frameworks such as Safe and Equal¹¹.

DVConnect recognises that, at times, the best pathway to connect with people with lived experience is through agencies that support them. If this is to be used, additional resources need to be provided to these agencies to identify and support individuals through the process. This includes financial costs and appropriate time frames.

Individuals who participate also need to be provided with resources to participate. While this includes fiscal support such as payments and reimbursement for transport costs, it also means due respect and recognition of that person as an expert. It also identifies the potential personal cost of participation. Trauma-informed support structures need to be in place. This includes pre and post work to ensure topics are clear, participants are well briefed on expectation and boundaries and are able to raise issues and maintain autonomy over their participation and information. Participants are also supported to know and be able to engage both formal and informal supports if needed.

Participation of people with lived experience needs to be beyond insight into current processes and how they impact for individuals. It needs to move to opportunity to participate in design, development and implementation feedback loops. Consultation is arbitrary and ineffective if people with lived experience are only engaged in identifying issues and not involved in assessing the suitability of developed solutions.

A simple example: Women who experienced DFSV, in a focus group identified that they did not know where to reach out for support. The sector took this issue and developed a tri-fold flier for police to provide. Despite being implemented victim/survivors continued to report not knowing where to reach out for support. The tri-fold flier was brought to a lived experience focus group for comment. While women had different reasons, the entire group agreed the flier was not an effective. This identifies that often seemingly helpful responses have no positive impact and may have unintended consequences.

Children have direct and distinct experiences of DFSV and their lived experience as victim-survivors in their own rights should also be valued and part of these processes. Children's specific right to participate and be heard in relation to matters that affect them is widely recognised as a fundamental child rights principle. This should be given effect in this context through age-appropriate, safe and culturally responsive mechanisms for children to be heard and involved at all points of engaging people with lived experience.

¹¹ Domestic Violence Victoria (2020) The Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework: Research Report and Framework. University of Melbourne [The Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework Report \(safeandequal.org.au\)](https://safeandequal.org.au)