



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON JUSTICE AND COMMUNITY SAFETY

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Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into Immediate Trauma Support Services in the ACT

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VICTIMS OF CRIME ASSISTANCE LEAGUE (ACT) INC.
A Free Community Support In ACT and Region

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Patron: Mr Bill Stefaniak AM; RFD

Standing Committee on Justice and Community Safety
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28 March 2024

Dear Committee

Inquiry into Immediate Trauma Support Services in the ACT.

Thank you for giving me the unexpected opportunity of being heard through this late submission. VOCAL only became aware of this inquiry from a brief mention made on the ABC radio news today. As the pioneer for Victims Services in the ACT since 1988, VOCAL (ACT) Inc. is well placed to give the Committee a different understanding of the kind of trauma experienced by people in Canberra, Queanbeyan and regions that are being seen by community workers as opposed to government salaried officers as represented by the services funded under the ACT government. VOCAL provides services to anyone asking for support whether there has been a crime or trauma from any other source irrespective of where the trauma occurred, or how long ago that trauma occurred. As this is a late submission, I will not cover issues already covered by others who have been invited to submit, as I am sure that the committee is well acquainted with support provided by government funded services and what the nature of trauma is. Trauma is a complex hidden issue.

As the world continues to experience unprecedented events, we in Canberra need to be well prepared for events in our own backyard which will leave individuals traumatised, and it is therefore timely for the committee to address such issues as available support services in Canberra. Almost everyday we hear on TV or various news media that there is a high need for more support and counsellors. Even the well-funded Victims Support Services ACT program complains that they have three months waiting list for traumatised victims of crime. It seems that their referral to other services is questionable. In the best interest of a traumatised person a referral to a well-known and more than well experienced community organisation is certainly possible but does not occur!

As a non-government funded community service of 35 years, VOCAL's experience of traumatised individuals which would not be eligible for government services cover a range of experiences:

- Domestic violence: children experiencing ongoing psychological and emotional abuses in dysfunctional families that are never the subject of police attention or even the neighbours or family friends. Such experiences have timeless effects on individuals throughout their lives.
- Sudden loss of finances: through various fraudulent means may cause different types of trauma to an individual i.e. through scammers on the internet versus in person extortion. Increasingly we are hearing of someone seeking love or someone seeking to improve on their financial situation ending up losing not just their life savings, but often also the whole content of their home from someone they know.
- Witnessing near death incidents from accidents from drug abuse versus Experiencing a near death incident, each bringing trauma of a different sort.

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- Sudden infant death versus sudden adult death at home or overseas during a holiday or a business trip. Depression is usually a presenting problem for many other underlying issues.
- Calling Mental Health Services for help Versus Police intervention: such as threats of suicide or self-harm on behalf of someone, but instead getting 4 or 5 police officers turn up and being treated as a criminal, put in one room under police guard, while the other four interview the person who is the one threatening suicide. Police end up threatening the suicidal person with arrest if that person does not comply to being taken away (tantamount to being arrested in the mind of a person already in distress) then proceed to take that person away in their van or else forced into an ambulance and then get a \$1,000 bill to be paid by the caller or the person who is seen as the service user who can barely cope financially.
- People with low credibility because of mental health, drug abuse or other disabilities often do not get police response when they cry out for help ranging from rape or home invasion.
- School in situ severe bullying versus cyber bullying by colleagues or other students.
- Office or workplace bullying over a sustained period resulting in loss of capacity to function at home and in the workplace resulting in loss of employment.
- Police intervention but mistaken identity or mistaken address resulting in damaged property and personal injuries with the resulting problem being pushed under the carpet.
- Family breakdown resulting in custody battles with one child being yanked from one parent and their siblings by the court to live with the parent they would rather die than see again.
- Vicarious trauma by nurses, police officers, and other emergency service providers who are not willing or able to access the services provided by their employers.

There is a saying in the help environment that if something does not work, stop using it and try something new. Government's well-intentioned reduction of duplication and integration of services into one stop shops is not meeting needs because there needs to be a community component of services for many who simply will not approach a government service. Funding yet another 1.5 government staff position is not an answer to the problem but perhaps this increased government wage and remuneration could in fact fund a community service for a whole year.(SACS Awards.) An improved referral service is much needed so that a timely service can be offered to prevent peoples from internalising their traumatic experiences when services are not available.

Recommendations:

- Improve referral services by having an external body investigate long waiting lists in government and non-government organisations. (One month being too long to wait)
- Compare number of people helped by supporting a community organisation versus an increase of public servants and eligibility criteria before government funding is given.
- Increase government funding and support to community organisation such as VOCAL ACT.
- Revival and government funding and support to an organisation such as Support Link in its earlier days of connecting a client to an accessible and available service as soon as the client has made connection with a service with a long waiting list or with the police.
- Improve the privacy law and client confidentiality to prevent services using it for turf protection and having long waiting lists instead of client best interest and timely service.

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