



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

SELECT COMMITTEE ON ESTIMATES 2022-2023

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Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into
Appropriation Bill 2022-2023 and Appropriation
(Office of the Legislative Assembly) Bill 2022-2023

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2022-2023 ACT Government Budget

Comments by Victims of Crime Assistance League (A.C.T.) Inc.

NOTE: These comments are made much later than anticipated because VOCAL's limited resources continue to be directed to the priority of immediate and urgent client services and related office management, in an environment without government funding.

Preamble

Victims of Crime Assistance League (A.C.T.) Inc. (VOCAL) has been providing essential services to victims of crime in ACT and region since 1988.

The organisation was formed by a group of families impacted by a number of child homicides in the region in 1988. Those families experienced great difficulties in navigating and participating in legal processes associated with justice processes related to those crimes.

This well established community service stands to support the ACT community through any adversity that befalls it – now and hopefully into the long term future.

Key Issues

- The 2022/23 ACT Budget includes a provision of **\$330 million for Justice** (much of which is directed to managing perpetrators of crime; but there is no provision of funds for VOCAL (ACT) which has been providing services for many years where there are gaps in the services available from the government based service Victim Support ACT.
- The Budget includes a provision of **\$498 million for Community Services**; but none of this is directed to VOCAL (ACT) a community organisation which has been providing services to ACT residents for many years.
- Rates of domestic violence remain far too high; and an established community organisation such as VOCAL (ACT) can provide relevant services, and meet gaps in services – this ongoing demand needs ACT government funding to meet the gaps in services.

Introduction

Victims of Crime Assistance League (A.C.T.) appreciates the opportunity to comment on the 2022-23 ACT Government Budget.

Our comments focus on how minor changes by the Government can lead to:

- additional local services for victims of domestic violence;
- greater efficiency of spending by government;
- allow the community to provide unique services which the government cannot via Victim Support A.C.T. (VSACT);
- filling gaps in services left by government services providers, and the relevant victims of crime Legislation and Regulations;
- reduce the load and waiting list of clients seeking services from VSACT;
- restore the partnership between VOCAL and VSACT for the benefit of victims, the community and government;
- help to redress the imbalance between funding directed to managing perpetrators of crime, and funding directed to services for victims of crime in the community setting, by the community; and
- enhanced implementation of the ACT Government's *Social ImpACT Strategy*.

Recommendation 1: Increase the services available for victims of domestic violence.

Rates of severe domestic violence incidents (particularly against women and children), including murder, throughout Australia remain far too high. Provision of funding to VOCAL (A.C.T.) would enable more families in the A.C.T. to seek and obtain a range of support services as well as counselling. Access to timely counselling services by potential perpetrators (i.e. partners of victims) who have a potential of becoming very violent, can help to avoid future violent incidents. Where potential perpetrators have better access to counselling, and do not feel that they are excluded from the process, there is a greater likelihood that future violent incidents could be defused and prevented, and where warning signs emerge there is a greater chance that Police and other agencies could be warned of the possibility of future serious acts of violence against a spouse or partner. Many existing models of services to victims of domestic violence may not facilitate perpetrators accessing counselling. A greater availability of services to assist potential perpetrators, would lead to a reduction in the rate of serious acts of domestic violence, particularly if spouses and partners are able to obtain more information and counselling about Court and child custody processes.

Recommendation 2: Improve efficiency and make government savings in overall delivery of services to victims of crime in the ACT.

Governments are continually looking to improve efficiencies in spending for the provision of services, and the use of taxpayers' funds. Since Victim Support ACT (VSACT) was established in the year 2000, its budget has grown significantly in order to meet demands for client services, administration, overheads, victim compensation payments to provide a time limited service.

Despite this growing expenditure, clients presenting to VSACT have sometimes encountered a significant waiting time before receiving victim support services. When VOCAL last had funding in 2011, it was able to provide services to at least 500 new clients per year, which diverted a significant load of clients away from VSACT. Over the last 10 years, since the loss of government support, VOCAL's ability to reduce the work load of VSACT (and hence its high running costs) has been thwarted. Nevertheless, VOCAL has continued its efforts with a skeleton staff, and has been able to see clients who would otherwise not be able to receive services from VSACT, or clients whose contact with VSACT was less than satisfactory for their needs. Clearly then there is a direct benefit to the community to have the choice of having both a government service as well as a community based service to fall back on for various reasons to be decided upon by the victim alone as their choice. Otherwise, some victims do not seek or obtain a service. By re-introducing government funding to VOCAL (of up to \$200,000), the government would realise savings of 3 to 5 times this investment, because of the much higher overheads and costs of service provision for VSACT. VOCAL has well established premises, experience, policy and procedures; which enable VOCAL to provide efficient services proven over its 34 year history. It is also noted that many of the procedural processes development by VOCAL (Forms and referral processes etc.) have been adopted by VSACT since it was established; including the recent duplication of VOCAL's volunteer program, using funds which were previously allocated to the community sector through a Tender process.

A relatively small investment in VOCAL, will provide many times that amount in savings for the ACT government; as well as enhancing the range of services provided to victims, and reduce the waiting times for traumatised victims; and also reduce the growing and substantial work-load of VSACT.

These savings can readily be demonstrated by comparing the costs of service provision (and number of clients serviced) by looking at the Annual Reports of both Victim Support ACT, and VOCAL, particularly for the year of 2010-11 (the year when VOCAL last received a full financial year of government funding) as shown below:

Year	Victim Support ACT		VOCAL	
	Govt. Funding	New Clients	Govt. Funding	New Clients
2010-11	\$2,320,000 *	792	\$235,000 (exc. GST)	167

* includes funding to VOCAL of \$235,000 (exc. GST)

Note that in the 6 month funding period July to December 2011, VOCAL saw a total of 153 new clients, bringing the total number of new clients in the final 18 months of funding to **320 new clients**. Importantly, VOCAL also **serviced many on-going clients** from previous years.

Currently, the costs for two qualified government employees – in wages and superannuation, and ongoing training – result in an amount comparable to the amount sought by VOCAL to run a whole community organisation able to produce services well beyond what two government employees can deliver.

When VOCAL was last funded by the ACT government in 2010-11, it was providing services to well over 200 new clients (and a similar number of ongoing clients from previous years), which represented a significant load off the government service Victim Support ACT. VOCAL in recent years has continued to provide services to victims (particularly those who are not eligible to receive services from VSACT), as well as those for one reason or another came to VOCAL after VSACT. Therefore, re-introduction of funding to VOCAL would provide significant savings to the government, and also provide essential services to victims within the community sector in support of the established government service.

Recommendation 3: Fill gaps in services for victims of crime in the ACT.

VOCAL, with its 34 years of experience in services to victims, provides many services which the government cannot provide because the government service is connected with criminal injuries compensation; and by its nature, services must be limited to and rendered equivalent to the type and extent of injuries and associated costs incurred by the victim. This therefore means that the government services range between 2 hours (for minor crime) up to a maximum of 18 hours (for major crimes).

Due to relevant Legislation and Regulations, there are various services which ACT government based services are not well placed to be the best choice for victims. Those services which VOCAL provides which the government cannot provide include:

- Ongoing counselling and support to victims (unlimited) after the allocated hours (from the government) have been exhausted, and victims still feel the need for contact with the support system – this is quite often the case for serious crime. If Government were to consider changing their model to include Ongoing services to victims, the cost of ongoing service provided by government employees would by far exceed the cost of a similar service

which has been VOCAL's model since 1988, provided within a community setting, with the use of trained and qualified volunteers under supervision.

- Emotional Support, Court Support, Practical Assistance by our volunteers which incur no cost except via management;
- 24 hour/7 days per week telephone support service. Victims of crime have access to an emergency Telephone Support Service, which unlike a call to Lifeline leads to a face to face appointment with the caller who can then access a range of services with the support of a trained volunteer, or when funded also to a salaried staff within 48 hours of the call by a victim of crime.
- Services to A.C.T. residents (local tax payers) whose crime occurred outside the A.C.T.; or tertiary victims of crime – whereas, the government service is provide only for crimes which occur within its own jurisdiction:
 - for example, victims who have moved to the A.C.T. from another jurisdiction (or return to the ACT after a holiday); women and children affected by the crime of their spouses and who have no access to a comparable service; Officers of the Australian Federal Police (together with family and friends) who reside in the A.C.T. but who have been affected by a crime in another State or in another country; may not be eligible to receive a service from government based victim services in the A.C.T. Yet efforts to reduce health costs or other consequences within the community demands that these citizens have access to help.

It is in the best interest of the ACT as a community to enable VOCAL to continue to provide these services in order to fill the gaps left by government-based services, to ensure that the ACT is known as a healthy and well cared for community with appropriate choices in health care initiatives for victims of crime – instead of insisting on putting all the eggs in the one basket - the idea of a one-stop-shop which caters for some but not all Canberrans.

Recommendation 4: Reduce the waiting list for provision of services by Victim Support ACT

In recent years, there have been various media reports about there being a significant waiting list for victims seeking services from Victim Support ACT. This has also been mentioned to VOCAL by many clients who have come to be a client of VOCAL after first seeking services from VSACT.

In addition, VOCAL has the capacity to provide services to the tertiary category of victims of crime – namely family members of offenders, caught up and traumatised by the crime. VOCAL has a long history of referring victims to other service providers including VSACT, instead of allowing a waiting list to develop. VOCAL also provides advocacy services and practical assistance, as part of the process of recovering after the effect of trauma arising from being a victim of crime. If VOCAL is again provided with government funding, this would create a significant reduction in work load for Victim Support ACT, as well as negating the need annually increase the size and cost of running a government service.

Recommendation 5: Enable VOCAL (A.C.T.) to continue to provide a range of unique services to victims of crime.

Many in the community, and many in government, may not be aware of the unique nature of services provided by VOCAL. Because of VOCAL's history, and its model for service delivery, it is able to provide a wide range of services when and as needed by its community. At VOCAL, we do not stand back and wait for what the government can do for victims – we say what VOCAL can do for its community and clients.

This is demonstrated by a number of Case Studies outlined in **Appendix A**.

These case studies highlight unique circumstances, and unique types of service delivery which VOCAL has been able to provide to clients who would otherwise NOT receive a service relating to the trauma and aftermath of being a victim of crime.

Furthermore, with the growing occurrence of disaster events both within the ACT and region, there is clearly an urgent need for community services which fall outside of government's role for victims of crime. Traumatic experiences have the potential of retriggering past traumas, and victims of crime who are traumatised by disaster events (unrelated to the crime through which the initial trauma occurred) will be in search of a service which VOCAL is well able to provide as needed.

Recommendation 6: Redress the imbalance in funding for management of perpetrators compared with funding for services for victims of crime

The total spending in the ACT on management of perpetrators of crime - in the provision of custodial sentences in prison - far outweighs the funding provided for services to victims of crime.

In addition, in 2011, the funding provided to Victim Support ACT, far outweighed the funding provided to the community sector (i.e. VOCAL), for the provision of community based services.

When VOCAL was last provided with government funding, its spending for **services to hundreds of victims of crime** (in one year) was comparable with the funds spent on **managing only one perpetrator** (for one year). This situation would also apply today, if VOCAL was again provided with essential government funding in order to provide a unique range of services to victims of crime.

Recommendation 7: Re-establish the partnership between Victim Support ACT and VOCAL, as intended in the original service model under the relevant Legislation and Regulations; and in accordance with the ACT Government Social ImpACT Strategy (currently under development)

In the early years of Victim Support ACT, there was a working partnership between it and VOCAL, whereby they shared the work load, and made reciprocal referrals as appropriate to the circumstances of the various clients. This was as intended under the relevant Legislation and Regulations. However, with the significant growth of VSACT, and other circumstances, this partnership has ceased as a result of changes in circumstances and the approach of the government service provider.

There are a wide range of services which appropriately have a complimentary relationship between government and community based service providers.

Re-establishing a partnership between the government and community based providers of services to victims of crime, will greatly assist in filling the gaps in services for victims of crime.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments.

4 August 2022

Bryan Harper
Chairperson
Victims of Crime Assistance League (ACT)

See below for Appendix A

Some Case Studies of Clients seen by VOCAL (A.C.T.) in 2019

(Summarised from some case studies given in the 2018-19 VOCAL Annual Report)

These case studies demonstrate some situations where some victims would not otherwise be able to receive services from the government based service provider.

Case A

A client who originally came to VOCAL many years ago (regarding domestic violence issues) was found to have historical child abuse issues as well. The client maintained regular appointments of these years, as her psychological and emotional issues eventually became enmeshed with a physical disability. The client found that she needed to fight in Court her case for government support for her disability, which exacerbated her general health which often led to her being on the verge of suicidal thoughts.

VOCAL provided the emotional support this client needed, as well as the practical support needed until she eventually won her case with the NDIS. A satisfied customer !

Case B

A man who said that he had walked past the VOCAL building many times in the past - but did not see the sign - came in for a visit without an appointment. His story was that he was raped as a very young boy when he was walking home from a friend's house. When he returned home, his mother in total disbelief about the story, allegedly said to him "You must have been putting out signals". This inferred that the young boy was somehow at fault. This would be the excuse used by the mother used to not do anything about supporting the traumatised boy, or to deal with the Police. The client went on to talk about how he handled his life throughout his growing years, the many relationship failures, and finally talking to the Royal Commission into Sexual Abuse, about his experiences. Having been a victim of rape in his childhood has meant that he became the target of other men who wanted to sexually abuse him. This may also have been due to the fact that he was the child of a single parent, who may have had many personal issues, including psychological impairment to deal with.

Many people think that talking to the Royal Commission about institutional abuse is helpful to the victim. Often what is not understood is that the victim has to revisit the actual traumatic experiences, and then is left to deal with the recurrence of symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. As the crime occurred long before the

advent of the Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme, or the Victims of Crime Act, and there being no traceable Police report or investigation; the help that he received from the government service was minimal.

The client faces the attitudes of many who either think he is mentally ill and is imagining things, or else it falls into the too hard basket. So from VOCAL's point of view, what prevents a person from committing suicide, or from preventing a crime against a perceived offender; is that someone is treating the complainant with respect, giving the person an avenue to speak about their grief, and providing practical help where it is required. VOCAL continues to assist this client.

Case C

For many years, it has been VOCAL's commitment to the community to include in its Policies and Procedures, the provision of assistance to tertiary victims of crime.

Tertiary victims are people who fall in the gap in service to primary victims. The Primary victims is the person who is directly hurt as a result of a crime. The secondary victims are the family members (and friends) of the primary victim; and also people who witness a crime. For VOCAL, there are Tertiary victims of crime, who are the children or spouses of offenders. For example, VOCAL has had many occasions to help wives or children of paedophiles who used their unsuspecting family members in order to gain access to their intended victims.

This particular case story though is about the trauma which occurred in the middle of the night when the Special Police force enter the house and pull everybody out of their bed and throwing anyone old enough to the floor, with little children left screaming, while the police team search the house and take away computers, and the father into custody. The mother contacted VOCAL's after hours Support Telephone Line – she described her traumatized children, and said that she feared that her teenage son might develop negative feelings which may affect his actions in the near future. The mother was not eligible to receive support from the government service (under the Victims of Crimes Act) as she was a tertiary victim. The symptoms she described were not dissimilar to those experienced by a primary, or secondary victim.

VOCAL's responsibility to the community means that if anything can be done to avert the consequences of a trauma, then VOCAL will assist the client within our means. The woman and her children were given a thorough debrief, and were provided with emotional support individually.

Case D

Recently, when the Service Co-ordinator was preparing to leave the VOCAL office, the doorbell rang – she was told that a man was here without an appointment. The Co-ordinator went to greet him and asked the usual question “what brings you here to VOCAL today”. In response, he said, “In 1987, I was at a school fete, and I saw a young boy being killed.” The Service Co-ordinator recalls the encounter as follows: “My blood curdled, as I instantly knew what he what about to tell me.” He was an eye witness to the murder of Grant Cameron, the son of Rita Cameron. This is one of the murders in the district that led to the formation of VOCAL (A.C.T.) Inc. The man went on to say that he was nine years old at the time of the crime, and he was caring for his younger brother at the fete at the time. He said that he cannot get the picture out of his mind, of the rage in the eyes of the murderer as he kicked the boy who fell to the ground twitching and turning blue, and everyone else nearby running away.

He (the client) recalled that he stood there as if paralysed, not knowing what to do to help. He eventually had to decide to walk away also. “It took ‘forever’ for an ambulance to arrive.” When he got home, his parents did not seem to realise that he was traumatised. They were good Christians, and told him that prayers should help, or something to that effect. On his return to school, he did not get any help either. It seems that at the time of the crime, adults did not realise that a child can be traumatised by seeing violence and murder.

This experience subsequently had many detrimental effects on his life, as he was growing up, and later; and today he decided for the first time to seek help, and found VOCAL. Since seeking help from VOCAL, he has indicated that it is the first real support he has received regarding his years of trauma. This is evidence that years do not bring healing – but appropriate specialised help does.