



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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ACT
Government

Standing Committee on Justice and Community Safety: Inquiry into immediate trauma support services in the ACT

ACT Government Submission

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Minister for Fire and Emergency Services
Minister for Police and Crime Prevention

Introduction

The ACT Government welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Standing Committee Justice and Community Safety (the Committee) Inquiry on Immediate Trauma Support Services in the ACT.

The scene of an accident or other traumatic event is extremely difficult for families, victims, ACT Policing members, ACT Emergency Service members and other witnesses to the event. The ACT Government is committed to supporting those affected by sudden and unexpected death and trauma.

This submission details the trauma support services available to the Canberra community, the challenges faced by ACT Policing and ACT Emergency Services members, support available to these members, and the provision of best practice support services.

I would be pleased to meet with the Committee to answer any questions.

SUPPORT SERVICES AVAILABLE FOLLOWING A TRAUMATIC INCIDENT

(Terms of Reference 1 and 3)

The ACT Government believes that services should be in place to support trauma experienced in the aftermath of an incident, and ongoing grief experienced because of loss.

In the ACT, trauma support services are delivered through a range of government funded services and support, free national support services and local privately run grief and loss counselling services. These are available to those in the ACT affected by the sudden death of a family member or friend.

Immediate Support Services

Immediate trauma support at incidents attended by police and emergency services are largely delivered in the ACT by members of ACT Policing with the support of emergency services members.

SupportLink Australia provided a Trauma Support Service without Government involvement from 2007 to 2013. This Trauma Support Service provided immediate and long term practical and emotional support to those affected by sudden death, in addition to 24/7 crisis response. At the time of an incident ACT Policing would seek assistance from the Trauma Support Service. This service was unique to the ACT.

Immediate 'on-scene' support provided by the Trauma Support Service would include helping people who require assistance with immediate challenges such as attending the morgue to identify the deceased, contacting family or friends, contacting other support services such as

counselling, liaising with police and assistance in understanding the coronial process. Longer term support was also provided to the more vulnerable clients via a case management process.

SupportLink and the ACT Government contributed funding towards a pilot service in 2014-15. Following an assessment of the services available to those affected by sudden and unexpected death, Government funding for SupportLink to provide the Trauma Support Service ceased in 2016. The findings of the assessment included that there was duplication of some existing government services and when the Trauma Support Service ceased, people affected by sudden and unexpected death in the ACT were likely to remain supported within existing Government services.

ACT Policing continue to fund SupportLink to manage referrals for individuals and families seeking support and assistance for a wide range of issues to non-government service providers, as well as notifications and reports to local Government organisations. This referral support service does not manage crisis support or 'on-scene' trauma support.

ACT Policing and emergency service agencies provide immediate support and referral services when attending a traumatic incident. The nature of emergency service work means ACT Policing and ACT Emergency Service Agency members provide initial support to those affected by a traumatic incident when attending the scene or delivering a death message. Members can then provide referrals to a range of suitably resourced and skilled government and non-government support services.

The ACT Government has established a number of support services available to families that are affected by sudden or unexpected death or are in the midst of a coronial process, including the ACT Coronial Support Services. Generally these services are available shortly after an incident and are well resourced and skilled to provide the specialist support needed by victims and witnesses of sudden or unexpected death. These are outlined in more detail below.

In addition to the assistance provided by ACT Policing there are other immediate options available for counselling and support in both the immediate, short and longer term. The ACT Government funds [Access Mental Health](#), a 24/7 telephone mental health support information and referral service (1800 629 354 free call).

Standby is a Commonwealth Government initiative that provides support for anyone who has been bereaved or impacted by suicide, including phone support 7 days a week 6am-10pm (<https://standbysupport.com.au/find-support/act/>).

Additionally, other services are available through charitable organisations. Lifeline (<https://www.lifeline.org.au/>) provides all Australians experiencing emotional distress with access to 24 hour crisis support (13 11 14) and Beyond Blue (www.beyondblue.org.au) provides information and mental health support (1300 224 636).

Short to Longer Term Support Services

The ACT Government has established a number of support services in the short to longer term to assist members of the community.

ACT Policing

ACT Policing has a dedicated Victim Liaison Officer (VLO) who works alongside Road Policing's Major Collision Team in relation to indictable offences for road related incidents. The VLO provides supplementary services to victims of crime that include acting as a link with the investigating/case officer, providing information about support services and making referrals where appropriate. The role of a VLO is to make contact with victims and offer referrals to applicable support services as required. The VLO may also be required to provide court support, court orientation and familiarisation tours, assistance with the preparation of Victim Impact Statements and applications to the Financial Assistance Scheme and providing updates to the victim and/or family when required.

ACT Policing also has a dedicated Victims of Crime Team ((02) 5126 9113) who offer support to victims, including access to counselling and support services.

These services are available in the days following an incident.

ACT Coronial Support Services

The ACT Government, through the ACT Health Directorate, provides funding to Relationships Australia Canberra Region for the operation of the ACT Coronial Counselling Service. This service is available for people who are affected by deaths that are subject to a coronial process and ACT residents who are affected by a traumatic death and are impacted by the coronial process.

The ACT Coronial Counselling Service provides the following specialised services and supports:

- a. intensive therapeutic counselling and family therapy including trauma, grief and bereavement counselling services;
- b. liaison with the coronial office and staff;
- c. support at coronial hearings;
- d. information about the impact of grief, bereavement and trauma; and
- e. referrals and links to appropriate support and services.

This service can be accessed from the time of the death to three months after the inquest process has finalised. Referrals to the service may be made by ACT Policing or by Courts upon the opening of a Coroners Court file.

In addition to referral to the ACT Coronial Counselling Services, the Coroners Court also refers people to "Griefline", a phone and web-based grief counselling service open from 8am to midnight, where they can access immediate over the phone support 1300 845 745 or <https://griefline.org.au/>.

The 2023/24 ACT Budget funded two new initiatives to provide support for members of the community through the coronial process:

- Funding was provided for the Coroners Court to engage a forensic counselling service to provide support to families during the first two weeks after death, to provide support where family may be involved in an identification viewing of the deceased and around the time when a postmortem examination may be conducted.
- Funding was provided to engage a second Court Family Liaison Office (FLO) to provide information to families about the coronial process and provides updates on the investigation. The FLO liaises with other support services such as the AFP Family Investigative Liaison Officer Coordinator, Director of Public Prosecutions Victim Support, and the Victims of Crime Commissioner's office to determine whether a family is receiving support through the process. The FLO does not provide counselling services.

Victims of Crime Support Services

Victims' rights of access to support, services, and legal and financial assistance are fundamental to the ACT justice system and are recognised in the ACT Charter of Victims' Rights.

Victims of crime are able to access a range of supports through Victim Support ACT (VSACT). Under the Victim Services Scheme, eligible victims receive support, such as counselling and massage therapy from approved brokered providers. These providers offer a range of skills including counsellors, clinical psychologists, massage therapists and mental health social workers.

The Victims Services Scheme also provides in-house case coordination, safety planning, justice advocacy (including ensuring victims' rights are protected in line with the Charter of Victims Rights) and in court support provided by trained, highly skilled volunteers.

The VSACT Court Support Program assists victims in navigating the court system. Court Support volunteers provide practical information and assistance to individuals attending the ACT Magistrates Court and the ACT Supreme Court.

The Victims Services Financial Assistance Scheme acknowledges the harmful effect of crime and assists victims to recover through a range of payments, including:

- immediate needs payments to assist with urgent medical and safety expenses;
- recognition payments that acknowledge the trauma experienced by victims;
- payments to recover economic loss;
- payments to recover the costs of a funeral; and
- payments to recover the legal costs associated with seeking support and assistance.

Further information on eligibility, relevant crimes, relevant injuries, amounts of financial assistance, timeframes, and the application process, can be obtained at:

<https://www.hrc.act.gov.au/victim-support/financial-assistance>.

Recent amendments to the *Victims of Crime Regulation 2000* have increased the range of victims eligible to access support under the Victims Services Scheme to include family members of victims who have been killed in motor vehicle accidents involving an offence.

To support this reform, the 2023/24 ACT Budget provided funding of 1.5 FTE to provide case coordination, crisis counselling and ongoing support to families bereaved by a motor vehicle collision arising from a criminal offence. These staff members provide intensive support to, and

advocacy for, family members, including wraparound case coordination, crisis counselling, court support and access to ongoing therapeutic care. Case assistance can also be provided to family members to access financial and other supports through the Motor Accident Insurance Scheme. These services are available during business hours, Monday to Friday.

The VSACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Outreach Program provides critical outreach support to clients, including immediate support following traumatic incidents arising in the course of, or as a result of, the commission of an offence. The program consists of two Aboriginal Liaison Officers with strong ties and connections to the ACT community. These individuals are assisted by VSACT's outreach social worker to ensure that culturally responsive services are available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victims.

VSACT also employ a Disability Liaison Officer (DLO) and Multicultural Liaison Officer (MLO) who, while not trauma specialists, can provide critical support and assistance to victims of crime with disability and from multicultural backgrounds, including newly arrived migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers.

Canberra Health Services Support Services

Canberra Health Services (CHS) offer onsite Employee Assistance Program support to staff and their families following critical incidents. CHS has developed the *Psychological Support for Staff – A Guide for Managers* to provide advice to managers on how to support staff day-to-day as well as following any incident.

Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Support Services

The Community Services Directorate (CSD) funds a range of trauma services, including those that provide immediate support for people who have experienced trauma as victim-survivors of domestic, family and sexual violence.

Domestic, family and sexual violence services are provided by a wide range of organisations, some of which receive ongoing funding and others time-limited funding (for example through the provision of grants). These organisations include but are not limited to:

- Domestic Violence Crisis Service - (02) 6280 0900, crisis@dvcs.org.au, <https://dvcs.org.au/>.
- Canberra Rape Crisis Centre - (02) 6247 2525 (phone), 0488 586 518 (text), crisis@crcc.org.au, <https://crcc.org.au/>.
- Victim Support ACT - 1800 8222 72, <https://www.hrc.act.gov.au/contact-us>.
- YWCA Canberra - 02 6185 2000, canberra@ywca-canberra.org.au, <https://ywca-canberra.org.au/>.
- Beryl Women Inc - 02 6230 6900, admin@beryl.org.au, <https://www.beryl.org.au/>.
- Toora Women - (02) 6122 7000, intake@toora.org.au, <https://www.toora.org.au/>.
- Doris Women's Refuge - (02) 6278 9999, women@doris.org.au, <https://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/domestic-and-family-violence-support/list-of-services/multicultural/doris>.
- Women's Legal Centre - (02) 6257 4377, admin@wlc.org.au, <https://wlc.org.au/>

- Legal Aid ACT - (02) 6243 3411, legalaid@legalaidact.org.au, <https://www.legalaidact.org.au/>.

Education Support Services

Where an ACT public school community is impacted by an unexpected death or life-threatening injury of a student or current teacher, the Education Directorate provides support to the public schools impacted.

These supports vary depending on the circumstances surrounding the death and consent provided by next of kin and/or ACT Policing regarding the release of details. Supports are determined on an individual basis and may include:

- communication to a particular cohort or wider school community. This can include provision of resources and contact details for external support services;
- provision of onsite counselling for students by school psychology service; and
- support and/or coaching to teaching staff regarding delivery of information regarding the event and how to respond and support students during this period.

Student wellbeing supports are available through the Clinical Practice team, including access to senior psychologists and school psychologists. The Directorate currently utilises the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) provider to deliver support services for staff in the event of a traumatic incident.

The Directorate's Early Intervention and Wellbeing Team may also provide support to affected staff, particularly where there is an already established relationship with affected staff, for example where Wellbeing Officers have provided support around an issue for a period which has then escalated into a traumatic event.

Ongoing student behavioural supports are provided through the Targeted Support, Positive Behaviour for Learning team and the Occupational Violence team.

Types of support needed following a sudden or traumatic incident

(Terms of Reference 2)

Each person's needs following a traumatic incident will be different. Useful supports include:

- **Health care** – access to emergency and acute health care services. Linkages to long-term health and rehabilitation services as required.
- **Emotional support** - listening to those affected, normalising trauma responses and sharing emotional regulation strategies where someone is experiencing distress.
- **Psychological first aid** - information on common physical and emotional reactions to traumatic events; guidance on how to restore emotional and physical safety; information on looking after yourself and/or family members following a traumatic event; and clarity on

when to seek professional support. Resources need to be age specific and tailored to children, young people, or adults.

- **Service navigation and connection** - information and resources to support people throughout their recovery process; linkages to relevant long-term health and wellbeing services; service coordination for people experiencing complex or intersecting difficulties; and enhancing connections to natural or existing personal and/or community supports.
- **Practical assistance and support** - access to immediate practice assistance for example accommodation, transport, essential items such as food, water, personal hygiene items, clothes and/or communication devices; support contacting and/or connecting with loved ones; and support with care arrangements for family members, including pets.

Challenges and role of ACT Policing and Emergency Service members

(Terms of Reference 4)

The ACT Government is grateful for the role ACT Policing and ACT Emergency Services members play in responding to incidents and supporting the well-being of the community.

ACT Policing

ACT Policing members are routinely exposed to traumatic events in the course of their duties. Police engage with members of our community at what can be the worst or most vulnerable moments of their lives, and routinely attend suicides, fatal motor vehicle collisions, family violence incidents and serious assaults.

Research has indicated cumulative exposure to traumatic incidents has the potential to increase the risk factors for psychological injury. Road fatalities can have a significant impact on affected families and the broader community. There were 18 fatalities on ACT roads in 2022. ACT Policing's Major Collision Team (MCT) are exposed to highly traumatic investigations including road fatalities where there may be more than one deceased or survivors who suffer significant and life changing injuries.

It should also be acknowledged that the associated trauma from attending the scene of a road fatality can be debilitating for first responders and in some cases impair the ability for a police officers to continue their career with life-altering consequences. MCT members remain in contact with families of deceased for the duration of the investigation.

ACT Policing have advised that across the workforce there are significant pressures on members to manage the welfare and maintain communication with victims and next of kin in line with legislated timeframes¹. The ACT Policing's Welfare Team often find that police attending these trauma type incidents in the public arena such as fatal motor vehicle collisions are faced with trauma affected witnesses and family members, which poses complexity for police to investigate

¹ Section 16A of the *Victims of Crime Act 1994* provides that a victim of the offence must be provided with an update about the status of the investigation as soon as practicable after a change in the status of the investigation and at least every 6 weeks, unless a less regular timeframe is agreed.

the incident and remain impartial. Being a key support for these witnesses and family members places a significant emotional toll on the mental health of ACT Policing's members. There are increasing levels of burnout from ACT Policing investigators largely attributed to the toll of managing and supporting the families of those injured, or who have died.

ACT Emergency Services Agency

The challenge of how to best support bystanders, witnesses, family or community members at a traumatic event or scene is an ongoing concern to Emergency Service members when in attendance at an accident or traumatic event. The provision of support can be especially challenging when members' primary role is to treat and care for a patient(s) injured on scene (for example, ACT Ambulance Service).

Members provide a wide range of roles depending on the incident. Their role can extend to concurrently maintaining scene safety and managing the distress of those who may be present at the time of the accident. In instances where Emergency Service members are not required to provide care to the patient(s) or perform their normal operational roles as responding paramedics or firefighters, they will remain on scene to assist police with family member support, and provide or confirm death notifications to family members on scene. The delivery of a death notification to family members on scene can impact members' personal stress and distress.

IMMEDIATE TRAUMA SUPPORT SERVICES AVAILABLE TO ACT POLICING AND EMERGENCY SERVICE MEMBERS

(Terms of Reference 5)

The ACT Government recognises the emotional effect this role can have on police and emergency service workers and the increased risk of burn-out, personal distress and psychological harm through vicarious trauma if not managed properly. The Government is committed to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of these members.

ACT Policing

ACT Policing have a number of services to support the health and welfare of members and their families. Support is available 24/7 to assist with work related stress or personal pressures.

ACT Policing's Welfare Team offer substantial support and follow up service to ACT Policing members.

Other services include:

- **Benestar** - 1300 360 364 (24/7) - Benestar provides a confidential counselling service for all AFP employees and their immediate family. The [Benestar website](#) also has information to support overall wellbeing.
- **Organisational Health Triage Team** – (02) 5127 0111 (business hours only) - The Organisational Health Triage team provides health related advice to all AFP appointees.

The team includes a psychologist, registered nurse and case managers who can assist with an immediate referral or advice.

- **AFP Chaplaincy** – (02) 5126 3769 (business hours only) - The Chaplaincy service offers spiritual welfare and pastoral care to ACT Policing members and their immediate families. Discussions with chaplains are confidential and do not need to be of a religious nature.

ACT Policing also utilises the Equip app. Equip is a free wellbeing app designed by police for police and their families. The confidential app can help track a member's physical, emotional and social wellbeing and put them in touch with support services.

ACT Emergency Services Agency

Emergency Service members of the ACT Emergency Services Agency (ESA) who attend an accident or traumatic event may access a number of robust internal and external support programs and initiatives. ESA respects each individual's choice to engage with support based on their preference and need, and internal initiatives as well as access to external support are offered to provide a wide range of suitable options.

- **Service Specific Peer Support Officer Programs** - ESA has developed a cohort of Peer Support Officers (PSO) that are trained and available across the ESA. PSO are volunteers or staff in their respective service who are available to their peers for support. Assistance can be requested by the individual or through a notification process by their manager or Service. All Services, including ACT Ambulance Service, ACT Fire and Rescue, ACT Rural Fire Service and ACT State Emergency Service, have access to peer support programs. Peer support programs can assist with the prevention, early intervention, and the de-stigmatisation of psychological distress.
- **ACTESA Chaplaincy Program** - The ESA has three volunteer Chaplains who provide denominational and non-denominational support across the whole of the ESA. Chaplains provide an important and valued support service to Emergency Service members and are available both during and immediately after significant events or incidents.
- **EAP** - ESA members have access to post incident support for a traumatic incident or event. A referral can be made to an external counsellor through the Employee Assistance Program. This support can be initiated by the agency, in conjunction with the Emergency Service member, or by an individual member. This support can be accessed in the immediate aftermath of the event, and is available in person or via telehealth appointment.

Each of these initiatives are supplemented with internal supportive practices. These include operational debriefs with an Emergency Service member's manager and policies that support members to stand down for a period of time or for the rest of the shift, and discuss their experience with their operational manager if they are comfortable to do so. This supports Emergency Service members to decompress, reflect and process the event while importantly recognising the impact of the event they have attended.

These services may be accessed by all staff and volunteers across ESA.

BEST-PRACTICE, EVIDENCE BASED, 'TRAUMA INFORMED' IMMEDIATE TRAUMA SUPPORT SERVICES

(Terms of Reference 6)

People will respond to a traumatic incident in their own unique way. Some events may have little impact on one person but cause severe distress in another.

In the first hours and weeks after the incident, it is important that people affected by sudden and unexpected trauma are safe, have their basic needs met (eating, drinking, keeping warm, sleeping) and their responsibilities covered (children, elderly, pets, employers are advised). The majority of the time people have the natural resilience to address these issues or existing support networks that can assist. The provision of this care does not require a specialist, it can be provided by a supportive family member or friend.

Best practice is for first responders to attempt to mobilise existing support networks and natural resilience. The support of family and friends can play an important role in someone's recovery from a traumatic event. They can assist by reducing other stresses in a person's life to allow them to focus on recovery. If a person does not have existing support networks they can access at this time and they become debilitated by their response to the incident, external intervention may be required. Some people may also be more vulnerable and require professional support due to pre-existing life situations such as domestic violence, family breakdown, depression, chronic illness, or alcohol or drug addictions.

Government and emergency services have a role in providing those affected by a sudden death with information that helps them make sense of what has happened. They should also be given support and information to enable them to make the best decisions for them and ensure they are included in processes and events that are relevant to their sudden bereavement and decisions that need to be made. Depending on what symptoms a person experiences, there are a variety of strategies a support person can use to help people cope in the moment.

Grief has no set pattern and expresses differently across different cultures. After a traumatic event, people often experience 'normal' grief responses common to any kind of trauma. However, they may experience more intense feelings but still not require any sort of specialist care to aid recovery, as most people will still recover with the support of family and friends.

For those who do show signs of complicated grief or mental health issues such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, alcohol and drug use, it is important that they are provided with specialist support.

Research and Resources

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