



Mark Speakman

Attorney General

Tanya Davies

Minister for Mental Health

MEDIA RELEASE

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VICTIMS TO HAVE THEIR SAY IN FORENSIC MENTAL HEALTH CASES

From today, victims of forensic patients will have a greater opportunity to be heard in Mental Health Review Tribunal (MHRT) proceedings following the commencement of new laws which allow submissions to be made outlining the impact a forensic patient's leave or release would have on a victim.

Attorney General Mark Speakman and Minister for Mental Health Tanya Davies said the new laws will enable victims to have their say in MHRT hearings for people who are detained after being found unfit to be tried, or not guilty of a crime by reason of mental illness.

"We've listened to the concerns of victims and they will now be given the opportunity to be heard and express how it will affect them if the forensic patient is granted leave or released from detention," Mr Speakman said.

"Submissions may include suggested conditions the MHRT could impose on the forensic patient to keep the community safe, such as orders preventing them from visiting certain locations and associating with specific people."

A new Specialist Victims Support Service (SVSS) will also officially begin operating in Parramatta today, providing dedicated support to victims of violence committed by people with cognitive and mental health impairments.

Mrs Davies said the NSW Liberals and Nationals Government has committed \$8.5 million to establish and maintain the SVSS.

"The SVSS will work with victims from an early stage in the justice process so they feel safe, understand court and MHRT hearings and can have their voices heard," Mrs Davies said.

"The service will regard a victim's privacy as paramount and won't release their personal information to the Tribunal or anyone else without the victim's consent."

The SVSS will provide:

- A victims register through which registered victims can request to be informed of key hearing dates and case developments (the register will also be accessible to families of victims who died as a result of an act by a forensic patient)

- Private rooms where victims can attend MHRT hearings via videolink
- Support to help victims prepare submissions to the MHRT and victim impact statements to the District and Supreme Courts
- Support for recovery ranging from counselling to crisis supports.

The introduction of the SVSS is part of a major overhaul of the forensic mental health system by the NSW Liberals and Nationals Government and will give greater consideration to victims' rights while maintaining fairness to people with a cognitive or mental health impairment.

To find out more about the changes, visit www.victimsservices.justice.nsw.gov.au.