

Victims of Crime Support Service – Statutory Review

To: The NSW Department of Justice

Re: review of the *Victims Rights and Support Act 2013* (NSW) to determine whether the policy objectives of the Act remain valid and whether the terms of the Act remain appropriate for securing those objectives.

Barnardos is a non-government child welfare agency operating a range of family support and Out of Home care (OOHC) programs in NSW and the ACT. In each year the agency assists over 4000 children, young persons and their families who are experiencing difficulties with poverty, violence, homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse, mental illness and social isolation. We aim to provide high quality direct services, in partnership with Governments, and with regard to research. We aim to provide advocacy and to disseminate knowledge to improve the delivery of child welfare programs within a social care framework which balances the need for immediate intervention with the need for prevention.

Barnardos Australia welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the statutory review of the *Victims Rights and Support Act 2013* (NSW).

We note that the policy objectives of the Act includes:

- to recognise and promote the rights of victims of crime;
- to establish a scheme for the provision of support for victims of acts of violence;
- to enable financial support paid and recognition payments made under the Victims Support Scheme to be recovered from persons found guilty of the crimes giving rise to the payments;
- to give effect to an alternative scheme under which a court may order the person it finds guilty of a crime to pay compensation to any victim of the crime; and
- to impose a levy on persons found guilty of crimes for the purpose of funding the Victims Support Scheme.

Our comments below relate primarily to provision of support for victims of acts of violence.

Victims of Crime Counselling Services

Across our services in NSW Barnardos have made many referrals to the Victims of Crime counselling support service. Our staff provide clients who have experienced violence with information about the service and how to apply for support. In our family support services in most instances these clients are female and victims of family violence, in some instances they are children who have experienced family violence. Where needed we have assisted clients to complete the forms and provide supporting evidence (police report and event number, medical report, letter of support).

We have found that the application process is relatively easy to complete, in plain English and with a quick turnaround response time.

Once approved it has been relatively easy to make a referral to one of the Victims of Crime accredited providers. In rural settings these providers are mostly based in a regional centre and rarely have a wait list. In metro settings there may be a waitlist and CALD options are limited –it can be difficult to find a provider who speaks the same language as client or provider does speak same language and client does not want to access as the CALD community is small and she does not want other people from within her community to know what has happened.

Wherever possible we have been able to match client's request for a counsellor's gender preference.

Where our clients have utilized the counselling service we have received positive feedback and a high level of satisfaction with the service eg *"It has helped me understand what has happened – helped me work through my experiences"*; *"It was good to talk with someone from outside of our area who didn't know me and my family."* *"I needed someone to talk to who understood DV and its impact."*

Our concern is the very limited number of accredited providers in rural settings outside of the major regional centres. In Mudgee, for example, for a period we did have a provider who travelled to Mudgee one day per week for a full day of appointments based at one of the offices of NGO. This worked well until this provider had to stop working for health reasons and now there is no accredited provider and the closest alternatives are 100km or more distance away. Further north and west eg Narromine, Nyngan, Gilgandra, Warren, Cobar, Coonabarabran there are no accredited providers listed and the travel distances to a regional centre are even greater. Even some of the larger regional centres have limited service available, for example, Dubbo there are only two accredited providers listed one of who works very part time and the other has a significant waitlist

For towns with a population of 3500 or more and where there are no accredited providers, greater effort could be made to facilitate access to a service. For example, better use of AVL technology could be explored; and incentives for providers to deliver an outreach service from a regional centre to these smaller towns.

Reimbursement of travel expenses

In a number of instances we have had to assist a client to relocate interstate due to severity of violence and lack of protection. In these cases we have applied for reimbursement of travel expenses. This part of the support service is very slow to respond – we have waited more than four months with no response.

