

Victims Support Agency  
October 2007

# Update VSA



DEPARTMENT  
OF JUSTICE



## The Victims Register Moves to the VSA

On 26 February 2007, the Victims Register was transferred to the Victims Support Agency. Originally located within Corrections Victoria, the Victims Register commenced on 20 August 2004 and allows someone who has been a victim of violent crime to be advised at key points while the offender is under sentence or (where applicable) extended supervision after completing the sentence. Those included on the Victims Register also have a statutory right to

The new Victims Register Coordinators, Heather Ameen and Liz Hall, are responsible for responding to enquiries, processing applications and notifying persons placed on the register with the appropriate information. Between them, Heather and Liz have a rich wealth of experience in both victims' services and Corrections Victoria.

Those included on the Victims

when the Adult Parole Board is to consider the prisoner's release on parole or schedules a meeting to decide what instructions and directions it will give if the prisoner/offender is made subject to an extended supervision order. Registered victims have a legal right to make a written submission to the Board.

In most cases, those included on the Victims Register will also be advised of the prisoner's sentence length and earliest possible release date and, where applicable, of:

- the prisoner's eligibility to be temporarily absent from custody on rehabilitation and transition permits
- any transfer of the prisoner interstate or overseas
- any escape from custody by the prisoner
- the prisoner's release on parole
- cancellation of the prisoner's parole.

Inclusion on the Victims Register does not entitle people to information about:

- a prisoner's prison location or security classification
- the programs that the prisoner has completed in prison
- the location of a prisoner during their temporary absence from prison on a permit
- where the prisoner lives or intends to live upon release from prison.

make a written submission to the Adult Parole Board when the offender is being considered for parole or extended supervision.

Register only receive information about the prisoner(s)/offender(s) identified in their application. They are given advance notice



Victims Register Coordinators, Heather Ameen (Left) and Liz Hall.  
Front cover: Victims Support Officer, Riddhika Rathod

After a prisoner/offender has been discharged, registered victims will not receive information in relation to any later sentence of imprisonment that person may serve.

If you require more information about the Victims Register, the Victims Register Co-ordinators can be contacted on 1800 819 817, or by email:

VictimsRegister@justice.vic.gov.au.

You can also go to [www.justice.vic.gov.au](http://www.justice.vic.gov.au) and follow the victims prompt.

## **Victims of Crime Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Strategy**

The Victorian Government is committed to ensuring that all Victorians are able to access the justice system and victim support services. This requires a justice system and victim support services that are communicating in a culturally sensitive and engaging manner with Victoria's diverse population.

The aim of the Victims of Crime Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Strategy is to empower Victoria's CALD community to make informed choices about seeking assistance from the justice system and victim support services.

Focusing on victims of violent crime, the project aims to:

- promote the principles of the Victims' Charter
- identify existing resources and programs
- identify barriers to participation in the criminal

justice system and victim services by CALD communities and strategies to overcome these barriers

- improve confidence in, and access to, the criminal justice system and victim services amongst the CALD community
- assist key agencies to plan and deliver appropriate services to CALD victims under the Victims' Charter
- provide information and support across the service system that is responsive and culturally appropriate for CALD victims of violent crime
- implement initiatives that are seen as highly relevant to the CALD community
- contribute to increased crime reporting by the CALD community
- contribute to a higher proportion of the CALD community being aware of support services offered through the Victims Assistance and Counselling Program (VACP) and the Victims Support Agency (VSA) Helpline
- establish a strong network with CALD stakeholders, the justice system and victim support services.

The strategy is being developed in consultation with key stakeholders within the criminal justice system, with an Advisory Committee consisting of representatives from:

- the VSA/Diversity Issues Unit
- Victims Assistance and Counselling Program

- County Court and Magistrates' Court
- Office of Public Prosecutions
- Victorian Multicultural Commission
- Department of Human Services
- Victoria Police
- Peak multicultural agencies: the Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV); and the Network of Migrant Resource Centres and Migrant Service Agencies.

The Advisory Committee will provide overall direction and management of the Victims of Crime CALD Strategy. A Victims of Crime CALD Strategy document will articulate the purpose and objectives of the Strategy, identify initiatives to achieve these objectives and indicate resources required.

For enquiries about the Victims of Crime CALD Strategy, please call Nesrene Asmar on 1800 819 817.

## **Launch of Specialist Sex Offences Unit**

On 26 April 2007 the Honourable Rob Hulls, Attorney-General, launched the Office of Public Prosecutions' Specialist Sex Offences Unit. This unit is led by Senior Crown Prosecutor, Michele Williams SC, and will substantially change the way sex offences are prosecuted in Victoria.

The Specialist Sex Offences Unit has been established in response to recommendations made by the Victorian Law Reform Commission's *Sexual Offences Law and Procedure: Final Report*. The Report identified



L-R Chief Executive Officer of the AFL, Andrew Demetriou, Senior Crown Prosecutor, Michele Williams SC, Attorney-General, Rob Hulls, Chief Commissioner of Police, Christine Nixon, Secretary Penny Armytage, and former Director of Public Prosecutions, Paul Coghlan QC.

some key concerns about the criminal justice response to sexual assault including low reporting rates; high attrition rates; low prosecution and conviction rates; and a widely held perception that the criminal justice system does not always deal fairly with people who have been sexually assaulted.

At the launch, the Attorney-General advised that the Victorian Government had responded to the Commission's recommendations by allocating \$34.2 million to the Sexual Assault Reform Package in the 2006-7 State Budget. The Attorney-General stressed that the reform package is about implementing cultural change

throughout the entire community. The Specialist Sex Offences Unit is part of the Sexual Assault Reform Package.

The features of the Specialist Sex Offences Unit are:

- Leadership from specialist crown prosecutors
- Training and guidelines for private barristers
- Greater consistency and continuity in sex cases
- Emphasis in the earlier resolution of cases
- Innovative professional development and support for solicitors

- Seamless, informative and respectful process for victims
- Addressing the needs and concerns of victims
- Greater access to witness support services
- Improved data collection and evaluation
- Improved community confidence in the criminal justice system

Other speakers at the launch were Paul Coghlan QC, former Director of Public Prosecutions, Penny Armytage, Secretary of the Department of Justice, Christine Nixon, Chief Commissioner of

Police, a victims' advocate and Andrew Demetriou, Chief Executive Officer of the AFL. All speakers spoke enthusiastically about the new unit and the need to change the culture that exists in our community. Andrew Demetriou said, "It's also important that we continue to remain resolute in insisting that sexual assault and other forms of violence against women, whether physical or verbal, is never, ever acceptable. Not now. Not ever."

Paul Coghlan QC expressed his hope that the establishment of the Unit will make victims more confident to come forward and report sex offences to police and will ensure victims get more appropriate support and are treated with sensitivity and respect.

## New Sexual Assault Centres

The Honourable Rob Hulls, Attorney-General, and Chief Commissioner Christine Nixon launched the Peninsula Sexual Assault Centre in Frankston on 26 April 2007. The Centre enables victims of sexual assault to get help from a multidisciplinary team of staff specialising in sexual assault in one central location. The Centre brings police, sexual assault counsellors and medical staff together so that victims of sexual assault no longer have to deal with different agencies in different locations.

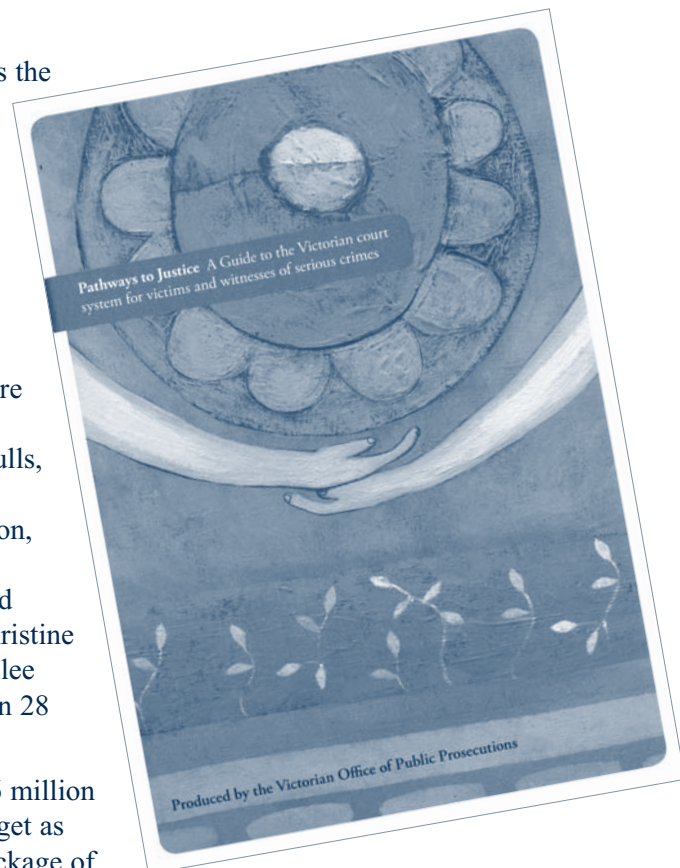
At the launch, the Attorney-General said, "While we cannot take away the pain, this centre allows victims to access appropriate help in a place where they will be treated with

sensitivity and respect. I expect this centre will encourage more people to come forward and report sexual assault, while reducing the trauma they experience in the criminal justice system."

Frankston was chosen as the location of one of the two specialised centres funded in the 2006-7 State Budget because it has one of the highest sexual assault reporting rates in Victoria and is also a high growth corridor. The other Centre was located in Mildura. The Honourable Rob Hulls, Attorney-General, the Honourable Bob Cameron, Minister for Police & Emergency Services, and Chief Commissioner Christine Nixon launched the Mallee Sexual Assault Centre on 28 May 2007.

The Centres received \$6 million in the 2006-7 State Budget as part of a \$34 million package of sexual assault reform initiatives. The Centres build on Government reforms made in response to the Victorian Law Reform Commission's *Sexual Offences Law and Procedure: Final Report*. The recommendations in the report aimed to make the criminal justice system more responsive to the needs of complainants in sexual offences cases. Other reforms include a new team of sexual assault forensic nurses, specialist sexual offences lists in the Magistrates' and County Courts, the Specialist Sexual Offences Unit explained above, and the Child Witness Service which will be featured in the next edition of *VSA Update*.

## Pathways to Justice: A Guide to the Victorian Court System for Victims and Witnesses of Serious Crime



As part of implementing the Victims' Charter, the Office of Public Prosecutions has produced the booklet *Pathways to Justice* to help victims when they come into contact with Victoria's courts. This booklet was jointly funded by the VSA and the Office of Public Prosecutions, and is a companion guide to the VSA's *Victim's Guide to Support Services and the Criminal Justice System*.

*Pathways to Justice* provides victims with background information about how the criminal justice system works, the court process including the

appeal process, the role of victims and witnesses at various stages, compensation and claiming expenses for attending court. The booklet also provides a list of contact details for more information and support.

In producing the booklet, the Office of Public Prosecutions aims to address the needs and concerns of victims and to prepare them for an appearance in court. Ultimately, the aim is to ensure we have a responsive justice system geared to supporting victims and witnesses of serious crime.

Copies of the booklet can be obtained from the Office of Public Prosecutions on 9603 7523 or through the VSA Helpline on 1800 819 817.

### **Professional Development Program**

On Monday 30 April and Tuesday 1 May the VSA held a Professional Development Program for Helpline and Victims Assistance and Counselling Program staff, and metropolitan and regional managers from the Department of Human Services. The event was held at The Koori Heritage Trust in Melbourne, hosting 38 participants and 18 presenters.

The program included: the criminal justice system; the challenges in dealing with traumatised clients; the Police Victims Advisory Unit; Court Network; VOCAT; and the Victims' Charter. Sandie

Beswarick from Western Region Health Centre in Footscray and Amanda Alexander from Ovens and King Community Health Centre in Wangaratta spoke about the respective challenges that their metropolitan and regional Victims Assistance and Counselling Programs experience. Sally Dunlop from Wimmera Uniting Care in Horsham and Toni Williams from Eastern Access Community Health in Ringwood spoke about innovations within their respective organisations.

A valuable aspect of the program was the group discussions that focussed upon strengths and challenges, as well as strategies to address future challenges. The networking between Helpline and Victims Assistance and Counselling staff was very beneficial, especially for those who work in regional areas. The program set the foundation for future professional development programs to be held during the course of the year.

### **Increased Compensation for Victims of Crime**

Under legislation passed by Parliament in April, State-funded pain and suffering payments for victims of crime will increase by up to 33%. The *Victims of Crime Assistance Amendment Act 2007* increases the maximum amount of special financial assistance which primary victims of violent crimes can claim from \$7,500 to



Training and Development Coordinator, Ben Elisha (Left) and Data Analyst, Henry Cao.

\$10,000. These provisions will apply to violent crimes committed after 1 July 2007.

The Attorney General, Rob Hulls said the new legislation fulfils the Government's election commitment to increase payments to victims of crime and builds on the package of reforms already introduced to improve responses to victims of crime. "This Government is committed to ensuring that victims of crime receive the support they need", Mr Hulls said.

The increased payments provided for in the new legislation will apply to all categories of special financial assistance. In addition to the increased maximum of \$10,000 for Category A payments which includes sexual offences and attempted murder, Category B payments which include indecent assault and armed robbery will increase from the current maximum of \$2,500 to \$3,250. Category C payments which include offences involving threats of death and conduct endangering life will also increase from \$1,000 to \$1,300, as will Category D payments for offences including threat of injury, assault and attempted assault from \$500 to \$650.

Awards of special financial assistance will continue to be made in addition to financial assistance awards for items such as medical expenses, loss of earnings and counselling costs. Victims of violent crimes do not need to suffer an injury to be eligible to apply for special financial assistance. Payments are made in circumstances where the Victims of Crime Assistance

Tribunal is satisfied that an act of violence was committed and that the victim has suffered a significant adverse effect as a direct result of that act.

Mr Hulls said that in making these amendments, the Government recognised that no amount of money can make up for the harm that victims suffer from an act of violence. "Special financial assistance awards are intended to constitute a tangible expression of the community's

of crime and to providing them with the recognition that they deserve.

## **Another Indigenous Liaison Officer joins the VSA**

In the last edition of VSA Update, The Victims Support Agency introduced Indigenous Liaison Officer, Nellie Flagg. She



VSA Indigenous Liaison Officer, John Bell

sympathy and concern for victims who have suffered from violent crime". He said the amendments were part of the Government's ongoing commitment to victims

has now been joined by John Bell. Originally from Heywood, John worked for the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service for three years before becoming a

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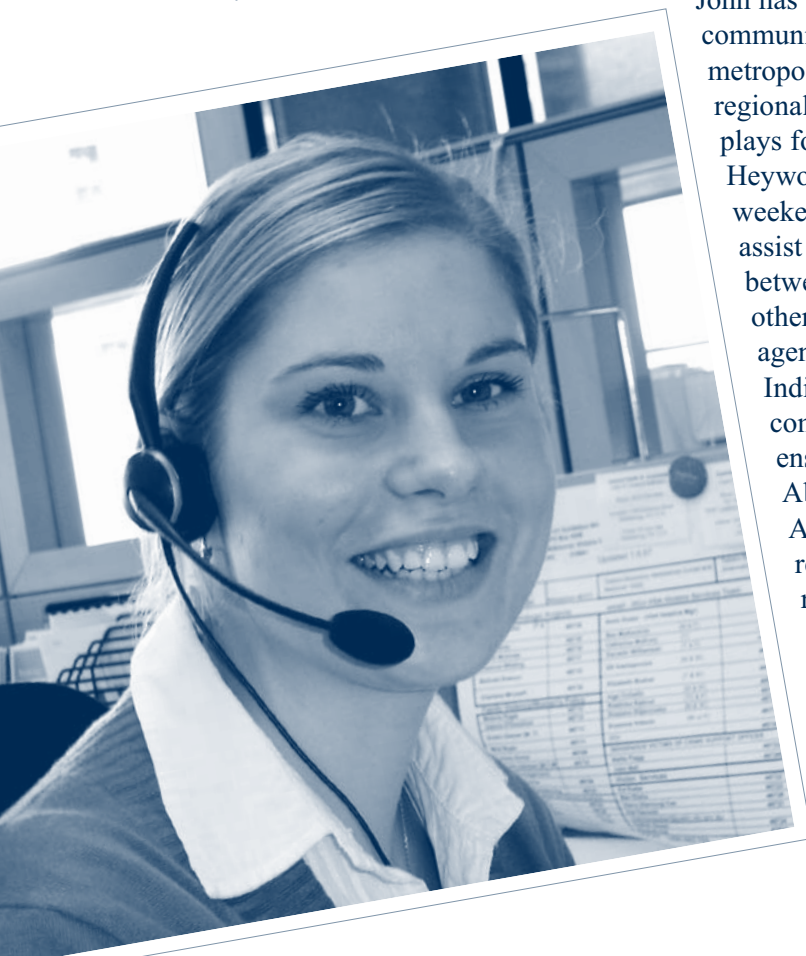
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Youth Lifestyle Worker at the Winda-Mara Aboriginal Co-operative in Heywood. Most recently John worked as a Koori

Diversion Worker for the Western Region Alcohol and Drug Centre based in Warrnambool.

John has strong ties with communities in metropolitan and regional areas, and he plays football for Heywood every weekend. He will assist Nellie to liaise between the VSA, other relevant agencies and Indigenous communities to ensure the Aboriginal Justice Agreement recommendations relating to Indigenous Victims of Crime are given effect.



Victims Support Officer, Katerina Zdravkovic

## Victims Assistance and Counselling Program

Listed below are the current Victims Assistance and Counselling Program contact numbers in each region.

### METROPOLITAN

|       |              |              |
|-------|--------------|--------------|
| East  | Ringwood     | 1300 884 284 |
| North | Coburg       | 9355 9900    |
| West  | Footscray    | 8398 4178    |
| South | Narre Warren | 9705 3200    |

### BARWON SOUTH WEST

|             |           |
|-------------|-----------|
| Geelong     | 5278 8122 |
| Warrnambool | 5561 8888 |

### GIPPSLAND

|         |              |
|---------|--------------|
| Morwell | 1800 777 423 |
|---------|--------------|

### GRAMPIANS

|          |                              |
|----------|------------------------------|
| Ballarat | 5333 1351<br>or 1800 660 556 |
| Horsham  | 5382 6789                    |

### HUME

|            |              |
|------------|--------------|
| Shepparton | 5831 6967    |
| Wodonga    | 02 6056 6282 |
| Wangaratta | 5723 2038    |

### LODDON MALLEE

|         |              |
|---------|--------------|
| Bendigo | 1800 620 542 |
| Mildura | 5022 5400    |

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[www.justice.vic.gov.au/victimsofcrime](http://www.justice.vic.gov.au/victimsofcrime)

For further information contact:  
Victims Support Agency  
Level 20 / 121 Exhibition Street  
Melbourne VIC 3000

Victims of Crime Helpline 1800 819 817

Victims of Crime Helpline  
1800 819 817

VSA Administration  
(03) 8684 6700  
VSA Online  
[www.justice.vic.gov.au/victimsofcrime](http://www.justice.vic.gov.au/victimsofcrime)

Office Hours  
9.00am-5.00pm  
Monday to Friday