

# **The Journey So Far: a discussion and reflection on the Victim Support Service (SA) response to address the identified need to develop support for Indigenous Victims of Crime in South Australia.**

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The Victim Support Service (VSS) is a community based, not-for-profit organisation in South Australia. It has been in existence since 1979 and has expanded from 1 metropolitan office to 2 metropolitan and 7 regional offices. It comprises of a range qualified professional staff and a strong volunteer base. We offer a comprehensive range of services for people who have suffered as a result of a criminal offence. This includes individual crime victims, their families, friends and the wider community. Services Include:

- Professional counselling, advocacy and support
- Support service for those affected by homicide
- Information about victims' rights and criminal injuries compensation claims
- Groups for women whose children have been sexually abused
- Women's Support Groups
- Support Group for people who have experienced a life threatening crime
- Court preparation programs for adults and children who need to appear in court as witnesses
- A Court Companion Service which provides support and information for victims and witnesses for the prosecution when they are required to attend court
- Training Seminars for professionals who have contact with victims of crime
- Presentations to community groups
- Advocacy for reform to the criminal justice system
- Resource Centre/library
- A Residential Break & Enter project

## **Where do we start?**

Victim Support Service has long regarded our response to Indigenous crime victims as an area of on-going concern. The planing process to develop our 2002 – 2005 organisational Strategic Plan identified Indigenous crime victims as a key priority which resulted in the following three priority action areas:

1. Client Support Programme
2. Community Development/Education Programme
3. Resource Management Programme

It was acknowledged that to start this process appropriately, the agency had to begin from a shared point of understanding. Given this, a cultural accountability workshop was organised.

## **Beginning with a shared understanding**

The aim of the workshop, which was facilitated by a Ngarrindjeri woman, was both to educate staff and volunteers about a black perspective of Australian history and to provide a forum to critically discuss potential differing view points. It was important for all agency staff to attend, including Board members and volunteers. This was symbolic of our commitment and laid the foundation to attempt to ensure that we would not be tokenistic. In addition it provided a forum to explore different decision making approaches with a focus on power in relationships. Finally the workshop engaged in a discussion about racism and its differing forms including institutional racism. The results of this workshop were profound. The agency committed to engage in a process utilising a cultural consultant. We were not in a position to work in partnership yet but we felt we wanted legitimacy to begin discussions with the Indigenous community.

## **The Indigenous Connections Working Party**

As a consequence of the cultural accountability workshop we formed a working party. One of the key aspects of this working party was to keep in play the notions and practices of power and decision making. As we were soon going to discover, whilst our intention was to keep these notions of power and decision making central to our process, this would be difficult not only because of organisational pressures, but also because of the working party's own internal constructs. This difficulty on more than one occasion had us "putting our foot in it".

The challenging workshop reiterated the working party's resolve to reject an "assumptions based" process which would have us changing the physical environment of the organisation and merely offering the current services that were currently available. We determined that by engaging in an "inquiry-based" process, guided by a respected person from the Indigenous community, we would be more likely to produce outcomes that were compatible with the needs of Indigenous crime victims and the current resource capacities of VSS.

Our first task was to identify someone who could act as our consultant and conduit to key Indigenous organisations. We approached the facilitator from our first cultural accountability workshop, who agreed to act in this role.

We began collating lists of names and organisations to contact. It was at this point that it was clear just how important our consultant was in enabling us to approach people with some legitimacy. She provided the opportunity to not only be introduced, but facilitated also the possibility to move beyond superficial interactions to a place of building trust and a meaningful dialogue.

As the working party began regularly meeting it became clear that the journey held much of the important information. Clues were emerging that revealed that this process was not just about meeting with Indigenous organisations. Importantly, what was also occurring was the richness in our discussions and debates after these meetings that highlighted new experiences and challenges for us and the organisation. We realised that it was important to somehow capture these experiences so that they

could become part of the organisational body of knowledge which could be shared with others who may embark on a similar journey.

It was crucial in our journey that the focus remained on “us” as an agency. It was important that the working party’s experiences and progress was not in isolation, and that the rest of the organisation could somehow engage in this undertaking. We sought to encourage a shared philosophy through a follow up cultural accountability workshop at our next annual planning retreat. The working party were also asked to present where we were up to at this retreat. We determined to talk about this in a way that both captured the tangible and less tangible outcomes, thus resisting the pressures of “lets do” to “lets ask”.

It was important that we acknowledged the range of experiences people brought to the organisation, but to also provide the opportunity to remain open to different ideas and knowledges. That is, not coming from a position of “knowing” but to try to hold onto the space of “asking”, thus increasing the organisations capacity for shared understanding and responsibility in undertaking this process ethically.

Following this retreat the Indigenous Connections Working Party were given the mandate from the organisation to continue.

### **Surprises and challenges along the way**

#### *Values and professional standpoints*

As our discussions evolved with various key agencies, a number of surprises and challenges arose. From all the different meetings came a number of differing views, sometimes diametrically opposing views. This raised the obvious, yet so easily forgotten awareness, of difference within Indigenous communities, families and individuals. The importance of having our consultant with us initially enabled us to debrief with an Indigenous person. This was extremely important for our working party which at times lost confidence in its core values and on occasion left meetings feeling extremely uncomfortable. Our consultant also had feelings of discomfort and this allowed us to discover where the issues were about values and not colour.

These debates and these conundrums didn’t have an answer. As soon as we walked into these Indigenous connections, we endeavoured to be accountable, rather than seek rights and wrongs. The ongoing dialogue was what was so precious. The responses to these meetings are now experienced differently. Each new experience provides a different perspective from which to reflect.

#### *Changes in thinking*

The metaphor of the personal is political began to come to mind in order for any real change to be made. The starting point needed to be owned by us as individual’s within the organisation. No real change could occur unless our own awareness was challenged.

#### *Power*

As a non-Indigenous organisation we are automatically in a position of power and needed to recognise where institutional racism comes into play. This required a fundamental shift to acknowledge the privileged position we were in both

professionally, personally and globally. A need to let go of the 'I'm not a racist' standpoint and recognise where we are all positioned, regardless.

### *Getting it 'right'*

The acute awareness of this power and privilege manifested in interesting behaviour. We became oversensitive and attempted to overcompensate. For example, the wording of emails and letters were painstaking in their aim for perfection. This resulted in us silencing and censoring ourselves which got in the way of our commitment to remain in the place of asking. The working party worked hard to move beyond this and pushed ourselves outside of our comfort zone.

### *A window into the reality of loss*

As trauma counsellors working with victims of crime we explore grief and loss daily. Yet through our meetings what became apparent was how pervasive loss is in the Indigenous community. Loss was very real for the people we were meeting. We 'knew' this academically, but were beginning to view this loss from a different vantage point. We began to ask ourselves how we might incorporate this knowledge to support not only victims of crime but also workers in the various agencies we hoped to develop partnerships with.

### **The next step**

The working party now was able to move to the next phase of the process which we decided would incorporate a multi level organisational approach.

### *Policy Review*

The working party reviewed the VSS policy manual to update any relevant policies using a lens of cultural accountability. We also developed a specific Anti-Racism policy and Anti-Racism statement with the view to have this statement on display in all VSS offices. (*see appendix 1*)

### *Organisational Structure*

The working party recognised the need for cultural accountability to exist in the decision making structure of the organisation. We proposed a range of options to be presented to the Board. These options were:

- Appoint a member using the current Constitutions process for casual vacancy.
- Create an advisory committee to the Board
- Create an additional position to enable the appointment of an Indigenous person through change to the Constitution

The Board elected to proceed with the final option and the change to the Constitution was made at the last Annual General Meeting.

### *Resource development*

VSS has been committed to remaining up to date in matters relevant to crime and its effects. The development of our Resource library has been one of our key strategies to achieve this. We now seek out relevant and current resources relating to Indigenous issues and are developing a useful catalogue of counseling resources, materials to represent an alternative historical perspective and critical issues.

### *Service Delivery*

The working party was now ready to address the area of client support/service delivery and recognised that we were not as yet in a position to 'know' what that would require. There existed stated and unstated tensions within the organisation to both stay committed to the respectful process of 'inquiry' yet at the same time be moving forward. It was at this point that we determined to put in a submission to the Commonwealth Government to explore the perceptions of crime and safety and the meaning of criminal victimisation within Indigenous communities.

To advance the rights of Indigenous crime victims the project would draw on fundamental principles of community development/education by working closely with, consulting with and being accountable to Indigenous communities in the region.

We focussed on the western region of Adelaide as it has a high level of crime and is represented by a high proportion of Aboriginal people. Our internal statistics also showed that the western region of Adelaide was under represented in our overall service provision.

While Indigenous approaches to working with crime victims may be different from VSS's current way of providing a service we argued that we required more information to develop best practice. Thus strategies uncovered through collaboration with agencies in the western region were likely to be crucial to the development of services in the future.

The proposed project is in three stages:

1. Identify key community organizations and members with whom to engage in consultation and invite representation on the project reference group.
2. Explore:
  - What is the experience and perception of crime in the area
  - What supports are available and utilized in the area – formal & informal
  - What other support would be appropriate and how may identified supports be improved/developed
3. Develop recommendations for support for Indigenous crime victims in the region.

A project reference group comprising representatives from key agencies would provide advice on aspects of the implementation of the project. This group would also provide effective links between the project and other key services and programs, and assist in the formulation of recommendations from the project based on the findings.

### **Where to now?**

VSS continues to seek to address the needs of Indigenous crime victims through the development of culturally relevant and effective practices. We hope to develop partnership opportunities and remain responsive to new opportunities and understandings as they arise. The Organization is currently waiting on the submission outcome and exploring various other initiatives.

## Appendix 1

### **Anti Racism Statement**

Victim Support Service (VSS) rejects racism in all its forms. We are committed to the elimination of racial discrimination and harassment in all areas. VSS recognises our collective responsibility to comment on racist practices, beliefs and systems. We recognise that injustices exist through institutional disadvantage, racial prejudice and discrimination and that Aboriginal Australians in particular continue to suffer injustices. VSS seeks to promote both the richness of diversity that exists in our community and the protection of fundamental human rights and principles of social justice...

(VSS Anti racism Policy 2004)