

**The Effectiveness of Referral Protocols:
Mildura Victims Assistance & Counselling
Program with Police in North Western Victoria.**

By

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The Victims Assistance and Counselling Program is funded by Victims Support Agency, Department of Justice Victoria. The program offers a range of services to assist and support victims of crime as they navigate their way through the criminal justice system. The program services the Northern Sector of the Loddon Mallee region, located in the North West of the state. The area includes the regions of Mallee, Northern Gannawarra and the Northern aspect of Buloke. The service is based in Mildura at the Sunraysia Community Health Services, with the most distant outreach town of Kerang being approximately 320kms and has a staffing of 1.5 EFT. (See attachment A)

Historically the Victim Assistance & Counselling Program was concerned that victims of crime who accessed the service a considerable time after an assault, on presentation, appeared more distressed than people accessing victims' services immediately following a crime. Persons accessing the service later seemed to have incurred more stress due to issues such as safety, financial difficulties lack of information regarding the legal practice, police processes and emotional issues relating directly to the crime. The victims, who had not received initial support, experience unnecessary stressors which were alleviated once they entered into the program.

Literature review

A literature review revealed that minimal written information about referral protocols between police and VACP agencies in Australia, whereas protocols and/or codes of practice do exist in The Netherlands, New Zealand, The USA and the United Kingdom. However, there is significant information about police referral policies, when dealing with victims of sexual assault, and domestic violence services both in Australia and overseas.

In “Victims Support the United Kingdom Experience”. Viney, A. (1999:5) states:

The outreach system of referral is designed to recognize two aspects of crime: duration and intensity. Some people who are victims of crime will suffer long lasting effects; the more quickly we are able to reach them, the more likely it is that some of our work will have preventative benefits for them. Others may experience severe effects, but for a shorter time. Reaching them quickly helps to reduce the alienation which would otherwise predominate.

The New Zealand experience is based on the 1997 “Memorandum of Understanding between Victim Support and the Police:

‘The Memorandum assures Victims Support of the provision of office accommodation within Police Premises... This ensures Victim Support services are constantly in front of Police so their obligations can be reinforced’ (Outtrim,L. 1999:5).

Wemmers, J (1994) discusses “The Dutch Victim Guidelines” and their Impact

upon Victim Satisfaction. Whilst discussing the police responsibilities according to “the guidelines” Wemmers (1999:133) states:

‘During this first contact they must inform the victim of the possibilities of victim assistance and where appropriate, refer the victim to the local victim assistance scheme’.

In the United States, many states have adopted the ‘Victims’ Bill of Rights’ National Organization of Victims Assistance [NOVA] (1988)’. The Dutch, the U.K. New Zealand and the United States have adopted a victim’s rights focus, where victims right to access support services are paramount.

Finally there is an Australian referral example in the ACT that involves direct electronic referrals by the police to social support services. The ‘Electronic Referral Systems: Between police and the social support sector’ discussed by Campbell, T. (2002) states:

‘Early intervention does not guarantee a different outcome but gives the recipient the best opportunity to achieve a better outcome’.

This electronic referral system does not support interactive professional relationships between police and service providers.

The literature supports the fact that immediate help is beneficial to the victim. According to Cook. B. etal (1993:41):

‘...the sooner the victims receive positive support and advice the easier their recovery will be’.

Further writings support the issue that information and support can reduce the suffering of victims. Cook, B. etal (1993:47) cite: the Victorian Community Council against Violence (VCCAV:1994, p.x):

'some victims of crime have suffered over long periods with out knowing about, or accessing , suitable services because they did not have such information'.

Early access to services to reduce the long term problems are supported by

Cook, B etal (1993:124) as:

'Early identification, particularly regarding the psychological impact of crime, is important to prevent the development of more serious problems in the long term'.

Literature regarding the Victorian “Police Code of Practice” for sexual assault victims was also examined:

“The development of the Code of Practice emerged out of the previous Law Reform Commission of Victoria’s reference on rape offences... the Code symbolized a new approach to thinking about sexual assault which placed the emphasis on developing a best practice model that could help to reduce the trauma experienced by Victim/survivors in reporting sexual assault to police’.
(Victorian Law Reform Commission 2003:118).

Whilst referring to victims of sexual assault, the Victorian Law Reform Commission (2003:119) state:

'it is also the quality of care provided to the victim at the point of crisis that will have a critical influence oh her long term well being'.

The importance of a sexual assault victim’s need to access emotional support

promptly is confirmed by Botash. A. etal (1994:10):

'...contact with a trained advocate and counselor within the first 72 hours of sexual assault is the most important contributing factor to the victim's recovery.'

Although sexual assault is a specialized area of victim support, the writer believes that the issues of access and support are in alignment with victims of general assaults.

In 2001, the Victims Assistance Program Coordinator met with the Senior Officers from the Mildura, Swan Hill, and Ouyen Police Stations and the protocols were formalized and implemented in July 2001. The protocols aim at easy point of entry for all victims of crime through a process of direct contact of victims detail by the police. (See Attachment B) The client statistics accessed from the Victims Assistance Program, client data computer program 'Resolve', identified that 12 months prior to the implementation of the protocols, 8.1% of victims who accessed the Victims Assistance Program were direct referrals from the police.

Following the implementation of the protocols, the referrals from the police increased to up 30.6% for a given 12 month period. The protocols continued until July 2004 when it was deemed necessary to cease the protocols due to breach of the Privacy Act. Following the abandonment of the protocols, referrals declined to 16.7%.

In 2006 the Victims Charter was established, which sets out principles on how the criminal justice system and victims support agencies should respond to

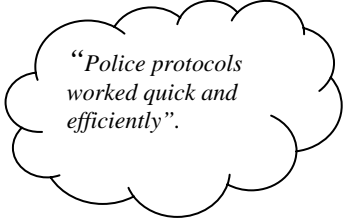
victims of crime. Principle 2: States that victims have the right to “to be given clear, timely and consistent information about your rights and entitlements and, if appropriate, be referred to victims and legal support services.” With this in mind the program began to advocate for the police protocols to be reinstated.

In September 2006 after local and state advocacy the protocols were once again formalized, signed off and re-instated. Since September 2006 police referrals have increased to 33%. During this advocacy period the Program endeavored to speak to both victims and police to obtain an understanding of the effectiveness of the protocols.

Objectives:

The objectives of the referral protocols were:

1. To increase police referrals to the Victims Assistance and Counselling Program.
2. To assist client to access the Victims Assistance and Counselling Program at an early stage of the process.
3. To improve outcomes for victims through early access to the Victims Assistance and Counselling Program
4. To strengthen relationships between Victoria Police and the Victims Assistance and Counselling Program.
5. To develop an integrated response to Victims.



“Police protocols worked quick and efficiently”.

Client Feedback:

Victims interviewed identified areas of support which the Victims Assistance and Counselling Program provided: emotional support, service information, police advocacy, access to Counselling, Victims of Crime Tribunal, Legal referrals, Housing referrals, assistance with Victim Impact Statements, liaison with other services, and familiarization with the court processes.

Victims interviewed who were provided with assistance within one month following the referral by the police, identified that early access to service was valuable and aided their recovery process

Victims identified that the benefits of accessing the Program included the prompt liaison with the police, kept them informed with the police and legal processes of their case, provided referrals to needed services, support and advocacy. All victims identified that early access to services aided recovery and believed their recovery process would have been different, had it been implemented much later. Victims comments included: *“later it would make it harder to deal with the effects of the crime”*. *“It would have been much harder to find the service”*. *“I probably wouldn’t have found the service without the police referral”*. *“I would have been an emotional mess”*. *“Worse off, if unable to access Victims services”*, *“Once accessing the VACP service I then felt at ease”*.

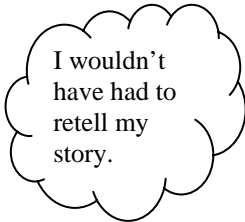
Victims of crime interviewed following the abandonment of the protocol and who did not receive a referral by the police, received support from the Victims Assistance Program between 3 months to 4 years following the crime.

These victims believed that earlier assistance to Program would have aided their recovery process. The following reasons were included: "Increased stress and work", "commitments would not have got as bad emotionally and financially",

"I didn't know that we could access counseling, thought we could cope". "It was a big relief to find help", "Answers from the police sooner, it dragged on, and it took 9 months to get a result".

All victims that accessed Victims Assistance Program & Counseling Program later believed their recovery process would have been different with earlier support. The explanations included: *"Life was more chaotic, I was bounced around services". "life would have been much easier", "I was too scared to go out and feared it would happen again". "I would have felt more safe and secure"; "No assistance was given at the time".*

Further comments included *"I would hate to see no services for victims", "Fantastic people at Victims Assistance and Counselling Program and without the support it would have made it a lot more difficult". "It would be better for people to know straight away". "There needs to be agencies like Victims Assistance & Counseling Program so people can have problems are heard and advice provided to assist and refer", "thank you for the support I value it 100%".*



I wouldn't have had to retell my story.

Police Feedback:

Police officers interviewed believed that the referral protocols between the Victims Assistance and Counselling Program and the local police implemented from July 2001 to July 2004 assisted victims of crime. The respondents identified that the protocols provided information and contacts directly between victims and VACP workers thus eliminating the uncertainty people can feel when dealing with the legal system. The weekly contact between Police Officers in charge, and the local Victims Assistance and Counseling Program afforded timely contact with Victims of Crime. This in turn provided victims with early intervention and support thus reducing trauma associated with their incident.

“Often victims are reluctant to seek outside assistance but with the protocol that was in place the need for them to make this first step was eliminated by the approach of the Victim Assistance & Counselling program”. “Probably more so with the large ethnic groups we have in Sunraysia”. One police officer believed the victims feel more supported and have more understanding of the police.

All the police officers interviews believed that the referral protocols assisted the police process. The feedback included that it “Allowed a better service with more time being spent and individualized approach to be offered to victims”. This resulted in the victim having a better understanding of their rights and legal practice.

One officer identified that the Victims Assistance & Counseling Program assisted in providing information to victims in respect to judicial processes and support victims during early emotional stages of this process. This

allowed investigating members to concentrate on their primary role. "The protocols reassured the victim and gave them the confidence to continue with the legal process and be prepared to attend court".

All the police officers believed that the protocols have enhanced the professional relationships between Police and the Victims Assistance & Counseling Program, and enhanced outcomes for victims. "The contact was on a regular and formalized level rather than through a simple and demonstrably ineffective referral system". "The regular presentations by Victims Assistance & Counseling Program staff to Police Officers enhanced this relationship. "It was identified that the regular contact with the Victims Assistance & Counseling Program staff increased the effectiveness of referrals and the officers that accessed the program believe it was vital for victims".

All officers identified that "The Information and support to victims was much better and delivered in a timely manner. Victims are provided with knowledge and support which allows them to recover from their experience in a more positive manner. The two agencies exchanging information certainly made the victims aware of the assistance available to them. Officers believed it empowered victims to take action if necessary knowing they will have the support and understanding if they need it in the future.

Other comments included "the program is very worthy of continued support". "The Privacy Laws have strangled something that was effective, positive and supportive". "The Victims Assistance & Counseling Program are dedicated professionals who have a genuine feel for victims needs and

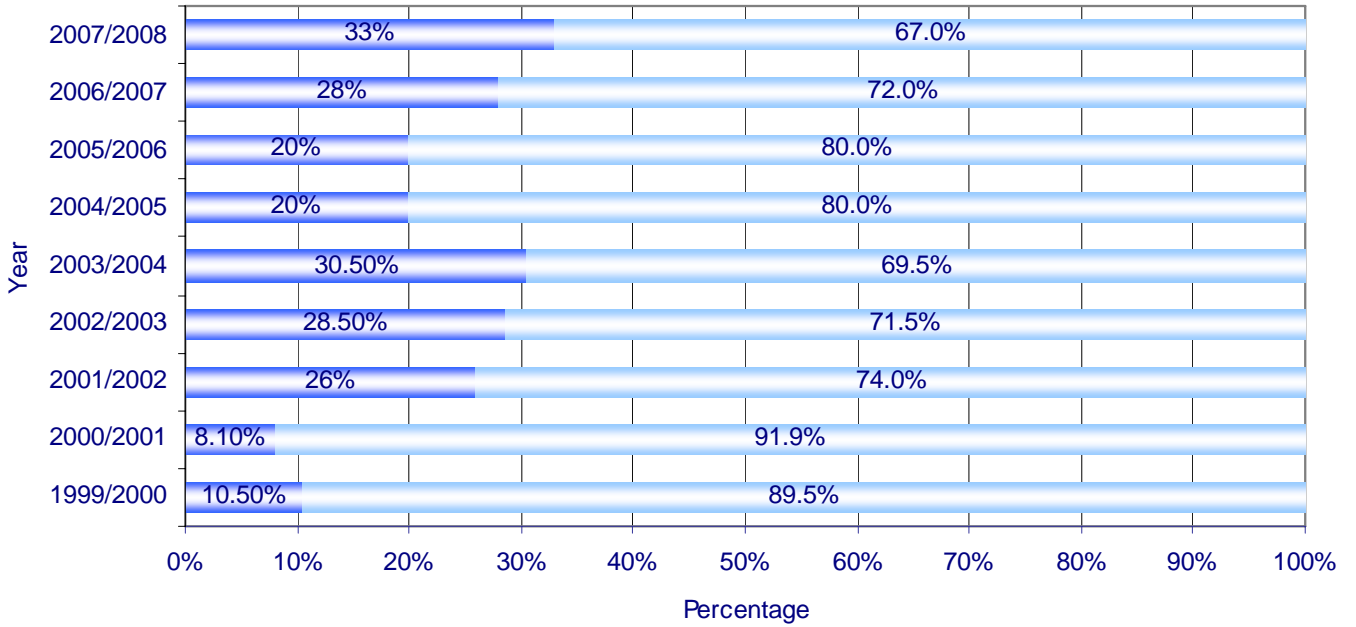
identified the program's workers go beyond their duties to assist victims".

"The protocols have enabled police members and Victims Assistance & Counseling Program to ensure that everyone is working towards the same goal and the victims are the ones that benefit in the long run".

Since the reinstatement of the protocols in 2006 police have stated that the protocols between the Victims Assistance and Counselling Program and the police have aided in the implementation of the Victims Charter with in North Western Victoria.

Secondary data analysis was used to identify that referral protocols increased police referrals to the Victims Assistance and Counselling Program. The "Resolve" data collection system, provided VACP data, comparing the police referrals for the 2 years before the protocols were implemented, during the time the protocols were active, for the 2 years following the abandonment of the protocols and the 2 years in which they have been reinstated. The data demonstrates that police referrals to the Victims Assistance & Counseling Program were the highest whilst the protocols were active.

% of Referrals Received From Police From 1999 to 2008



■ % of Referrals from Police
 ■ % of Referrals from Other Sources

Conclusion:

The evidenced based research has confirmed that formal referral protocols between the Police and Victims Assistance & Counselling Program enhances the effectiveness of support and outcomes for victims. The protocols provide prompt access to support and counselling services, promoting the victims' recovery.

The protocol promotes positive relationships between the police and the Victims Assistance & Counselling Program, resulting in and increased the police referrals. Statewide formalized protocols will support Victims and reduce further trauma. Referral Protocols between the Police and Victims Services uphold Victims' rights to ensure prompt access to supportive information and direct access to service delivery.

The development of formalized Victorian State Referral Protocols, between Victims Assistance & Counselling Programs and the Victorian Police would assist in the implementation of the Victims Charter and ensure that victims of crime are treated with courtesy, respect and dignity by criminal justice agencies.

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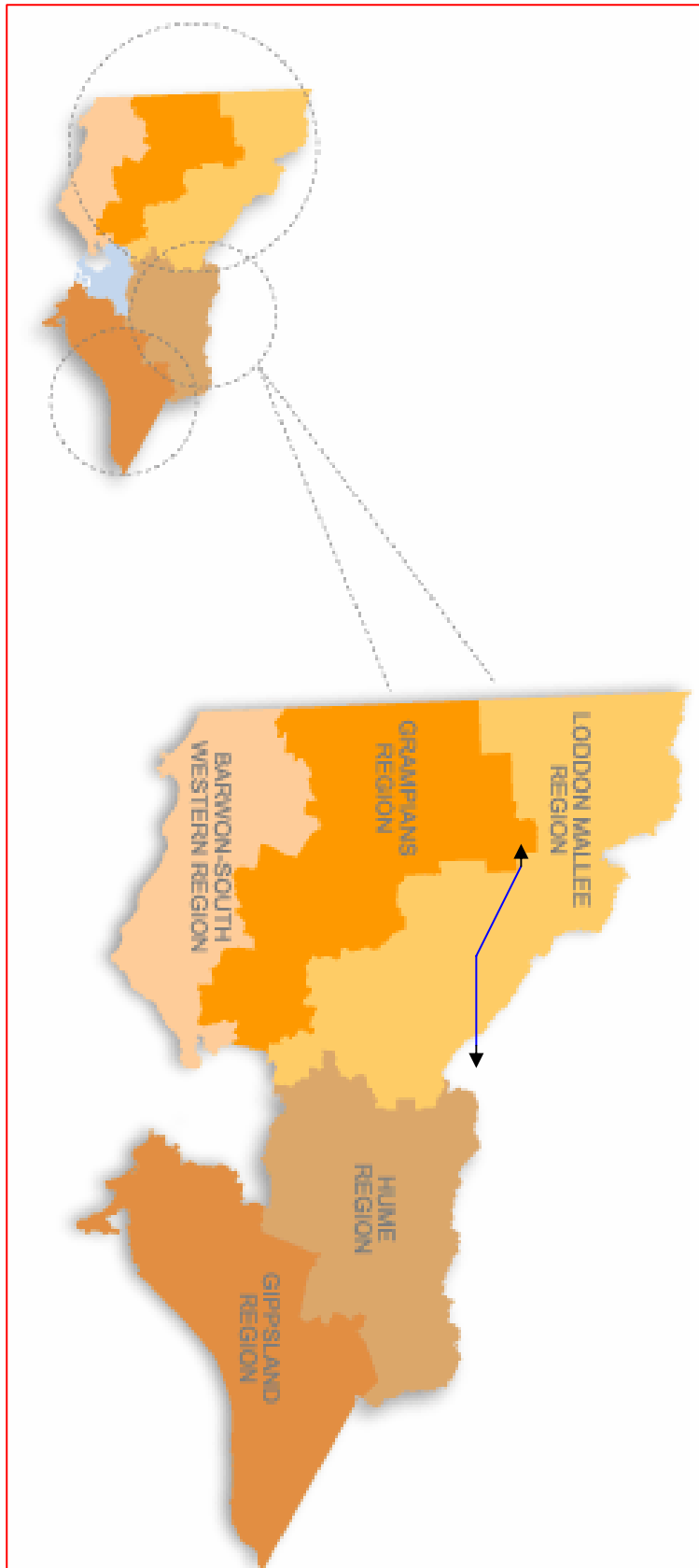
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ATTACHMENT A: Program covers area above the line in the Loddon Mallee Region. 320 Kms.



ATTACHMENT B:

Referral Protocol between the Victims Assistance and Counselling Program and the Mildura Police.

July 2006

CLIENT INTAKE AND ASSESSMENT: ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

A victim of a crime to their person, and persons associated with the victim.

A person not implicated in the crime at hand.

REFERRAL PROCESS

The Victims Assistance and Counselling Program worker or a member of the Victorian Police Force initiates referrals between the Victims Assistance and Counselling Program and Victoria Police, with the consent of the victim.

The Victims Assistance and Counselling Program worker will telephone the Mildura Police Station weekly to maintain contact, and to assist with the victim referral process.

REFERRAL INFORMATION.

1. The referees name and designation
2. Client name, date of birth, address, phone number.
3. Reasons for referral
4. Immediate concerns including risk assessment
5. Name of other agencies (if any) involved.
6. Name of guardian if appropriate
7. Signed release of information/consent form.

CASE MANAGEMENT RESPONSIBILITY

A Victims Assistance and Counselling Program case manager will be allocated on the next working day.

The Victims Assistance and Counselling Program case manager will liaise with the reporting or investigative officer as deemed necessary, with the consent of the client.

Signed

Signed

Co-Coordinator
Victims Assistance and Counselling Program

Mildura Police

Date: ___/___/___

Date: ___/___/___