

Media release

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Achievable reforms to the Victim Support Scheme are urgently needed to improve supports for victim-survivors, says South West Sydney Legal Service

South West Sydney Legal Centre has today recommended a series of reforms to the NSW Victims Support Scheme, saying the Scheme remains invaluable to the recovery of victim-survivors of domestic and family violence.

“Our staff regularly support women affected by domestic and family violence to apply for assistance under the Victims Support Scheme, which is designed to support them to pay medical bills, access counselling, access new housing and recover from the financial costs of violence,” says Yvette Vignando, CEO of the Centre.

“It would be a huge mistake if the Department decided to scrap this crucial Scheme, rather than reform it,” says Ms Vignando. “We know from experience the barriers victim-survivors face to accessing these supports. We also know that there are solutions to these barriers.”

The NSW Department of Communities and Justice is currently reviewing the *Victims Rights and Support Act 2013*, which established the Victims Support Scheme, to determine if the policy objectives of the Act remain valid and if the terms of the Act remain appropriate for securing those objectives.

“We cannot overstate the positive effect the Victims Support Scheme has for our clients, when it functions as it should,” says Ms Vignando. “Funds from the Scheme can enable our clients to move from unsafe housing and give their kids a safe home; to access dental care to recover from facial injuries inflicted during the violence; or to finally speak to a counsellor after years of silence.”

“Alternatives to the Scheme will be insufficient to replace it. It provides a unique avenue for recognition of the harm caused by violence and the individual impact of each act of violence,” says Peter Multari, Principal Solicitor at South West Sydney Legal Centre. “For many clients, the Scheme plays an important role in acknowledging the pain and trauma they have suffered. In fact, one of our clients recently told us they were brought to tears when reading their Notice of Decision, in which the Assessor, a stranger to them, acknowledged their impossibly difficult experience.”

“Our submission contains multiple case studies that get to the heart of how our clients experience the Scheme. The unnecessary delays when a woman urgently needs funds to relocate or access medical care but is asked to prove injuries the police already have records of. The lack of access to their own data, which cuts to the heart of procedural fairness. These issues can be resolved by simple reforms to the Act and to how Victims Services Assessors interpret the Act,” says Mr Multari.

“The sector is united on this, releasing a [Joint Position Statement](#) this month which has been endorsed by more than 70 organisations. Our submission adds to these consensus reforms, drawing on the lived experience of our clients and the expertise we have developed in supporting them to apply and appeal decisions under the Scheme.”

Read our [full submission here](#).

Information about South West Sydney Legal Centre

South West Sydney Legal Centre was founded in Liverpool in 1986, to provide free legal services so local people can improve their access to justice. We are now also one of the larger frontline providers of DFV services in NSW.

Our services support many thousands of clients every year and serve some of the state's most disadvantaged local government areas. We support women affected by DFV to make safety plans, access protection from the courts and connect with services like housing, counselling and legal advice.

We operate multiple specialist services, all of which work with victim-survivors of DFV:

1. South West Sydney Community Legal Service
2. South West Sydney Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service
3. Sydney Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service
4. Bankstown Domestic Violence Service
5. Liverpool and Fairfield Staying Home Leaving Violence Service
6. Financial Counselling Service for women affected by DFV.

Last year, our DFV services assisted nearly 8,000 women and demand increases every year. In 2020-21, there was a 20% increase in the number of referrals to our legal service of women experiencing DFV.

In the same year, women at risk of or experiencing DFV accounted for 72% of clients accessing our legal representation services. The vast majority of those representation services relate to assisting clients to access support under the Scheme.

Since changes were made to the operation of the VSS in 2020, our legal team has seen a significant spike in the number of hours required to support women affected by DFV applying to access support under the Scheme.

More information about South West Sydney Legal Centre is available here:

https://www.swslc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/SWLC_AnnualReport_2020-2021_final.pdf