

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Victoria's Criminal Justice System

Melbourne—Friday, 5 November 2021

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Dr Samantha Ratnam

Ms Harriet Shing

Mr Lee Tarlamis

Ms Sheena Watt

WITNESSES (*via videoconference*)

Ms Cathy Oddie, and

Mr Thomas Wain.

The CHAIR: Welcome back, everyone. Thank you for joining us for the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Victoria's Criminal Justice System.

We are very pleased to welcome Cathy Oddie and Thomas Wain, who are victim representatives on the Victims of Crime Consultative Committee, very important roles to play. So welcome to both of you. We are very pleased you could join us.

I would just like to give you a little bit of information about parliamentary privilege. That means that all evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege, and that is under our *Constitution Act* but also the standing orders of our Legislative Council. Therefore the information you provide to us today is protected by law. You are protected against any action for anything that you say here today at this hearing. Of course, if you were to go and repeat it outside this hearing, you may not have the same protection, and any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee could be considered a contempt of Parliament.

We are recording today. We have got Hansard in the background. You will receive a transcript of today's hearing, and I would really encourage you to have a look at it to make sure we did not mishear you or misrepresent anything that you have told us today. Ultimately and fortunately for us it will form part of our report and it will go up on the committee's website.

Cathy, if you would like to make some opening remarks, followed by Tom, and then we will open it up for committee discussion. Thank you again.

Ms ODDIE: Thank you, Fiona. My name is Cathy Oddie. I am a victim representative on the Department of Justice and Community Safety's Victims of Crime Consultative Committee. I am also a family violence lived experience consultant on Victoria Legal Aid's specialist family violence court project steering committee. In addition to these appointments, I am currently a call taker at the police assistance line. In 2015 I made a submission and gave evidence to the Royal Commission into Family Violence, which resulted in recommendations 104 and 106 and led to the review of the *Victims of Crime Assistance Act*, which was tabled in the Victorian Parliament in 2018. I have been a survivor advocate with the Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre since 2007 and became a survivor ambassador for Mettle Women in 2019. I was recently appointed to the board of Violence Free Families.

I am a victim-survivor of two long-term abusive relationships. During these relationships I experienced coercive control and gaslighting. I was also subjected to severe physical, emotional, psychological, sexual, verbal and financial abuse. My perpetrators were responsible for burning me, breaking my bones, holding me hostage at gunpoint and choking, kicking and punching me. My life and the lives of my friends and family members were threatened repeatedly, which made it hard to leave my abusive partners due to fear. My first perpetrator stalked me for 10 years after my relationship with him finally ended. In 2005 there was a day and night when his stalking and harassment of me was so intense that I was too scared to return to my home and was left in a vulnerable situation where I was raped by a stranger.

The abusive relationship with my second perpetrator ended with his actions causing the death of my baby daughter that I was pregnant with at that time. The second perpetrator also left me with \$70 000 in debt—sorry, I will just take a moment—which had been accumulated as a result of his addictive behaviours and the financial abuse he had subjected me to. In February 2010 I was assaulted by an intoxicated female stranger in an unprovoked attack at Southbank whilst enjoying a night with friends to celebrate my birthday. This assault left me with a whiplash-type neck injury.

Despite having experienced such a severe level of abuse and violence, as well as having reported many of the crimes perpetrated against me to police, none of the four offenders who caused harm to me have ever had to face any real accountability for their actions. Only one of the offenders was arrested, and despite the threats to

kill and the serious assault he committed, he was able to have his charges downgraded so that he could be recommended for diversion and pay a court fine of \$500 rather than receiving a criminal conviction.

I have had three successful VOCAT claims regarding the first three offenders, and I am currently waiting for the outcome to be decided of my fourth claim in relation to my second perpetrator for domestic abuse. It took three years to receive a decision on the first VOCAT claim I lodged in response to being raped, and it is unacceptable that victims of crime are made to wait such lengthy durations to receive an outcome. To my knowledge there is currently a backlog of about 5000 VOCAT claims waiting to be processed. This is simply not good enough.

Receiving VOCAT compensation, participating in the Royal Commission into Family Violence, being involved in the advocacy work that I do as well as appearing here today is the only justice I am likely to receive. I believe that the complex web which is Victoria's criminal justice system needs to do so much better to support victims of crime. Although much progress has been made since I first needed assistance in 2001, there are many things which could be implemented to ensure that the various agencies which make up the criminal justice system are victim centred and trauma informed in their approaches.

I have provided a submission to this committee which raised a range of issues that I feel are critical to be addressed by this inquiry. However, the ability for victims of crime to be able to access affordable trauma recovery services, particularly in residential treatment settings, is something I would like to highlight. I would also like to draw attention to the urgent need for this inquiry to recommend that a formal review occurs to address the ability of victim-survivors of sexual violence perpetrated by a stranger to be given the right to know the identity of their offender, which is currently prohibited and has created a two-tier justice system which is failing victims of sexual offences.

I finally would like to acknowledge my fellow victim representatives on the Victims of Crime Consultative Committee—Thomas, Melinda and Sandra—for the work that we are involved with and the contribution they make as well as the courage of all the other people with lived experience who have contributed to this inquiry. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak at today's hearing. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Cathy. Thomas, would you like to add something to that?

Mr WAIN: I guess what I suffered with or what I went through was a home invasion, and the perpetrators were never apprehended. It was New Year's Eve. It was a hot night, I decided to stay home and my brother, who was 20 years in age difference, decided to stay home with me—mum and dad's house, obviously. It was a three-storey home, so mum and dad were on the top level. We had the front doors open and the roller door open just to let some breeze through, because it had really been hot for about four days.

I was just at my computer typing a script and I looked over, and there were these two guys at my door with stockings over their heads. I did not think twice, I just ran at one of them and tackled him to the floor. But the other guy actually snuck past—I did not realise—and jumped up onto my futon where my brother was laying. My brother said, 'What do you want?'. The guy did not say a word, and went to punch him in the face, and my brother blocked it.

At this point I was unaware that the guy actually had a scalpel, and it just nicked my brother but it actually hit his ulnar nerve, so it went and stuck into him across here about three inches deep into his upper arm. I did not know this had happened at this point. The perpetrator obviously saw a lot of blood and panicked and ran. As he ran, I sort of looked back and the other guy pushed me off. I was still calling for my father. But being three storeys it is a bit of a journey to get down there. It just happened so fast.

After that happened I was a bit lagging behind and at this point still did not know what happened to my brother, and I was sort of trying to chase after them to see if I could get a numberplate or see—you know. I got back to the courtyard and walked in and at the front door I just got a view of my dad ripping a sheet and tourniqueting my brother's arm and walked into my room and saw more blood on the walls than they were white.

Not for one second do I feel that the world owes me anything or anything like that. I guess it is something that I have grown from and learned from. I guess the experience throughout that was quite horrendous in the sense that there was no support. It was really, 'Where do I turn to?'. It was on my own, probably, to seek that help.

Things have changed, which is really, really, really—I guess it is inspiring just to know that people care, because at that point I did not think anyone cared. So that is sort of basically what happened to me.

We live 3 minutes from the Royal Melbourne Hospital, and they said if we had lived 5 to 10 minutes he would have bled to death. They never found the perpetrators. Some of the remarks the police said were just really highly inappropriate. You know, there was sort of a good cop and bad cop, and one of them said at one point to my mum, ‘Well, Thomas obviously knows who has come and stabbed his brother, because people don’t just go around doing that’, and, ‘We don’t have a crystal ball. We are the police, but he could be walking down the street tomorrow and get stabbed in the back’. And Mum was just beside herself. But then the other cop came in and said, ‘Look, New Year’s Eve, you know. It is a high crime incidence. Robberies—people go away, people have just got Christmas presents. It’s a big time for people to—so they were sort of obviously quite shocked that there was someone there’.

So that was one of my experiences with crime. So it did not go to court, because they never caught the person. It is sort of like, ‘If they do, you know, you may be able to sue them, but they won’t have any money, because people who go around stabbing people don’t have any money’. So there were all these things thrown at me that were just—so the best thing that happened out of that was I got a dog, and she just was my saviour. A husky, mind you—so getting a first dog who is a husky I do not recommend, but I persevered.

So that was my experience. But going on what others said, that is not what I believe. I just am focused on the whole judicial system, and a real focus of mine is, you know, the safety of women especially. As you know, there are two women who die at the hands of a male partner every week in this country, and it is just horrendous. I am just backing up Cathy in everything she says, and she is quite inspiring, the way that she goes about it.

I am sure Cathy has got some more things to say, and I would love to add to it. But as we spoke about before we came to the hearing, I asked her if it was okay that I sort of joined in, because that is where my real passion lies. So Cathy, if you take it away, then—

The CHAIR: Thanks so much, Thomas and Cathy. You are both absolute warriors, and I think the community is better for the work that you have been doing somewhat tirelessly. I very much appreciate it, and as a person with dog allergies I did almost start sneezing when you started talking about your husky. But I think there is also some information, which we might go to, in the submission around emotional support dogs, because it really is important, as you said. Cathy, if I could start the questions by just asking if you could tell us a little bit more about your recommendation around a trauma recovery centre. You mentioned up in the Illawarra there has been a trial of that, but maybe you could expand for the committee and tell us a bit more about what that trauma centre does.

Ms ODDIE: Okay. So the Illawarra Women’s Health Centre have proposed a pilot model of a trauma recovery centre which initially is focused on the needs of women who are victim-survivors of domestic abuse and sexual violence. It does not exist yet; yes, there is not actually a facility such as this that exists in Australia. So the model that they have proposed would be easily replicated across any state, and as I stated in my submission, aside from women who are survivors of domestic abuse and sexual violence, it would be a model that would be appropriate for people who have experienced trauma in the context of being a victim of crime. Now, I look at this model—people can read my submission via the inquiry website, where I have provided an attachment to the submissions made by Illawarra Women’s Health Centre—and effectively by providing accessible and affordable trauma recovery services, as alluded to earlier today by Kathleen Maltzahn in her conversation with you, it is actually something that would save state and federal governments a lot of money, because ultimately when you look at things such as psychiatric inpatient stays and also drug and alcohol rehabilitation centres, it is not addressing the reason why many people end up needing to access those types of services, which are already funded and available for anyone across any socio-economic status. Many people are led into being in those situations of addiction or psychiatric care because they have experienced trauma. So allowing for people to have that access to affordable health care makes for healthier individuals and healthier communities. Right now, as I stated in my submission, the only types of services available for people who might wish to have this type of specialist treatment cost on average \$1450 a night for a minimum stay of two weeks. That excludes pretty much most individuals, and I think that is just unacceptable.

The CHAIR: Yes. Thank you, Cathy. I wanted to get it out in your own words. I think that it just sounds like it is a really great initiative that we should be looking at. I will go to Tania and then Sheena.

Ms MAXWELL: Thank you, Chair. Cathy and Thomas, thank you so much for being here today, and thank you for so much for the work that you are both doing. It is absolutely imperative that victims have a voice through the process of this inquiry, and it is something that I have certainly pushed very hard for, as, Cathy, you know as an advocate for victims of crime. Look, your submission is fantastic, and I love what you have raised here. We have had previous speakers who have been talking exactly about that trauma recovery centre, and I think that that is something that will be very valuable in our recommendations.

I want to move on. And let me say I am so sorry for what you have both endured. It is deeply traumatising for all of us to hear this, but it is information that we need to hear. We need to understand exactly what victims go through physically, emotionally and financially, and Cathy, you have articulated all that, particularly in your submission, so incredibly well. I want to just talk about not being allowed to know who your perpetrator was.

Ms ODDIE: Yes.

Ms MAXWELL: What is the reasoning behind that, Cathy?

Ms ODDIE: Okay, so in my circumstance the reasoning behind that is that the offender had not been arrested and the police had not had an opportunity to formally question him. The reason why that has not happened is that the rape occurred on a Saturday night and he left the country on the Thursday following that. I reported to the police on the Tuesday, and in terms of the police investigation stage, by the time the rapist had flown out of Australia they had not actually identified him at that point.

So going forward to where I am now—that was 2005, so all these years later—it is something I sort of did not question at the time. I mean, I guess it upset me, particularly at the VOCAT hearing around the rape, that the offender's friends who had been present at the apartment on the night the rape occurred were at that hearing. I knew by this stage, because the detective on my case had informed me, that they had become aware of the person's identity, they knew exactly where he was living and in which country, they had his address and they had spoken to that person—in a country from where there is actually extradition to Australia, I would like to also state. There is actually no reason why the police could not have organised a way to interview this person, but ultimately it was something I guess I just accepted—that what the police told me is what should happen.

But as I have become more involved in advocacy I have questioned that more. My desire to know this person's identity is not to broadcast it in public, because obviously that would still be subject to things such as defamation laws. This person is still entitled to go through the judicial process and have that. Why I want to have access to that and also on behalf of other victim-survivors in a similar station is that not knowing someone's identity prevents you from taking steps to protect yourself. In my case I guess it would seem like a fairly minimal thing, but I would love to be able to actively block this person and their friends and family on social media because I am very public in the work that I do. I feel actually sick at the thought that I may have been interacting with this person online for years. Look, I probably have not, but it is another thing that is outside of my control. They know my identity but I am prevented from knowing theirs.

Let us take this to a case that happened last year in Melbourne. A 17-year-old girl was interacting with an individual on Snapchat and this person, the male, presented themselves to be younger than they actually were. They arranged to meet up in a suburban part of Melbourne. She discovered he was not who he had represented himself to be online, and he raped her in a suburban train station toilet. So he knew her identity, she did not know his. He knew where she lived. That was reported to police. They were able to identify this individual. He was questioned, but in that case it was a situation where the question of consent was brought into it; because of the online conversation consent was seen to have been given.

She is in a circumstance where she is not allowed to know his identity, so she cannot take out an intervention order. She is also not allowed to do what at the other end of the justice scale would be to actually take a civil claim in regard to crimes compensation. Yes, you can go through VOCAT without knowing your offender's identity, like I did, but in terms of this young woman's case it is not about the money in terms of the compensation fact or wanting to take a civil claim, it is wanting to get an acknowledgement from the offender of the harm which was caused to her. So without being able to have that ability to serve legal documents such as an intervention order or to go through the civil compensation process, it means that you are locked out of

things that people who do know the identity of their offender of sexual violence have the opportunity to do. And I think in this day and age it is just not good enough to create a two-tier system. We should have equality of experience.

The other part about this is that when I questioned what is the current process or legislation sitting behind why I am not allowed to know that identity and why this young woman is not—and the thousands of other victim-survivors that are probably in a similar situation—I was referred back to the victim rights charter, and it was effectively that the offender's right to not have their reputation damaged was seen as more important than a victim being able to take steps to protect their immediate and ongoing safety and also to get appropriate justice outcomes. That is why I would like a formal review to happen to investigate this and also to put a call out to the community. Now that there is me and the young woman I am sure there are many others in this situation who would like to have a voice on this issue.

Ms MAXWELL: Absolutely. And that was a very largely publicised, horrendous experience for that young girl. I will let it go around, and I will have another question as we go around. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Sheena.

Ms WATT: Thanks, Chair. Thank you, Cathy and Thomas, for being with us. I have been asking a series of questions today around victims of crime but in particular victims of crime from my community, the Aboriginal community. I just wonder, are there any particular insights or advocacy around multicultural or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victims of crime that you have come up with in your work advocating on behalf of victims of crime? If there are not, I am happy to take that for later.

Mr WAIN: I just feel Indigenous incarceration needs to be improved. It is just disgusting really, to be honest. Excuse the language, but I mean the way that they are treated is just beyond my comprehension—and it is one thing that I am very passionate about, you know, that there is that fair treatment. A lot of it just gets pushed under the rug, or there is no support. A lot of them are in rural communities, and that should not impact their ability to seek help. And also where there are elders being involved—you know, because it would be hard for a younger Indigenous person to speak to someone—this person comes along, they have never seen them before, but at least if they have got a peer worker or an elder, they can sort of open up. But I just feel that there is just a huge gap in that space that we really need to do a lot of work in.

You know, I can write you a two-pager, basically write down what I believe needs to change. It starts from youth justice, and it goes all the way up. And I believe that even at the youth justice point, you know, there are ways to avoid incarceration, and just that support there would just be huge. I just feel that it is one space that is forgotten about. It is sort of really hard for me; as I look over at my wall—I have got an Adam Goodes poster hanging up on the wall with his guernsey—you know, it sort of makes me emotional thinking: how are First Nations people not treated at least equally to Anglo-Saxons?

There just needs to be a lot of reform, and I do not even know how to begin to start, but I am more than happy to send you an email with some dot points, because it is one that really, really gets to me. You see it on the news all the time, but you look deeper into it and it is an epidemic. It is something that really needs to be looked at and changed and not have, I guess, this initial perception about 'This is how it is' or 'This is what they've done' or 'This is how they are'. It needs to be each person on their own merit, and I feel that they are just being left behind. It is a really big issue that needs to be looked at seriously. And I guess also they do not have the means a lot of the time to be able to access computers, to be able to do this, and all that sort of stuff, so it is quite difficult. I just feel there is a lot of room for improvement there.

Ms WATT: Well, thank you so much, Thomas, and I think the department said this morning that the access rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to access victims of crime support services is so much higher, despite having much higher rates; indeed being victims themselves. I thought that was a really important pick-up, and I was just wondering if that sort of point had come through your work with victims of crime. Are particular cohorts less likely to access support as victims of crime, and what are some of the recommendations that you might have? So if there is anything that you wanted to add to that, Cathy, I would be very happy to hear it.

Ms ODDIE: Yes, sure. I think something that is really important to acknowledge as well is our fellow VOCC victim representative, Sandra. She is actually an Indigenous elder—Aunty Sandra, we call her. She is

based in the Mildura area and does a lot of work in the Koori Court. So I am sure, in terms of if you wish to speak to her further post this hearing, she would be very open to having a discussion with you.

So I think what I look at in regard to culturally and linguistically diverse communities and Indigenous communities is that we have to apply the ‘Nothing about us without us’ approach and ensure that in terms of all aspects of the criminal justice system, whether it is from the victim side or the perpetrator side, you actually are making sure to do co-design, consultation—all those sorts of processes—so that you are not putting a system onto people. It cannot be power over, it has to be power with. By including them in the design process, then you are making a system that is fit for purpose, that actually engages people to respond and get the support that they need. I think this is the thing, unfortunately—why the system does not meet the needs of so many people is that it was designed by a particular cohort of individuals many years ago, white Anglo men. So I think it is time. Just because certain things have been done a certain way since day dot, it does not have to stay that way.

I think what we also have to acknowledge is the lack of assistance for people who have different residential statuses. So people who are on temporary migration visas are particularly vulnerable, and we have seen that happen. The circumstances have been exacerbated throughout the pandemic. So for people who are experiencing domestic and family violence, instead of expecting people to find the services, you need to actively engage, go into those communities, because they might not receive the information in the traditional ways that the broader community would. So I think that is a really important thing: to be proactive rather than reactive.

Ms WATT: That is enormously helpful, Thomas and Cathy. Thank you so much for that. I really appreciate it.

Mr WAIN: Can I tell you one thing with that? It will be very brief. There are so many positions and things that come up for Koori support workers and this sort of thing. Obviously you have got to prove yourself—whether you do a course or what have you—but someone like me, like, I dedicate my life to being a support worker for Indigenous Australians, and I find it very difficult, being a white male with no Aboriginal background, to get into that space. So I think it is difficult, but I think it should be each person on their own merit. If someone is really showing dedication and they put their blood, sweat and tears into it, it does not matter what colour skin they have. Some of the government positions clearly state you need to be Indigenous, which is fair enough for a while. But I just feel that sometimes it could work if you could find the right—whether they be Asian or a white Australian, it does not matter. I just feel like if they have that passion and that desire, then they will fight for them. I am saying that I feel sometimes it is a bit of a barrier.

Ms WATT: Thanks, Thomas.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Thomas. Tania, I will leave the last questions for you.

Ms MAXWELL: Thank you very much, Chair. Just a question directed at both of you. One is: how do you feel about the length of time for court appearances or for any justice to be served? Certainly in both your cases that has not happened at all, but as advocates you obviously hear about other victims of crime who have gone through the justice process. The second one, quickly, is about the length of time for victims of crime support. Thomas, you touched on that a little bit, but it would be great if you could both elaborate a little more on that.

Mr WAIN: I would just like to start off with plea deals. I think it goes then to that question being that you may go to court and it is dragged out, and then all of a sudden a plea deal is agreed upon without victims knowing. So a victim comes to court and a plea deal is done, and it is all just a big—

So I feel that the victims really should have a massive say or at least the prosecution needs to come to the victim and say, ‘Look, this is what we’re going to put on the table and offer them. How do you feel about that?’, so they do not get that shock. And then with things like Cathy waiting so long, and going past, for example, a perpetrator that raped you, in the courtroom or down the corridor—it is just horrific. Cathy would be able to go further into it, but it went on for months. Do not get me wrong, I think the plea deal can work, and I think that it does eliminate and diminish the amount of time that a hearing will go on for. Obviously because there are so many court hearings that go through, I just feel that that really needs to be looked upon. And I guess on adjournments, there are a lot of things that could be amended in the sense of continuous adjournments unnecessarily. And I believe victim impact statements are huge. Probably 50 per cent of the magistrates really

look into them deeply. I just feel that there would be a massive impact and it may even shorten the course or the length of the trial or the hearing.

I hope that answers some of the questions. I feel that it is quite a traumatic experience for someone that has gone through whatever crime it may have been as it gets dragged out, dragged out, and they are having to relive it. So whether it be that they do not have to go to court every time—they can be on Zoom video and be in the comfort of their own home and not feel ‘Oh, my God, that man’s eyes are on me’ or what have you and not have that intimidation and not have that PTSD all coming back to them. I will be quiet. Cathy, you go for it.

The CHAIR: Cathy.

Ms MAXWELL: Thanks, Thomas. Great.

Ms ODDIE: What I would say in regard to this is that we need to make sure that the time it takes to get a final outcome happens as soon as possible in any court process or victims of crime assistance process, because the longer these things drag out, the longer it exacerbates the trauma. Court environments are not therapeutic environments; they are inherently contributing to the harm that someone is actually experiencing. I think any victim of crime that I have spoken to has unanimously shared with me that there has been the crime perpetrated against them but their experience of going through the court system has almost felt like being violated yet again and they have had new trauma as a result of going through the court system. I know that has 100 per cent happened in my case. As I stated in my submission, as a result of my first attempt at getting an intervention order regarding my first perpetrator, I now cannot enter a Magistrates Court building without being triggered for a severe PTSD episode, and I am sure that is similar for many victims of crime. The sooner that we can get outcomes, it is better for the victim of crime, the perpetrator and their supporting friends and family members.

The other thing that I would like to sort of raise here too is that it is about also not just addressing the process of the trial or the VOCAT claim process, it is about also the supporting structures around that. So in the family violence setting, men’s behavioural change programs, for example, there is such a waiting list for perpetrators to access that, they might have that as part of their conditions for their corrections order but they are not able to complete that within the required time frame. That has implications both for that offender as well as for the victim of the crimes they perpetrated. We need to ensure that the things that support the system like that are also given priority in funding.

The CHAIR: Absolutely. Thank you.

Ms MAXWELL: Sorry, Chair. Can I just ask one quick question?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Ms MAXWELL: Just in relation to that, I have had victims who have said to me that they have actually attended court but the offender, who is incarcerated, has not been brought to court, and the trauma that that perpetuates for that victim. Do you, as advocates, hear much about that?

Ms ODDIE: No, I have not.

Mr WAIN: I think I did actually in the lead-up to it. I guess it was they may appear via a video link or they refuse to come up, and I just feel that the victims really emotionally gather themselves to be able to get to court that day and put themselves into the position of, ‘Okay, I’m going to see the offender’ and they are not there. There is sort of just this whole overwhelming sensation that, ‘Okay. Maybe they will adjourn, and I’ll have to experience this again’. I have come across a few people who have experienced that, and I guess that for them it is just another waiting process of that unknown. I feel at the same time that it is like they feel, ‘Why should I be here but they are not?’ and, ‘What, because they decide, “No, I do not want to speak to the magistrate” or, “No, I’m not coming up to the court” or what have you’. It is just not on. I feel that if they can go by video link it is important that victims do have that opportunity as well. At times I think it would be really important because, one, they could open up more and not feel that they are being judged, looked upon, violated, you know, PTSD all that sort of stuff. They are in the comfort of their own home and they have got that support around them. I think those questions are really relevant, and I would be more than happy to write some stuff up if it can help, just to gather my thoughts and send it through. It would be a pleasure.

Ms ODDIE: What I would just probably add to that is probably less, because I have not had it reflected back to me regarding the perpetrator not attending a hearing, but I can imagine the impact of that. I think the thing that I would like to highlight at this moment is what I hear about more is around victim impact statements and the fact that perpetrators are given the right to veto what parts of the victim impact statement are read out. I just think that is absolutely ridiculous. That should not be allowed. It takes a lot to write down the impacts that have occurred to you, and you are doing that for a purpose—for the offender to actually hear and recognise the harms that have been caused to you. And just a final note on victim impact statements is that despite having lodged and successfully received three VOCAT compensation claims, for the first three I never was invited to write a victim impact statement.

It is only in this most recent one that I lodged this year that I was given the opportunity to write one up. So I think that should also become a standard part of VOCAT claim applications which is going to progress to the new financial assistance scheme, because allowing someone to write in their own words about what has happened to them and the harm—what that has meant—and being given the choice whether they read that out or have someone read that on their behalf is so empowering. You do not know how much that means until you realise that you have not had that opportunity, so let us give victims that opportunity.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Cathy, Thomas, thank you so much for joining us today. This has just been a really wonderful session. You guys are wonderful. You are such warriors, and we are really grateful, and I think on behalf the community, thank you for all of the work that you are doing.

As I mentioned at the outset, you will receive a transcript of today. Please do have a look at it, because it will form part of our report and it will go up onto the committee's website shortly as well. Thank you all.

Witnesses withdrew.