

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2026–27 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Thursday 21 May 2026

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

John Pesutto – Deputy Chair

Jade Benham

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Aiv Puglielli

Richard Riordan

Meng Heang Tak

WITNESSES

Anthony Carbines MP, Minister for Victims; and

Emma Cassar, Secretary,

Bill Kyriakopoulos, Deputy Secretary, Community Safety, Victims and Racing, and

Nicola Quin, Chief Operating Officer, Department of Justice and Community Safety.

The CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2026–27 Budget Estimates. The committee's aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, anything you say outside of this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website.

I welcome the Minister for Victims the Honourable Anthony Carbines as well as officials from DJCS. Minister, I invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes, after which time committee members will ask you some questions. Your time starts now.

Anthony CARBINES: Thanks very much, Chair and colleagues. I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are gathered, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and pay my respects to their elders past and present. I would like to acknowledge other Aboriginal people with us today.

Visual presentation.

Anthony CARBINES: Of course any victim of crime is one too many, and our thoughts are with those who have been affected by any criminal behaviour. However, when a crime does occur, the Allan Labor government is equally committed to ensuring that the criminal justice system understands the needs of victims of crime and respects their rights and delivers services that are trauma informed to support their recovery. That is why this government has made significant investments in victim services and continues to make improvements to the system so that it remains victim centred and culturally safe. The government is providing victims of crime in Victoria with effective trauma-informed support services to help them manage the effects of crime, assist them to navigate the justice system and support their recovery.

Supports include free services that can offer information, advice and support, such as the Victims of Crime Helpline; a network of community-based agencies delivering more intensive case management support through the victims assistance program; services to support victims who participate in criminal justice matters and provide greater access to justice, such as the Child and Youth Witness Service and the intermediary program; and specialist services such as the victims register. The register assists victims by providing certain information about an offender's sentence and when offenders may be preparing for parole and release from prison. As you can see from the data provided, these services support a significant number of victims each year.

The Victims Legal Service is Victoria's first dedicated legal service for victims of crime. The VLS, which commenced in March 2023, provides legal information and assistance to victims of crime who are making applications to the victims of crime financial assistance scheme and for restitution and compensation order matters. Delivered in partnership through Victoria Legal Aid, Aboriginal legal service providers and community legal centres, the VLS offers independent, specialised and trauma-informed legal advice and support. Last week the Commonwealth government also announced an expansion of its specialised sexual violence legal services pilot through further funding for the VLS. Under this expanded pilot the Victims Legal Service will partner with Victoria's forthcoming justice navigator pilot, funded through the Victorian government's women's safety package to further assist victim-survivors in understanding their rights and to

navigate the complex landscape of the justice system. Significantly, the victims of crime financial assistance scheme, established in 2024, is now providing an administrative scheme for victims of crime against the person to access financial assistance. The FAS replaced the Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal and has made payments of some \$72 million since November 2024. The scheme assists victims to access counselling and pay for medical expenses, funeral expenses and other critical assistance to support them in their recovery from violent crime.

This budget continues the Victorian government's significant investing in supporting victims of crime. The budget invests \$8.7 million for two years to sustain improvement in front-end processing in managing victim inquiries delivered through investment in the previous budget. This budget continues investment in the financial assistance scheme to help respond to significant demand for the scheme. And the budget will invest some \$6.32 million for two years to support the VLS to continue its operations in assisting victims of crime, building on over \$10 million provided through successive budgets to establish and operate the dedicated service. As the primary referral pathway for victims to the FAS, this investment will ensure that victims can continue to access free, consistent and quality legal advice in applying to the scheme. The 2026–27 state budget provides \$2.53 million over two years for the victims of crime commissioner to support continued advocacy of victims' experiences in the justice system. We know victims are able to get on with their recovery when they get the information and advice they need to navigate the justice system and access to the support they need. This investment through the budget does just that.

Finally, through the community safety package, \$4.5 million over five years is being provided to increase capacity to the child and youth witness service. Child and youth witness service practitioners are trained professionals who provide support to child victims and witnesses through the criminal process. Their support minimises the traumatising effects of giving evidence and increases the likelihood that a prosecution can proceed and that offenders can be held accountable for their actions. The FAS is the biggest reform of the victim services system in a generation. It plays a key role in the justice system, and it has meant great results for victims.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. The first 8 minutes is going to the Deputy Chair.

John PESUTTO: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Minister and officials. Minister, referring to the departmental questionnaire, question 9, page 87, the strengthening women's safety legal services and supports program lapses this year. Do you believe that enough dedicated work has been done in this space for it now to be absorbed into business as usual as stated?

Anthony CARBINES: I think you will find the reference that you are making is not specifically to my victims portfolio.

John PESUTTO: But it is within there. More importantly though, Minister, the women's safety legal services and supports program – are either of your officials able to assist you with that?

Anthony CARBINES: I think you will find that, overall, the financial assistance scheme has provided support to 52,000 applications, and in our strengthening women's safety package we have remained committed to providing support and delivering on the 2016 Royal Commission into Family Violence. But specifically, my task through the financial assistance scheme is to ensure that all victims of crime who seek assistance get it, and we have seen some 52,000 people receive financial assistance through the program.

John PESUTTO: Minister, this initiative related to family violence intervention orders only, not to the wider issue of women's safety, including those who have been victims without being related or a family member. The numbers of non-family violence stalking cases have increased every year since the VLRC tabled its report. Why isn't anything being done in this space?

Anthony CARBINES: I think they are really matters that you should put to the Attorney when she appears before you in the coming days, because they sit with her.

John PESUTTO: Isn't this really about female victims of domestic and family violence, Minister, and stalking?

Anthony CARBINES: All victims who choose to make applications to the financial assistance scheme are supported, and that is –

John PESUTTO: It is not just that, it is the stalking reforms, Minister.

Anthony CARBINES: Well, the stalking reforms are clearly in the purview of the Attorney-General, not me.

John PESUTTO: You do not, as Minister for Victims, have any interest or involvement in that?

The CHAIR: Excuse me, Deputy Chair. Mr Galea on a point of order.

Michael GALEA: It is a completely inappropriate question. We have been through this ground many times before. It is not appropriate to be asking ministers about their personal interests or concerns with any other portfolio. It is about asking this minister about this portfolio.

John PESUTTO: Okay. I will proceed.

The CHAIR: No, excuse me, Deputy Chair. I am going to rule on that. Mr Galea is entirely correct. I would also remind you that the Attorney-General is before us tomorrow, and the minister for family violence will be here this evening.

Anthony CARBINES: It certainly is absolutely critically important that all victims of crime are given support and the financial assistance scheme provides financial support –

John PESUTTO: Okay. You have had the point of order. You objected. Minister, you objected because it is not your job. You do not get to squeeze time. Now, let me proceed. Under the list of initiatives for the community safety package, page 6 of BP3, it states:

Funding is provided to deliver serious consequences to perpetrators of ... crime and keep the community safe ...

Do you agree with there being serious consequences for perpetrators of violent crime, particularly given your oversight as Minister for Victims?

Anthony CARBINES: As Minister for Victims my ministerial responsibility is to oversight the financial assistance scheme that has provided finalised applications for 52,000 Victorians and seen \$78 million allocated to victims of crime as compensation and support for the suffering that they have endured as victims of crime. The financial assistance scheme is some \$420 million-plus allocated by our government. Established by our government, it is much better than what previously was in place under VOCAT, where people were stuck in court with lawyers.

John PESUTTO: Okay, Minister. On behalf of victims, can you assure the victims you have responsibility for looking after: do you agree that there are serious consequences for perpetrators of violent crime?

Anthony CARBINES: The financial assistance scheme is about ensuring that victims of crime –

John PESUTTO: You are kidding. You cannot answer that question?

Anthony CARBINES: get the finances and the supports that they require. We have seen some 52,000 applications being acquitted and some \$78 million provided to them. What is critical about this is that previously, under the VOCAT system, victims were required to endure long court cases and expensive lawyers to get justice. Under the financial assistance scheme put in place by my predecessor, Mr Erdogan, we are now seeing victims get quicker support, stronger support and more appropriate financial support than ever before.

John PESUTTO: Okay, Minister. You have strayed well away from the question. Assuming you do agree that there should be consequences for offenders, how do you balance that with the continued reduction in sentences for prisoners, including violent and high-risk offenders, through the excessive use of emergency management days, which as you know, as minister with oversight of responsibility for victims, traumatises victims when it happens?

Anthony CARBINES: Emergency management days are a matter for the corrections minister, and they would best be addressed to him. But if you want to talk about victims of crime, I am happy to talk about the financial assistance scheme established by the Labor government that is providing great financial support to victims and is doing so far more effectively than the court-led system that operated previously.

John PESUTTO: Minister, in budget paper 3 there is a line item of \$2.6 million over two years for the victims of crime commissioner. What funding did the commissioner request?

Anthony CARBINES: The commissioner has been provided with \$2.6 million over two years in this budget as well as base funding in the departmental accounts of some \$1.3 million. I want to thank Commissioner Langdon for the work that she does.

John PESUTTO: Has the commissioner had a commensurate rise in funding with the increase in the number of crime victims?

Anthony CARBINES: The commissioner has been particularly tasked to review the charter for victims. She has done that work and presented it to the Parliament. The government is considering its response to that work. That has been valuable work conducted by the commissioner, and her role continues to be funded in this budget.

John PESUTTO: How does the funding to the commissioner stack up against other similar operations around the country, such as the Queensland victims of crime commissioner?

Anthony CARBINES: My concern is making sure that the victims of crime commissioner in Victoria is responsive to victims of crime here in Victoria. The \$2.6 million over two years in the budget on top of her base funding of \$1.3 million is a significant contribution that demonstrates our support for her work. The fact that she has delivered a review of the charter for victims to recommend changes to ensure that the charter for victims is better understood and better aligned across government and across services in Victoria is one the government will respond to soon. We thank her for the work and her ongoing advocacy, particularly the work she does in our victims of crime consultative committee.

John PESUTTO: Is it still the government's intention, Minister, to absorb the victims of crime commissioner into the broader department of justice?

Anthony CARBINES: The Silver review has made a range of recommendations. But as the budget papers demonstrate – BP 3, pages 72 and 73 – there is \$2.6 million over two years for the victims of crime commissioner and \$1.3 million allocated in base funding. Nothing could be clearer than that her work continues to be funded by our government, and we value her work and her advocacy on behalf of victims.

John PESUTTO: Will it be absorbed into the department, Minister?

Anthony CARBINES: The budget papers clearly state that the office of the victims of crime commissioner continues to be funded for the next two years at \$2.6 million, plus \$1.3 million in base funding.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. We are going straight to Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Minister and officials, for your attendance this afternoon. Minister, I will ask about the financial support for victims of crime, which is referenced in budget paper 3, page 72, in particular 'Delivery of victims of crime financial assistance scheme'. I am hoping you could talk a little bit more to that beyond what you have done so far in your presentation.

Anthony CARBINES: Thanks, Member for Point Cook. The victims of crime financial assistance scheme can provide victims of violent crime in Victoria with financial assistance to help in their recovery. This includes assistance with counselling, safety expenses, medical expenses and other expenses that can help a victim recover from the crime. The FAS continues to represent the most significant investment and the biggest reform to the victim services system in a generation. The FAS introduced a suite of landmark reforms and key features of the scheme, including increasing the time limits up to 10 years for applying for family violence and sexual offences, expanded eligibility for victims by better recognising children exposed to violence in family relationships, increased financial assistance maximums and the introduction of victim recognition statements.

The FAS is administered through my department and the Department of Justice and Community Safety, and it replaced the Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal, VOCAT, an administrative scheme. The FAS does not involve hearings, and victims can apply for assistance through a secure online portal at a time and place that suits them. The FAS also moves away from decisions based on judicial discretion to a more standardised decision-making framework. As I noted in my presentation, the FAS has made payments of some \$72 million since its commencement in November 2024. Victims of violent crime are now able to receive financial assistance of up to \$61,000, with some eligible for up to an additional \$25,000 in certain circumstances.

In addition to these payments, the FAS has also issued 359 victim recognition statements. Victim recognition statements are provided by the FAS on behalf of the state and acknowledge the impact of violence on the victim, helping victims feel heard and acknowledged as part of their recovery. The FAS also provides a dedicated pathway for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victims of crime. Through this pathway, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victims of crime can communicate their recovery needs to the FAS through a cultural support plan and can contact the FAS through a dedicated phone line. This phone line also assists to further remove some of the barriers to access that can otherwise be experienced by this group of victims.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thanks, Minister. I note there are a series of enhancements that have been made that you have just taken the committee through. How do these enhancements go to supporting victims of crime?

Anthony CARBINES: Thanks, Mr Hilakari, victims of crime deserve timely access to financial assistance, and the department continues to make improvements to its processes and the scheme's case management system and online application portal to support victims in their recovery. The online application portal was a key feature of the introduction of the new scheme, giving applicants greater control over how they manage their application and their approved expenses. Since the FAS's commencement in November 2024, several enhancements have been made to the scheme's case management system and online application portal to improve accessibility for users and make processing applications more efficient. While I referred to some of those improvements in my presentation, I am happy to expand on them for the pleasure of the committee.

The full suite of improvements made to the system since commencement enables victims to vary their VOCAT and FAS awards through the portal; seek internal review of FAS decisions through the portal; manage their authorised representative through the portal, including adding a new authorised representative or removing one; access more information in the portal in the 'Manage application' view of their finalised application; see more information about the assistance they have been awarded; and access more information about approved expenses and select the expense they want paid and provide an invoice or receipt for that expense.

The scheme's guidelines have been updated to make it clearer and easier for victims and their representatives to understand what to include in their applications, and the FAS has also implemented improvements to its payment processes to speed up payments through enabling service providers to use a digital web form to upload invoices and request payments directly from the FAS, automating remittance and enabling victims to confirm the bank details up-front, removing multiple manual steps from the process.

As outlined in my presentation, the 2026–27 budget provides further investment in the FAS workforce to support the delivery of frontline operations and support front-end processing. This investment helps sustain improvements around the contact centre, which manages victim and authorised representative enquiries to the FAS, payment processes to support payments to victims and service providers and other front-end processes like changes to the processing of interim assistance or funeral expenses and decisions along those lines where a victim can receive initial assistance for critical recovery needs. This may include items such as counselling, safety or medical expenses while they wait for the final decision to be made by the FAS. The 2026–27 budget investment recognises the continued importance of supporting victims through their journey in recovering from the effects of violent crime.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Minister. It sounds like we have made real strides since the previous system, so I appreciate that and also the work of the department in delivering that. Two line items down on the same budget paper reference, BP3, page 72, is the line item 'Improving access to justice for vulnerable victims of crime'. There is around \$6.4 million dedicated to that. How will this assist victims of crime who need access to legal support?

Anthony CARBINES: Thank you, Mr Hilakari. As outlined in the presentation, the budget does provide some \$6.3 million over two years for the ‘Improving access to justice for vulnerable victims of crime’ initiative. The funding supports the continued delivery of the Victims Legal Service. The VLS provides free, independent legal information and assistance to victims of crime in victims of crime financial assistance scheme and restoration compensation order matters. The VLS was first established back in March 2023 in response to a number of reviews that identified the need for independent legal support to access the financial assistance. It was designed in partnership with legal stakeholders including Aboriginal legal services, specialist women’s family violence services and victims of crime themselves to ensure the service is trauma informed, culturally safe and best meets the needs of victims. Through this funding the VLS will continue to be delivered as a partnership between Victoria Legal Aid, Aboriginal legal service providers and 10 community legal centres. As a statewide service this means victims anywhere in Victoria can get the support they need to access financial assistance so they can recover and get on with their lives. Other support for the VLS works hand in hand with continued support and funding for the victims of crime financial assistance scheme.

The VLS continues to be a primary referral pathway for victims to access the FAS, and the VLS ensures that victims, especially those with complex matters, receive consistent and quality advice. Support for victims of crime through the VLS includes a dedicated helpline, which is delivered by Victoria Legal Aid and staffed by specialist lawyers who provide triage information, advice and warm referrals to ongoing casework, to VLS services and their providers and other legal services.

As mentioned earlier, the VLS also supports victims with restitution and compensation order matters. For those on the committee who may not be aware, those restitution and compensation orders are ancillary orders or, in other words, orders that a court may impose in addition to the sentence imposed upon an offender. These orders allow for the return of property or compensation for harm caused to the victim of an offence. There is no limit to the amount of compensation that can be made for either expenses or pain and suffering. The victim can make an application for restitution or a compensation order by themselves, or alternatively the Director of Public Prosecutions in the County Court or Supreme Court or a police prosecutor in the Magistrates’ Court may apply for an order on behalf of a victim. In this way victims are supported by the VLS to enforce court orders and claim compensation directly from offenders.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Minister. I noted in your presentation on the same matter Commonwealth funding for the Victims Legal Service. I am just checking: could you explain how this funding is provided for and how this supports victims of crime as well?

Anthony CARBINES: Thank you, Mr Hilakari. In August 2023 Victoria was selected to participate in an Australian government program to pilot specialised and trauma-informed legal services for victim-survivors of sexual offences. This was formalised through the Albanese Labor government providing Victoria with \$2.55 million in funding over three years from 2023–24 to 2025–26 to pilot this program through the VLS. The pilot was delivered specifically by Victoria Legal Aid, Women’s Legal Service Victoria and Djirra, a statewide Aboriginal community controlled organisation. These organisations deliver significant support to victim-survivors to protect their confidential counselling and health information through legal advice, referrals and representation and to Aboriginal women to report sexual violence to police through Djirra’s range of programs and supports.

On 6 March 2025 the Australian government announced further funding of \$19.6 million to extend the pilot services in Victoria, Western Australia and the Australian Capital Territory and establish pilots in all other jurisdictions. Last Friday the Albanese and Allan Labor governments publicly confirmed that the pilot will continue, with the pilot to expand and partner with Victoria’s forthcoming justice navigator pilot. The justice navigator pilot, delivered by my colleague the Minister for Prevention of Family Violence, seeks to embed justice navigators in Victoria, specialised sexual assault services supporting victim-survivors of sexual violence to understand and exercise their rights and to assist them in navigating all the support, compensation, justice and recovery options that are available to them, and that funding support by the Albanese government will continue to December 2027.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Hilakari. Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon. To start us off, we have been talking a lot about the victims of crime financial assistance scheme, so I will stay on that topic. I am informed there are now numerous

psychologists who no longer take on FAS clients because of issues with the payment scheme that make it impossible for them to get paid unless their often traumatised clients undertake an onerous and technical process. To the department's awareness has there been a marked decline in successful reimbursement of psychologists under the FAS, as opposed to the previous VOCAT scheme?

Anthony CARBINES: I might ask the Deputy Secretary to touch on some of the reforms and the interactions with our key stakeholders that provide services under the FAS.

Bill KYRIAKOPOULOS: Yes. We have been speaking very closely and working very closely with service delivery providers. At the moment I believe it is about 15 days for payment, so it has been a big change over the last year or so. There are some occasions where providers will provide services before an application is made or complete, and that is a risk for providers that they take on. Those that have applied for reimbursement and funding where the application has been made, as I said, it is around a 15-day wait time now for them to receive their reimbursement. So I am not aware of those particular matters.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you. Are you able to provide the committee, noting we have already said that FAS has issued \$72 million since its commencement in 2024, what amount of funding was reimbursed to victims for psychological support during the 2024–25 financial year?

Bill KYRIAKOPOULOS: Not specifically. There is an interim assistance element of the application that can be applied for ahead of the full application. Interim assistance is up to \$5000 for medical and safety expenses, and that also includes five counselling sessions.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Can you tell us how much was expended from those arrangements for 2024–25?

Bill KYRIAKOPOULOS: I do not have that figure, but I can take it on.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Come back to us on that one, and if you are coming back to us, up to date for this financial year would be great as well, if you can. Thank you.

Can you tell us how this process has changed, rather than just processing time, compared to the previous VOCAT scheme?

Bill KYRIAKOPOULOS: Well, this is an administrative scheme, so people do not have to go through the judicial process to receive any sort of financial support or assistance. So by establishing an online portal, people can apply themselves for support, for counselling support, for funeral expenses and for any other type of financial support they might need. For a primary victim the maximum they are eligible for is \$61,000-plus, and secondary and related victims is \$51,000.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Minister and officials. Thank you for appearing before the committee today. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee's request. The committee is going to take a break before beginning its consideration of the portfolio for racing at 3:35 pm. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.