

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2025-26 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Thursday 5 June 2025

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Jade Benham

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Aiv Puglielli

Meng Heang Tak

Richard Welch

WITNESSES

Anthony Carbines, Minister for Victims; and

Kate Houghton, Secretary,

Bill Kyriakopoulos, Deputy Secretary, Police, Racing, Victims and Coordination,

Marnie Williams, Chief Executive Officer, Victims of Crime Financial Assistance Scheme, and

Samuel Ho, Chief Financial 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 2025–26 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, comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and is broadcast live on the Parliament's website. The broadcast includes automated captioning. Members and witnesses should be aware that all microphones are live during hearings and anything said may be picked up and captioned, even if said quietly.

As Chair I expect that committee members will be respectful towards witnesses, the Victorian community joining the hearing via the live stream this evening and other committee members.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check, and 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: Thank you very much, Chair. 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, and I extend that acknowledgement to any Aboriginal people with us this evening.

Visual presentation.

Anthony CARBINES: The government offers a range of services for victims to help manage the effects of crime and support them through the criminal justice system. This includes services that provide support to victims in the immediate aftermath of crime, such as the Victims of Crime Helpline; more intensive case management support, such as that offered by the victims assistance programs delivered locally by community agencies; and services that can support victims throughout their contact with the criminal justice system, such as the child and youth witness service and of course the intermediary program. At the other end of the criminal justice process the victims register assists victims by providing certain information about an offender's sentence and when offenders may be preparing for parole and release from prison. I will not go through all the individual areas shown here but, as you can see, these services provide support to significant numbers of victims each year right across the system that are timely, effective and trauma informed.

In March 2023 we launched Victoria's first victims legal service, supported by a \$7.3 million investment over three years in the 2021–22 budget. The victims legal service is a partnership between Victoria Legal Aid, Aboriginal and other specialist legal service providers and local community legal centres. Operated by Victoria Legal Aid, the VLS helpline is the victims legal service's primary entry point. The victims legal service provides free legal advice and support to people who have suffered injury or loss as a result of a crime, helping

victims access assistance through the financial assistance scheme or from an offender. As of 31 March 2025 the VLS helpline has provided information and legal advice in response to 6678 inquiries. The success of the VLS allowed Victoria, with the support of the Australian government, to pilot an expansion of the service to provide advice to victim-survivors of sexual violence wanting to protect their confidential counselling and health information in court cases and to Aboriginal women wanting support in reporting sexual violence to police. We are incredibly proud to see the government fulfil our election commitments to deliver this scheme. The victims legal service has received a further \$3.2 million in the 2025–26 budget to continue providing legal assistance to victims of violent crime in Victoria, and the government recently announced a further investment of \$284.2 million across four years in the 2025–26 budget.

This latest investment sees more than \$470 million invested in the establishment of the financial assistance scheme and the transition from the Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal. The scheme, otherwise known as the FAS, represents a fundamental change in the way victims access financial assistance in this state. The FAS has some key features that differ from the Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal. The FAS has a guided application process, which means victims and their authorised representatives can apply online through the FAS portal. Authorised representatives can submit applications on behalf of victims and are not limited to legal practitioners. The FAS is also connected to the wider victim support system, using referrals for victims who need extra help. The FAS has also broadened eligibility by expanding the definition of ‘close family member’ to recognise close personal relationships and expanded the definition of ‘relevant offence’ to include more sexual offences. Application timeframes have been expanded for up to three years for adult victims or 10 years for sexual offences or family violence. There are increased maximum amounts of special financial assistance for primary victims, which has doubled to up to \$20,000 for a single violent act or \$25,000 for multiple offences.

Importantly, the FAS also introduces victim recognition as part of the financial assistance process. Applicants to the FAS who receive assistance will also be able to receive recognition statements acknowledging the effects of the act of violence and expressing the state’s condolences. Applicants can also request a victim recognition meeting. Meetings will be prioritised for victims of the most serious offences, such as homicide, in the first year of operation. We are well across the issues and have been prioritising enhancements swiftly, and the FAS has continued to work with stakeholders to identify and address implementation issues since commencement. The FAS advisory group has also been established and is working well, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Minister. I am going to throw to Mr Welch.

Richard WELCH: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister. Minister, I will go to budget paper 3, page 70, table 1.18. The budget forecasts expenditure on the FAS, financial assistance scheme, of \$74.2 million in 2025–26 but only \$70 million in the following years across forward estimates. With crime rising in Victoria by 16 per cent in the last year alone, why is the government cutting funding to victims of crime over the forwards?

Anthony CARBINES: I see where you have gone there, but there has certainly been no reduction in funding. This budget, the 2025–26 budget, provides \$284.2 million over four years for the victims of crime financial assistance scheme, and that also comprises \$70 million each year for awards. That is money to go directly to victims, and we have provisioned that money in the forwards in the budget. Not only is that –

Richard WELCH: Is that indexed?

Anthony CARBINES: My colleagues can speak to that.

Richard WELCH: It is indexed, so it will be more than \$70 million.

Anthony CARBINES: Yes, the value of it.

Marnie WILLIAMS: The actual legislation indexes the amount of awards an eligible victim is entitled to, and there is a statutory formula that indexes that amount.

Richard WELCH: So the forwards could be higher than \$70 million.

Anthony CARBINES: The element that I think you are going to is there has been a provisioning also in the budget of \$4.2 million for additional operational staff, and that has been provisioned for the new financial year

in the new budget from 1 July. And that additional \$4.2 million that is allocated for additional staff is about us flexing up our financial assistance scheme. As we transition from VOCAT, we are going to be growing and building. We are going to need to continue to build our staffing complement, and that is allocated in the budget.

Richard WELCH: Minister, that extra staff – the cost of that is all front-ended, is it, in that extra \$4 million?

Anthony CARBINES: The \$4 million is an amount that is to recruit those additional staff. It would be more than 30 additional staff that we would be recruiting.

Richard WELCH: So how are they paid for in the subsequent years?

Anthony CARBINES: That will be a matter for subsequent budgets.

Richard WELCH: So these forward estimates do not reflect that, then?

Anthony CARBINES: What we have done in this budget is we have allocated the \$284 million over four years, which is because it is important for us in the provisioning of the funding for victims that that must be allocated across the forwards and clear –

Richard WELCH: You can understand my confusion, though. You have just said you are getting these extra 35 staff. Are they only –

Anthony CARBINES: No, I said over 30.

Richard WELCH: Are they only for one year?

Anthony CARBINES: No. They are funded in next year's budget.

Richard WELCH: Out of that \$70 million?

Anthony CARBINES: No. The \$70 million – you can add it up here: the \$70 million times four in the \$284 million – is across the forwards, because that is quarantined money, only for victims, only for payments to victims. Beyond that is the \$4.2 million that is allocated for additional staff in the new financial year, and further commitments around funding for those staff will be considered in future budgets.

Richard WELCH: Okay, they are not reflected here. There is a document published by the victims of financial assistance scheme entitled 'FAS responses to feedback provided in information sessions'. This is from 28 April 2025, page 5. In relation to invoices of service providers, it states the FAS anticipates that it may take up to 90 days to address this processing backlog. Minister, why are victims of crime being asked to wait up to 90 days to be reimbursed for payments they have made for vital services such as trauma counselling?

Anthony CARBINES: Thank you for your question. Given some of the operational elements of that –

Mathew HILAKARI: I am trying to follow along. What budget paper are we talking about? Sorry. You said page 5.

The CHAIR: Sorry, is there a point of order?

Mathew HILAKARI: Yes. I will be quick. A point of order: could you just reference the budget paper?

Richard WELCH: It is under BP 3, page 70, table 1.18. It is the operation –

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you.

Richard WELCH: And the services provided under that funding are relevant. So if we could go back to the answer, please.

Anthony CARBINES: Yes. What I would say is that for some of the operational elements of the scheme I will go to my colleagues to speak to. But we need to be very clear that the government in the budget has provisioned up to \$70 million per annum over each of the next four years for payments to victims, and we are

in the process in a scheme that has been operating since 18 November 2024 – so, barely just over six months. As we transition from VOCAT, as we transition and scale up our scheme, we are also going to see a greater administration and payments to victims. My colleagues can speak to some of the operational outcomes that we have been dealing with over the past few months that you have asked about.

Richard WELCH: But is there a target? Do you have a target time for them to be set, and are you meeting that KPI?

Anthony CARBINES: My colleagues can speak to the operational elements.

Marnie WILLIAMS: In terms of the document you were referring to, that was in response to some information sessions that were held with key stakeholder cohorts. So we are actively engaging –

Richard WELCH: No, I know where it came from. Just in terms of the KPIs –

Marnie WILLIAMS: Yes. In terms of just informing the rest of the committee what you are referencing, in terms of KPIs, that comes from the fact that we introduced a new service provider payment process on 14 April, and that was in response to some feedback we got in relation to the design of the scheme.

Richard WELCH: No, but my question specifically is on the KPIs.

Marnie WILLIAMS: The KPIs are that we are aiming to work towards the department of justice's processing guidelines, which is 30 days. We are not there at this point. We have –

Richard WELCH: When do you plan to be there?

Marnie WILLIAMS: It is a good question. At the moment we are working on some significant backlogs. Our VOCAT award recipients –

Richard WELCH: How significant are the backlogs?

Marnie WILLIAMS: At the moment there are about 1800 invoices that need to be processed.

Richard WELCH: Wow.

Minister, section 39 of the victims of crime Act provides that the scheme decision-maker can authorise payment of reasonable legal costs. However, in practice it appears that internal policy caps for legal costs for exceptional circumstances are capped at \$330, and there is apparently no transparency and no reasons given for the rejection of claims and no objective assessment explained as to the reasonableness of that rejection. So the question is: what will the minister do to ensure that reasonable legal costs incurred by victims of crime because of the complexity of the matter will not continue to be rejected simply because they are outside an internal policy which is not supported in the legislation?

Anthony CARBINES: I will ask my colleagues to speak further who operate the system, but what I think is important to focus on here is payments to victims directly. I have had many engagements with the community legal sector and the Federation of Community Legal Services around some improvements that we have made to our systems to make the streamlining of applications and the payments of invoices more effective.

Richard WELCH: But on the cap itself – there is this artificial internal cap – is that something you intend to maintain, or will you address it?

Anthony CARBINES: Well, I will ask my colleagues who operate the system to speak to those matters.

Bill KYRIAKOPOULOS: Before I throw to the CEO, there are clear guidelines that were workshopped and consulted on with stakeholders, including legal service providers, other service providers and victim representatives in recent years in the lead-up –

Richard WELCH: It is not supported by legislation, and it is creating –

Bill KYRIAKOPOULOS: They are guidelines that guide the decision-making and the parameters around the decision-making of the financial assistance scheme.

Richard WELCH: So are you going to maintain it?

Bill KYRIAKOPOULOS: Marnie can speak to the work with legal service providers around those.

Marnie WILLIAMS: In terms of the question, that particular matter is the subject of correspondence that was addressed to the victims of crime commissioner on 29 May. I was provided with a copy of that documentation as a courtesy. So that has been brought to my attention about the exercise of those powers around –

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Williams. I am going to cut you off there.

Richard WELCH: Thank you.

The CHAIR: We are going to go straight to Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, officials, for attending this evening. I appreciate it is starting to get a little bit later, but we will keep you here for a little while longer as well, so that is a brilliant thing for all of us. Minister, I am going to take us to BP3, page 70, on the victims of crime financial assistance scheme continued operations. As you mentioned a little bit earlier in your previous responses, there is \$284.2 million dedicated to this line item. What does it mean in practice, and in a practical way, for supporting victims of crime?

Anthony CARBINES: Thanks, Mr Hilakari. The Allan government understands that trauma can stay with victims for life and, where crime can be prevented, victims need support when that crime cannot be prevented. So the establishment of the financial assistance scheme in November last year by the former minister for victims, my good friend Minister Erdogan, is delivering a once-in-a-generation reform that puts the voices of victims at the heart of this important service. The FAS is the result of many years of hard work. Following a review by the Victorian Law Reform Commission, it became clear that the Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal was no longer fit for purpose. The commission recommended a new trauma-informed, victim-centred scheme be established. The FAS better supports victims of crime, making it easier to get financial assistance and have trauma recognised outside of court. The FAS can be accessed from the privacy of someone's home, minimising the risk of further trauma for victims, who are no longer required to attend court to receive their access to financial assistance.

The government has also expanded the eligibility for the service, particularly for victim-survivors of family violence and sexual assault, ensuring that they have access to improved financial assistance and supports. We have also changed the requirements for families, ensuring family members are able to access individual assistance, and we have expanded the definition of 'family' to recognise Aboriginal kinship relationships, LGBTI relationships and other family members that an applicant may consider a close family member, such as in-laws.

When you undertake a reform of this magnitude, there is always an adjustment period and the need to continue to identify opportunities to enhance and refine the scheme's operations. Since taking on the Victims portfolio, I have met with our partners across the sector, including the victims of crime commissioner and community legal centres, to hear directly how we can continue to improve the FAS. The FAS is getting on with implementing many of the suggestions made by our partners, and I would like to take the opportunity to thank them for their open and constructive engagement and continued support for the FAS. Our work is never complete, and we are always looking at system improvements, and the system from the victims' perspective being at the front of our minds.

Mathew HILAKARI: What are some of those changes that have been occurring since late last year?

Anthony CARBINES: Thanks, Mr Hilakari. As I was going to in my previous answer, the establishment of the FAS is a once-in-a-generation reform. So the government understands that when you undertake reform of this magnitude, there are always opportunities to further refine and enhance the system to improve outcomes for victims through the early implementation phase. So as part of the work undertaken to identify areas for enhancement, I have met with a number of our partners – the victims of crime commissioner, community legal centres, South-East Monash Legal Service – to hear firsthand of their experiences and the experiences of the clients of the FAS. These meetings were very valuable. They provided me with a better understanding of some

of the challenges that have emerged through the transition period, and the department has listened to this expert advice and acted to implement changes to make the process smoother for victims. The key system improvement that has been implemented is to streamline the identity verification process of victims. Under recent changes legal representatives are no longer required to complete identity checks for their clients, making it easier for victims and their authorised representatives to progress their applications and access assistance. We have also implemented new processes in relation to the payment of invoices for service providers such as counsellors, psychologists and other health professionals, enabling them to submit their requests for payment directly to the FAS.

While these changes are having a positive impact for victims, authorised representatives and service providers, we know that there is more work to be done. We also understand that our partners across the sector have valuable insights to share with us on how we can continue to enhance the FAS and improve the services for clients. It is also why we are establishing an advisory group of experts from across the sector to ensure that we continue to hear directly how we can refine and improve the FAS. We know there is more work to do. We are committed to that. We continue to work with our stakeholders and partners, who are also very committed in their work to supporting victims, and we want to make sure that they are supported in the work we need to do with the FAS.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Minister. On the same budget reference, the line above is the ‘Victims’ Legal Service’. You mentioned in your presentation there was a federal or Commonwealth element to that as well. How does this program go to support victims of crime?

Anthony CARBINES: Thanks, Mr Hilakari. The Victims Legal Service is our first ever legal service dedicated to victims of crime. The VLS is a victim-centred, trauma-informed and culturally safe legal support for eligible victims, delivered in partnership through Victoria Legal Aid, Aboriginal legal service providers and community legal centres. The service was designed in partnership with legal stakeholders, including Aboriginal legal services, specialist women’s family violence services and victims, demonstrating again our government’s commitment to working with and listening to victims. The VLS provides legal information and assistance to victims of crime who are making applications to the Victims of Crime Financial Assistance Scheme, the Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal and for restitution and compensation order matters.

In the first 12 months of operation the VLS exceeded expectations, delivering services to approximately 3395 services. The VLS is continuing to assist victims to access advice and support, receiving more than 25,800 referrals. The VLS was established in response to a significant number of reviews that identified a range of legal issues experienced by victims of crime. These reviews consistently recommended the need for a dedicated victim’s legal service. The Victims Legal Service commenced service delivery in March 2023, following an initial investment of \$7.32 million over three years from 2022–23 as part of the ‘Supporting Victims of Crime’ initiative in the 2021–22 budget. As of 31 March 2025 the VLS helpline has provided information and legal advice in response to some 6678 inquiries. In the last reporting period, 1 July–31 December 2024, Victoria Legal Aid and community legal centres provided over 3123 services to over 2497 victims, including information and legal advice, referrals and ongoing representation under service agreements. The VLS provides this data biannually.

The Victims Legal Service was designed in partnership with legal stakeholders including Aboriginal legal services, specialist women’s family violence services and Victims of Crime to better ensure the service is trauma informed and culturally safe. The pilot is delivered through the Victims Legal Service in partnership with Victoria Legal Aid, Women’s Legal Service Victoria and Djirra. Of course that Victims Legal Service helpline is the victim legal service primary entry point and operates 9 am to 5 pm, Monday to Friday. A webchat function is also available, and the helpline is operated by Victoria Legal Aid.

As of 31 March this year the VLS has provided information and legal advice in response to 6678 inquiries to the VLS helpline and made some 587 referrals to VLS providers for ongoing assistance. The phone line triages calls to specific VLA teams or to CLCs and the Aboriginal legal service’s ongoing support and representation. Access to comprehensive legal assistance depends on the person’s financial circumstances and CLC eligibility. The VLS is funded for a total of over 21 FTE by 2024–25, which includes 12 FTE in our community legal centres and over nine for the VLA.

Other legal support is available for victims of crime. Victims continue to have access to free legal advice and support services through Victoria Legal Aid and community legal centres on matters relating to family violence, debt, family law, child protection and consumer and tenancy matters. The 2021–22 state budget provided \$2 million over four years as part of the justice system response to family violence initiatives to deliver a pilot program to embed legal services within the Orange Door network, and that pilot commenced in October 2022 at the Bayside Peninsula Orange Door.

Mathew HILAKARI: And the Commonwealth government, from your presentation I understand, also has found its way to support this program. I am just hoping you can talk to the benefits of that. It is great to see the Commonwealth taking up and supporting some of the programs we have initiated.

Anthony CARBINES: Thanks, Mr Hilakari. Under that pilot program you mentioned, Victoria will receive \$2.55 million from the Albanese government over three years, from 2023–24 to 2025–26. The pilot was delivered through the Victims Legal Service in partnership with Victoria Legal Aid, Women’s legal aid Victoria and Djirra. The Commonwealth government provided \$8.4 million over three years from 2023–24 for a pilot to assist victims of sexual violence in protecting their confidential communications, counselling records and health information in court and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victims when reporting sexual violence to the police, for which Victoria received \$2.55 million over three years. And on 6 March this year the Australian government announced further funding of \$19.6 million over three years from 2025–26 to extend the pilot service in Victoria, Western Australia and the ACT and nationally expand the pilots to include one in each jurisdiction. On 1 March 2024 the VLS expanded services under the Australian government pilot to provide advice and representation for victims.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. We are going to go to Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good evening. Just starting on budget paper 3, page 70, ‘Output initiatives’, ‘Victims of Crime Financial Assistance Scheme continued operations’, can I ask: what metrics are you using to evaluate the rollout of the FAS to ensure it meets the needs of victims and mitigates the risk of secondary traumatisation? You mentioned one metric is paying invoices in 30 days. Are there any other specific metrics you can tell us about?

Anthony CARBINES: I will ask my colleagues to go to some of those performance indicators. I think our starting point of course is transitioning from a more adversarial, court-based VOCAT system to the FAS, which has always of course been a victim-built system, if you like – a victim-centred system. The fact is that while there is legal representation in terms of processing some of the applications, more and more we are seeing directly victims wanting to have ownership and a voice in proceeding with their applications themselves, and this is the system that reflects their empowerment. But my colleagues may like to speak to some of the other KPIs that are guiding our work.

Bill KYRIAKOPOULOS: Thanks, Minister. I should say that you spoke about secondary trauma. One of the reasons for the introduction of the financial assistance scheme was because we were being told by victims and their representatives that the judicial process of VOCAT was quite traumatising. The administrative scheme through the website and through authorised representatives presents a much more trauma-informed process and application for support for victims of crime. There are two other measures that are detailed related to the FAS. The first one is the number of applications lodged with the scheme, and the second is the proportion of applicants that are satisfied with the scheme and agree that their recovery needs were being met.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: And so there are no other evaluation metrics you would want to tell us about tonight?

Bill KYRIAKOPOULOS: They are the ones in the budget. Are there any others, Marnie, that are worthy of mention?

Marnie WILLIAMS: At an operational level there are a whole host. We have got a framework that outlines the different measures. We will be conducting surveys. Obviously, there is a key line measure in the budget paper, but underneath that there will be sub-measures. Particularly, we have got a cultural safety pathway, so we want to make sure our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are being appropriately looked after. We will pull out certain measures in the survey to address those things. A new part of the scheme is internal review. An applicant, if they are not satisfied with our decision, can seek an internal review of a decision from a decision-maker who is more senior. We will be monitoring how many of those we get, and that will be another

measure, as well as how much money we award and how quickly we award it – you know, the things you would expect from an operational scheme.

Anthony CARBINES: Sorry, Marnie – I should just mention there is, under the legislation, an independent review that has to be conducted within two years, which takes us to about 26 November.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Puglielli. Minister and department officials, thank you very much for taking the time to appear before the committee this evening. 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 very short break before beginning its consideration of the portfolio for racing at 6:55 pm. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.