

Darebin Information & Volunteer Resource Service

Submission to the Parliament of Victoria Economy and Infrastructure Committee Inquiry into the Increase in Victoria's Road Toll



Darebin Information, Volunteer & Resource Service



Inquiry into the Increase in Victoria's Road Toll

Darebin Information, Volunteer & Resource Service (DIVRS) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Parliament of Victoria Economy and Infrastructure Committee for consideration as part of their Inquiry into the Increase in Victoria's Road Toll.

In particular, DIVRS proposes recommendations in relation to Item 7 of the Terms of Reference - adequacy of driver training programs and related funding structures such as the L2P program.

Introduction

DIVRS is a not-for-profit volunteer driven organisation that delivers free services and programs for vulnerable populations in Darebin in an effort to reduce financial crisis, social isolation and barriers to accessing community information.

DIVRS has coordinated the L2P Program in Darebin since 2010. In this time the program has supported over 325 learner drivers through the assistance of almost 100 mentors who have provided 18,500 volunteer hours.

The Victorian L2P Program has been extensively evaluated by Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu in 2018 and was found to be a successful model in terms of increasing road safety.

Throughout the time DIVRS has delivered L2P the need to extend the same type of road safety program to drivers from new arrival communities has become apparent.

Need for Migrant Driver Program

Throughout the delivery of the L2P Program in Darebin, it became evident that members of new arrival communities that don't meet L2P eligibility requirements are in need of additional assistance in gaining local driving experience and confidence in interpreting and adhering to local road rules and regulations.

For many young people who apply to the L2P Program in the Darebin local government area, they do so because their parent/s don't have a Victorian Driver's Licence. In many cases, these young people go on to become the main driver of the family.

Through our relationships with local agencies and Victorian Police officers, we have found that some people from new arrival communities drive without a valid licence due to factors such as:

- Difficulty understanding and navigating the systems and processes of obtaining a licence or converting an international licence to a Victorian licence;
- The prohibitive cost of driving lessons for many individuals;
- Being ineligible for the L2P Program (due to exceeding the age limit);
- Lack of community supports, for instance in having access to a fully licenced driver to practice with;
- Language barriers.

These barriers can lead to a number of potentially hazardous outcomes for individuals and the community including:

- Unsafe driving practices, impacting on the safety of other road users, the driver and passengers (for instance, some new arrival community members do not understand requirements regarding child restraints);
- Unlicensed driving, leading to these community members becoming involved in the justice system, having offences recorded against them and/or incurring debt;
- Younger family members not having a licenced driver to teach them how to drive.

In response to the above DIVRS made a successful submission to Darebin City Council in 2019 for funding of a pilot program, based on the L2P model, aimed at assisting this group. Whilst this funding is welcomed and will benefit up to 50 community member over the time of the pilot, DIVRS is of the view that a more comprehensive and broadly funded ongoing program across the state is necessary.

DIVRS' Migrant Driver Program model

The DIVRS pilot Migrant Driver Program (MDP) has been operating since February 2020 and is largely modelled on the L2P Program in that it matches community members with trained volunteers who use a program vehicle to gain driving experience and work towards gaining a probationary licence. Participants have access to a number of professional lessons prior to being matched with a mentor.

Where the MDP differs is that applicants are initially screened to assess their road knowledge and whether they have sufficient English skills to be able to effectively communicate with the mentors for the safety of both parties throughout the process. This is in part due to limited funding and not being able to offer interpreters during driving sessions. The match is also for a shorter period due to the participants not having to complete 120 hours of driving experience.

DIVRS has sought input from two similar programs that have been operating for some time (Moonee Valley and Whittlesea), and have applied learnings from these programs to our pilot.

The L2P model was selected as base for the MDP as it has been shown that the financial investment has had a positive impact on road safety. The 2018 Deloitte evaluation shows that:

- likely casualty crashes prevented due to L2P are estimated at 25%;
- the value of these avoided crashes are calculated to be over \$15 million;
- participants demonstrate a higher perception of risk associated with driving behaviours than the general population;
- the program reduces unlicensed driving;
- the program greatly benefits disadvantaged community members.

These safety, social and financial benefits can be replicated amongst new arrival communities and would be of great benefit to the broader community.

Findings of the pilot program

To date the program has been well accepted and has supported a number of local residents who would have otherwise struggled to gain driving experience. Many of the participants have had some experience on the Victorian roads, having taken professional lessons with driving instructors, but were unable to continue the lessons because the financial obligation was too high for them to

maintain. A number of these learners also do not have access to a licensed driver or vehicle to practise driving.

Many of the program's current participants stated their main reasons for wanting to gain their Victorian licence included providing greater support to their family, as well as being able to support themselves with increased accessibility to work, education and community opportunities.

Some the examples of the participant learners in the program include:

1. Female, 39 years old, originally from Republic of Congo. Arrived in Australia in October 2014. Single mother with two young children. Currently supported by Darebin based women's refuge after fleeing family violence. Referred to the program by her case manager. In her application stated that driving would allow her to 'be independent, improve circumstances and link in with [her] community'.
2. Male, 21 years old, originally from Afghanistan. Arrived in Australia in April 2019. Referred from case manager of housing organisation. Currently living with family (parents and 5 siblings) in public housing and studying English with as Adult Migrant English Program.(AMEP). He has his overseas licence, but wants to gain experience on Victorian roads. In his application he stated his reasons for applying were 'to gain enough experience and support to get [his] licence in Victoria and better [his] chances of finding work'.
3. Female, 55 years old, originally from India. Arrived in Australia in 2014. Is already involved in the Darebin community and has just completed her diploma in Community Services. Gaining her licence is vital to gaining employment within the community sector. She lives with her husband and neither have their licence, so gaining her license will also greatly impact her day-to-day life. Furthermore, when her mother visits from India, she becomes her main carer and so having her licence will also assist her carer role.

Whilst the Darebin pilot has only operated for a short time, the feedback from participants, caseworkers and organisations working in the sector and local police officers has been overwhelmingly positive. Organisations such as AMEP, Asylum Seeker Recourse Service and Launch Housing to name a few have advised that there is a great need for such a program and that it will make a significant difference in supporting newly arrived members of the Darebin community.

In the same way that the L2P Program results in safer drivers, increased access to employment and education opportunities, and enhanced community connection for participants and volunteers it is envisioned that the MDP will provide similar outcomes for new arrival community members in Darebin.

Feedback from volunteer mentors to date has been that participants have grown in confidence and driving ability throughout their time in the program, and that they have appreciated the social connection. These connections have also resulted in DIVRS being able to refer participants to a range of other beneficial programs and services.

One of the main findings of the pilot has been that there is an enormous need for this program amongst the wider community. The program has received constant enquiries from people out of the Darebin area who are seeking to participate. DIVRS are only aware of two other similar programs in metropolitan Melbourne, so for most of these enquiries we are unable to refer these community members to a corresponding program.

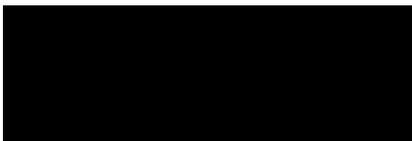
A barrier to assessing how successful such a program would be in the longer term is the difficulty in accessing relevant evaluation data, for instance data from local Magistrates' Courts in order to identify a downward trend in offences, convictions, fines, etc. or how many people are diverted to such a program by magistrates. This could potentially be overcome if there was overarching coordination for a similar program across the state that could facilitate program evaluation.

The key challenge for the program is that funding is not secure on an ongoing basis and that following the pilot period this segment of the community will again lack support and be at greater risk of undertaking unsafe driving practices.

Recommendations

DIVRS recommends that State Government funding be made available for a comprehensive MDP, particularly focused in local government areas that have a substantial population of new arrival communities to increase road safety within these communities. The program should be based on the successful L2P model and include a comprehensive evaluation component.

Thank you for considering this submission and I look forward to the publication of your report in November 2020.



Julie-Anne O'Brien
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