



## INFORMATION / FACT SHEET

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### WITNESS ASSISTANCE SERVICE (WAS)

#### WHAT IS THE (WAS)?

The **WAS** provides a state-wide information, education, support and referral service to victims of crime, witnesses for the prosecution, and their immediate families in matters dealt with by the **Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions (ODPP)**.

The ODPP established the WAS in South Australia in October 1995 with the aim of providing information and support to victims, witnesses and their families at increased vulnerability due to the nature of the alleged offences against them, and / or the nature of their personal circumstances.

The WAS ensures that all victims of crime and their immediate family members have access to information, support services and are aware of their rights and responsibilities when dealing with the criminal justice system.

The service is internal to the ODPP, and is staffed by a team of Social Work Professionals (Witness Assistance Officers)

#### WHY THE NEED FOR A (WAS)?

In South Australia, principles relating to the treatment of victims of crime in the criminal justice system are outlined in the ***Victims of Crime Act 2001***.

The ***Declaration of Principles Governing the Treatment of Victims*** outlines in the ***Victims of Crime Act, 2001*** establishes clear principles governing how victims of crime are to be treated in the criminal justice system, and gives statutory recognition to victims of crime and the harm that they suffer from criminal offending

The WAS has been established to *'ensure that all victims of crime and their immediate family members have access to information, support services and are aware of their rights and responsibilities when dealing with the criminal justice system'*.

Public agencies and officials including the ODPP are required to:

*(1) have due regard to victim's needs and rights, and*

*(2) deal with victims of crime with sensitivity and respect their special needs.*

#### WHO DOES THE (WAS) WORK WITH?

WAS staff provide specialised information and support to victims of crime and witnesses for the prosecution at increased vulnerability due to the nature of the alleged offences against them, and / or the nature of their personal circumstances.

Witness Assistance Officers (WAO's) work with a range of Primary & Secondary victims of crime including:

- Adult, adolescent and child victims of crime
- Prosecution witnesses
- Parents of child victims (non-offending)
- Immediate family of deceased victims, and
- Significant others

In particular, information and support is provided to victims of crime and prosecution witnesses who:

- Are distressed, traumatized and / or at some increased vulnerability due to the nature of the offences involving them.
- Have personal circumstances which place them at an increased vulnerability; or
- Have some other special need or circumstance.

In addition to its metropolitan based services, the WAS also provides services and supports to victims and witnesses living in regional and remote areas, including Port Augusta, the Riverland and Mount Gambier.

## WHAT DOES THE (WAS) DO?

The WAS provides a state wide specialist social work service focussing on access to information, education, support & referral services to victims of crime and their immediate family members, and witnesses for the prosecution.

Specialist Witness Assistance Officers (WAO's) provide practical and emotional support to victims and witnesses throughout their experience with the Criminal Justice System

The activities of the WAS continue to be guided by the need to provide timely, responsive and quality services to victims, witnesses and their families.

A range of targeted services and supports are provided by the Witness Assistance Service, including:

- Providing **Information and Education** (regarding court procedures, court outcomes, victim rights and responsibilities, DPP role and function, etc).
- Acting as a key point of **Liaison and Communication** between legal staff and victims (i.e. attend meetings, assist in the communication of legal decisions made by the Office, assist victim / witnesses to represent their needs, questions and concerns, etc).
- Attending '**Proofing**', **Pre-trial and Post-Trial Meetings** between the office and victims and witnesses.
- Undertaking **Social Work Assessments** (regarding the impact of crime on individuals; their coping & well-being, mental health concerns, support structures, practical assistance, etc).
- Providing **Crisis Support & Referral Information** (i.e. crisis intervention; support through the legal process, debriefing support, and referral as appropriate).
- Providing **Court Familiarisation & Court Preparation** services.
- Assessing **Vulnerable Witness Provisions (VWP's)**
- Assisting with the preparation of **Victim Impact Statements**.
- Providing a limited **Court Companion Service** (primarily to child victims & witnesses, or referral to the Victim Support Service (VSS) Court Companion volunteers).
- **Advocating** for victims needs within the DPP and CJS; advise victims of their rights, responsibilities and avenues for complaints.

- **Liaising** with external agencies (i.e. SA Police, Victim Contact Officers, Victims support service, Yarrow Place Rape & Sexual Assault Service, Respond SA, Families SA, etc).
- Providing **Education and Training** to DPP staff, external agencies, other professionals and members of the community.

## HOW DO YOU MAKE A REFERRAL TO THE (WAS)?

The WAS allocates referrals on a priority basis.

Referrals to the WAS may be received through a number of sources including:

- *From solicitors and prosecutors within the ODPP*
- *A member of the police service or other government services*
- *External agencies and non government services*
- *A victim or witness (self referral)*

All child and adolescent victims and witnesses under the age of 18 years are required to be referred to the WAS (*ODPP Statement of Prosecution Policy and Guidelines*).

Having received a referral, WAS staff makes contact with the person referred, and ascertain if, and to what degree, they require support and involvement with the Service.

## HOW CAN I CONTACT THE (WAS)?

For more information please contact the Witness Assistance Service, on **(08) 82071529**.

To make a referral please contact the Duty Witness Assistance Officer on **(08) 8207 1529**

Toll Free **1800 505 404**

Fax: **(08) 8207 1799**

Email: **dpp@agd.sa.gov.au**

Website: **www.dpp.sa.gov.au**

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