Critical Incident Response

Framework for Victim Support

Victim Services, Support and Reform

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1. The purpose of this framework

Victim Services, Support and Reform (VSSR)[1], located within the Department of Justice and Community Safety (DJCS), is the Victorian Government's lead agency for providing support to people affected by emergencies caused by criminal acts. Emergencies are defined as critical incidents in line with the definitions contained in the *Emergency Management Act 2013* (Vic) and within the State Emergency Management Plan (SEMP).[2]

This Framework outlines VSSR's response to victims affected by crime caused by critical incidents and describes the types of services they will receive to assist in the process of recovery.

A critical incident is characterised by any crime against a person where:

- *there are multiple victims or witnesses*
- *the broader community is impacted*
- *the nature, scale, intensity and profile of the incident warrants an immediate, coordinated victim support response*
- *broader Victorian Government emergency management arrangements are activated and/or*
- *other exceptional circumstances.*

Critical incidents generally impact a significant number of victims, exceed a business as usual response capacity, and affect the wider community's sense of safety, particularly where the incident becomes the focus of extended media attention.

The Framework is informed by evidence-based practice and research and has been developed using consultation with victim services and other experts in trauma-informed practice, policing, and emergency management. It builds on multi-agency experiences, including learnings from the Bourke and Flinders Street incidents in Melbourne in 2017, 2018 and 2020, and aligns with broader developments within the emergency management field with the focus on responses that promote 'resilient recovery'.[3]

The Framework aims to provide a consistent understanding of the impacts of critical incidents on victims and identifies the types of services available following a critical incident caused by a criminal act. While the needs of victims may vary, support generally includes specialised trauma services, practical assistance to help victims recover from the immediate effects of crime, support through criminal justice system proceedings and referrals to address other needs as they arise. It also outlines how Victim Services assists with the coordination of a whole-of-government approach to the provision of relief and recovery support.

Victim Services

In this document 'victim services' refers to VSSR's front-line operations (for example, Victims of Crime Helpline) and funded services (for example, Victims Assistance Programs).

The Framework provides high-level guidance on victim services roles and responsibilities in respect of:

- preparation for a critical incident
- responding to a critical incident
- participating in governance arrangements, systems and processes throughout the early, medium and longer-term recovery phases and

[1] Formerly the Victim Support Agency.

[2] The State Emergency Management Plan (SEMP) was revised from 30 September 2020 and replaces Part 7 of the Emergency Management Manual Victoria (EMMV). Emergency Management Agency Roles, can be accessed via: https://www.emv.vic.gov.au/responsibilities/semp/roles-and-responsibilities

[3] Resilient Recovery Strategy, Emergency Management Victoria, 2019, https://files-em.em.vic.gov.au/public/EMV-web/Resilient_Recovery_Strategy.pdf.

- monitoring, evaluating and learning from a critical incident.

The Framework is not designed for use as an operational guide. Rather, its value lies in guiding victim services' planning for, response to, and follow-up after a critical incident as well as supporting an understanding of the role of victim services in relation to other emergency service and relevant support agencies.

It defines the importance of the provision of timely, appropriate and agile support to victims that is scalable, informed by a specialised understanding of the impact of trauma, and alert to minimising factors likely to contribute to re-traumatisation.

It is intended to complement other emergency management and victim support service provision arrangements in Victoria which require coordination and rely on agency roles and responsibilities being clearly defined at all levels.

Victims of critical incidents will benefit from a service response that is tailored to meet complex needs and is efficient, effective and well-coordinated. This also extends to support for families in cases in which the victim has died.

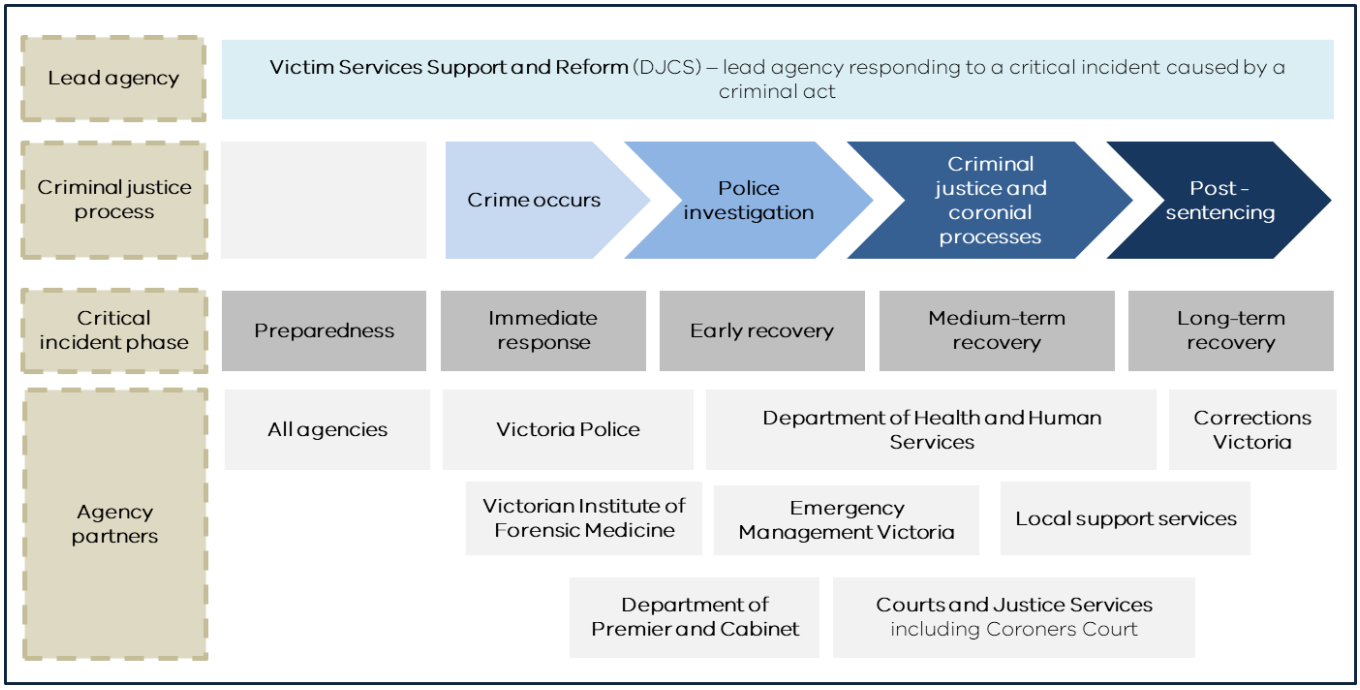
The delivery of specialised, trauma-informed support to victims and witnesses of critical incidents, including large scale critical incidents, is also important for re-building community confidence as part of the wider recovery effort.

The Framework is supported by the following documents:

- VSSR Critical Incidents Operating Manual
- VSSR Workforce Capability Framework
- Information Sharing and Communications Protocol for Critical Incidents

VSSR's role as the lead agency for the victim service response works in conjunction with other key emergency services and agencies. A summary of agency involvement is provided in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. High level roles and responsibilities throughout the critical incident response



2. Background

The Victoria Government is committed to providing a specialised response to victims, families and communities affected by critical incidents caused by crime.

Critical incidents can have significant local, national and international impacts, particularly on the broader community in terms of perceptions of safety and a shared sense of collective grief in the aftermath. These events are inherently unpredictable, often violent and may attract intense media and public interest.[4]

Victoria has tragically experienced a number of critical incidents in recent years, starting with the January 2017 Bourke Street incident, which was the first of its kind in Melbourne. This was followed by two similar incidents - Flinders Street in December 2017 and Bourke Street in November 2018. While the antecedents for these events were not connected with terrorism, the National Terrorism Threat Advisory System nonetheless rates Australia's terror threat as 'probable'[5] so critical incidents remain a risk for Victorians in the future.

Victoria's approach to supporting victims of critical incidents has been viewed as both comprehensive and effective. However, the 2017 Bourke Street Tragedy demonstrated the specific pressures associated with supporting multiple victims of large-scale critical incidents. It also demonstrated that while victims were provided with effective support, victim services' approach was largely reactive, with roles and responsibilities being defined 'on the run'.[6]

The need for a specialist critical incident response capability being available for immediate deployment has been recognised.

It relies on operational flexibility, workforce capacity and resourcing. It must be well integrated across support services, be quality assured, and provide a seamless experience for victims given their engagement in various systems is likely to extend for some years.

Alongside victim-specific services, victims of critical incidents and their families may also require assistance from other government organisations, such as WorkSafe and the Transport Accident Commission or from other departments such as the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Education and Training. Refer, as well as linkages to a range of non-government organisations and community service providers.

What does the evidence suggest?

Evidence suggests that events that result in collective trauma, especially those intended to cause harm, are associated with more adverse mental health impacts.[7] The United Nation's Madrid memorandum of good practices for assistance to victims of terrorism immediately after the attack, confirms that the quality with which victims' emotional needs are met will significantly impact on how well victims cope with trauma.[8] Experience from the Red Cross highlights that where people receive support in the immediate aftermath of a distressing event, they may be less likely to develop a mental health problem than if no support was offered.[9]

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[4] A number of studies and news stories indicate media coverage intensifies trauma in victims: http://thenewdaily.com.au/news/world/2017/05/26/terror-victim-warning/; http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17512780903429829?scroll=top&needAccess=true.

[5] National Terrorism Threat Advisory System, 3/3/20, https://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/Pages/default.aspx.

[6] Findings from a workshop with key stakeholders on 7/12/18 to review the victim services response.

[7] Reifels, L, Pietrantoni, L, Prati, G, Kim, Y, Kilpatrick, D.G, Dyb, G, Halpern, J, Olff, M, Brewin, C.R. & O'Donnell, M,L, 2013, *Lessons learned about psychosocial responses to disaster and mass trauma: an international perspective*, European Journal of Psychotraumatology, 2013 vol. 4.

[8] Madrid Memorandum on Good Practices for assistance to victims of terrorism immediately after the attack and in criminal proceedings, Global Counterterrorism Forum 2013.

[9] Brady, K, Randrianarisoa, A & Richardson, J, Best Practice Guidelines: Supporting Communities Before, During and After Collective Trauma Events, Australian Red Cross, 2018, p11, https://www.redcross.org.au/getmedia/03e7abed-2be0-43b7-95d7-0e8f3d5206bd/ARC-CTE-Guidelines.pdf.aspx.

It is estimated that the prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among those directly affected by human-caused disasters could be as high as 30-40 per cent in the first year compared to five-10 per cent amongst the general population.[10] A study of the 2005 London underground bombings found PTSD symptoms in 72 per cent of the 255 victims.[11]

A 2016 Australian study also noted that 'traumatic stressors have an enduring and lifelong effect, not only as the cause but as a significant contributor to the gamut of psychiatric illness, particularly depression, substance abuse and anxiety'. The study further notes that 'at a societal level, the long-term impact of traumatic stress on mental health has been identified by the world Mental Health Survey as one of the major determinants of impairment and disability.'[12]

What we know about the victim experience

Most people who are victims of critical incidents will experience trauma. Fortunately, with effective support, traumatic reactions typically resolve without severe long-term consequences.[13] However, for some victims, their families and witnesses, critical incidents can be physically and psychologically devastating. The resultant trauma can be long-lasting, and sometimes present several weeks or months after the critical incident has occurred.

For other victims, there may be pre-existing issues or needs (e.g. mental health, substance misuse) that are severely compounded by the trauma caused by critical incidents.[14] In cases where families are bereaved by homicide, the impact is also likely to be further compounded by coronial and criminal justice processes, with proceedings that often extend for years after the event.

How can a planned and evidence-based response to victims help?

Victim services need to be accessible, tailored and responsive to individual needs.[15]

Access to professional victim support services can significantly reduce the impact of physical, psychological and emotional injuries experienced by victims in the aftermath of crime, and also reduce any extended need for medical, social and financial support services.[16]

Victim services must be responsive to victims throughout the recovery process and ensure the service system can be stepped-up or down to meet different needs as they arise or intensify, or as milestones in the criminal justice process trigger or re-trigger victim trauma. There is also evidence that suggests early intervention with services is likely to improve victims' willingness to engage in the criminal justice process.[17]

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[10] Galea, S. & Resnick, H. 2005, "Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in the General Population After Mass Terrorist Incidents: Considerations About the Nature of Exposure", CNS Spectrums, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 107-115.

[11] Brewin. C, Robertson, M, Thompson, M, d'Ardenne, P and Ehlers, A, Promoting Mental Health Following the London Bombings: A Screen and Treat Approach, Journal of Trauma Stress. 2008 Feb; 21(1): p.3–8, Scragg, P, Robertson, M, Thompson, M, d'Ardenne, P, and Ehlers, A, Promoting Mental Health Following the London Bombings: A Screen and Treat Approach, Journal of Trauma Stress. 2008 Feb; 21(1): p.3–8.

[12] McFarlane, A, 'Traumatic Stress, the Uncounted Cost', in Australia 21, *Trauma Related Stress in Australia,* 2016, p.53.

[13] *Trauma-informed care in behavioural health services*, Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) Series, No. 57, Centre for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), Rockville (MD): Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (US); 2014.

[14] An acknowledged area in need of further investigation regards the potential for new incidents to trigger people impacted by past events, and the implications of this for communication, services and tailored support. Brady, K, Randrianarisoa, A & Richardson, J, 2018, Best Practice Guidelines: Supporting Communities Before, During and After Collective Trauma Events, Australian Red Cross, p34, https://www.redcross.org.au/getmedia/03e7abed-2be0-43b7-95d7-0e8f3d5206bd/ARC-CTE-Guidelines.pdf.aspx

[15] Resilient Recovery Strategy, 2019, Emergency Management Victoria, p9 https://files-em.em.vic.gov.au/public/EMV-web/Resilient_Recovery_Strategy.pdf

[16] In 2011, the Australian Institute of Criminology estimated the annual costs of crime to the Australian economy at $47.6 billion (including victim support and recovery).16In addition, the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence noted that the estimated annual cost of family violence to the Victorian economy in 2009 was $3.4 billion, State of Victoria, Submission 717, 19.

[17] Department of Justice, Barriers and strategies to engaging clients, *Youth on Track*, 2014, NSW Government, Australia.

3. Definitions

The following definitions are used throughout this framework.

Victim Services, Support and Reform

VSSR is responsible for coordinating a whole-of-government approach to the development of policy and the delivery of services for victims of crime in Victoria, including victims of critical incidents.

VSSR has specialist in-house capability to quickly and effectively support victims, through delivery of the:

- **Victims of Crime Helpline** - a phone-based service available to all victims of crime which provides information, psychological first aid, support and referrals
- **Victims Assistance Program (VAP)** - delivered by community service organisations across Victoria that provide a range of supports, including case coordination, practical support, including brokerage, and assistance with navigating the criminal justice system and its processes and
- **Victims Register** - provides eligible victims of crime with certain information about their offender and facilitates the participation of victims of crime in parole and post-sentence supervision decision making processes.

VSSR delivers additional services for victims of crime including the Child Witness Service, Intermediary Pilot Program, Family Violence Restorative Justice Service and victim support for youth justice group conferencing.

For more on the services provided by VSSR see: https://www.victimsofcrime.vic.gov.au/.

Victim services

In this document 'victim services' refers to VSSR front-line services (for example, Victims of Crime Helpline) and funded services (for example, VAP).

Victim of crime

For the purposes of this framework the following definition of 'victim of crime' applies:[18]

- **Primary victim**
  A person who is injured or dies as a direct result of:
  - a violent crime committed against them
  - trying to arrest someone they believe, on reasonable grounds, has committed a violent crime
  - trying to prevent the commission of a violent crime
  - trying to aid or rescue someone they believe is the victim of a violent crime.
- **Secondary victim**
  A person who is injured as a direct result of:
  - being present at the scene of a violent crime and witnessing that crime
  - subsequently becoming aware of a violent crime where he/she is the parent/guardian of the primary victim who was under the age of 18 at the time the criminal act was committed.
- **Related victim:**
  A person who, at the time of the violent crime:
  - was a close family member of a deceased primary victim
  - was a dependant of a deceased primary victim
  - had an intimate personal relationship with a deceased primary victim.

[18] *Victims of Crime Assistance Act 1996* (Vic).

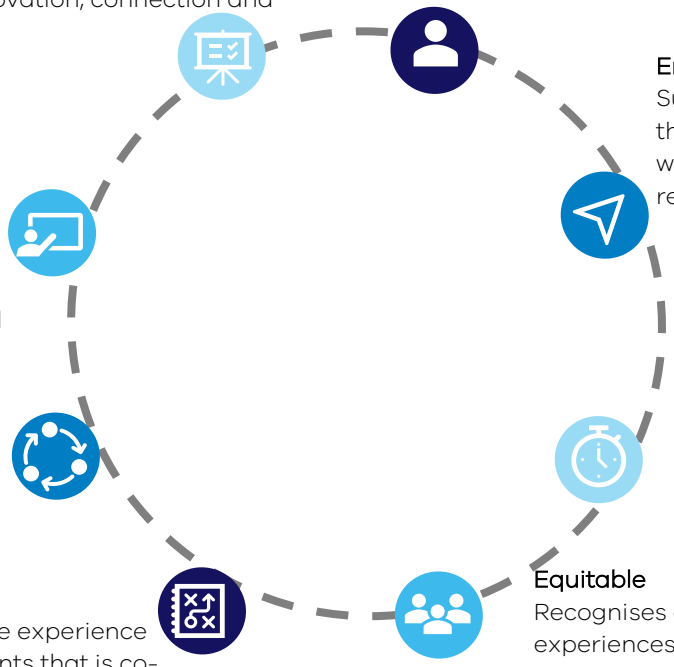
4. Principles

The following principles underpin the approach to responding to victims of a critical incident. The principles are drawn from best practice service delivery to victims of crime, informed by the Victim Services Review 2019[19] and have been modified to suit the critical incident response and recovery context. They draw on:

- The *Standards for the Provision of Services to Victims of Crime in Victoria*[20]
- The *Victims' Charter Act 2006*
- The Community *Safety Statement* 2019-20[21]
- The *DJCS Emergency Management Framework* and associated documents
- The *National Principles for Disaster Recovery*[22]
- The principles of relief and recovery drawn from the *State Relief and Recovery Plan*[23]
- The *Resilient Recovery Strategy* developed by Emergency Management Victoria (EMV).[24]

System leadership
Uses a victim-centred approach and expert knowledge to lead the wider service system and drive system responses to victims of critical incidents based on innovation, connection and accountability.

Trauma informed and victim led
The service response is informed by a deep understanding of the impact of trauma and victimisation and actively resists re-traumatisation.



Professional and supported workforce
Delivered by a skilled and capable workforce based on evidence and leading practice. This workforce is kept safe and well, with vicarious trauma recognised and managed.

Empowerment and recovery
Supports victim agency through well-informed choices with a focus on resilience and recovery.

Flexible and responsive
Has the flexibility to adapt and can adjust to the needs of victims over time.

Accessible and timely
There are multiple access points for victims of crime to access the services they need at the stage at which they need them. A service response can be readily deployed in the instance of a critical incident.

Planned, integrated and co-ordinated
Provides a seamless service experience for victims of critical incidents that is co-ordinated with other service responses.

Equitable
Recognises and reflects the needs and experiences of victims of critical incidents from diverse circumstances and backgrounds. This includes, for example, age, accessibility, language and gender identity.

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[19] Victims Services Review: Strengthening Victoria's victim services system, Final Report, Centre for Innovative Justice, RMIT University, 2019

[20] Standards for the Provision of Services to Victims of Crime in Victoria, Victim Support Agency, Department of Justice, Melbourne 2007, https://www.victimsofcrime.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/embridge_cache/emshare/original/public/2017/07/29/722e49af7/standards-for-the-provision-of-services-to-victims-of-crime-in-victoria.pdf.

[21] Community Safety Statement 2019-20, Victorian State Government, accessible via: https://communitysafety.vic.gov.au/media/1213/community-safety-statement-2019-20.pdf.

[22] State Emergency Management Plan (SEMP), accessible via: https://www.emv.vic.gov.au/responsibilities/semp.

[23] State Emergency Management Plan (SEMP), accessible via: https://www.emv.vic.gov.au/responsibilities/semp.

[24] Resilient Recovery Strategy, Emergency Management Victoria, accessible via: https://files-em.em.vic.gov.au/public/EMV-web/Resilient_Recovery_Strategy.pdf.

5. Scope of victim support in critical incidents

This framework applies to critical incidents caused by criminal acts that occur in Victoria. Generally, only Victorian residents will be eligible to receive ongoing support.

Victim services role within an emergency related critical incident

VSSR is the lead agency responsible in Victoria for providing psychosocial support to people affected by emergencies caused by criminal acts. This includes providing practical assistance to help victims recover from the effects of crime, representing their voice in the justice system and coordinating a whole-of-government approach to service provision.[25]

Support for Victorian victims of critical incidents that occur outside Victoria

Victims of critical incidents that occur outside Victoria are not eligible for Victorian-funded victim services as eligibility is based on the geographical location of the incident. Requests to support victims of interstate or international critical incidents, who are ordinarily residents of Victoria, will be considered on a case-by-case basis by VSSR.

When a critical incident occurs interstate, the relevant jurisdiction will usually provide support for Victorians, however the level of support available can be variable and the risk to service continuity high.

When a terrorist incident occurs overseas, the Australian Government has several initiatives to support victims. These may include:

- consular assistance provided by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.[26]
- Australian Victims of Terrorism Overseas Payment, which provides financial assistance to victims of 'declared' overseas terrorist acts.[27]
- Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment.[28]
- counselling through Medicare - Better Access to Mental Health Care package.[29]

Support for victims who live interstate or overseas

Victims who usually live interstate

Victims who live interstate will be supported by victim services in Victoria pending a referral to an appropriate agency that is local to the victim in their home state or territory.

Victims who usually live overseas

In circumstances where a person has died overseas as a result of crime or is severely injured and the family lives overseas, coordination of support across multiple service needs will be important. International students generally hold Overseas Student Health Cover and international tourists often have travel insurance, which may include financial support for repatriation, emergency accommodation and flights.

If victims do not have insurance, there may be other services that can assist such as international student support services, Embassy and consular services from their home country.

[25] State Emergency Management Plan (SEMP), accessible via: https://www.emv.vic.gov.au/responsibilities/semp.

[26] https://www.smartraveller.gov.au/i-need-urgent-help.

[27] https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/individuals/services/centrelink/australian-victim-terrorism-overseas-payment.

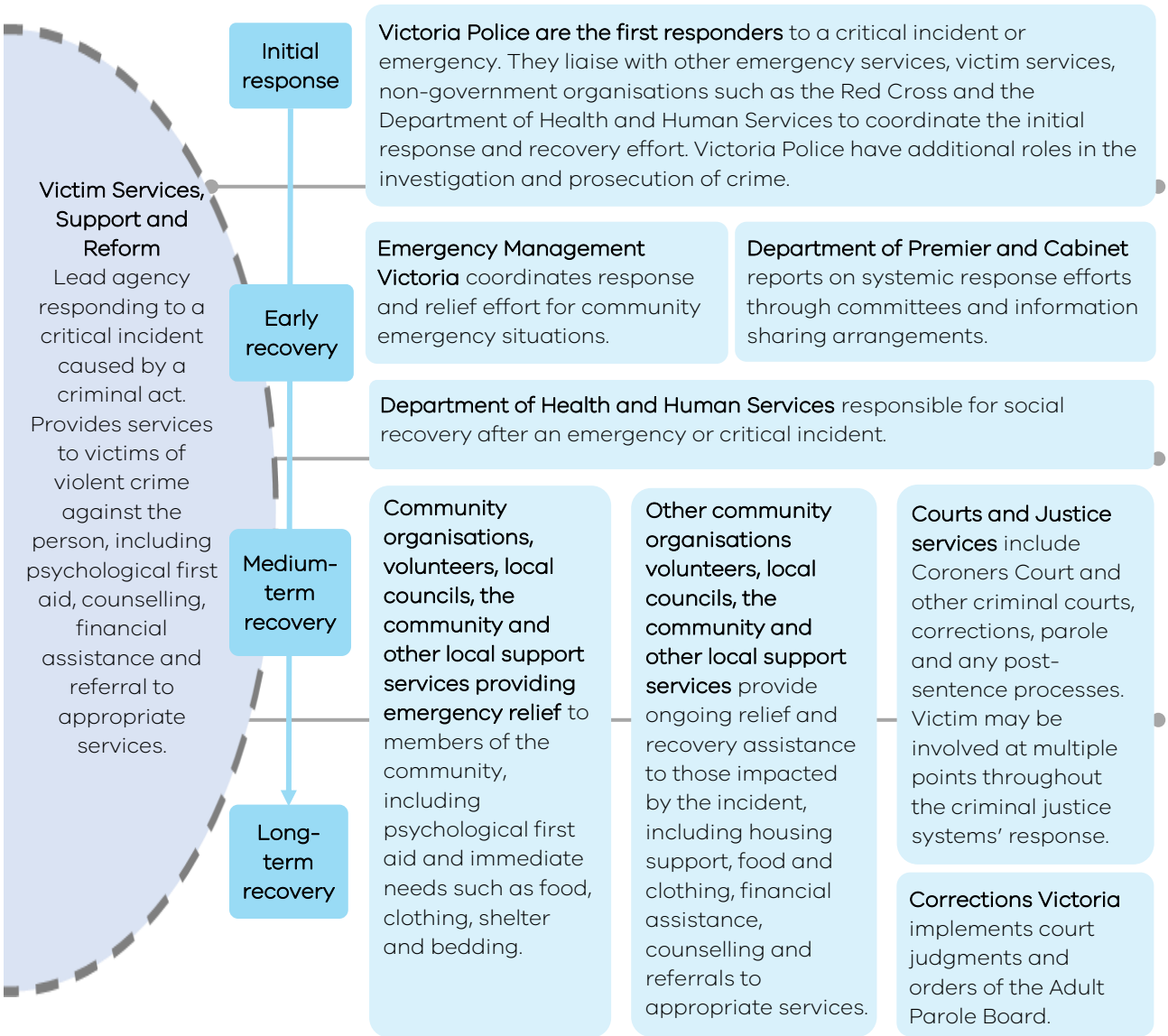
[28] https://www.disasterassist.gov.au/Pages/disaster-recovery-payment.aspx .

[29] https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/mental-ba-fact-prof.

6. Agency partners to the victim services response

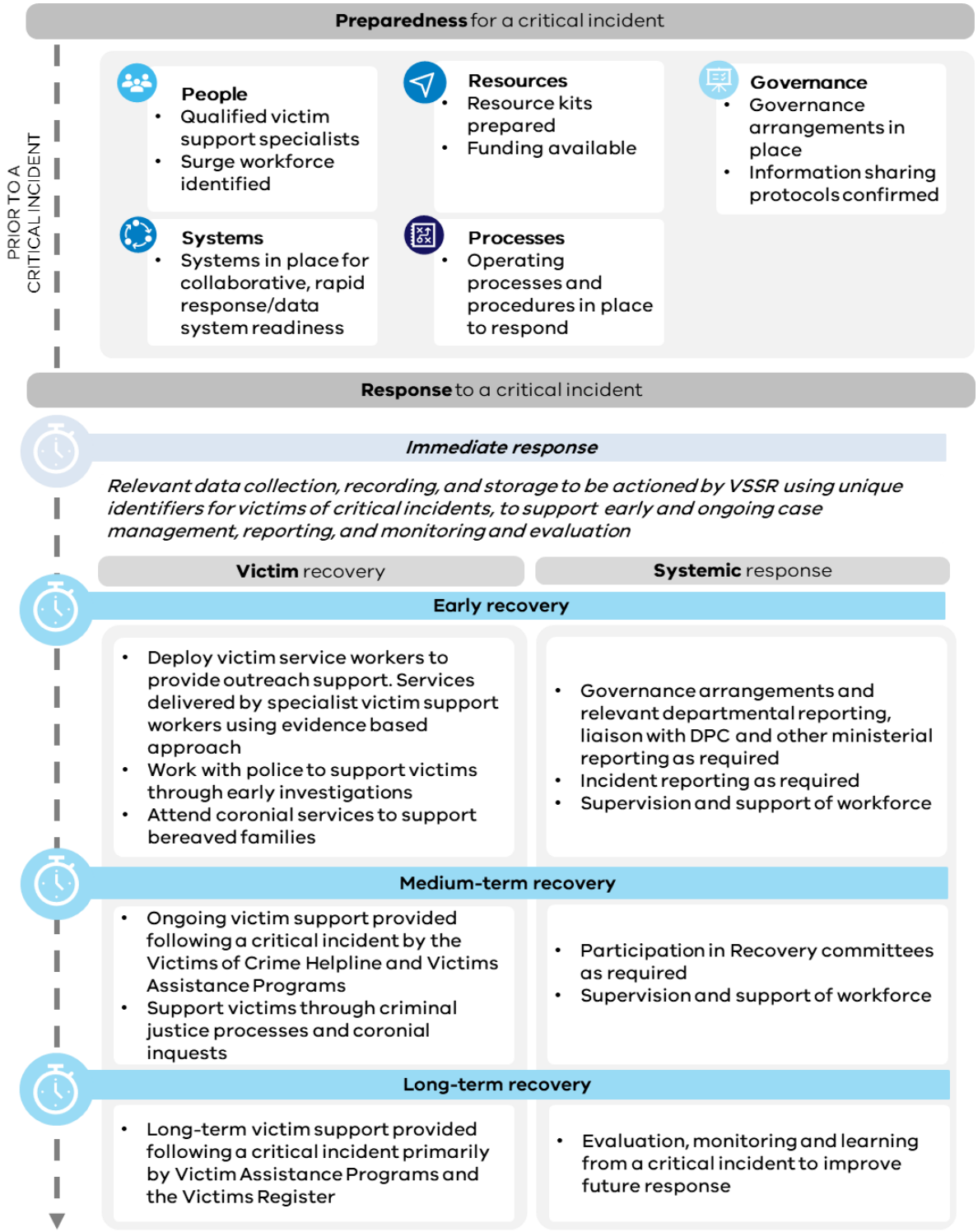
Alongside a specialist response function, VSSR relies on its agency partners to deliver a coordinated response to victims.

A summary of key agency involvement is provided below, with further detail about specific roles and responsibilities outlined in the Operating Manual. At the highest levels of governance, Ministerial Committees of Cabinet are involved which include the State Emergency Management Committee (SEMC), State Crisis and Resilience Council (SCRC) and related sub-committees, as well as EMV, the Emergency Management Commissioner and Inspector General-Emergency Management (IG-EM).



7. Victim services critical incident response operating model

As lead agency in supporting victims of critical incidents, VSSR will work with Victoria Police (VicPol), EMV, DHHS and other key criminal justice agencies to support victims of critical incidents. A summary of the operating model used by victim services in preparing for and responding to a critical incident is provided below, with additional details provided in section 8. The Operations Manual will comprehensively outline the manner in which these activities are to be implemented.



8. Victim Services Planning and Preparedness

An effective response to critical incidents relies on Victim Services having a baseline readiness that can be mobilised quickly. In line with Emergency Management Victoria's, Victorian Preparedness Framework,[30] an effective response for victims of crime requires the following key elements being in place.

8.1 People

Responses require:

- qualified management and staff to assist with early, medium term and long-term victim recovery responses
- a 'surge' workforce that can be mobilised swiftly and effectively
- maintaining staff health and wellbeing which may include flexible or remote working arrangements
- partnerships and collaborations with related service agencies in response to the emergency.

Key capabilities and skills

Victim service workers must be qualified and experienced to support victims of critical incidents, with competencies in:

- psychological first aid (PFA)
- trauma-informed practice
- bereavement support
- cultural awareness/cultural safety practice
- gender, disability and LGBTIQ sensitivity and awareness
- complex case coordination and/or case management.

VSSR will develop critical incident training that will be offered to victim service staff on a regular basis.

Structured training will be supported by formal supervision, and continued staff development in competencies for delivering inclusive practice for supporting the needs of victims from diverse identities, circumstances and backgrounds.

Surge workforces

To support an effective critical incident response, a flexible, scalable and adequately resourced approach to victim support services is required. If the scale or nature of a critical incident drives a level of demand that exceeds the existing workforce capacity, a 'surge' in staffing will be necessary to provide an immediate response to victims, with the ability to scale operations up and down as required. Critical enablers of surge capacity[31] include:

- whole of organisation approach, leadership and enabling culture
- alignment with business continuity plans
- clear mandate and legislative obligations
- skilled, knowledgeable and supported staff
- rosters and registers that can be rapidly deployed
- regular drills, training and exercises
- established protocols, systems and procedures
- systemised learning practices and commitment to continuous improvement
- flexible funding arrangements and appropriate financial resourcing.

VSSR's workforce capability framework will identify key competencies required for staff to participate in a 'surge' victim support workforce for responding to critical incidents. The Operating Manual will identify a scalable model for surge workforce capacity for a critical incident response within Victim Services, Support and Reform.

[30] Victorian Preparedness Framework, Emergency Management Victoria, accessible via: https://files-em.em.vic.gov.au/public/EMV-web/VictorianPreparednessFrameworkMay2018.pdf.

[31] B Emmens, & R Houghton, *Understanding surge capacity within international agencies*, July 2008, accessible via: https://odihpn.org/magazine/understanding-surge-capacity-within-international-agencies/.

8.2 Resources

Necessary resources are prepared and readily available to victim services staff - for example, resource kits including identification cards, mobile phone and chargers, as well as Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

8.3 Governance

Formal governance arrangements are in place with relevant Ministerial and departmental officials, including the Department of Premier and Cabinet, to ensure accurate and contemporaneous reporting of victim support activity and other relevant communications are maintained.

In Victoria, the Security and Emergency Management Committee of Cabinet (SEMC) is the Victorian Government's Ministerial decision-making body during a large-scale emergency, including for critical incidents.[32]

VSSR is responsible for the governance arrangements, systems and processes required to support victims of a critical incident. During and after a critical incident this may include:

- identifying a key contact for information sharing and reporting
- developing a holistic understanding of the victims involved in the incident
- monitoring resource implications
- participating in Recovery committees
- establishing a Victim Support Working Group to coordinate support for victims
- contributing to communications regarding the critical incident and ongoing referral pathways.

8.4 Systems and Processes

Information technology systems, financial, workforce management, workplace health and safety systems are enabled to support the response to a critical incident. This will include enhanced modalities for integrated data capturing, sharing, reporting and storage to enable timely and appropriate case management and referrals and pathways. Mechanisms for continuous improvement and system strengthening will be aligned with learning processes for critical incident response.

Our information technology systems, with the Helpline as the gateway service, enable for accurate records to be captured on victims of critical incidents and maintained to ensure timely reporting and appropriate follow up.

Operating procedures within VSSR will be developed to ensure necessary data fields are implemented in response to a critical incident. This will be informed by processes which are subjected to periodic review to allow for continuous improvement and system integration.

Operating procedures and other processes are also being established for information and communications to ensure a coordinated and effective response. These will be informed by established information sharing arrangements and protocol between DJCS and DPC for example, as well as between VSSR and other agencies for operational purposes.

8.5 Data and information

Data capture of critical incident cases will inform case management priorities for Helpline and VAPs.

VSSR will coordinate the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data relating to victims, their immediate support needs, and the services with which they were provided. VSSR will make all attempts to ensure that data being collected from victim services can be used for a range of purposes minimising the need for further information requests. VSSR will ensure client privacy and appropriate data storage.

[32] The SEMC is chaired by the Premier and comprises Ministers with security and emergency management responsibilities. It provides direction and oversees the implementation of policies, strategies and programs affecting security, critical infrastructure resilience and emergency management. It also oversees prevention preparedness, response and recovery for major emergencies requiring whole of government coordination. The Chief Commissioner of Police and the Emergency Management Commissioner attend SEMC in an advisory capacity. Arrangements are outlined in the State Emergency Management Plan (SEMP), accessible via: https://www.emv.vic.gov.au/responsibilities/semp.

9. Victim support following a critical incident

Support for victims of a critical incident will be streamlined from an immediate response (early recovery), through to responding to the medium and longer-term recovery needs. In practice, victims' needs will fluctuate according to the scale and complexity of the incident, and the individual context for the victim. Adopting victim-centred approaches, that are tailored to the needs of the victim and their family, are therefore paramount.

9.1 Immediate recovery

It is essential that victims and family members are provided with immediate support to assist the process of recovery from the earliest opportunity following a critical incident

It is also important during this period to gain community confidence in government and victim services' ability to support victims, especially where the event triggers a sense of collective grief, fear, or outrage. This should occur in line with best practice principles which promote a sense of community safety, calm, connectedness, empowerment and justice.[33]

Deploy victim services staff to provide outreach victim support

Immediately following a critical incident, victim services staff may be deployed to central information or triage points to provide support and information to victims.[34] Victim services will coordinate this outreach support in collaboration with VicPol.

Victim services staff will be briefed prior to attending the triage point and will be appropriately equipped with resource kits.

Debriefing will occur at the conclusion of every shift as part of handover to ensure continuity of service delivery and to support the supervision and wellbeing of staff.

Impacts of critical incidents on victims

Victims of a critical incident may experience:

- **physical injuries/impacts**: as a direct result of the crime or physical effects that are triggered in response to the crime such as insomnia, fatigue, headaches, hypervigilance or hypersensitivity, difficulty concentrating, planning, remembering, setting priorities and making decisions
- **concerns about practical needs**: accessing property/personal items that are part of the crime scene, connecting with family, concerns about safety and security, emergency accommodation, medical or transport assistance
- **psychological impacts**: shock, disbelief, disorientation, anger and uncertainty about the future.

These impacts will be experienced differently by victims depending on the nature and scale of the incident, their values and belief systems, the quality of their personal supports and their levels of resilience.

Initial recovery services

Victims services will connect with victims and/or family members of victims as soon as practicable to offer:

- **psychological first aid:** helping victims to identify their immediate needs and their strengths and abilities to meet these needs
- **information and referral:** assessing impacts and working with victims to determine priorities for support, identifying relevant referrals to other services, including

[33] Brady, K, Randrianarisoa, A & Richardson, J, 2018, Best Practice Guidelines: Supporting Communities Before, During and After Collective Trauma Events, Australian Red Cross, p20, https://www.redcross.org.au/getmedia/03e7abed-2be0-43b7-95d7-0e8f3d5206bd/ARC-CTE-Guidelines.pdf.aspx

[34] Note: victims services' staff should not be deployed to the crime scene because VicPol may still be bringing the incident under control or conducting a forensic examination of the scene. Appropriate locations for outreach include police stations, hospitals, relief centres and other triage points.

VAP agencies and other community, health, legal, and financial services

- **practical support:** using brokerage funding to purchase urgent assistance with transport, meals, emergency accommodation, interpreters and cab vouchers
- **emotional support:** supporting victims during the initial police investigation, including during interviews and the taking of witness statements.

Services will be provided through the Victims of Crime Helpline, the Victims Register and through the VAPs and include:

Support provided by the Victims of Crime Helpline

- receiving e-referrals from VicPol and taking telephone calls from victims and the public
- conducting telephone assessments
- triaging victims' needs to determine their relative priority
- providing information and support
- making referrals to VAP agencies and other specialist services.

Support provided by VAP agencies

- using brokerage to purchase immediate practical supports (e.g. emergency accommodation, security, transport, replacement of essential items), counselling and related therapeutic services
- supporting a victims' families to attend the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine (VIFM) to identify loved ones
- supporting victims during lengthy and sometimes confronting police interviews to determine the facts of the crime/incident

When providing an immediate response, victim services staff will:

- actively engage victims to feel safe, understood, and confident in the expertise and professionalism of the worker
- support victims in decision-making
- tailor support to meets the needs of diverse and marginalised populations
- engage in culturally respectful communication and provide culturally safe support
- collect information to understand victims' needs and the supports required
- use age-appropriate approaches for children and young people.

Victims' preferences need to guide the pace and timing of engagement with various support services. Victim services will also actively seek to engage victims or other witnesses who may not have had contact with VicPol on the day of the incident (e.g. by publicising the Victims of Crime Helpline) nor have been offered support.

9.2 Medium-term recovery

Ongoing support is offered to victims following a critical incident. During this time, victim services assess the changing needs of victims once the immediate crisis has passed and adopts a case management approach that considers:

- victim resilience, self-efficacy and existing support networks
- requirement for bereavement support
- age, in particular children and older people
- cultural and religious diversity
- gender, ability, mental health/illness, cultural safety
- trauma impacts that may be a barrier to engagement with services
- pre-existing issues that could impact on recovery such as previous exposure to trauma, mental health issues or illness, substance use, disadvantage and marginalisation
- individual responses and appropriate recovery pathways.

The Victims of Crime Helpline continues to provide support to victims as required in areas including:

- referrals for tailored support to victims with delayed response to trauma
- referrals to VAP agencies for support services

Support services provided by VAP agencies (including face-to-face support, outreach, telephone, email, letter and website) may include:

- assessing victims' support needs and coordinating services
- developing a Case Management Plan with a focus on long-term recovery, engagement with the criminal justice process, and empowering victims to make decisions about how to best meet their recovery needs
- referrals to other relevant services including legal, mental health, medical, family violence, education, workplace related, housing and child and family services
- communicating regularly with victims to provide updates on the progress of criminal justice proceedings including coronial inquests and inquiries
- assisting victims with the preparation of Victim Impact Statements, lodgement of Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal (VOCAT) applications and giving evidence during criminal justice processes
- supporting victims during coronial inquests and other processes
- advocating for victims to support various interactions with social and other justice related service systems.

9.3 Long-term recovery

Victims of critical incidents may experience longer term impacts that require ongoing case management support, particularly where there are criminal justice proceedings or because there may be more complex circumstances in which victims are needing to manage their recovery.

Commemorative events may be held, and victims may be consulted as part of this process. Victim support services will assist victims if they wish to attend. VSSR provides departmental assistance to government to ensure these arrangements are sensitively managed and that victims' and family members' need for privacy is respected, including whether they choose to attend or participate in events.

Victims Register

If an offender of a critical incident receives a prison sentence, victims may choose to be registered on the Victims Register, where they can be notified about certain information relevant to the offender's prison term, such as when the prisoner applies for parole. In this instance, registered victims will be notified by the Victim Register and offered the opportunity to prepare a victim submission to the Adult Parole Board. Their submission might influence the kinds of conditions that could be attached to the parole decision. This is also the case where the offender is subject to a post-sentence order. Victim services can support victims of critical incidents to register on the Victims Register and can assist with the preparation of victim submissions.

10. Communities in recovery and learning from a critical incident

Critical incidents impact people differently. Gender, culture, race, socio-economic background and geographical location can influence victims' pathways to recovery, as can more individual factors such as exposure to earlier traumatic events, and pre-existing issues such as mental health and substance use.[35]

In Victoria, there is increasing recognition that the recovery process from large scale events, including critical incidents of a criminal nature, takes time and may have a significant impact on people's long term physical and mental well-being. Research into longer-term recovery since the 2009 bushfires in Victoria suggests that the engagement of close friends and family, active social networks and connection to community were important influences on resilience and recovery.[36]

The results of a ten-year study by the University of Melbourne found that individual and community capacity to recover and to adapt to changed circumstances was heavily influenced by the targeting and timing of recovery services in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, as well as support arrangements and connection in the medium to longer-term.[37] The experience at the different stages of response and recovery had a profound effect on individual and community resilience.

A review of the victim services response to the 2017 Bourke Street tragedy in Melbourne also highlighted the importance of a long-term, flexible approach to support victims following a critical incident at different stages of recovery.

An internal DJCS review into the 2017 Bourke Street incident found that victims may need help getting their life back on track in different ways, including mental and physical wellbeing, housing, managing finances and claiming benefits. A case worker approach can assist with the necessary emotional supports, counselling, practical assistance, safe accommodation, and advocacy with respect to supporting victims to navigate the justice system.

Experience from both the Bourke Street, and subsequent critical incident experiences in Victoria, has shown that a victim-centred approach, which can be tailored to meet individual needs, that is trauma-informed, is what constitutes best practice.

A key driver for the development of this Framework is a commitment to improving the experience of victims when they are in contact with the criminal justice system as a result of a critical incident and to ensure the services they received helped support their recovery from their experience.

In parallel with service delivery to victims of a critical incident, VSSR will draw on these experiences to strengthen systems'-based recovery efforts and ensure that the learnings from these incidents improve future service delivery and recovery efforts in future.

10.1 Monitoring, evaluating and learning from a critical incident

It is important to learn from the response to critical incidents and to take steps to ensure that victim services continue to improve delivery,

[35] Parkinson, D, Duncan A and Kaur, J, 2018, *Long term Disaster Resilience*, Gender and Disaster Pod, https://www.genderanddisaster.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Vol-1-Executive-Summary-29-Oct-with-references.pdf

[36] Gibbs L, Bryant R, Harms L, Forbes D, Block K, Gallagher HC, Ireton G, Richardson J, Pattison P, MacDougall C, Lusher D, Baker E, Kellett C, Pirrone A, Molyneaux R, Kosta L, Brady K, Lok M, Van Kessell G, Waters E, 2016, *Beyond Bushfires: Community Resilience and Recovery Final Report,* University of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, accessible via: https://mspgh.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/3043187/Beyond-Bushfires-Final-Report-2016.pdf

[37] Gibbs L, et al; 2016, *Summary of Beyond Bushfires Report*, accessible via: https://mspgh.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/3330736/Beyond-Bushfires-briefing-note-Jan-2020.pdf

work together and build resilience for future incidents.

VSSR will use an iterative approach to monitor, evaluate and improve the victim service response. This will include reviewing how effectively the victim service sector supported victims of critical incidents using informal and formal approaches to evaluation.[38]

Evaluation frameworks will consider the:

- extent to which victims' support needs were met
- quality of service delivery and experience
- effectiveness and accountability of systems and governance arrangements
- quality of partnerships with key service providers
- the wellbeing of staff following an incident.

The lessons learned will be shared with victim services and integrated into existing processes including this Framework, to improve future critical incident response efforts.

[38] For example, Client Voice Framework for Victorian Community Services, Department of Health and Human Services, accessible via: https://engage.vic.gov.au/client-voice-framework