



a fairer victoria achievements so far

Strategy Eight Improving access to justice

strategy eight

Improving access to justice

Aim

Improving the way the justice system accommodates the needs of vulnerable Victorians can reduce hardship and exclusion. In addition to changes to the family violence system outlined in Strategy Three, A Fairer Victoria is making a range of other improvements to the courts, legal advice and correctional services. There has been a strong focus in the last three years on improving the way the justice system works for women.

Reforming sexual assault responses

A major reform to the way the criminal justice system responds to sexual assault has been underway since 2006/07.

These reforms are a collaborative partnership aimed at changing attitudes and behaviour across the criminal justice system. The new *Crimes (Sexual Offences) Act 2006*, for example, gives an unprecedented level of respect for the privacy and dignity of victims of sexual assault in Victoria.

Among other things, the new Act prevents the accused from personally cross-examining victims. It also strengthens some offences, providing better legal protection for children and for people with a cognitive impairment, so these witnesses will no longer be subject to cross-examination at committal hearings.

In our reforms to Victoria's sexual offence laws and procedures, we have so far:

- established the Specialist Sex Offences Unit within the Office of Public Prosecutions to ensure the effective and sensitive prosecution of sexual offences. By late 2007 the unit was handling 450 sex offence cases involving 453 accused and 750 complainants
- established a specialist sexual offences list at the County Court and Magistrates' Court. By June 2007, 662 cases had been finalised, and by the end of July 2007 300 sex offence matters were listed in Magistrates' Courts throughout Victoria

- established two multi-disciplinary sexual assault centres in Frankston and Mildura in 2007, to deliver an integrated justice and human services response under the one roof, including police services, counselling and forensic examinations
- established a forensic nurses network to train and support nurses to provide forensic examinations to adult victims of sexual assault, and
- established a new *Child Witness Service* in 2007. At the end of January 2008 the service had received 308 referrals and had assisted 300 children through the court process.

Better responses to women's offending and re-offending

There are rising numbers of women in prison. The *Better Pathways* strategy, launched in November 2005, is providing more prevention, early intervention, diversion, rehabilitation and transitional support initiatives for women at risk of offending and re-offending. So far we have:

- issued more than 600 transport and childcare subsidies to women supervised on community correctional orders
- provided transitional accommodation and support services to women released by the courts on bail – to date, eight women and their children have been assisted
- assisted more than 150 women prisoners access community-based services and treatment programs upon release, through the *Women's Integrated Support Program*

- provided cultural support and assistance to Vietnamese women prisoners through a Vietnamese Liaison Officer
- implemented a *Problem Gambling Program* for Vietnamese women in acknowledgement of the relationship between gambling and Vietnamese women's offending
- commenced an integrated mental health service to women prisoners in July 2007, which includes a 20-bed inpatient component, outpatient and outreach services, and day programs for women prisoners experiencing mental illness
- funded the *Women4Work Program*, which commenced on 1 July 2006. To date, the Program has assisted 190 women, placed 56 women in short term jobs and 27 in longer term positions, and
- made sexual assault counselling, advocacy and support services available to women prisoners 24 hours a week. To date more than 30 women have accessed these services.

Protecting Victorians' human rights

The *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act* is the first human rights charter enacted in any Australian state. It came into full effect on 1 January 2008. The Charter protects and promotes human rights in Victoria. To support the implementation of the Charter, over 500 legal and legislation policy officers have attended human rights training workshops. A further 300 service delivery staff across government (including local government) have also been trained.

Community-based justice

We have improved the way the legal system works for vulnerable groups in our community, including victims of crime. The changes are addressing the underlying causes of crime and disadvantage through improved information, support and services to offenders and victims. So far, we have:

- established a Neighbourhood Justice Centre in Collingwood, which commenced operating in February 2007 providing support to people who may not normally feel they have access to legal and justice services. To date, the Centre has dealt with over 1,200 matters including civil and criminal matters in the Magistrates' Court, family violence and Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal matters, VCAT matters and Children's Court matters
- established five new community legal offices around Victoria, in Cranbourne, Melton, Boronia, Bendigo and the Corio/Geelong region, providing free legal information and advice to more than 100,000 Victorians each year, and
- enacted the Victim's Charter in November 2006, to ensure victims are treated with respect and compassion, and receive a sensitive response from the justice system.

A Fairer Victoria is making a range of improvements to the courts, legal advice and correctional services. There has been a strong focus in the last three years on improving the way the justice system works for women.

Published by the State Government of Victoria,
1 Treasury Place, Melbourne VIC 3002.

This publication is copyright. No part may be
reproduced by any process except in accordance
with the provisions of the *Copyright Act 1968*.

© State of Victoria 2008

Authorised by Peter Batchelor,
1 Spring Street, Melbourne VIC 3000.

Printed by On Demand,
152 Sturt Street, South Bank

ISBN 978-1-921331-21-3