

DVCS: A Brief Overview

(Note: this summary is based on a more detailed overview and history prepared as part of an ANROWS-funded research project – see <https://anrows.org.au/node/1058>)

Who are we?

The Domestic Violence Crisis Service (DVCS) in Canberra was established in 1988 as a non-government, independent organisation. It provided a 24/7 crisis telephone line, and call-outs to homes where police were responding to domestic and family violence (DFV) incidents to assist women and children to achieve safety. It also provided court support to help a woman apply for an ‘ex-parte’ emergency order to allow her back in the house and for the person who used the violence to leave.

Thirty years later these service elements remain the core service response but DVCS has also expanded to provide other support to families who have experienced domestic and family violence. In the most recent decade there has been an expansion into non-crisis services such as support groups, a program for young people and their families, and a residential and therapeutic program for men who use violence and want to change their behaviour. Table 1 provides a summary of key events in each of the decades since the DVCS was founded.

Table 1: Brief timeline of DVCS

FIRST DECADE (1988- late 1990s) ESTABLISHMENT AND CHANGE	SECOND DECADE (2000 - 2010) CONSOLIDATION AND INTEGRATION WITH THE JUSTICE SYSTEM	THIRD DECADE (2010- present) EXPANSION IN NON-CRISIS SERVICES
<p>1988 established as crisis telephone line and direct crisis intervention at scene of incident</p> <p>1988 ACT Policing MOU</p> <p>1992 ACT Community Law Reform Commission review of legislation and complementary AIC research</p> <p>1997-98 major review of service and extensive process of change</p> <p>Major changes in language to “persons who use violence” (PUV) and “persons subject to violence”(PSV) and the expansion of the service to include all persons</p> <p>Men encouraged to access DVCS and decision to employ male staff</p> <p>DVCS Men’s Line established</p> <p>DVCS key member of the inaugural Domestic Violence Prevention Council</p> <p>1998 FVIP (Family Violence Intervention Program) established</p>	<p>Increase in the volume of crisis line calls and police call outs</p> <p>Priority given to children and their safety</p> <p>2004 FVIP MOU with 10 core agencies including DVCS</p> <p>2004 onwards significant changes to DVCS included mechanism to share information with prosecution with consent of clients, creation of court-based advocates and client service coordinator, contracted by corrections to provide partner support</p> <p>2007 Young People’s Outreach Worker Program (with CPS) funded</p> <p>DVCS key member of the Domestic Violence Prevention Council</p> <p>2007 Independent review of DVCS (Urbis 2007) describes DVS as informed by a framework of feminist and narrative ideas with open-case management</p> <p>By 2007 no discrete program for men; men as PUV and PSV seen as core business</p>	<p>Increase in the volume of crisis line calls and police call outs</p> <p>Re-shaping of children’s program into YPOP</p> <p>Expansion of court advocacy and support program plus a dedicated criminal justice focus worker</p> <p>2014 funding of support groups</p> <p>Moved to fee for service community education</p> <p>Fund-raising increasingly a focus</p> <p>DVCS key member of the Domestic Violence Prevention Council</p> <p>Advocates for a Safe@Home program in the ACT</p> <p>Provider for Commonwealth funded Staying@Home program.</p> <p>Merger with Connections ACT and development and implementation of Room4Change program.</p>

Origins of the DVCS

It was the Women's Liberation movement of the 1960s and 70s that brought domestic violence to public attention and in response there was the establishment and rapid growth of refuges for women and children who were experiencing the violence. From the early 1980s on, there was also a push for further reforms in responses to domestic violence in Australia and elsewhere. DVCS was established as a part of those reforms. The key drivers for the ACT reforms were the Canberra Women's Refuge, now known as Beryl Women Inc. and the oldest refuge in Australia, and the Commonwealth Office for the Status of Women (it was before self-government), which, in 1982, recommended a taskforce to reform the ACT domestic violence laws.

Several years later the Australian Law Reform Commission released a discussion paper that recommended the establishment of a crisis service in the ACT. To gauge the response to this a public phone-in was held with 120 people responding and a domestic violence interagency committee was formed. There was additional impetus to reform when in early 1986 there was a family shooting tragedy.

During 1987 funding was secured from the ACT Community and Health Service and DVCS became operational in April 1988. It was community-based with a management committee and a total of 15 staff – a co-ordinator, an administrative officer and 13 crisis workers.

From the beginning the service has had a clear feminist philosophy underpinning and informing its practice. The safety and empowerment of clients was and is viewed as a core objective. Like other domestic violence services, the organisation has become more structured and practices more professionalised over time, but the underlying rationale and ethos that informed its establishment continue to guide its daily operations and strategic focus.

DVCS a crisis and justice focus

There was no Australian model to work off in developing the service and there was reluctance among many police and court staff to work with the service, but through sitting around the table together the protocols for working together were in place before DVCS commenced its service provision. The perceived differences of DVCS and the police in work styles and philosophies were at first viewed as obstructing any real working relationship but over time a level of trust and respect was built up. The effectiveness of DVCS workers attending a crisis incident is dependent on the cooperation of the police and on some occasions that was compromised by the behaviour of police at the scene. Such problems decreased as crisis workers and police continued to work together and meetings and discussions continued to be held at the senior level.

The relationship between DVCS and the police was unique at the time and was further embedded when DVCS was named as an "authorised crisis service" under Part 4 of the *Domestic Violence Agencies Act 1986*, which meant that the service received and continues to receive notifications that a call for assistance in relation to a DFV incident has been made to police. Attending officers offer the services of the DVCS and where consent is given, the DVCS workers attend the scene. A MOU with the police did and continues to allow the sharing of client information to assist in achieving safety for a family.

In 2007, an independent review of DVCS identified key changes and milestones of the previous 20 years as:

- From quasi-collective to structured management.
- Changing the language to that of ‘users of violence’, and ‘those subject to violence’.
- Being part of law reform in the ACT.
- Working with men. The decisions taken to encourage men to access DVCS services and to employ male staff were considered quite radical given DFV policy at the time.
- Working with children and young people as part of a strengthening in commitment to prioritise safety of child and young people that had evolved over the previous 10 years.
- Developing a unique and workable partnership with police.
- Working with criminal justice agencies and government departments as a key party to the Family Violence Intervention Program (FVIP). According to the review, DVCS was a key partner because it was an “independent advocate focusing on victim safety, providing support at court, and providing knowledge about how different services work together”. (Urbis, 2007, p.7)

DVCS expansion in services

Compared to a decade ago, the range of programs offered by DVCS has changed in scale and with added focus. The core services such as the crisis intervention (including the 24-hour telephone line), court advocacy, and community education continue to operate, and as part its commitment to the ACT’s Family Violence Intervention Program, the position of a criminal justice focus worker is maintained. The program for young people is now called the Young People’s Outreach Program and a program of support groups has been commenced.

The service participates in the Crisis Services Scheme that was established in 2014 for women (or their children) with disabilities. The scheme is based on the needs of women (or their children) associated with their intellectual, psychiatric, sensory or physical disability and is available to women who choose to remain in their own home, women who choose to stay with family or friends, or women who require access to emergency accommodation. DVCS also continues to provide support to partners/ex-partners of men who participate in community corrections programs for DFV offenders.

In July 2016 two new programs were introduced. The first was the Safe@Home service. Funded by the federal government, this program works with women and their families after they have left an abusive relationship. It involves case management, risk assessment, safety planning and security upgrades, and the aim is to enable women and children to stay at home or a home of their choice.

The ACT Government funds the second program, Room4Change, which is a residential therapeutic service to help men address their violence and controlling behaviours while their families are supported to stay in their own home.

Current context

DVCS continues to be funded by the ACT Government with an operating budget of approximately \$2.3 million and the service has also developed a fundraising program. It now has a board of governance, and an expanded workforce that includes a leadership team of 10

headed by the Chief Executive Officer, 36 staff and 8 relief workers (DVCS annual report, 2016-17).

DVCS has been profoundly affected by the publicity and the focus on DFV over the past few years, brought about by many tragedies in the ACT and nationally. Most significantly for the service, there was a sharp increase in calls to the crisis line. The demand had been growing steadily over the years but spiked in 2015-2016, with numbers almost double that of eight years ago. In 2016-17, there were more than 26,600 incoming contacts with the crisis team, and an average of more than 100 face to face crisis contacts a month. Other DVCS services have also expanded with, for example, legal advocacy involving an average of 70 face to face contacts a month.

The ACT Government has allocated more funds to DVCS to try to meet the increase in demand and DVCS has also responded by establishing new processes for responding to calls and providing support as well as the fundraising initiatives.

More broadly in the ACT, funding has been allocated to other agencies to improve service responses and the position of Coordinator-General for Family Safety has been established to oversee reforms and increased system integration. DVCS continues to be a key contributor to the development of the structures, policies and processes in the ACT that will ensure a more effective response and safety for all families.