

Kerrie : Closing Speech.

2017 has been a year of significant change for our victim support unit. We started the year with new staff, new energy and an added focus on promoting the trauma informed practice that we offer not only to people in the Hunter Region, but NSW wide.

Many of you would be aware that **Robyn** took some well-earned long service leave in May this year, pending her retirement. While she moved to Melbourne to be with family, she has never been far away from her other family here – she has always been available to guide me and offer her invaluable insight and advice when I've needed it.

This year has been a busy year for advocacy, and I'm very proud that we have been able to provide written submissions to the NSW Sentencing Council, The Department of Justice and the Federal Attorney General on the following issues pertinent to victims rights:

- Amendments to the Crimes (Administration of Sentences) Act
- Parliamentary Inquiry into a better Family Law system for victims of domestic violence
- Amendments to the Crimes (Sentencing Procedure) Act
- Victims Involvements in Sentencing through Victim Impact Statement
- Amendments to the Crimes (High Risk offenders) Act
- Strengthening Child Sexual Abuse laws
- Family Law Amendment – Family Violence and the cross examination of parties.

Many thanks goes to **Hannah** for her exceptional way with words and her eagerness to attend round table conferences and policy meetings with me.

Throughout the year, we have been able to assist a staggering 700 new clients, in addition to those of you who have stayed connected with throughout the years. The referrals for all crime types have been steadily increasing however 3 weeks ago our administration guru, **Wendy**, had to take emergency family leave and we realised she is the glue of our little organisation. For 2 long weeks we struggled without Wendy, and we all are extremely grateful for the work she does to keep the organisation running.

Within the past 6 months we have assisted well over 100 high risk domestic violence victims as a part of the Safety Action Meetings held in the Newcastle Region. Naturally, many victims are extremely fearful and often reluctant to give evidence against their partner in court. **Vanessa** has worked tirelessly with local police, police prosecutors and the domestic violence high risk offenders team to ensure victim safety, and she's been able to empower many women through the court process with exceptional results.

VOCAL was represented in the Sydney Town Hall iQ2 Debate of "Do Prisons Work?" Myself and Kerry Tucker (who spent 5 years in a maximum security prison), debated against Julian Burnside QC and Aboriginal Leader Warren Mundine. We argued that Prisons are necessary to provide punishment, and they provide a sense of justice to victims of crime and are essential for the safety of our community. Unfortunately we lost the debate, and although it was somewhat terrifying to speak in-front of 1000 people, it was an excellent platform to promote our unique service.

We continue to build our profile with Newcastle LAC and Lake Macquarie LAC as well as the social workers at John Hunter Hospital. GPs are getting on board after hearing of the assistance we provide, we have an MOU with Community Corrections and such a collaborative approach helps to ensure specific, personal needs are being met.

After attending the DPP conference in Sydney in June, which was titled "Victims Voices" I approached the Department of Justice and asked for an increase in our funding, stating 4 Victim Support Specialists just aren't enough to cover the growing demand. Unfortunately, as I suspected, I was told a funding increase was not possible. Our committee has worked hard to increase our membership base to 50 members, and at only \$15 per year I urge you to please consider joining our organisation and making VOCAL your charity. Wendy will be able to take cash or card donations in the hall during afternoon tea.

Please share your knowledge of VOCAL with others who may need it. We are passionate in our work to assist men, women and children, of any crime, at any stage. Thank you for coming today and building this beautiful tree of angels with us.

