

**The Hon. Greg Smith, SC MP  
Attorney General and Minister for Justice**

**Welcome Address**

**Meeting the needs of victims of crime  
Conference 18 May Sydney**

I am delighted to welcome you all to this important conference, which is the result of collaboration between the Australian Institute of Criminology and the Victims Services division of the Department of Attorney General and Justice.

The conference will focus on “Meeting the needs of victims of crime”, which is something I have strived to achieve throughout my career – particularly during my time at the DPP and more recently in politics.

Victims of crime struggle with a variety of problems;

- physical;
- psychological; and
- financial.

It is important that we understand their needs and support them appropriately as they move through the criminal justice system.

Traditionally in Australia, issues concerning victims of crime have been matters for State and Territory governments.

But In recent years there have been significant changes in federal legislation responding to emerging trends that involve victims of certain crimes that transcend borders, such as online identity fraud and human trafficking.

After having a look through the program I am looking forward to hearing about your deliberations.

Dr Jonathan Doak is the Director of the Criminal Justice Research Group at Nottingham Trent University in the United Kingdom. Dr Doak has published widely on victims' issues, including their rights in the criminal justice system.

David Levine has been Chairperson of the Serious Offenders Review Council in NSW since 2006. He was a Judge of the NSW District Court and the NSW Supreme Court until his retirement from the bench in 2005.

Justice Levine is no stranger to research and his own personal library is famously one of the largest in Australia. The state library has also been a significant beneficiary of this passion.

Dr Ann O'Neill is the Director and founder of Angelhands, based in Perth Western Australia. Angelhands provides support and assistance to those who have been affected by murder or serious personal violence.

Dr O'Neill suffered enormous personal tragedy 14 years ago when her estranged husband shot and killed her two young children before turning the gun on her. Dr O'Neill overcame these events by going back to

school and obtaining a social work degree. There aren't too many people like her; that can speak from the perspective of a victim, a service provider and a researcher.

The Attorney General and Justice portfolio is working on better meeting the needs of victims.

The Victims Access Line averages 300 calls a day from victims of crime across NSW and is staffed by trained counsellors who help victims navigate the criminal justice system and repair their lives.

There is a Victims Journey website to assist the victim at each stage; from the time a crime is reported, through the Police investigation to prosecution, court processes, sentencing and after court.

We all know that being a victim can be confusing and traumatic, but we also know that access to information is empowering and has a significant part to play in recovery.

The O'Farrell Government recognises the importance of victims' rights, which are enshrined in the Charter of Victims Rights as part of the Victims Rights Act 1996.

These rights give victims a voice within the justice system and ensure victims are treated with courtesy, compassion, and cultural sensitivity as they journey through the criminal justice system.

Last year, I supported amendments to the Charter, strengthening the existing 17 rights, and introducing an additional right facilitating access to a complaints process if the victim's rights have not been met.

Previously, the Charter only applied to people employed within government departments. It now applies to non-government agencies and contractors, funded by the State, who provide services to victims.

My Department will be helping these agencies to develop a Code of Practice that is consistent with the principles of the Charter. The Code will be available to both service providers and victims of crime. Victims Services will be required to report on this implementation in the Department's Annual Report to Parliament.

I am excited that the theme of this conference is meeting the needs of victims of crime and building the evidence to help us to do better. I am personally committed to developing criminal justice policies that are responsive to the needs of victims of crime.

This conference is covering a wide range of issues affecting victims of crime.

It also provides an opportunity for service providers to share what is working and alert us to what has not worked.

But most importantly, it is an opportunity for victims themselves to tell us what they need and how their needs have – or haven't – been met.

The challenge for policy makers, researchers and service providers, is to establish better working relationships, founded upon an appreciation of each other's roles and experiences. Only by working together will we see these initiatives come to fruition for the benefit of victims of crime. This conference will provide an opportunity for greater interaction and understanding.

My portfolio - Attorney General and Justice – looks after victims issues. There is one initiative I would like to tell you a little about – and that's the Victims of Crime Research Agenda, which has been developed in consultation with service providers and researchers.

It aims is to stimulate new, high quality research, which directly supports service provision for victims of crime in New South Wales.

It is important because the body of evidence, particularly in an Australian context, of what works best for victims of crime is limited. The Research Agenda will enable a more systematic approach to research that will deliver findings that are useful at both a policy and operational level.

The Agenda will be available on the new Victims of Crime Clearinghouse website that my Department is developing and is due for launch later this year.

This Clearinghouse will contain summaries of research articles, reports, and conference papers relating to victims of crime from Australia and overseas.

Although there are a number of clearinghouses in Australia, such as the Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse and the Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia, this is the first Australian clearinghouse specifically for all victims of crime.

Looking at the conference program I can see one of your biggest dilemmas over the next two days will be deciding which workshops to attend.

They cover issues ranging from understanding the needs of victims, supporting victims of sexual assault, domestic violence and victims of human trafficking and responding to the needs of the vulnerable victims of crime within in the criminal justice system.

But I don't think you mind me suggesting that even with 50 sessions, the conference might not cover all the issues affecting victims of crime.

I hope that service providers at this conference will be challenged by the presentations and find the information useful in improving their services. It is also my hope that researchers will be encouraged to expand their work in this field.

I have made a note of the sessions on Victim Impact Statements to be held this afternoon.

The topic for Tracey Booth from the University of Technology in Sydney is "The voice of the crime victim in the sentencing hearing: 'An improperly enacted and damaging ritual'?"

And Sarah Krasnostein from the University of Melbourne is conducting a session, “A right to know: To what extent are sentences affected by Victim Impact Statements?”

They recognise that victims now have a voice in the administration of justice;

After all, it is only proper that the law should not only assess the effect of a crime on society, but also the personal impact on those who are left behind to pick up the pieces.

What is important that all involved in the justice system treat victims with sensitivity and respect for their grief.

That is what is behind the O’Farrell Government’s plan to amend sentencing laws to allow judges to take into account – as an aggravating circumstance – the contents of impact statements on family members of homicide victims.

A judge would have to consider the possible and probable consequences of criminal behaviour, not only its significance to society in general, but the actual affect of a specific crime upon those who have been intimately affected by it.

The O’Farrell Government believes it is another step towards restoring public faith in the fairness of the Criminal Justice System in NSW.

I congratulate Victims Services and the Australian Institute of Criminology in organising this conference. And I assure you I will take a great interest in the n the research and ideas discussed at today's proceedings.

Enjoy the day.