



Queensland Homicide Victims' Support Group

FAMILY SUPPORT AFTER MURDER INCORPORATED
ABN 88 536 686 758 REGISTERED CHARITY NUMBER 1253

15 June 2018

Queensland Sentencing Advisory Council
GPO Box 2360
BRISBANE QLD 4001

Dear Kathleen and Victoria

Re: Delay in support around the death of a child

In light of feedback stimulated by QSAC's research into sentencing for child homicide, QHVSG is currently undertaking a review of its processes and systems for supporting the survivors of child homicide.

When there has been a homicide in Queensland, QHVSG typically receives official notification and referral from the Queensland Police Service within 24-48 hours of the incident. This process serves to connect our group and its intrinsic expertise with surviving close family members, friends or next of kin to the victim as soon as possible after the event.

Our experience with this early connection fully endorses extensive research that suggests that timely intervention with individuals who have experienced acute grief and loss or trauma correlates positively with improved coping and well-being, both in the short and longer term.

From this early involvement, families and other survivors of homicide typically form a deep level of trust with QHVSG. This trust is something that is carried with them not only in the first few months when the loss is raw, but also when it comes time to trial, or sentencing. The family or friends commonly look to their Family Support Coordinator or to QHVSG in general, to assist them in managing the many difficult facets of their journey.

During the court process or sentencing, QHVSG is commonly in a position to "bridge the gap" between the police, the DPP, court processes and family members. At this time the family often turn to us for support or advice, for assistance with impact statements, and to ask questions relating to what is happening and what they can expect of the justice process. The trust that they have with the group without doubt, results in a more bearable and supported experience.

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In regards to the death of a child, QHVSG understands that there are a number of obstacles that may prevent immediate referral of family members to our group for support. On guidance from the QPS, we have come to appreciate that there is an increased difficulty in determining the circumstances and cause of death of the child. Due to these and other complexities, charges are not necessarily applied until some time has passed. Additionally, given QHVSG's stance as a victim based support service, and the statistics that suggest that it is often the primary carer of the child who is involved in the death; there may not be anyone relevant to refer to QHVSG for support.

Historically, because of these factors, referral from the QPS to QHVSG for a child homicide is seldom within 24 – 48 hours. Rather, it can be many months, or even years before a family member of friend is referred to the group for support. In some cases, this referral occurs only a short period of time prior to scheduled plea or sentencing.

The result of this late referral is that the family or friend who is supporting the child, has likely gone for a prolonged period of time with little or no specialist support around their traumatic loss. They commonly feel "let down" or undervalued as a victim by what they term "the system". This early experience translates into a guarded trust, not only of support agencies, but also of the legal and justice process and its effectiveness in general. The subsequent journey for attending court for trials, pleas or sentencing can therefore often be even more difficult than it typically is.

Whilst we acknowledge that there are some aspects of the death of a child that may prohibit early referral, discussions are underway with the QPS, and with the specialist services within the child protection investigation units in order to examine whether improvements can be made to ultimately connect family members of child homicide with QHVSG's specialist support in a more timely manner. It is hoped that the benefits of this early connection can then apply more readily to child homicide family survivors.

QHVSG is pleased to be involved in the review of sentencing for child homicide and hopes that outcomes, like this review of our own internal process, will result in positive changes not only in terms of analysing sentencing process and measures, but also in further supporting and protecting victims and their rights.

Regards

Elaine Henderson
Acting Chief Executive Officer
QLD Homicide Victims' Support Group