



Strategic Plan

2021-2023

Áras Uí Dhálaigh, Four Courts, Dublin 7.

RCN: 20079246, CHY20042, Company No. 409085

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Message from the Chairperson

The year 2019 was a successful year in the history of Victim Support at Court (VSAC) with the service providing support to victims of crime across Ireland. VSAC provided free and confidential support to 1,482 victims of crime, prosecution witnesses and their family/friends, an increase of 8% compared to 2018. V-SAC staff and volunteers had 5,435 individual contacts with the victims of crime, their families/friends, and prosecution witnesses. Our 50+ trained volunteers gave 1,418 days of their own time to support victims of all types of crime.

V-SAC's ability to support victims of crime is possible only through the professionalism and diligence of our staff and the dedicated commitment of our court accompaniment volunteers, we offer them our sincere gratitude. To our funders, the Department of Justice, and donations given by members of the public, we offer you our thanks for your continued support and guidance and for facilitating best-practice exchange within the sector. To our referral agencies, the Director of Public Prosecutions, An Garda Síochána and fellow support organisations, who continued to support and work with us in 2019 in the areas of training, awareness-raising and information exchange, thank you. Your support has strengthened us as an organisation and added value to the work that we do with victims of crime. In the last three years, our volunteer base has grown by three hundred percent. This is an incredible success for V-SAC. I would like to congratulate the staff and volunteers on this and to also welcome all the new volunteers who joined us during the year.

During 2019 we expanded our service into the Eastern and South Eastern Court areas. Countrywide support was provided in respect of 629 trials/hearings, including pre-trial visits, sentencing, retrials and appeals. It is our intention to continue with our expansion roll out in the coming years in order to provide a fully maintained national service. V-SAC has raised its profile in the voluntary sector, and we are recognised as a 'specialist' service providing court accompaniment to victims of crime.

The board of directors significantly changed during 2019, with the departure of a number of members in July (we thank them for their service) and the introduction of seven new members to the board during the year. As a board we are confident that we will continue to provide leadership, governance and strategic direction as we plan for the next stage of our strategic development over the next three years.

The Minister for Justice and Equality, Charlie Flanagan, opened the launch of V-SAC's 2018 Annual Report, we were also subject of national media coverage on European Day for Victims of Crime. In recognition of its success during 2019, V-SAC was shortlisted for two National Charity Awards. 2019 was a year of change and new challenges with the courts implementing new legislation where domestic violence hearings are to be held in camera, i.e., a closed court. V-SAC began a new process in the District Courts in the CCJ to provide support in Court number 18 on the 2nd and 4th Monday of each month.

The year 2020 was a challenging year for V-SAC and everyone involved in the delivery of the court accompaniment service, victims, volunteers, staff, and directors. V-SAC proved itself to be innovative and agile while dealing with the challenges and restrictions imposed by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This is testament to the strength and resilience of the V-SAC organisation, its volunteers, and staff in continuing to provide support to over 1,000 people during the year.

Most importantly, to the 2,500+ victims of crime who allowed us to be there and support them during one of the most traumatic and challenging times of anyone's life, we say thank you for your trust in us. We hope we made your journey just that little bit more bearable.

Kieran Kenny

Chairperson

Acknowledgments

As a volunteer-led charity, we are reliant on the wonderful work of our volunteers to deliver our services. Their kindness and time freely given to victims and survivors of crimes is daily inspirational and I thank them on behalf of the board for all that they do.

As we consider our future, we recognise that we work in partnership with many others to achieve our mission. A core part of the next three years at V-SAC shall be to strengthen these partnerships. In particular, we are grateful to the An Garda Síochána, the Director of Public Prosecutions and her office, the Courts Service, and the legal professions for their continued support and cooperation. Similarly, we have many fine colleagues and friends in the charity sector working to support victims in different ways and we look forward to continuing our work together.

The Department of Justice have been our core funder since our inception. These vital funds have enabled our volunteers to accompany victims during their trials over the past 15 years, allowing us to support victims at their most vulnerable. On behalf of all at V-SAC, I thank them.

We wish to sincerely thank the staff of V-SAC for their professionalism and unwavering commitment to the needs of our clients and our volunteers.

Finally, we acknowledge the many victims of crime who, over the years, have bravely placed their trust in us during their time at court. This strategic plan will enable us to reach even more victims of crime, to continue to be worthy of that trust.

1. Introduction

Who we are:

V-SAC currently operates in the Criminal Courts of Justice at Parkgate Street, Dublin, Tallaght and Blanchardstown District Courts and the Eastern and South Eastern courts, but the cases we handle originate from all parts of the country. V-SAC is the only service whose sole function is to provide court accompaniment for all victims of crime, regardless of the type of offence. Counselling services are not provided, but referrals are offered to other appropriate services as and when required.

V-SAC is funded on an annual basis by the Department of Justice and works closely with An Garda Síochána, Court Services of Ireland, the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) and other related crime victims' organisations in the justice system. The organisation undergoes an annual audit to ensure compliance with the requirements of the Companies Acts and the Revenue Commissioners. In addition, V-SAC is subject to ongoing audits by our funder, and we comply with the Charities Regulator's Governance Code..

What we do:

Victim Support at Court (V-SAC) is the only voluntary service in Ireland dedicated solely to court accompaniment for victims of crime, their families, and witnesses. We are at the forefront of delivering a high-quality court accompaniment service within the Irish judicial system.

We provide court accompaniment to victims of crime, their families and witnesses in trials involving major criminal offences such as murder, manslaughter, death by dangerous driving, attempted murder, rape, sexual assault, domestic violence, assault, harassment, human trafficking, robbery, aggravated burglary, theft, arson, and tiger kidnappings, among others.

In addition, we provide information on the court setting including pre-trial visits where there is an opportunity to visit the court beforehand and learn about court procedures. Victims, their families, and witnesses are assisted during their time at court by trained volunteers who provide assistance and support during the trial process. They are given access to a secure private area away from the general public where they can feel safe and have privacy.

Our Volunteers:

Volunteers are extremely important to the support that we give to victims and witnesses. We really value the work and commitment of our volunteers.

We provide training to equip our volunteers to support victims from the first time they have contact with the organisation. Going to court can be a daunting and frightening experience. We train our volunteers to deal sensitively with victims, their families and prosecution witnesses to ensure we provide a friendly face, support, a listening ear, and information

during a trial. Our volunteers are also trained to give specific support to vulnerable persons, if required.

“Volunteering with Victim Support at Court over the past three years has been life enriching. There hasn’t been a day when I haven’t marvelled at the bravery and stoicism of a victim and their families; learnt from their stories; gossiped and laughed gallows-like along with them (while keeping the tissues close by). And then they leave, and a little bit of you goes with them.”

“I really feel honoured to be a volunteer with VSAC and to be able to help people through possibly the most distressing time in their lives.”

“Volunteering with V-SAC has brought positive benefits to my own life, i.e., giving victims and witnesses the comfort that there is someone in the court to support them when they are feeling vulnerable in the busy court setting.”

“There is a tremendous calmness and efficiency from the time you step into the V-SAC area at the CCJ. Always greeted with a smile and a welcome.....To be in a position to aid and comfort members of the public whose lives have been challenged in the cruellest way possible, is my privilege.”

Our Staff:

Much of the work of our paid staff is about supporting volunteers, giving them direction, and providing the training and systems they need to do a great job.

V-SAC is staffed by a full-time paid General Manager, two full-time paid Volunteer Coordinators and a part-time accountant who ensures good financial governance of the organisation. The General Manager oversees the day-to-day running of the service including the recruitment and training of volunteers to assist victims of crime, their families and witnesses in the court setting both before and during the trial. The General Manager reports to the Board of Directors.

The Volunteer Coordinators liaise with referral agencies and ensures that volunteers are allocated to support victims, their families, and witnesses in cases where our support is requested.

Our Board of Directors:

There are six members of the Board of Directors of V-SAC. They include a Chairperson, Financial Director, Company Secretary and three additional members. The role of the Board is to set the strategic direction of V-SAC and ensure that the organisation operates to the highest levels of good governance and accountability. The Board are all volunteers who receive no remuneration for their time and who, like our court accompaniment volunteers, receive reimbursement of receipted out-of-pocket expenses only.

Equality at VSAC:

We welcome volunteers from every walk of life and from right across the community. This helps us reach out to people in need, whatever their circumstances. That is why we have policies in place to make sure we attract the best volunteers from all backgrounds and experiences.

We provide services to victims, regardless of their gender, age, race, civil status, family status, disability, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, political opinion or membership of the Traveller community, as well as people at risk of poverty and social exclusion. Our role is to make sure everyone has the support they need when they come to court.

2. Vision, Mission, Values

Our Vision:

Our vision is for a society which treats victims and survivors of crime with compassion, empathy and respect..

Our Mission:

Our mission is to provide a safe and supportive environment for victims of crime, their families or witnesses while they attend court.

We do this by:

- Allowing victims of crime, their families or witnesses experience a court setting in advance of the trial through accompanied visits to a criminal court when the court is not sitting
- Facilitating them in their attendance at court by making available to them a private area away from the general public where they can feel safe and avail of privacy
- Referring such victims of crime, their families or witnesses to other support agencies or organisations as appropriate
- Recruiting, training, and supporting volunteers to undertake the work of court accompaniment and related activities in a comprehensive and professional manner
- Promoting support for victims of crime generally.

Our Values:

- Treating all victims and witnesses with respect empathy and compassion.
- Working in partnership with criminal justice agencies, public bodies, and support organisations to meet the broad range of victims' needs.
- Acting with integrity: we hold ourselves to the highest governance, ethical and legal standards.
- Valuing our staff and volunteers, their professionalism and commitment and providing opportunities to support their learning and development.
- Empowerment: enabling victims of crime to navigate the criminal justice system successfully and equipping our volunteers with skills and tools to deliver a compassionate, empathic service.

3. Our Strategic ambition

V-SAC was established in 2005 and over the last 15 years we have built a reputation as a professional and trusted service. Over the next 3 years, our services will continue to empower victims and witnesses and make them more resilient in dealing with the criminal justice process.

Our positive reputation gives us a strong public profile and good standing with our stakeholders. It provides us the opportunity to strengthen and further develop a more substantial role as a central player in providing support and assistance to victims of crime.

Our core activity remains:

- To continue to provide a first-class service which meets the needs of victims of crime and/or their families or witnesses, by ensuring that they are assisted and supported in a professional and caring manner when attending court proceedings or pre-trial visits
- To continue to recruit, train and support volunteers to undertake the work of court accompaniment in a comprehensive and professional manner so that a sufficient number of volunteers is always available to continue to carry out our work

We have identified 4 key strategic objectives over the next 3 years which will better equip V-SAC to realise this activity and to support our mission. Each objective has a number of strategic goals attached, with project plans and SMART criteria tied to these over the lifetime of the strategic plan.

3 (a) Strategic Objectives

1. **DELIVER** high quality support for anyone affected by crime who needs it
2. **BUILD** partnerships and alliances to work together on putting victims and witnesses first
3. **CHAMPION** the rights of victims of crime, witnesses and those affected by crime
4. **DEVELOP** V-SAC to enable the delivery of an excellent needs-led service

Strategic Objective 1

DELIVER high quality support for persons affected by crime who needs it

- a) Maximising Communications:
Develop a communications plan to enhance our organisational profile among our stakeholders and use social media and technology to reach all sections of the community.
- b) Pursuing quality standards:
Pursue an accreditation of excellence for voluntary programmes, using the external review process as an opportunity to benchmark our activity and volunteer development against the highest standards across the sector. Maintain and develop links with other national and international volunteer and victim support organisations to identify and implement evolving best practice.
- c) Governing with integrity:
Uphold best practice corporate governance in line with the Charities Regulator Governance Code, and compliance requirements as a registered company and charity.
- d) Planning for the future:
Develop a 5-year budget and cash flow projection, which anticipates future funding needs based on expansion and ongoing operating costs.

Strategic Objective 2

BUILD partnerships and alliances with other organisations to work together on putting victims and witnesses needs first.

- a) Strengthening co-operation:
Continue to liaise with our partner organisations and stakeholders, including The Courts Service, An Garda Síochána, Office of the DPP, and other victims' groups to build upon our existing partnerships and increase our referrals from these services.
- b) Build external partnerships, networks, and alliances:
Develop external partnerships, networks and alliances to deliver the right services to the communities, family and individuals we serve.
- c) Maximise the benefits from our partnerships:
Promote victims' rights and share best practice in victim issues by being creative in determining which services can be delivered by V-SAC alone and consider opportunities to work in partnership with similar organisations to provide better support for victims.

Strategic Objective 3

CHAMPION the rights of victims, witnesses and those affected by crime.

- a) Engaging with external partners:
Develop a Public Affairs strategy to influence public policy, build and maintain V-SAC's strong reputation and find common ground with stakeholders.
- b) Raising awareness:
Actively develop and promote V-SAC as a centre of expertise on victim issues by raising awareness of V-SAC to the public in, for example, health, education, social policy and other sectors.
- c) Expanding our Volunteer base:
Promote our services to local communities, responding to their needs and taking an active part in Diversity, Gender, Age, Location, race, etc so our services are available to anyone who needs them.
- d) Advocacy:
Advocate for national and local solutions that advance the interests of victims.
- e) Research:
Undertake or commission work of direct relevance to service user needs and expectations and to the development of best practice.

Strategic Objective 4

DEVELOP V-SAC to enable the delivery of an excellent needs-led service.

- a) Securing development opportunities:
We will provide on-going training and CPD to our staff and volunteers, to enhance their capacity to provide compassionate, empathic support to victims, recognising that volunteering is a two-way process which works to the betterment of both service-user and volunteer. We will enable our directors to receive training relevant to their role in V-SAC.
- b) Supporting expansion:
Put in place a staffing and supervision framework that meets the needs of an expanding national service, ensuring that victims and witnesses will be speedily and appropriately matched with volunteers, that volunteers are adequately supported and supervised and that the overall service is coordinated effectively.
- c) Reviewing our processes:
We will keep under review of our policies and procedures, and ensure we maximise efficiency, enable succession planning and support induction of staff, volunteers, and directors.
- d) Robust data collection:
Establish data collection that allows for the sharing of information and analysis across agencies to improve the quality of service provided by all.
- e) Evaluation:
Capturing and sharing the victim and witness experience through robust, evidence-based research.

Ownership and responsibility for the oversight and implementation of this plan rests with the Board of V-SAC and staff.

3 (b) [Review of this Strategic Plan](#)

The strategic objectives and goals are given expression in an annual work plan for the organisation. Those targets, timelines and budgets will be reviewed by the Board on a quarterly basis. The Strategic Plan will undergo a full mid-term review in January 2022.



An Roinn Dlí agus Cirt
agus Comhionannais
Department of Justice
and Equality

