

RMA ISSUE BACKGROUND

**Victim Services
Unit Regionalization:
RMA Concerns**



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Introduction

Rural Alberta is a unique place. It covers large areas with sparse populations, often far from towns and cities. As a result, the service delivery in rural areas is often innovative out of necessity. Unfortunately, the trend within Alberta (and worldwide) is to centralize and standardize how services are delivered. On paper, this trend often leads to perceived improvements in efficiency and consistency. In reality, however, it often results in reduced access to services, service delivery approaches that are less responsive to local needs, and minimized local governance of services.

Unfortunately, this trend is currently playing out in Alberta through the regionalization of victim services delivery. Alberta has a unique model in which victim services are delivered by local organizations funded through a combination of provincial grants, municipal contributions, and tireless fundraising by local volunteers. This system has evolved over many decades and has resulted in a victim service network that meets local needs. Those providing support better understand service users because they are community members too.

Unfortunately, the Government of Alberta (GOA) is moving forward with a regionalization model that will replace local victim services units (VSUs) with four service delivery regions. According to the GOA, this change will result in more consistent service delivery and governance of victim services. However, the GOA has not clearly explained how and why the current model was not meeting expectations, or even defined what it considers to be “quality” victim service delivery and what portion of communities were not receiving it under the current model.

For a provincial government that places great importance on having the autonomy to do things “the Alberta way” within Canada, the lack of respect for the unique, localized, made-in-Alberta approach of the current VSU model is disappointing. The RMA has consistently expressed its concerns with the proposed changes since the idea was first introduced in 2020. In fact, RMA members recently passed [Resolution 10-23S: Victim Services Delivery Model](#), which requests the following:

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Rural Municipalities of Alberta (RMA) advocate to the Government of Alberta to maintain the current model of victim services program delivery and instead provide direct assistance to the small number of communities that are struggling to operate under the current model and have insufficient services for victims; and

FURTHER BE IT RESOLVED that RMA advocate to the Government of Alberta for more consistent funding for the current model and the development of an approach for more consistent regional collaboration and information-sharing within the current model.

This issue backgrounder is intended to summarize the current victim services model and describe the GOA’s proposed changes. It then analyzes the claims made by the GOA to argue that to this point, no evidence or justification has been provided for why the current model should be overhauled or how the new model will improve service to victims of crime or tragedy in communities across the province.



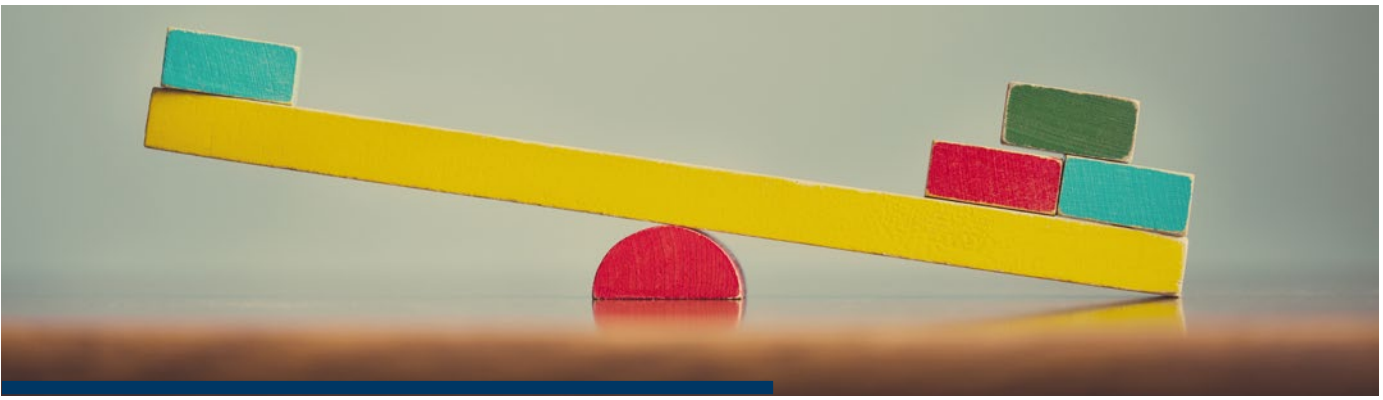
What is the current state of victim services in Alberta?

VSUs have provided critical assistance for victims of crime and tragedy for over 30 years. Services include immediate crisis support, justice and court system guidance, and assistance navigating government programs that offer counselling and other supports.

VSUs are operated locally within communities in partnership with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), municipal police services, and community-based programs. Because VSUs are local by nature, no two programs will look the same. They can adapt and accommodate the distinct needs of each community by fostering the knowledge of volunteers that have dedicated their time to understanding their communities. What started out as a grassroots movement of localized volunteers passionate about helping others has, over the course of three decades, evolved into a reliable means of ensuring victims of crime and tragedy can access the unique supports they deserve during times of crisis, grief, and uncertainty.

Most VSUs in Alberta are police-based programs. These are recognized as non-profit organizations with corporate legal status that act as a governing body. Alberta police-based victim service programs utilize highly trained volunteers to provide a 24/7 response to victims of crime and tragedy. Volunteers provide a continuum of services, from the time of first response by police to the final disposition of the case by the courts. These programs rely heavily on volunteers that are committed to professional development, education, minimum core training standards, mentoring, and advocacy for victims. Permanent staff are also required to ensure that these programs run smoothly and adequately. To maintain funding and grants from the Government of Alberta (GOA), police-based programs are required to complete [quarterly statistic reports and annual progress reports](#) to assist with auditing and demonstrate accountability.

Regardless of population or geographical area that they serve, VSUs are eligible to receive a maximum of \$150,000 in annual provincial funding, which is typically not adequate to properly fund the services. In many cases, municipalities help supplement these costs, but also face their own financial limitations. Because of these financial challenges, almost all police-based VSU programs in Alberta fundraise to provide services to victims of crime. Some programs must fundraise as much as 50% of their total operational expenses each year. Alberta's VSUs need long-term and sustainable funding because every year the demand for programs and services exceeds the funding available. This has significant implications related to recruitment, staffing, adequate training, decision-making, organizational culture, physical office space, liability, reporting, administrative structure, and many other areas in which these programs simply lack the time and resources to make major changes to accommodate.



What changes are being made to VSUs?

In 2019, the GOA launched an MLA-led Victims of Crime Review, which aimed to identify specific gaps in services and supports available for victims of crime within the current model. One aspect of the review focused on the victim services model. The review suggested three possible new approaches to victim services governance and delivery (zonal approach, government approach, and municipal approach). The review did not consider a continuation of the current model. During the review, the GOA provided no information on how local service delivery or administrative functions would be funded under the proposed approaches, which is critical to understanding how the concepts would impact service levels in various locations and community types. However, the review indicated that any new service delivery model should:

- ◆ Encourage consistency in services;
- ◆ Reduce administrative and service duplication;
- ◆ Include sustainable paid staffing;
- ◆ Reduce over-reliance on volunteer advocates;
- ◆ Include longer-term funding arrangements to provide greater operational stability; and
- ◆ Address the reluctance of some victim-serving organizations to collaborate.

Following the review process, the GOA announced plans to shift from the current model to a zonal model beginning in 2024. There are nine municipal / Indigenous operated VSU programs that are not included in the zonal redesign, comprising Alberta's largest cities and First Nations. The other 62 VSUs will be condensed into the four-zone model. All four zones will operate with a board of directors, an Executive Director, centralized professional support staff (CPSS), and frontline case workers. The CPSS are paid employees of the board of directors and will include:

- ◆ One human resources professional
- ◆ One regional manager
- ◆ One cultural safety specialist
- ◆ One administration / office manager
- ◆ Qualified financial management (potentially a shared service)
- ◆ Qualified legal resources (potentially a shared service)

Victim case workers will be dispersed throughout the zone, each working from RCMP detachments. The GOA has provided no information on how caseworks will be dispersed throughout the region or what level of service will be expected in terms of responsiveness, access, specialized supports, etc.

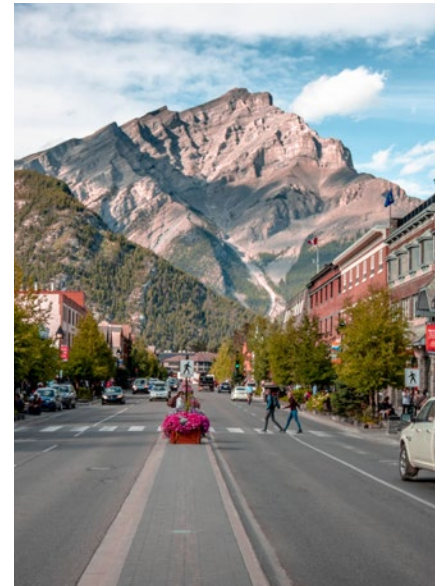


What are the concerns with the zonal approach?

The [GOA 2023 budget](#) included a plan and funding model to replace local VSUs with a zonal model by March 2024. According to the GOA, this redesign will promote a standardized, financially sustainable, and professional level of service to victims of crime and trauma across the province. However, the GOA has shared no information about why this change is necessary or how and to what extent the current service delivery model was not meeting these outcomes.

Flexibility versus standardization

As mentioned, the existing model is unique in that it allows victim service delivery to be localized. Given the benefits of a localized approach that the current model provides, there is no indication that the standardization of VSU service delivery is necessary or would improve service outcomes. For example, Bow Valley Victim Services, which operates in Banff, Canmore, and surrounding communities provides staff and volunteers with training to deal with the unique needs of tourism-based communities. Because tourism is so prevalent in this area, victims are often not from the local community, meaning that support may be required through virtual delivery in consultation with services available in the victim's home community. Would this level of specialized service and community understanding be maintained if Banff and Canmore were two of many communities within a broad service delivery zone?

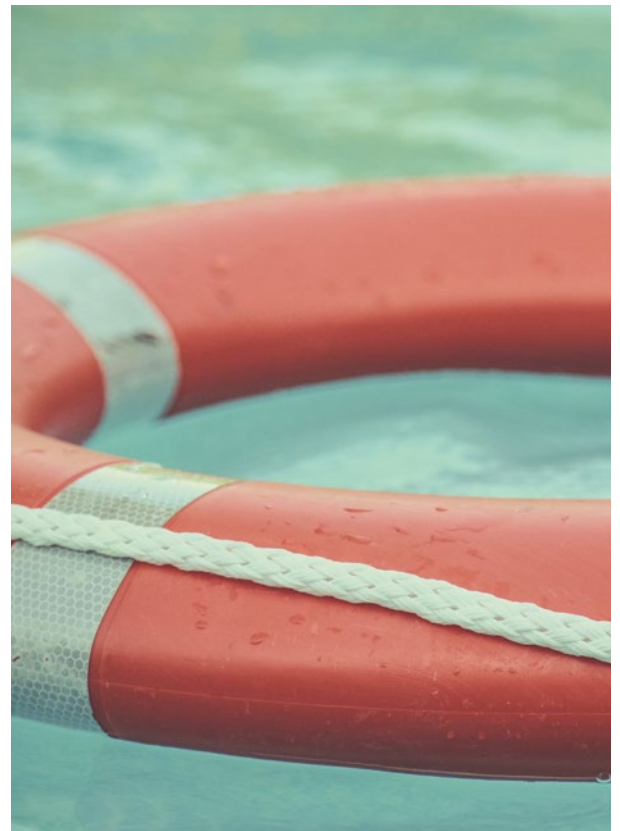


Financial sustainability

It is no secret that many VSUs struggle to remain financially sustainable under the current model. While this is a risk to the viability of the service, it is not a result of the model itself, but rather of deliberate provincial policy decisions to not provide local VSUs adequate funding. In fact, a 2016 report by the [Auditor General of Alberta](#) identified that the Government of Alberta was not properly utilizing the Victims of Crime Fund (VOCF), which is used to support VSUs along with other victim programs. The report found that despite a surplus in the VOCF, provincial grant funding for small, rural-base VSUs was arbitrarily capped at \$150,000, which had not been increased or adjusted for inflation since 2009. The report also pointed out that this modest amount had resulted in some VSUs reducing their service levels, and many focused heavily on local fundraising to remain viable, which “divert the time and energy of volunteers and staff away from the core purpose of the program.” Despite the fact that the 2016 report identifies \$150,000 as inadequate and criticizes the GOA for the arbitrary grant, the same limit remains in 2023. When discussing how the new zonal model will be

funded, GOA representatives stated that the program would receive a funding amount that exceeded the cumulative grant funding allocated to individual VSUs **plus the total amount generated across the province through fundraising**. This leads to obvious but yet-to-be answered question: If the province has the capacity to provide a new model with adequate funding, why not provide the current model with adequate funding?

VSUs currently struggle to fund their programming through provincial support and rely heavily on fundraising to meet the needs of their organizations, volunteer training, and victims of crime supports. By distancing VSUs from local communities, services will become more expensive to attain, require more resources, and dismiss the tireless work of volunteers and employees that are experts in their communities. The main concern is that the zonal model would effectively remove all of the benefits from the current service delivery model, while costing the GOA the same, if not more, to maintain.



Defining “effective” victim services

Despite arguing that the zonal model will improve Alberta’s victim services system, the GOA has not (to the RMA’s knowledge) provided any analysis or data defining how the current model does not meet service delivery outcomes, how the zonal model will improve outcomes, or what thresholds or benchmarks are used to measure service delivery success.

This is significant; the GOA’s proposal is much more than a tweak to the existing model. It fundamentally ends victim services as it is known in Alberta.

It eliminates boards of directors, eliminates volunteer roles, and eliminates long-standing local partnerships. It also invests in brand new regional governance structures, senior management positions, and frontline caseworkers. Given the disruption that such a shift will cause to service delivery and the costs of creating a new provincially based model, such a decision should be based on evidence that the current model is not meeting the needs of victims.

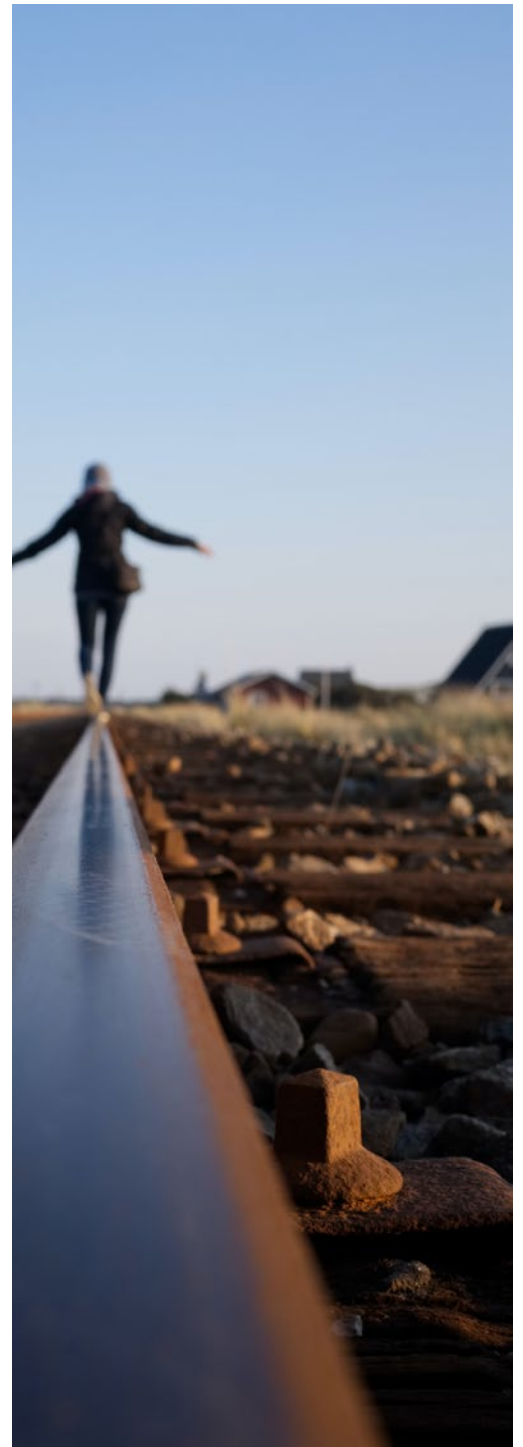
While much of the GOA’s rationale for implementing the zonal model has been linked to supporting more consistent service delivery, little information is available as to what level these “consistent” services will be delivered at, why consistency is so important in a service for which it is so crucial to treat each incident as unique, and if or how the “inconsistency” of the current model impacted service quality and outcomes for service users. In other words, the GOA has emphasized consistency based on an assumption that it equates to enhanced service quality but has provided no evidence that the two are linked.

Service access

Despite emphasis on consistency and standardization, the GOA has not adequately addressed if and how the disconnection of victim services from local police detachments will impact timely access to the service for victims. It is unclear how police will work with victim service providers under the new model, and whether connections will be consistent across communities if case workers are physically located in only certain communities.

Lack of recognition for community and service provider perspectives

The GOA is in the process of finalizing implementation details related to the zonal model despite opposition to the shift from the RMA, ABmunis, Victim Services Alberta, and many VSUs and municipalities across the province. In discussions with the RMA, GOA representatives have dismissed these concerns as a case of service providers that will be impacted by the model prioritizing self-preservation over “the greater good” for victims. This assumption could not be further from the truth. In fact, the RMA has no direct role in representing or advocating for VSUs. However, in its role as an advocate for strong rural communities, the RMA cannot support a policy shift that removes local governance and service delivery control and replaces it with a centralized model, especially when no details are provided as to how the current model is not meeting community needs and how the new model will enhance service quality. While governance and administrative capacity is a consideration in how to design and deliver any service, at the end of the day, service outcomes are what matters most, and the GOA has provided absolutely no response to concerns shared by the RMA and other stakeholders on how service levels informed the decision to shift to a new model.





How will these changes to VSUs affect rural municipalities?

Rural VSUs provide services that reflect the needs of their residents. Under the proposed service delivery changes, dozens of local VSUs would be modified into a four-zone model. It is currently unknown if and how individual communities within each zone will be served, and how local needs will be reflected in a more standardized and centralized approach. However, both the RMA and other stakeholders have shared concerns that services may be eliminated or modified based around the needs of larger communities within each zone.

In addition to the risk of a centralized model leading to reductions in the quality and accessibility of victim services in rural communities, the shift will also further weaken rural communities more broadly by removing a true community service. Highly trained volunteers will no longer have a role, local VSU boards will be disbanded, and rural residents that have dedicated countless hours training and supporting their friends and neighbours through some of the worst moments of their lives will be told their efforts are no longer needed, because a more “professional” system can do it better.

Volunteers are critical to the ongoing success of VSUs. Without the dedication, commitment, and hard work of volunteers, the organizations would be unable to fulfill their missions and mandates. In the unfortunate event that an Albertan falls victim to crime or tragedy, they deserve to have prompt and sustainable access to support.

People across the province have dedicated themselves to volunteering with their local VSUs, a position that requires compassion, dedication, and many hours of training. The new zonal model will not only remove many of these volunteer positions, but also remove unique local community support when victims need it most.



What has the RMA done about this issue?

The RMA has been involved in conversations and consultation about the transition to a new VSU delivery model since the GOA began discussing the shift in 2019. In response to an initial round of GOA consultations on the shift, led by MLAs Angela Pitt and Nathan Neudorf, the RMA provided a formal submission expressing concern with the proposed shift away from the current model. Some of the key questions and concerns raised by the RMA in 2020 that still hold true today include the following:

- ♦ More research is needed on the extent to which the current victim services model meets the needs of victims.
- ♦ The Government of Alberta is not adequately recognizing the importance of the flexibility and collaboration built into the current model.
- ♦ Each of the proposed test concepts (including the zonal model that the GOA ultimately selected) have significant gaps and unanswered questions that must be evaluated before any changes are made.

Specific questions raised by the RMA regarding the zonal concept included:

- ♦ How would regions be developed that are meaningful to stakeholders that are involved with or interact with victim services?
- ♦ How will existing local service delivery be impacted by a regional model?
- ♦ How will decisions on service delivery be made within regions that would likely include multiple large urban municipalities and isolated rural areas?
- ♦ What role (if any) would volunteers have in a regional model?

Three years later, many of these questions remain unanswered, even as a transition to a regional model is confirmed.

At the RMA Spring 2023 Convention, rural municipalities voiced their frustration with the new model by endorsing Resolution 10-23S: Victim Services Delivery Model, which calls on the RMA to continue to advocate for the current service delivery model:

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FURTHER BE IT RESOLVED that the RMA advocate to the Government of Alberta for more consistent funding for the current model and the development of an approach for more consistent regional collaboration and information-sharing within the current model.

The resolution calls for continued funding and support for victim services across the province using the current local service delivery model, while also identifying the systemic underfunding currently taking place.

The RMA recently met with GOA representatives to discuss the implications of the zonal model for VSUs and rural victim services delivery. During the discussion, the RMA voiced concerns about the discontinuation of the current model and the detrimental impacts that the zonal model will have on employees, volunteers, and community members. Despite not providing supporting data or evidence, the GOA argued that the zonal model will provide the same, or better, levels of care for victims, despite it being far removed from local communities.

The RMA also met with representatives from Victim Services Alberta to better understand their concerns with the zonal model, and how the change will impact front-line service delivery, staffing, and volunteers. As community members and victim services experts, they explained that quality and efficient services are critical to community resilience.





Conclusion

Throughout the consultation process, the RMA has consistently argued that the current VSU delivery model is a uniquely Albertan example of a service designed to allow local needs to be met. Any governance issues or poor service delivery outcomes linked to the current model have been the exception and can often be traced to the lack of provincial funding available to build local governance capacity and support service delivery without separate fundraising efforts. Even after several years of engagement, it remains difficult to understand the value of sacrificing the flexibility and collaboration present in the current model to create a standardized, centrally controlled model.

The RMA input into the review process has included concerns with both funding amounts and the relatively short-term nature of the current grant-based approach.

It is extremely disappointing that the GOA has chosen to undergo a costly transformation of victim services and has committed to providing the new model with significantly more funding than existing VSUs receive currently.

Victim services support Albertans of all backgrounds during the most difficult periods of their lives. Unfortunately, the shift to a regional model is much more concerned with creating a centralized and “professional” governance model than with how this change will actually impact the supports available to victims.

Have questions?

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