



RMA
RURAL MUNICIPALITIES
of ALBERTA

Victim Services Update

RMA Member Guide

June 2024



Introduction

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 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.

For over thirty years, local victim services units (VSUs) have provided essential information, support, and local referrals for victims of crime and tragedy. Unfortunately, the Government of Alberta (GOA) is continuing to move forward with a regional model that will replace local VSUs with four service delivery regions, called Regional Victim Serving Societies (RVSS). 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.

Several months ago, RMA released an [issue backgrounder outlining rural municipal concerns](#) with the Government of Alberta’s plan to regionalize victim services. This issue backgrounder raises several concerns that RMA has regarding this redesign, including:

- ♦ That a standardized regional approach to victim services delivery will replace the flexibility and local focus of the existing model.
- ♦ That the GOA plans to provide increased funding for the new model rather than sufficiently fund the current model.
- ♦ That the GOA is moving ahead with this decision without providing any public analysis or data explaining how the current model does not meet service delivery outcomes.
- ♦ That the disconnection of victim services from local police detachments under a regional model will risk timely access to the service for victims.

Since the release of RMA’s issue backgrounder, the GOA has continued with the creation of RVSS, including the formation of four regional governance entities. RMA has become aware of further details of this process and continues to have concerns about the effectiveness of this redesign and its impacts on rural service users, staff, and volunteers.

Contact

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RMA Concerns

Loss of local flexibility

Under the existing model, sixty-two VSUs operate across the province and provide crucial support to victims of crime and tragedy. Although there will continue to be nine municipal and Indigenous VSU programs operated in the largest cities and First Nations in the province, the new victim services model has four regional hubs that will replace the other local VSUs across the province. The four central RVSS will have to support nearly one hundred communities each.

Regionalization of programs often leads to the standardization of service delivery. While standardization is not necessarily an inherently bad thing, it also creates a risk that delivery at a local level will not meet the unique needs of communities. Victims in different communities require unique support, which is what the current localized system offers. Unfortunately, the GOA's plan to regionalize VSUs will remove the ability for these organizations to operate at the level necessary to provide adequate and timely support for victims.

Service levels

Under the new model, GOA decision-makers have suggested that phone support may replace in-person support in instances where victims are too far to access VSU hubs. Despite in-person support being a fundamental and necessary aspect of victim services, there may no longer be access to this service under the regionalized model. This means that victim will be given a "1-800" phone number to call for support as an alternate resource for assistance, rather than having the resources available to provide the required in-person support. This removes the personal nature of victim services and does not follow a trauma-informed approach. Victims of crime and tragedy require timeliness and genuine access to support no matter where they reside. This is especially concerning given that most communities have an existing volunteer network willing to provide in-person support locally.

Staffing

The professionals that assist victims of crime and trauma require a high degree of empathy with corresponding education, experience, and skills. The only way to recruit and retain these professionals is to ensure that they are fairly compensated.

Based on a survey conducted by the Alberta Police-Based Victim Services Association (APBVSA) in 2021, the average VSU program manager wage in Alberta was \$38.41 per hour. In 2023, the City of Calgary conducted a review on the wages for program managers. This review concluded that based on the demands and skills required of this position, program managers should be paid at a base wage of \$52 per hour.

Individuals that serve as program managers in the current local VSU model will be referred to as "court and support navigators" under the new GOA-administered regional model. Despite the fact that program managers are already arguably underpaid in the current local model, the GOA plans to significantly reduce wages for these crucial frontline support positions further. The wage range of court and support navigators has been set at \$27.00 to \$32.40 per hour, a significant decrease from the average paid for a similar role in the local model, and barely above half of what is justified based on the City of Calgary's analysis.

Should they choose to do so, individuals serving in a program manager position in an existing local VSU are required to re-apply for the position of court and support navigator under the new provincially-administered structure. Despite many of these program managers devoting their time and expertise to their position for many

years, they will not automatically transition into the same role after the VSU transition. It is also important to note that many court and support navigator positions will only be part-time, rather than full-time. Considering current victim services program managers have made a livelihood and career out of the positions that they work, many will be unable to step down to part-time positions as it is simply not financially sustainable. It is unclear how these part-time positions will effectively work across the province to fulfill the duties currently being taken on by full-time positions. It is also unclear how retention of employees will be fulfilled when the skills required of this work does not align with the compensation. This shift to part-time positions not only calls into question the provincial claims that the shift to the new model will enhance service levels, it also shows a disregard for maintaining crucially important skillsets in rural Alberta.

The shift to court and support navigators and the corresponding wage cut causes concern for the staffing of VSUs across the province. This raises several questions about how this transition will function, including:

- ♦ Will program managers accept a decrease in pay for the difficult work that they do in order to continue working as a court and support navigator? If they do not, who will fill these roles?
- ♦ Will a part-time position fulfill all of the duties currently being taken on by a full-time position?
- ♦ Will court and support navigators be restricted in the extent and duration of support they provide due to a shift to half-time positions?
- ♦ Will new court and support navigators be qualified to continue the work of previous program managers?
- ♦ Will there be increased staff turnover for employees leaving these positions for higher-paying careers?

Any changes to VSUs across the province should be evidence-based and support the needs of victims. However, the GOA has provided no information on why they believe court and support navigators deserve lowered hourly pay and half-time roles. Considering there is evidence of what the standard should be for program managers/court and support navigators, it is concerning that the GOA has made the decision to cut the wages of these positions with no explanation why.

Budget

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 VSUs with adequate funding. The GOA has allocated \$36 million to assist victims of crimes and tragedy in Budget 2024. Although this is only a slightly lower number than the \$39 million that was allocated to victim services in Budget 2023, it suggests that the GOA is already expecting the regional model to provide an enhanced level of service with less funding. Considering the transition to a new VSU model is the result of the GOA being adamant that current VSU programming is inadequate to serve the needs of Albertans, it is concerning that the budget for victim services is already being decreased.

When discussing how RVSS will be funded, GOA representatives stated that the programs 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. However, there are already budget cuts to victim services for 2024, which calls into question whether the intent of regionalizing is to allow the Government of Alberta to more easily reduce victim service costs and service levels.

Throughout this transition process, RMA's main question has been why the province is willing to increase spending on a new model but is unwilling to support the current local model with adequate funding. Unfortunately, it is now made clear through budget allocations that ensuring victim services have the financial support they need is not a priority of the GOA, and there is likely a long-term provincial intent to significantly reduce service levels and costs in the long-term.

Considering the regionalization of victim services is set to be fully operational by Fall 2024, it is unclear how \$3 million in savings is worth the complete overhaul and regionalization of what is currently effective and localized victim services programming. While the RVSS replace local VSUs, it will become clear that more financial support is needed for access to resources and replace the tireless work of volunteers that will no longer have a role.

Key Messaging

While the transition to a regional model continues, RMA continues to advocate for a shift in government direction to properly support local VSUs. RMA has developed the following key messages for members to bring forward to their MLAs and the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Services.

Regionalization will not meet local needs

- ♦ Any changes to important programs should be made with the intent of improving services from the perspective of service users.
- ♦ Creating four regional hubs to replace sixty-two VSUs across the province cannot adequately support the needs of victims of crime and tragedy.
- ♦ The GOA is moving ahead with regionalization concerns from local VSUs and community members that the redesign will pose significant risks to service quality.

Victims require timeliness access to service and support

- ♦ The foundation of victim services is ensuring that residents have timely access to service and support in their communities in the unfortunate event that they fall victim to crime or tragedy.
- ♦ The new model has not been justified through the lens of service level quality. The focus is on administrative efficiency and centralized control of the service, with the actual frontline impacts viewed as a secondary consideration.
- ♦ The GOA has already confirmed that timely access to services will be compromised in some communities, as residents will either have to travel far distances to reach a hub for support or rely on different 1-800 numbers to navigate getting the help they need.
- ♦ There should be zero barriers for victims to receive the services and support they require in times when they need it most.

Staff require adequate compensation for the work that they do

- ♦ VSU program managers offer invaluable support, such as:
 - ◇ Consulting with victims;
 - ◇ Sudden death notification;
 - ◇ Redirecting victims to additional and external resources;
 - ◇ Providing financial assistance;
 - ◇ Providing victims with an insight and guidance through the court process;
 - ◇ Accompanying the victims to court;
 - ◇ Organizing meetings between the victims and the Crown;
 - ◇ Restitution;
 - ◇ Victim impact statements;
 - ◇ Reviewing statements with victims before they have to testify; and
 - ◇ Fundraising efforts.

These examples paint a picture of the services that VSUs offer, but cannot show the full extent of the work and emotional labour that program managers are subject to on a daily basis.

- ♦ The GOA must ensure that full-time positions remain the standard for victim services employees and that their wages adequately account for the extremely difficult work that they do.

The GOA has provided no evidence as to why the current VSU programming needs to be overhauled

- ♦ Despite arguing that the regional model will improve Alberta's victim services system, the GOA has not 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.
- ♦ There is no evidence available explaining why local VSUs must be overhauled, and there continues to be no known benefits to the community, victims, program managers, or volunteers regarding this change.

The GOA should adequately fund VSU programming that is already successful in communities

- ♦ 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 regional model will effectively remove all of the benefits from the current service delivery model, while costing the GOA the same, if not more, to maintain.