



ACT HUMAN RIGHTS
COMMISSION

Australian Capital Territory

Vicarious Trauma Prevention Policy and Operating Procedure

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Statement of Commitment

The ACT Human Rights Commission (HRC) recognises that its staff may be exposed to hearing about, responding to, or processing information about experiences of trauma, abuse, violence, and exploitation. The HRC is committed to supporting its staff to prevent the development of vicarious trauma associated with such exposure as far as reasonably practicable.

The HRC acknowledges that it has duties to provide a safe work environment under work, health and safety legislation and relevant policies and strategies developed by the ACT Government, including the Justice and Safety Directorate, which are referred to below.

The HRC is committed to providing vicarious trauma training to all staff at induction and further training as required in accordance with the procedures outlined below.

The HRC is also committed to providing clinical supervision, clinical debriefing or non-clinical supervision and debriefing in accordance with the procedures below.

Purpose

The purpose of this policy and the associated procedures is to define vicarious trauma; outline the types of supports that can be provided by the ACT Public Service and the HRC; and the procedures for providing such support.

This policy also aims to introduce more consistency in the provision of support to prevent vicarious trauma at the HRC.

Definitions

Vicarious trauma is 'the negative transformation in the helper that results (across time) from empathic engagement with trauma survivors and their traumatic material, combined with a commitment or responsibility to help them' (Pearlman and Caringi, 2009, 202-203). The greater the exposure to traumatic material, the greater the risk of vicarious trauma. People who work in services to which people with traumatic histories present seeking help, or who work with traumatic material are at particular risk.¹

The HRC provides services, including individual and systemic advocacy for vulnerable people who have often experienced trauma, abuse, violence, and exploitation. These services are provided by the following Commissioners and their staff:

- President and Human Rights Commissioner
- Discrimination, Health Services, Disability and Community Services Commissioner (DHSDCSC)
- Public Advocate and Children and Young People Commissioner (PACYPC)
- Victims of Crime Commissioner (VOCC)

These Commissioners and staff may also need to respond to people threatening suicide or self-harm or threatening them.

¹ <https://www.blueknot.org.au/Workers-Practitioners/For-Health-Professionals/Resources-for-Health-Professionals/Vicarious-Trauma>

Means of providing support to prevent vicarious trauma include:

Clinical supervision, which is a formal professional relationship between two or more people in designated roles that facilitates reflective practice, explores ethical issues, and develops skills.²

Clinical debriefing, which is a conversation among two or more people to review a simulated event or activity in which participants explore, analyse and synthesise their actions and thought processes, emotional states and other information to improve performance in real situations. Debriefing can be highly structured as in formal supervision sessions or can be unstructured, including on the way back to the office after a home visit.³

Non-clinical supervision to individuals and groups, which is focused on unpacking dynamics with clients and cases and impacts on the self and the group.⁴

Vicarious trauma training, which helps staff to deal with the emotional and psychological residue of exposure that individuals experience from working with children, young people and adults who share their stories of abuse and exploitation.⁵

Relevant ACT Government policies and programs

ACTPS Work Health Safety and Wellbeing Strategy 2019-2022

This strategy articulates how the ACTPS strives to create workplaces that are safe and enable staff to be healthy, engaged and skilled to participate fully and perform at their best. The inclusion of supporting mental health and wellbeing demonstrates the government's commitment to addressing mental health risks and creating mentally healthy workplaces.

Healthy Minds Thriving Workplaces -an integrated mental health and well-being strategy 2019-2022

This strategy states that work stressors have a clear impact on mental health in the workplace. People who are exposed to higher levels of trauma and distress are at higher risk of experiencing mental health concerns. Workplaces that support people by assessing and managing stressors can reduce the impact on mental health.

The first two initiatives to provide support under this strategy are Mental Health Guru and Executive Mental Health Champions.

Mental Health Guru is an online program from the Australian National University that is available to all ACTPS employees and assists them to recognise mental health conditions, to understand how they can be managed generally, and in the workplace, and how to get help.

² <http://clinicalsupervision.org.au/clinical-supervision/>

³ https://www.clinedaus.org.au/files/resources/fact_sheet_briefing_and_debriefing.pdf

⁴ <https://www.blueknot.org.au/Supervision>

⁵ <https://professionals.childhood.org.au/course/identifying-and-responding-to-vicarious-trauma-in-staff-and-volunteers/>

Executive Mental Health Champions undertake activities within directorates to prioritise mental health and wellbeing and encourage early intervention. The Executive Mental Health Champion for the Justice and Community Safety (JACS) Directorate is Georgeina Whelan.

ACTPS Protocol for responding to people threatening suicide or self-harm

This protocol provides guidance on the procedures to be followed to ensure the person making the threat and the person receiving the threat receive support. An employee who has received such a threat should notify their manager immediately and be encouraged to access the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) as soon as possible.⁶

ACT Government Managing Occupational Violence Policy

The purpose of this policy is to ensure that directorates develop procedures to protect the health and safety of workers who have the potential to experience occupational violence, which is defined as ‘any action, incident or behaviour that departs from reasonable conduct in which a person is assaulted, threatened, harmed or injured in the course of or as a direct result of his or her work.’ It may include personal intimidation, verbal abuse, threatening behaviour, or abuse through technology (text, emails and phone calls).

JACS Work Health Safety and Wellbeing Plan 2020-2024

This plan supports the ACTPS Work Health Safety and Wellbeing Strategy 2019-2022 and includes objectives that executives, managers, supervisors, and workers have the appropriate knowledge and skills to contribute to continuous improvement of health and safety.

JACS Occupational Violence Guidelines

These guidelines provide a framework for identifying and managing occupational violence, including through the use of de-escalation techniques and duress alarms; reporting of incidents via Riskman⁷ and post-incident support through the EAP or other support programs. The HRC Client Interview Room Procedure provides further information about de-escalation techniques and duress alarms.

Vicarious trauma prevention procedure

Vicarious trauma training

At the induction of a new staff member, the Director of the relevant Commissioner’s team will consult them about any previous vicarious trauma prevention training they have undertaken and determine the type of training to be provided in consultation with the staff member. The Director may delegate this responsibility to another staff member.

The Director or their delegate will refer the staff member to any appropriate training on ACTGov Learn, the JACS Learning Management System or other external training. The staff member will complete the training within a reasonable timeframe.

The Director of the relevant Commissioner’s team or their delegate will review the need for further training with a staff member at least every 6 months and refer the staff member to appropriate

⁶ [Employee Assistance Program \(sharepoint.com\)](https://sharepoint.com)

⁷ [Work Incident Reporting - ACT Government 1602 SR 28](#)

training if needed in the context of their Performance and Development Plan (PADP) and its review every 6 months.

The Director or their delegate will liaise with JACS People and Workplace Strategy (PWS) about approving payment for any external training. If PWS is unable to pay for external training, the Director or their delegate will liaise with the relevant Commissioner about the costs of external training.

Clinical supervision, clinical debriefing or non-clinical supervision to individuals and groups

Clinical supervision, clinical debriefing or non-clinical supervision to individuals and groups will be considered by the Director of the relevant Commissioner's team or their delegate at least every 6 months in consultation with each staff member in the context of their PADP and its review every 6 months.

The Director or their delegate will also adhere to any SOPs or guidelines applicable to their team.

The Director or their delegate will refer the staff member to appropriate clinical supervision, clinical debriefing or non-clinical individual or group supervision. The staff member will attend the clinical supervision, clinical debriefing or non-clinical individual or group supervision within a reasonable time.

The Director or their delegate will monitor any internal and external arrangements for provision of clinical supervision, clinical debriefing or non-clinical individual or group sessions, including any costs of such arrangements and liaise with the relevant Commissioner about these arrangements.

Related Legislation and Policies

- *Work, Health and Safety Act 2011*
- *ACTPS Work Health Safety and Wellbeing Strategy 2019-2022*
- *Healthy Minds Thriving Workplaces -an integrated mental health and well-being strategy 2019-2022*
- *ACTPS Protocol for responding to people threatening suicide or self-harm*
- *ACT Government Managing Occupational Violence Policy*
- *JACS Work Health Safety and Wellbeing Plan 2020-2024*
- *JACS Occupational Violence Guidelines*
- *HRC Client Interview Room procedure*

Review

This document will be reviewed after 12 months of operation