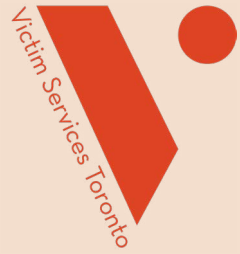


VICTIM SERVICES TORONTO

PERSONALIZED CRISIS SUPPORT INSIDE COMMUNITIES: EXIT ROUTE

Evaluating a new Victim Services Toronto Project

I) SITUATION ANALYSIS

At Victim Services Toronto (VST), crisis counsellors, social workers and case managers provide immediate crisis response, intervention and prevention services to individuals, families and communities affected by crime and sudden tragedies. This includes emotional support, systems advocacy, financial assistance, safety planning, and referrals to appropriate programs.

Teams work from the VST central office at Toronto Police headquarters, with a minimum of two crisis staff in-office at any given time. Toronto Police Service (TPS) collaborates with VST on a range of crimes that include intimate partner violence, assault, human trafficking, homicide and mass casualty events. Most referrals come from constables who often are the first to make contact with victims, and collaborations extend to sergeants and detectives while cases are investigated.

Due to high call volume at the VST central office, staff support is limited to the short term and is sometimes provided in-person. Many referrals originate from the main TPS intake line and, given their volume of calls and the steps needed to connect people to specific VST departments, victims can face a delay in accessing supports in the real time as travel time to location outside of downtown core was hard to manage by workers from the central office

Victims have time-sensitive needs, crises have a cascading nature, and VST was concerned there was a potential gap in delivering timely and culturally sensitive services. There is also the ongoing challenge of staff being able to access only a central bank of community services, which often lack specialized, nearby, or newer programs in each community.

II) SOLUTION: EXIT ROUTE – A PILOT STUDY

With limited capacity to support Toronto's dense urban population, VST conceived a decentralized model of support whereby staff can more closely connect with communities – specialized by neighbourhood, crime, or service. It is called "Exit Route."

It received three-year grant funding to pilot this model, beginning in January 2022. The pilot program's core elements comprised Neighbourhood Victim Advocates, Human Trafficking Specialists, and Housing Specialists.

NEIGHBOURHOOD VICTIM ADVOCATES (NVAS)

VST neighbourhood victim advocates (NVAs) in teams of two serve focused areas of the city, located in four local Toronto Police Services units.

NEIGHBOURHOOD	LOCATION OF NVAS	REASON SELECTED
1) Entertainment District & Parkdale 2) Rexdale	TPS 14 Division TPS 23 Division	Growing population density
3) Jane & Finch 4) West Hill	TPS 31 Division TPS 43 Division	High incidences of intimate partner violence

NVAs are embedded in these communities to provide immediate in-person and on-scene support for victims of crime and sudden tragedies. They connect with clients in-home, in the community, or at a police division. Their versatile role includes case management, advocacy, VQRP+ services, emotional support, crisis intervention, safety planning, and help finding emergency shelter and food.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING (HT) SPECIALISTS

Within Exit Route, decentralized VST staff are specialized by crime, and the initial focus was human trafficking. The Greater Toronto Area has Canada's highest rate of human trafficking and VST has noted a three-fold increase in these victims over the past five years. In 2022 the organization served over 450 survivors.

Two specialists work from the VST central office, in close proximity to the TPS Human Trafficking Enforcement Team and Women's College Hospital. Their support ranges from assessing a victim's primary and medical needs, safety planning to advocacy, emotional support and navigating the system.

HOUSING SPECIALISTS

The housing crisis in Toronto spurred a role where VST staff could develop in-depth knowledge in relation to victimization and crises. This specialist, in the VST central office, primarily supports victims of human trafficking and intimate partner violence, as well as those with complex housing needs. They help complete applications, provide support letters, make referrals, and advocate for each victim's housing needs.

COLLABORATIONS WITH POLICE

TPS officers or detectives first meet with victims, obtain a statement, and then connect them to a NVA or specialist for personalized support. VST staff provide initial and ongoing support that begins at intake, while officers provide investigation updates, address concerns, and file charges if desired. Exit Route staff work daytime shifts from Monday to Friday, with the 24-hour VST Crisis Response Program covering evenings and weekends.

III) EVALUATING EXIT ROUTE'S IMPACT

In January 2023, an external agency evaluated Exit Route's impact to date through interviews, focus groups and written statements from VST staff, TPS staff and clients.

From this qualitative data, the agency analyzed themes and patterns. The program's impact is assessed within the following three key relationships:

1. VST and Victims

THEME: RISING TRUST

In the previous model, victims often connected with different crisis counsellors, leading to a less personal connection and the traumatizing need to repeat their stories. Through Exit Route, VST staff are better positioned to develop deeper relationships with clients. Needs assessments and referrals for support are done at the client's pace, giving time for a trusted relationship to grow while empowering victims to determine their own timeline. Clients report feeling supported to know a single counsellor will be there to understand their situation and emotional and physical needs.

Human trafficking (HT) survivors have layers of repeated trauma,trauma bond and threats which risk becoming normalized to them. Staff report it is more helpful that they be supported by a specialist who can identify red flags and provide the right support.

"Clients may only share what they need in a moment to get the services that are top of mind for them. Over time, by building relationships, they trust you enough to share what else is happening with them. I have a client who only after three months shared with me that she has food security issues. In her culture that would have been seen as a failure, but she finally felt safe and comfortable enough to ask for it." —NVA staff member

"We are in the heart of the community, and building more intimate relationships with the community in their space. We were guests and now we live and stay there with them. When decentralized, you're in the heart of it, you're not on the outside looking at it, you're on the inside now." —NVA staff member

THEME: IMPROVED RELIABILITY

Embedding NVAs inside communities brings improved accessibility to meet clients more efficiently and where they are most comfortable. Clients report being able to rely on VST more for in-person and personalized support.

As all NVAs and HT specialists work in pairs, each member stays updated on one another's clients and can step in to support when needed – which clients understand and rely on. Throughout the day, clients can trust there is VST staff member who knows their story.

"Once when my partner was away, her client needed support in the hospital. As I already knew what supports were in place for this client, I knew this new support they requested was something they qualified for, so I was able to get that right away for her." —NVA staff member

"We needed to get a person to safety right away, out of their home, but there were no shelter spaces available. We needed a taxi, a hotel, and we were in a time crunch. One of us was engaging with the client while the other was on the phone trying to coordinate everything." —NVS staff member

THEME: LONG-TERM SUPPORT

Through Exit Route, VST staff can build longer-term relationships and provide more continuous personalized support – such as checking in to see if their needs are being met through community supports. They can more easily connect to community agency staff to help move clients off waitlists, gauge if other support is needed, and learn ways to transition clients to longer-term services.

In the centralized model, two crisis staff could offer only short-term support and had to prioritize cases based on urgency. Exit Route opens the opportunity to have a nuanced understanding of clients' long-term goals and offer more proactive personalized support.

"For clients to have a consistent connection on a human to human level has so much more power than just connecting them to services, because they know there's someone that always has their back. Having one person with them throughout their journey allows for consistency… when their whole life has been inconsistent." —HT specialist

"I have a client who is staying in a hotel for safety. She was new to the country and didn't learn how to get around as her partner was controlling. I was able to meet her at her

hotel lobby and walk her to Shoppers Drug Mart and get the passport photos. With the prior model, this walk wouldn't have been high priority. As she's in a hotel, it would be considered that she's in a safe space, and they need to attend to other issues that have immediate safety concerns, but this woman needed this support to leave the country." —NVA staff

2. VST and Community Partners

THEME: CLOSER CONNECTION TO APPROPRIATE RESOURCES

Prior to Exit Route, VST crisis counsellors had to sift through a central binder of community resources to find services for clients, who then had to contact these agencies themselves.

During the pilot study, NVAs report being able to get a firmer grip on the unique community, health and social services available in their neighbourhood. They attend events, reach out to agencies, and join community networks and committees including FOCUS Toronto community hubs devoted to the most vulnerable residents.

Together with community partners, NVAs and specialists can better advocate for all clients, and expedite appropriate supports. For instance, HT specialists collaborated with nurses at the Women's College Hospital sexual assault unit to simplify the intake process and fast-track clinical assessments that open access to additional services.

"When you're on the outside, community agencies can tell you they have a waitlist and are at capacity, but when you're embedded in their community, advocacy takes on a new level. We're better able to advocate for clients to ensure they're not falling through the cracks." —NVA staff

"When advocating for VQRP funding, it's easier when you're only doing HT-specific cases. When your brain isn't pulled into different crime types, you're able to focus and so it cuts down time to do advocacy piece. You also learn what to share, you don't want to overly disclose someone's trauma history, so you can get supports while protecting their confidentiality." —HT Specialist

THEME: CLIENTS PLACE GREATER TRUST IN COMMUNITY AGENCIES

Exit Route has enabled NVAs to form close relationships with agency employees, connections that provide an insider's view on available resources, waitlists and eligibility criteria involved – and the ability to make personal introductions to clients.

At Women's College Hospital, HT specialists can call ahead and arrange for a survivor's seamless intake straight to a sexual assault care team. This type of "warm transfer" ensures fulsome victim support, without the burden on clients to reach out on their own.

As clients trust in VST staff grows, they are more likely to extend that trust to service providers being recommended – better enabling the "wrap-around" service they need.

"A survivor has been trafficked by one person. When we can break that and bring in community, for the survivor the feeling is that 'now I have a whole community.'" —HT manager

"Before this model, we wouldn't get feedback from service providers on their waitlists. Clients were given referrals and would contact the agency on their own. Now because we have a closer relationship with community partners, we don't even refer clients to a service until the waitlist is clear, thereby removing a barrier for them." —NVA staff

3. VST and Toronto Police Services

THEME: INCREASED OPENNESS OF VICTIMS TO SUPPORTS THROUGH VST

Situated inside police divisions, NVAs can personally introduce themselves to clients and put often apprehensive victims at ease. NVAs report that connecting with clients so soon after they report a crime has helped to build greater trust and stronger relationships than over phone calls.

Clients quickly understand that VST staff are not police but are instead there to support them – bringing a sense of comfort and empathy that helps them deescalate post-crisis.

"When we call the central line for VST, we may never hear back. We may hear the name of a crisis counsellor who received the message but we wouldn't know who they are or how to reach them, and therefore different staff every shift. Now we can go directly to NVAs." —TPS Detective

"When meeting a client in person for the first time, I can see when they are tired and physically exhausted. I can offer them a bottle of water and tissue if the client is emotional. I can read their body language and see that even these small gestures help to calm them down." —NVA staff

THEME: IMPROVED COMMUNICATION

The close proximity between police and NVAs inside divisions provides more opportunities (both scheduled

and impromptu) to confidentially discuss client status, new developments, and investigation updates. This enables more proactive client support, as VST staff can determine what information could empower victims: if the accused is in custody or being released, bail conditions, and other important details.

This enhanced TPS-VST communication extends to speaking with clients together, a combined expertise that lets them pick up on different details that inform the most appropriate supports for each victim.

"Now having two NVAs who are part of the team (means) they're included, they're updated, they're more informed, and they can forge better connections with the victim." —TPS Detective

"[The NVA] would say, 'We're going to meet with the client tomorrow, I noticed a mood change, she sounds panicked. Is there anything that's changed in her case that I should know about? Victims are always concerned for their safety and who could get to them. (Meeting with them) is less a formal interaction with police; it's more fluid and more authentic and they see that we care." —TPS Detective

THEME: INCREASED SAFETY FOR CLIENTS

Exit Route's collaborations between HT officers and VST's HT and housing specialists enables faster client support. Officers report that for dynamic cases, this model has helped give victims more immediate support in the all-important early window of time.

This has boosted a sense of safety for clients, with an accused's whereabouts unknown. For HT survivors, this is especially pertinent, as they need urgent safety plans to keep them safe and minimize the risk of them returning to their trafficker out of fear.

This tighter web of support replaces past issues where clients call the central VST number or an officer's number, which may ignite a fear of contacting authorities and also having to follow up if they can't reach someone. In Exit Route, VST staff can serve as intermediaries between victims and police, and collectively adjust safety plans in real time.

"When someone isn't supported right away, this gap of time gives time for the complainant to 'cool off' and feel they don't need support whereas if you offer supports right away, people who could benefit from supports are more likely to say yes. (This) has the potential to avoid further crises and trauma." —TPS Superintendent

"Although police receive training on being compassionate, VST staff are more skilled to support victims with their emotional needs. Now when I have a notification (that an accused is granted bail), the NVA can connect with the victim and I can ask the NVA to sit in with me… as I share information with them." —TPS Detective

THEME: GREATER STAFF CONTINUITY

The closer proximity between TPS officers and NVAs gives greater transparency into schedules, shifts and who to contact in someone's absence – all generating timely support needed.

This continuity is important when cases unfold over weeks, months or even years. Exit Route has forged closer connections between NVAs, frontline police officers and the courts, resulting in improved communication between these teams and the victim, for whom VST staff can serve as advocate and conduit.

NVAs who work in different regions can also collaborate and ensure clients stay well-served and well-informed should they live in one division but have experienced an incident in another.

"An incident happened in 31 Division but (the victim) lives in another division. An NVA in the division where they live was able to call the 31 Division NVA to learn if the person's partner who has been abusive was bailed out of jail. For this client, the uncertainty of their abuser's whereabouts was creating anxiety. In being able to communicate this information to the client in a timely way, I could see the severity of their crisis go down." —NVA staff

"A NVA may have first engaged with an officer's supervisor on a case and so if that supervisor isn't available the next time, the NVA can now go to the detective sergeant and (obtain) further details on the case. There's no need for the NVA to validate who they are in order to get this information – they're part of the team." —TPS Superintendent

THEME: VICTIMS STAY CONNECTED TO THE INVESTIGATION

For many victims, interactions with police and decisions on providing statements and pressing charges can feel daunting. VST staff can reassure them, answer questions, and provide emotional support wherever needed, at any stage in the resulting legal process. Because this VST staff also has a close relationship with police, clients feel more open to staying involved in the investigative process.

Since it takes a long time to reach court, HT survivors risk dropping out of sight. For them, knowing they have a trusted HT specialist to return to anytime lets them feel better connected and better supported, while helping the investigation underway.

"Clients feel safe with us. Because they have trust in us and we have a relationship and trust in the [police] human trafficking team, they are willing to (engage) and see if it fits for them." —HT specialist

"Without this model, the onus is on a victim to call an officer if they need to share something about their situation or need questions answered. If they don't call us, we don't know what we're missing." —TPS Superintendent

THEME: MORE MEANINGFUL VST-TPS CONNECTIONS

Through Exit Route, interactions between VST staff and police are more meaningful and lead to a deeper appreciation of one another's roles. After one year of Exit Route, officers report feeling there is someone they can rely on to help support their cases – specifically with the victimization aspect. NVAs say that their relationships with police have only grown stronger and more trustworthy.

Police have greater awareness of VST's specialized knowledge on how best to support victims and, while most officers will seek help from people in times of crisis, they have a more limited knowledge of appropriate community resources, and their time is better spent on criminal investigation.

"Before, I rarely used Victim Services and it was a long wait (when we called). There was a real disconnect, and a lot of our resources were being devoted to victim care instead of arresting the accused. Not only was that a concern for the victim but it was also a public safety concern. To have Victim Services staff there with them is a world of difference." —TPS Detective

"Prior to this program investigators were doing their job in addition to locating and advocating [for] supports for clients. The relationship that has been built between the HT specialists and the investigators has fostered a collaboration of supports. We are no longer working in silos. [This has] decreased the time for clients to access specialized support." —HT Detective

"I have found having [access to] a housing worker even more useful than I could have imagined. I feel as though getting a victim into a permanent home versus having the accused or victim stay with friends or family during the court process has helped them move on and become more independent." —TPS Detective Constable

"These two [NVAs] are very attuned to community and very responsive to suggestions on how best to meet the needs of victims. In my 35 year career, these are some of the top two staff I've ever worked with." —TPS Division Detective

IV) EQUITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

The neighbourhoods of Parkdale, Rexdale, Jane Finch and West Hill are home to an above-average number of racialized and immigrant Torontonians who face language barriers and social inequities.

As Exit Route has facilitated more engagement and in-person interaction, most staff report an improved ability to connect with clients through race, ethnicity and/or language, and build relationships with a wider array of agencies that provide culturally sensitive supports.

Race: All NVAs identify as people of colour. For clients of the same race, it has meant NVAs can build a more trusting relationship. Clients report feeling more supported as a result of someone who has experienced racism themselves.

Culture and Ethnicity: NVAs who share these traits with clients report having a more intimate understanding of the experiences being shared with them. In turn, clients feel more understood and more comfortable asking for help.

Language: Many NVAs and specialists speak multiple languages, which they report helps them better understand a victim's issues and trauma. They can also more efficiently reach an interpreter if needed and sit in-person together with them on a call.

Gender: For female victims of sexual assault, it is reassuring to be connected to a female NVA. VST did embed one male NVA in Exit Route, which officers report is helpful for supporting male victims.

"One of the biggest connections I can make is with clients from Central Asian or South Asian as we share these demographics. I understand cultural tendencies, for example related to domestic violence and honour killings, and so they feel more comfortable." —NVA staff

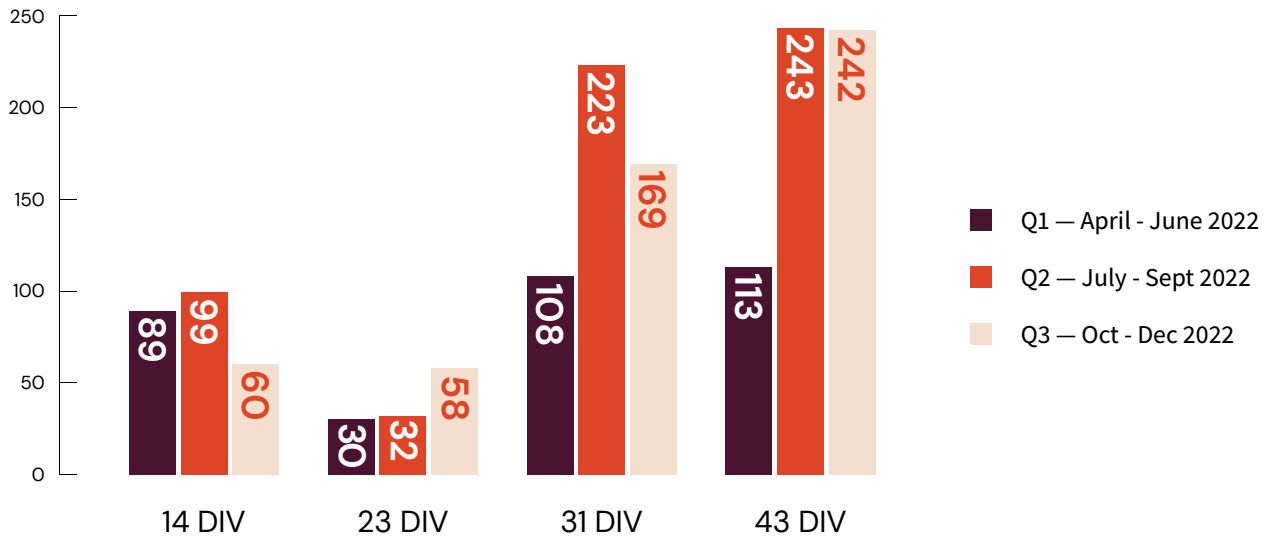
"There are clients who walk into 31 Division, when they see me, they ask in Mandarin if I speak Mandarin. When I say I speak Mandarin and Cantonese, there is immediate relief showing in their body language and verbally they are more open towards myself and this seems to make them less anxious around police." —NVA staff

"As a woman from the Turkish Community, I have supported other Turkish individuals. When clients attend the division or connect with me by a referral, immediately there is much appreciation expressed as it is comforting to know that someone from their community will be supporting them." —NVA

"Having a male and female Victim Services staff at the division is helpful. For female victims of sexual assault, I can connect them to [the female NVA] and for male victims, such as young high school boys who are victims of stabbings, they connect better with [the male NVA]" —Detective

V) EXIT ROUTE – KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. Referrals have risen. The pilot study found that referrals to Exit Route staff rose from April through December 2022 – in the case of two divisions, more than doubling from Q1 to Q2.



2. More trusted relationships. A clear major benefit is strengthened ties between service providers and victims, and between VST and TPS – whose collaborations helps victims understand VST's distinct role and trust their support during vulnerable times.

3. Fewer barriers for victims to access supports. This includes greater access to services, warm transfers to services, and greater communication across all channels. By reducing or eliminating barriers, such as fear of contacting police or expressing safety concerns, fewer victims "fell through the cracks".

4. More efficient use of resources by VST and TPS. For VST staff to focus on a neighbourhood or crime, they report a greater focus on serving their caseload and finding more appropriate supports. Greater collaborations mean all involved can devote more time to their areas of expertise.

5. Potential increase in arrests. While one year is an insufficient sample size, VST and TPS feel Exit Route will spur more prosecutions as victims are more likely to stay connected to investigations and feel more empowered and safer to press charges.

6. Reduced cases of intimate partner violence. The four TPS divisions report fewer victims than in previous years whereas in other divisions, the number of IPV cases has risen or remained level. This may speak to how more long-term robust support can prevent patterns of repeated abuse.

7. Stronger client-centered approach. Exit Route allows for clients to continue at their own pace and discretion with more consistent and effective supports. The interdisciplinary approach by TPS and VST keeps clients and their needs in focus.

VI) EXIT ROUTE – NEEDS

Members of TPS and VST identified specific needs to ensure the decentralized model is as successful as possible.

MORE VST STAFF AND RESOURCES TO MEET DEMAND

Greater awareness of Exit Route, particularly specialists, has triggered a rising flow of referrals from clients, officers and community agencies – and as a result of word spreading among victims themselves.

Through this model, staff provide ongoing support to clients, and caseloads can quickly rise whereby demand outstrips capacity. One NVA reported that on any given day she may be working on five existing clients, manage 10 new referrals, and provide impromptu support to police or clients in person.

There is a clear need for NVAs embedded across police divisions for more fulsome support across the city as currently staff may support only those in their division.

EVENING AND OVERNIGHT COVERAGE

Many crimes, including human trafficking and sexual assault, are more common on evenings and weekends, when Exit Route staff do not work. The central VST crisis line is the catch-all during these times, but lacks the specialized knowledge needed to, for instance, guide a HT survivor or other victim toward help and shelter. It is not sustainable for NVAs and HT specialists to work longer shifts to keep up with a growing demand, as they are at acute risk of vicarious trauma and burnout.

ADDITIONAL EXIT ROUTE SPECIALISTS

Due to rising demand and limited affordable housing options, more housing specialists are imperative to explore possible solutions for victims who otherwise face long waitlists, shelters at capacity, or potentially unsafe hotels. Additionally, given that deeper expertise in a crime enables staff to provide more personalized support, there is a need to broaden specialist roles to cover such areas as homicide, assault, and sex crimes.

HIRING INDIGENOUS STAFF

While purposefully diverse in staff, VST presently has no Indigenous members. NVAs and HT specialists report that many clients identify as Indigenous, and statistics show high proportions of Indigenous victims of crime in Toronto and in Canada. Indigenous Exit Route staff would enable greater person-centered support, Indigenous-specific crisis response, and access to more traditional, ceremonial and culturally relevant supports.

VII) CLIENT PERSPECTIVES ON EXIT ROUTE

"Victim Services has been a life line for me and my daughter…I cannot express the gratitude I feel for the people who have helped me. I feel this service is essential and if I had not been able to access it I do not know what i would have done. They provided me and my daughter safety and helped me get back home, which I will be eternally grateful for." —Client, 23 Division

"My husband abused me and even a lot of time he abused me, he tortured me but before that, I couldn't take step against my husband, but [date/month] 2022 my life was changed. That time you helped me a lot and even support me financially by giving me Walmart coupons. Even when you contact me a lot to confirm that is that I am ok, that's really very big…you gave me a lots of knowledge related to my rights in this country…maybe I [would have] attempted suicide for this tough situation but you came into my life like an angel…you gave me confidence that I will be stand that's very big thing…you helped me to fill my Ontario works application. I can't forget you because you change my life from hell to heaven. At the present moment with your help I am starting my first job McDonald's as a crew member…that's a big thing, you supported me in searching for jobs." —Client, 43 Division

"In [month/date], 2022 when [my partner] was charged and arrested for assault and uttering death threats, two police constables from 23 Division removed him from our home…he had conditions to his release, mainly not having any contact with me at all…I was truly happy he was physically gone from my life however, I couldn't help but feel broken as a person. This feeling quickly changed when I reached out to Victim Services of Toronto…two days later I received a call from [the housing specialist] explaining her role with VST…[the housing specialist] immediately made me feel that I was going to be okay and heal…[her] words were soothing and comforting. Her kindness toward me as she worked toward completing the housing application process was profound. [She] genuinely cared about me…[she] met with me at my local library to complete the applications. By working with VST I was able to press a "reset button" on my life…without VST's intervention my tragic situation would have completely shattered my life. —Client, 23 Division

"I am a single mother of two. I went through a hard time with my husband. The police offered to help and the next day, [NVA] reach out to me. It was so good to get support from her. She listened, she gave advice. I had my head on my shoulders and I just needed extra help. She was always checking, and asking for updates on how we're doing. She helped to get a counselling program for my kids. There was some information the police needed from me regarding my husband's belongings. It was like tag to try to reach the police so [NVA] was able to reach the police for me. [NVA] was so wonderful" —Client, 31 Division