

**Media Release:**

**Supporting survivors, children and vulnerable witnesses in the Australian Capital Territory**

This week, the police have announced the success of the ACT Intermediary Program, introduced a year ago to protect children and vulnerable witnesses in the state's criminal justice system. Similar schemes have been introduced in New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania, and a Queensland scheme will commence in July.

IGFF first wrote to the ACT Attorney-General regarding the challenges vulnerable witnesses face in May 2020.

The use of witness intermediaries to support those in the ACT pursue justice is a crucial step forward, and we commend the government's choice to implement this recommendation of the *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*.

The decision to embark on a justice pathway can be an extremely intense and vulnerable time for survivors. For survivors of institutional child sexual abuse, court processes can rekindle historical trauma and retraumatise those bravely seeking justice.

The Attorney-General, and the ACT Government, are right to recognise that legal proceedings are an incredibly stressful time for survivors, and this is an important acknowledgment – yet criminal courts are not the only way that survivors seek recognition and redress.

As it stands, as in Tasmania and other jurisdictions, in ACT civil trials self-represented defendants are permitted to directly question their alleged victims. This means that survivors can be cross-examined by their abusers in court.

Without specific protections for these vulnerable witnesses, survivors are unable to access justice on an equal playing field. There is an urgent need to redress this injustice, and make sure that there is true equality for all before the law.

Acknowledging the impact of court proceedings on vulnerable witnesses in criminal cases is a key step forward, and we applaud the ACT Government's decision and hope that other Australian states and territories soon follow suit.

However, this reform is simply not enough on its own. We hope that these same protections will soon extend to all survivors seeking to tell their truth in a court of law:

There is still much work to be done in making it safe for all to speak.

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*Clare Leaney is CEO of In Good Faith Foundation, a national charity and support service providing advocacy services to individuals, families and communities impacted by institutional abuse for over twenty years.*

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