



Office of Public
Prosecutions
Victoria



OPP Court Dog Program Evaluation



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Background

The Office of Public Prosecutions (OPP) commenced Australia's first Court Dog Program in 2017. In 2018 the program Coordinator Julie Morrison was awarded a Churchill Fellowship to study court dog programs in the USA and Canada. This opportunity and the experiences and lessons learnt, enabled the OPP to start a full-time program in 2019. The Fellowship report can be found [here](#).

The OPP now has two dogs available to support victims and witnesses as they interact with the criminal justice system. The dogs, Lucy and Kiki, were provided by [Assistance Dogs of Australia](#) who are members of [Assistance Dogs International\(ADI\)](#). ADI and the [International Guide Dog Federation](#) set the international benchmark standards for facility dogs.

Julie Morrison also provides support to other agencies and state jurisdictions, assisting them to start court dog programs.

While there is strong anecdotal data supporting the use of court dogs, there has been a lack of quantitative data. Many agencies who are interested in starting a program are asking if there is data to support the positive role of the dog in the criminal justice system. This project evaluation seeks to address this need.

This project was made possible by The Winston Churchill Trust's Impact Fund, supporting Churchill Fellows to achieve impact in Australia following their Fellowship travels. Read more about the Churchill Trust and other Fellowship stories via the [website](#). The OPP also provided financial support to the project.

To reduce the possibility of an unintentional bias from an internal evaluation, [Paper Giant](#) was chosen to undertake the evaluation. Paper Giant is an Australian-based company expert in mixed method research. It's aim is to better help organisations create positive impact through work that considers the perspectives and lived experience of the people it affects.

Project aims

This project aims to contribute insight into the following research aims.

- Better understand the impact court dogs are having on victims in the criminal justice system.
- Identify how the Court Dog Program could be improved to better support victims.
- Build the case for expanding the Court Dog Program to allow for more dogs working across more parts of the criminal justice system.

Research framework

Considerations

The highest ethical standards were applied to all parts of this research.

1. A trauma informed methodology underpinned all stages in the research. Participants were not asked to recount the criminal experience or the nature of the offending against them. The research focused on how the court dog program impacted them.
2. An internal ethics review was conducted and a conservative approach was adopted with victims. Only adults and parents/guardians of children were approached. Children and adults with cognitive impairment were not approached.
3. Participation was voluntary and participants were offered the opportunity to opt out of the research at any stage. All communications with victims included contact details for the Victims of Crime Helpline and other mental health services such as Lifeline.
4. For those participants that were interviewed, identifiable data was only collected with informed consent.
5. Paper Giant is ISO-certified and the survey platform chosen was [Qualtrics](#). Qualtrics is also an ISO-certified organisation and ensures information security best practices in asset management, access control, cryptography, and network security.

Methodology

A mixed methods design was adopted which incorporated both a survey and one on one interviews. This resulted in both quantitative and qualitative insights to build the evidence base.

Phase 1 Survey

The survey was designed to measure the effectiveness of the Court Dog Program against the stated program objectives of reducing anxiety and enhancing the fact-finding process.

- Survey structure

There were three dedicated cohorts that were surveyed, each having its own survey flow and focus. The primary cohort were victims who have lived experience of the Court Dog Program. Supporters, family members and / or guardians of victims are also considered part of the primary cohort. This cohort was asked questions on their thoughts and opinions of the impact of the Court Dog Program on their well-being.

The secondary cohort – made up of Judges, Solicitors, Social Workers and Intermediaries – also had its own dedicated survey flow. This cohort was asked questions that focussed on the court procedural considerations.

The third cohort was the general public, who helped enrich the attitudes and perceptions of the Court Dog Program.

Risk containment strategies embedded into the survey were successful in ensuring the data was not contaminated or compromised by survey bots.

- Recruitment and engagement

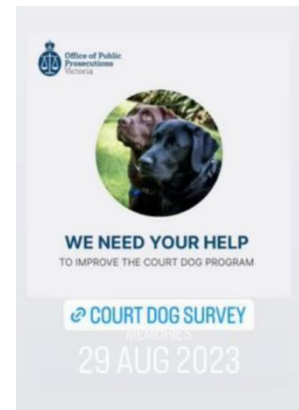
Direct recruitment of the victims of crime was done through email and text message. Victims and parents/guardians of children supported by Lucy or Kiki from 2021 to Sept 2023 were contacted. There was a response rate of around 35 per cent, which was very positive especially given there were no incentives included.

The second cohort – workers in the justice system – were recruited directly via the OPP website.

An invitation to participate in this research was also promoted through Lucy’s Instagram profile. This enabled more victims supported prior to 2021 to participate. Posters in court and other relevant waiting rooms that included a QR code linked to the survey also captured respondents.

Participants were given the opportunity to include comments for each question. The response rate for these was extremely high with over 300 comments received across all three cohorts.

Instagram Post with link to Survey



- Margin of error

Margin of error describes how likely it is that the survey results reflect the views from the overall population and the smaller the number the better. For this research, the margin of error was calculated at 10 per cent.

Based on sample sizes achieved, the quantitative findings found in this report are judged to be cautiously representative of the populations of interest.

- Survey respondents

Victims/guardians	68
Family/friend of a victim	5
Workers in the justice system	111
Members of the public	84
Other	12
Total	280

Phase 2 Interviews

The interviews were conducted to both validate research hypotheses and generate new findings that complement survey insights.

- Interview structure

The interviews were done remotely in a semi-structured way that built off a pre-prepared and agreed upon discussion guide. The interviews were up to one hour and covered attitudes towards and experiences with the Court Dog Program.

- Interview participants

Three key stakeholder groups were identified and interviewed.

Victims	2
County Court Judges	2
Intermediary	1
Total	5

To reduce the risk of legal disclosure, only victims whose matters were finalised before the court were chosen for interview.

Key findings

1. Court dogs are a valued source of support for victims and witnesses
2. Court dogs save money and promote better access to justice
3. The demand for more court dogs is widespread
4. Court dogs do not adversely impact court proceedings
5. The Court Dog Program should look to improve awareness, communications and coordination of the program

1. Court dogs are a valued source of support for victims and witnesses

Survey respondents were asked a number of questions on how the presence of the dog made them feel. Response options were 'A great deal, A lot, A moderate amount, A little, Not at all'. For the purposes of analysis, any response rate of 'Moderate, A Lot, A Great deal' was taken as a positive response.

Nearly all victims reported feeling stressed and anxious about their day in court (99 per cent), while 74 per cent reported feeling overwhelmed. However, results suggest that the Court Dog Program is an effective support measure that helps mitigate some of these strong negative emotions and promote a sense of calm.



The majority of victims also reported that the court dog was helpful and grounding to them during their time in court.



It appears that the benefits of the court dog often start long before the day of the court proceedings. Interestingly, 93 per cent of victims responded feeling less overwhelmed and 86 per cent felt less stressed when they were told that Lucy or Kiki was booked for them.

If Lucy wasn't in my life, I would not have survived.
– Victim

Lucy gave me the confidence to address a murderer.
– Victim

My child is disabled and going through a traumatic court experience could have been a lot worse if we'd not had the dog to help. When we talk about going to court we focus on how Kiki and Lucy made her feel, not the negative. Thanks to those who've piloted this project.
– Parent / guardian of victim

There is nothing as powerful a signal of safety as a dog asleep at your feet. Because if there was a threat, that dog would not be asleep at your feet.
– Intermediary

My daughter was so excited when she heard it's gonna be a dog there. It helped her during the breaks to take her mind off what was going on.
– Parent / guardian of victim

I found my support dog very grounding and she had a positive effect on my anxiety and overwhelming feelings. She was great and so attentive, calming and so beautiful. Thank you so much for the positive effect on me when I was with this beautiful dog.
– Victim

2. Court dogs save money and promote better access to justice

Victims and witnesses who are often dealing with emotional distress and anxiety, reported finding comfort and support in the calming presence of court dogs, enabling them to express themselves more effectively and with greater clarity. This is supported by the responses from workers in the justice system.

94%

Of workers in the justice system believe victims and witnesses get through their evidence more efficiently

Victims and witnesses who are able to express themselves more clearly are also less likely to take as many breaks. This leads to fewer delays which benefits the victim or witness, the accused and the court itself.

Another compelling benefit of the Court Dog Program is that it saves time in a costly court environment. Courts are expensive to operate. Delays are costly and can quickly add up.

Conservative estimates of the costs of running a court dog program* and the costs of running a court hearing, show the following;

30
minutes

A time saving of 30 minutes per hearing is enough to make the Court Dog Program cost-neutral

* Figures based on OPP costs of running a program for 10 years with an average of 50 hearings per year.

If you've got a really upset complainant who breaks down and cannot go on. That means proceedings have to stop. You've got the enormous expense of a full courtroom, every day in court cost 1,000s and 1,000s of dollars.

– Judge

The money that is spent on having an extra dog or more is absolutely worth it

– Judge

It's about resources, because it [victim distress] means you've got to have a lot more breaks. Sometimes the witness is so distressed that you've got to come back on a different day.

– Judge

3. The demand for more court dogs is widespread

94%

Of all respondents across the three cohorts
advocate for more court dogs

This positive response was also reflected in the optional open questions. When asked for improvements and feedback about the program, 148 respondents were very clear in their support for more court dogs. This near unanimous backing extends across the justice spectrum, including victims, justice workers and the general public, all recognising the benefits that the court dogs bring to the legal landscape. A common request was that dogs be available for support in regional areas.

The call for more dogs is echoed by the call for more access across the justice system landscape. When asked if there were other areas where court dogs could add value, the response was as follows.

91 %

Children's Court

89 %

Family Court

73 %

Crisis response

71 %

Police

While 75 per cent of workers in the justice system strongly agree that victims should have the right to a support dog, it's essential to balance this with the perspective that proceedings should not be unduly delayed due to the unavailability of court dogs.

As our justice system continues to evolve into a more supportive and accessible setting, careful consideration should be placed on improving access to support programs, like court dogs, without compromising the efficiency of legal proceedings.

More court dogs are needed to meet the demand. For sexual assault cases involving young children or very vulnerable complainants, [they] would be greatly assisted by more court dogs being available.
– Worker in the justice system

More dogs would make witness support easier. So very clearly my only concern with the program is scarcity.
– Intermediary

I feel the program needs to be expanded to every part of the legal system
– Victim

It has been an overwhelmingly positive experience but more dogs and handlers are required and dogs need to be available all over the State.
– Worker in the justice system

4. Court dogs do not adversely impact court proceedings

95%

Of workers in the justice system do NOT have any concerns about the impact of the dog

The concerns raised were around:

- the welfare of the dog
- whether other victim-centred practices could have an equal or greater impact
- in its current form of two dogs, it isn't equitable as many victims and witnesses miss out
- the potential influence on the jury.

The last concern around the influence of the dog on the jury is an important one as it risks undermining the credibility of the program. Highlighting that the program is not designed around generating sympathy for the victim and that it is a proven support program that helps witnesses to give their best evidence, could help to combat this concern.

While these concerns were raised, it must be remembered that the number was very low and should not overshadow the lack of concerns from the vast majority of workers in the justice system.

Feedback from the interviews with the judges supported the lack of concerns with the dogs. Both judges spoke about how the training of the dogs ensures that interruptions to proceedings just don't happen.

The OPP follows the international benchmark standards for Court Dog Programs developed by the [Courthouse Dogs Foundation](#). These state that only dogs from accredited training schools should be used as court dogs. Accreditation is through [Assistance Dogs International](#) or the [International Guide Dog Federation](#). This ensures the highest standards of breeding, training and selection of dogs.

The ideal dogs tend to have low energy levels, minimal reactivity, high trainability, and exceptional resilience. The breeding and training program focuses on cultivating dogs with consistently reliable and predictable temperaments and behaviours. This is essential within the legal environment, considering that any mishap from the dog could potentially lead to its removal or an appeal during the conviction process.

They are incredibly well trained. I have never seen a court dog interrupt proceedings

– Judge

The training is so good now, there's just no issues

– Judge

5. The Court Dog Program should look to improve awareness, communication and coordination of the program

The program should look to improve the information flow and modernise the booking system

While the most common opportunities for program improvement relate to introducing more dogs and acquiring more resources, there was a strong sample of respondents who requested improvements on the operational side – more information, more awareness and better systems. Improvements to the information flow, such as easily accessed plain language onboarding guides will help victims, intermediaries and social workers better understand the program.

Better booking systems was a common issue raised. A solution that improves the transparency around court dogs' availability should be considered. The earlier victims know they have a dog available, the earlier they can start to benefit from less intense negative emotions around their court appearance.

Handler availability was another issue raised. When bookings have to be cancelled due to lack of a handler, the victims/ witnesses/ parents/guardian expressed disappointment and frustration. Added to this are the loss of benefits that the dog would have brought before and on the day had they been available.

Increase efforts to engage with the community and build more awareness

Enhancing the understanding of legal professionals and social workers regarding the benefits court dogs offer to vulnerable victims and how the program operates is essential for maintaining this communication link to the public.

Considering alternative strategies to increase awareness is important too. Social media, like Lucy's Instagram page, raises awareness through the sharing of uplifting stories, serving as a source of positivity for many victims and general public. The OPP website is another opportunity to be further explored for opportunities such as victim case studies.

Continued efforts to secure media publicity are valuable in building credibility and trust, not only for the Court Dog Program but also for the justice system at large.

96%

Of victims who follow Lucy on Instagram found it positive to stay connected to her

The booking process is a bit cumbersome

– Worker in the justice system

More awareness for court users so they know service is available if needed.

– Victim

Educating legal professionals about the benefits of including a court dog during the investigation and prosecution of crimes and other stressful legal proceedings.

– Worker in the justice system

More availability of dogs and handlers. My child had a dog booked for a sentencing hearing which was cancelled the day before due to resourcing issues. It impacted her greatly not to have the comfort of the dog that had been planned.

– Parent/Guardian

Having more secure bookings and better organisation- I wasn't sure I was 100 per cent booked until I went into the OPP, despite having this date booked for months prior

– Victim

Summary

1. Court dogs help victims and witnesses feel more calm and less overwhelmed.
2. Court dogs help victims and witnesses feel more grounded.
3. Court dogs help people to give their evidence. Better evidence leads to fewer delays.
4. Court dogs offer exceptional value.
5. There is nearly universal support for more Court Dogs.
6. Better access is requested to more areas across the justice system.
7. Procedural concerns with the Court Dog Program are rare.
8. Court Dog training standards ensure disruptions are rare.
9. The coordination and booking system should be improved and modernised.
10. Efforts to improve program awareness should be expanded.

Court dogs are a source of comfort to victims and witnesses.
They do not adversely affect proceedings and they save resources.
The program requires further investment so it
can expand to help more people.

Recommendations

1. Expand the collateral that demonstrates the value of the Court Dog Program e.g. document case studies of those with lived experience of the Court Dog Program.
2. Expand the information on the OPP website and consider including;
 - o how the program works including transparency about the booking system and dog availability
 - o case studies
 - o more information about the dogs.
3. Share the collateral often and widely to build awareness.
4. Improve and automate the booking system including transparency around dog availability.
5. Increase dog availability by investing in training more handlers.
6. Continue to gather quantitative and qualitative data through exit surveys.
7. Look for ways to gather data on the cost saving efficiency proposition made in this research.
8. Identify funding opportunities for expansion of the program.
9. Create an advocacy and community engagement strategy to continue to promote the benefits of the Court Dog Program.
10. Build strong partnerships with key stakeholders in government and legal system who advocate for a compassionate and supportive approach to the criminal justice system.

The impact of the Court Dog Program was profound. It's not something you can quantify or quite explain unless you yourself have been a victim of crime and had to go through the stress of the system. To have Lucy there made me feel loved and human, in what was otherwise a very dehumanising process. Lucy distracted me from being panicked before court and she eased my worries during cross examination.

- Victim

For more information about this report or the Court Dog Program, contact Julie Morrison at the Office of Public Prosecutions; julie.morrison@opp.vic.gov.au.