



COTA Victoria

2020—2021 Review



Promoting Opportunities. Protecting Rights. For people 50+



Celebrating 70

It's been a special year for COTA Victoria. In 2021, we celebrated 70 years of promoting opportunities for, and protecting the rights of, all older Victorians.

When COTA Victoria was established in 1951, Victoria led the way in highlighting the serious problems many older people faced following the Depression and the Second World War, including loneliness, low income, and lack of housing and community amenities. Over the past 70 years, there's been a lot of progress addressing these and other issues.

Yet much remains to be done. COTA Victoria will continue listening to and amplifying the voices of older Victorians. We are the leading

not-for-profit organisation representing the interests and rights of older Victorians. We lead government, corporate and community thinking about the positive aspects of ageing. We develop and promote policies to address issues of concern to older people. Through Seniors Rights Victoria, we focus on addressing elder abuse and protecting the rights of older people.

Our vision, purpose and values give us clear direction. And our highly experienced staff – supported by capable and committed volunteers – continue the important work started in Victoria some 70 years ago.

This Review highlights our services, projects and programs across the areas of policy, education and engagement, and Seniors Rights Victoria. It also showcases the stories of some of the people who were part of our work this year.

Our vision

Ageing in Victoria is a time of possibility, opportunity and influence.

Our purpose

COTA Victoria advances the rights, interests and futures of Victorians as we age.

Our values

Respect, Diversity, Collaboration and Integrity

Acknowledgement of country

COTA Victoria acknowledges the traditional owners of country throughout Victoria and their continuing connection to land, culture and community. We pay our respects to elders past, present and future.

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Message from the President

The past year has been challenging for all Victorians.

Our staff and volunteers have shown commendable resilience in continuing our operations throughout the pandemic. Their efforts are a fitting testimony to the value of our organisation as we celebrate 70 years in Victoria.

COTA Victoria has lead community organisations to continue to address the collective needs, rights and opportunities of Victoria's older people. This leadership has included the Assistive Technology for All campaign; our response to the Aged Care Quality and Safety Royal Commission; our continued work to address elder abuse; our promotion of healthy living through *Living Longer Living Stronger™*; and our increased emphasis on our Older Men: New Ideas (OM:NI) groups.

The quality of ageing in Australia is not simply a matter for government or service organisations: it's a collective responsibility. This led to the formation of COTA in Victoria 70 years ago, and it remains central to our current strategy and operations.

We're grateful for our productive working relationship with the Victorian Government. We give particular thanks to Ministers The Hon Luke Donnellan, The Hon Martin Foley and The Hon Gabrielle Williams. Special thanks also to Jackie Kearney, Executive Director, Seniors, Ageing and Carers, Department of Health and Human Services and Anthony Plummer, the new Executive Director, Seniors, Ageing and Carers, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

Gerard Mansour continued his support of COTA Victoria in his role as Commissioner for Senior Victorians and Ambassador for Elder Abuse Prevention. We also value the support given by Amy Schwebel of Victorian Legal Aid.

It has been a delight to work with our Chief Executive Officer, Tina Hogarth-Clarke, and our highly qualified and experienced volunteer Directors on the COTA Victoria Board. This year Lynette Moore retired after 11 years of Board service. On behalf of all at COTA Victoria, I thank Lynette for her significant contribution.

I also acknowledge Professor Briony Dow and Dr John Chesterman. Both served on the Seniors Rights Victoria Advisory Committee for 10 years and made major contributions to the success of this important program.

As part of our Board transition planning, I will retire from my position as President at the end of 2021. I will remain a Board member.

It has been an honour to lead a highly capable and committed Board since 2017. During this time, COTA Victoria has built a solid foundation for our work in coming decades to promote opportunities for older Victorians and protect their rights. We've strengthened our finances and agreed on a strategy to guide the future of COTA Victoria.

Mike Lescai

Message from the CEO

It's been another extraordinary year – probably one of the most challenging in our 70 year history. Last December we hoped to say goodbye to 2020 and welcome a more 'normal' 2021 – but that did not eventuate. However, I remain resolute, trusting that we will see a sustainable 'new normal' emerge in the coming year.

I'm very proud of our COTA Victoria team, which has risen to meet challenges head-on, supporting older Victorians through what has been a really difficult 18 months. We continued most of our programs and services throughout the year, adapting them to be COVID-safe and accessible to as many older people as possible. The telephone became our most valuable tool, keeping us in touch with older Victorians as they tackled difficult issues, sought information, or felt isolated and needed a friendly ear.

Alongside many other community organisations, we worked to bring older people into the digital world so they could join in while staying at home. At the same time, we advocated for equal access to services and information for those who couldn't move online – or simply chose not to. I extend my sincere thanks to my team for their dedication to their work on behalf of older Victorians.

That work is to ensure decisionmakers – including government, business and community leaders – are aware of the unique challenges that

many older Victorians face. These challenges include, but are not limited to:

- circumstances that lead to elder abuse
- loss of employment reducing income
- increased loneliness for people isolated through lockdowns
- communication that doesn't recognise the cultural diversity of older Victorians
- difficulty reaching relatives in aged care with contact, love and support.

As this Review shows, we develop policies and advocate to overcome challenges like these. At the same time, we promote the many opportunities available to older Victorians.

I sincerely thank our volunteers, who are an important part of our COTA Victoria team. While the pandemic limited our activities, you contributed valuable insights to inform our work. I am confident there are bigger and better things for our volunteers on the horizon.

Finally, I would like to thank the COTA Victoria Board for your ongoing encouragement and support.

Tina Hogarth-Clarke

Board members



Mike Lescai
President



Gregg Nicholls
Deputy President



Kathryn Brown
Treasurer



Maya Avdibegovic
Director



Mary Downie
Director



Graeme Bird
Director



Cathy Mead
Director



Robert Caulfield
Director



Lynette Moore
Director



Tina Hogarth-Clarke
CEO

Our volunteers

We cannot do the work we do without the help from our team of volunteers. From peer educators, OM:NI leaders and Aged Care Navigators to those that help in the office or with advocacy, our volunteers are what make COTA Victoria tick.



‘Thank you to all the presenters, organisers, panellists and people commenting. What a great forum. So many valuable insights and some great ideas.’

Attendee at ‘COTA in conversation forum, ‘Will Australia’s aged care system be fixed?’

The past year has shown us just how important our volunteers are to the delivery of our services and programs. Next year, as part of our engagement and connection work, we will increase our efforts to recruit and train older volunteers.



Clockwise from top: a Peer Educator meeting; ATFA campaigner and spokesperson Peter Wilcocks with his home accessible technology; Aged Care System Navigators at Outlook Community Centre Pakenham; OM:NI 10th Anniversary at Diamond Creek; presentation for ACSN Dandenong



‘Thank you so much for the opportunity to participate in today’s seminar. I found it very interesting, informative and hopeful. I was very grateful to be invited to take part; hopefully I was helpful to someone else.’

Attendee at ATFA event ‘Improving access to assistive technology for people outside the NDIS’



Policy and advocacy

Leadership in policy development and advocacy on behalf of older people continues to be one of COTA Victoria's strengths. The work of our Policy area is guided by current events, input from older people and the advice of our Policy Development Committee (PDC).

This year, we saw the value of COTA Victoria's model, which combines the efforts of dedicated volunteers and highly qualified and committed staff. COTA's policy and advocacy work was supported by our PDC, made up of volunteers with wide-ranging experience and expertise in age-related matters. By forging alliances with other community groups, we took powerful collective action to address broad social issues.

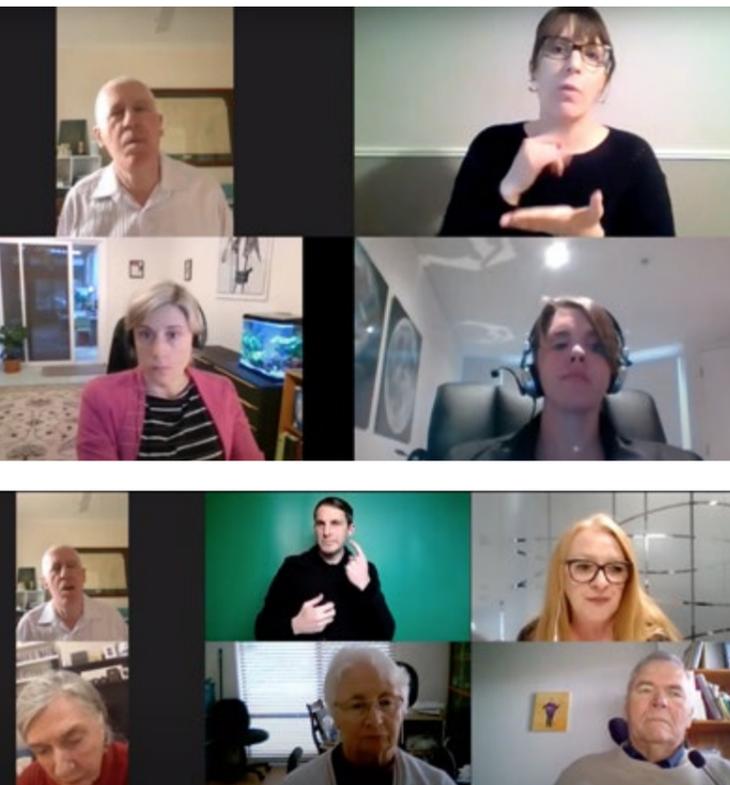
Assistive Technology for All

One focus this year was continuing to lead the Assistive Technology for All (ATFA) campaign. This national campaign is calling for better access to technology – such as hearing aids, wheelchairs, mobility scooters, specialised computer software and home modifications – for people with disability who aren't eligible for National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) support.

'Excellent Zoom conference. I learned a lot and I will follow through with the petition etc. Keep up the good work.'

We now have some 30 organisations contributing their voices to this growing alliance. This year, we hosted former Disability Discrimination Commissioner Graeme Innes for our event 'Improving access to Assistive Technology for people outside the NDIS'. Some 233 participants registered for the event, which also featured a panel of older people speaking powerfully about their struggle to access much-needed equipment and aids.

Graeme Innes, top left, and panellists at the ATFA event 'Improving access to assistive technology for people outside the NDIS'



Government inquiry responses

Responding to Australian and Victorian government inquiries continued to be a key part of our policy work. One priority was providing input to the review of Victoria's *Retirement Villages Act 1986* with the assistance of our PDC volunteers. Another priority was our response to the Australian Government's Aged Care Quality and Safety Royal Commission. More than 90 people attended our unique online conference, hearing from a panel of experts about the Royal Commission's report and recommendations. Participants also had the chance to have a say about how the aged care system could be improved.



Research and collaboration

Research provides an evidence base for our policy work and creates opportunities for older people to have a say. That's why we continued our involvement with the Melbourne Ageing Research Collaboration. This involvement allows us to contribute to and access age-related research from over 20 organisations including hospitals, aged care service providers, universities, advocacy groups and government.

Our volunteers also advocated on issues such as older Victorians' access to services and their ability to use technology, and we continued our efforts to educate the community about elder abuse and the impact of ageism.

'Thank you COTA Victoria, all participants/contributors and especially the key speakers. An informative and inspiring opportunity to learn and give.'

Left, Marlene Krasovitsky, Director of the EveryAGE Counts Campaign, presents at our online event, Ageism: a conversation in the context of COVID-19



Above, aged care consumer Robin Vote speaks at the COTA in conversation forum 'Will Australia's aged care system be fixed?'





Peter Wilcocks in his home, using assistive technology to prepare an ATFA presentation

The power of many

Peter, 71, has spent decades advocating for the rights of older people. Peter's involvement with the aged care system started early when, at 16, he began volunteering as a community visitor in a residential care facility. As the recipient of a Home Care Package, he now has firsthand experience of the aged care system.

Peter contracted polio at age four and now lives with post-polio syndrome. As such, he understands the critical role that assistive technology plays in enabling older people with disability to age well. That's why he's a strong advocate for the Assistive Technology for All (ATFA) campaign, led by COTA Victoria.

'Too many older people with disabilities fall outside the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) coverage. They struggle to meet the costs of basic equipment and services they need to have a standard of living most people take for granted,' Peter says. In his case, that equipment includes a respirator, specialised wheelchair and leg braces. These items can cost as much as a small car.

Had Peter been eligible for the NDIS, his assistive technology would have been fully funded.

Instead, Peter and others like him face huge costs; wait months or years for limited funding; rely on family members for support; or simply miss out altogether. The ATFA campaign is seeking to address this inequity to ensure that no older person with disability is left behind.

Peter has been impressed by the work of ATFA coordinator, Lauren Henley.

'Lauren's campaign organisation has been amazing. She has connected key representative groups, giving them a focus and one voice in advocating for equal access to assistive technology. COTA Victoria has acted as a facilitator and shown the power of many working for an important cause,' Peter says.

'I just need to say thank you for giving as much help as you can and for fighting the good fight. ... It really is despicable how we are all treated, with no sign of a level playing field for all.

I will be signing the petition and contacting my MP. Thank you again for all your efforts. I had thought that we had all been left behind but now it has been demonstrated to me the tireless work you are all doing to get us heard.'

— ATFA campaigner



COTA Victoria Policy Development Committee member Rhonda Day

Research boosts advocacy impact

After an impressive professional career that included stints as Victoria's Assistant State Ombudsman and the ANZ Customer Advocate, Rhonda Day hasn't lost the drive to use her skills to make a difference to the lives of others. Now retired, Rhonda contributes her policy and customer advocacy expertise as a member of COTA Victoria's Policy Development Committee.

As part of that role, Rhonda represents COTA Victoria on the Steering Committee of the Melbourne Ageing Research Collaboration (MARC), as well as chairing MARC's Community Advisory Group. Rhonda keeps COTA Victoria informed about research projects and professional development relevant to our policy priorities. She also briefs MARC partners on potential research topics and the issues COTA Victoria sees in its work with older people.

'MARC is one of the many collaborations with other groups in Victoria that ensure our policy development and advocacy is well-informed, and that it builds on and contributes to the work of others. Our involvement is another way of ensuring the impact of our policy and advocacy work,' Rhonda says.

Education and engagement

In 2021, COTA Victoria continued to build and manage a portfolio of programs and projects that promote opportunities and improve the quality of life of older Victorians.



RTE participants celebrate their achievements at an online graduation ceremony hosted by Gerard Mansour, Commissioner for Senior Victorians and Ambassador for Elder Abuse Prevention



New career, new life: Carol's story

'I had a difficult childhood and was raised in foster care. I started working at 14. I did quite well and became a retail manager. I had four kids with my first husband and became a stay-at-home mum.

After I divorced, I set up a business with my new partner. I taught myself bookkeeping and accounting and assisted our company to reach a turnover of \$15 million. I did quite well and managed to send my kids to private school.

Unfortunately, I wasn't an expert in legal matters. My partner moved all our assets to a different company and then left me. I only found out when I went to the ATM and there was no money left in my account.

I was homeless, and ended up couch-surfing with my two teenage children. I was shocked, embarrassed, and mentally down for a couple of years.

I heard about RTE. I had never considered a career in aged care or disability. The program was exactly what I needed.

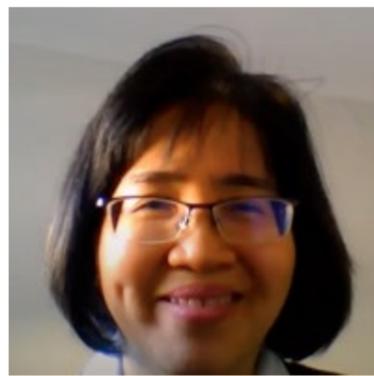
The organisers supported me with a Life Coach and a Certificate III training course. I did that with others who had their own life struggles. I am now completing a Diploma in Nursing and have found a casual paid role as a support worker.

Through RTE I have realised I really enjoy supporting others. It has been the best opportunity I have had in a long time. Now I finally get paid for something I have done for free for years.'

We have brought our education and engagement programs and projects together under the categories of social and economic participation; health and wellbeing; information outreach, support and referral; and engagement and connection.

Finding new pathways into work

One of this year's successful social and economic participation projects was Reach, Train and Employ (RTE), developed in response to growing unemployment among older workers. RTE trained mature age people to work in the aged care and disability sectors. Our first graduates came from the municipalities of Brimbank and Melton, on Melbourne's fringe. We are very proud of the participants, who completed the Certificate III in Individual Support (Ageing and Disability). So far, 75% have found work. The project was delivered in partnership with RMIT University and Good Shepherd Australia and New Zealand with support from the Australian Government's Try, Test and Learn Fund.



Connecting older men

Our Older Men: New Ideas (OM:NI) men's discussion groups remained active throughout the year, adapting to the restrictions of lockdown. A unique form of social participation, OM:NI offers older men the opportunity to share their knowledge and experiences in an informal and safe social environment.



Staying active in older age

Living Longer Living Stronger™ (LLLS) is our leading health and wellbeing program. When COVID-19 hit in 2020, we quickly trained LLLS providers and instructors to switch to online delivery. At the time, there was some reluctance to change. Would older adults be willing to go online? And could instructors deliver individualised strength and balance programs remotely? But after 15 months, we've seen that trainers who stepped out of their comfort zones to take LLLS online have 'COVID-proofed' their businesses and gained many satisfied participants.



A still from LLLS training videos for the Victoria Together initiative

Rodney's online success

Rodney is an LLLS provider in Nathalia, a small town in northern Victoria. Last year, he joined our free instructor training so he could shift his classes online.

At first, Rodney had concerns about the change. The training showed him how to use new payment methods; create a warm, caring environment online; and provide technical support for participants.

Rodney discovered that online delivery had advantages, too. Older people who found it difficult to leave the house or travel to the studio could easily access Rodney's online classes.

The feedback from participants has been so positive that Rodney has decided to continue permanently with online delivery.

Here's what people have to say about Rodney's online classes:

'I have attended classes for many years in person and online. I find online easy to access via Zoom using a tablet. Online has enabled me to continue classes while holidaying in Queensland recently. It's also great to connect with others during these COVID times.'

– Pauline

'I have been doing a Gentle Exercise Program with Rod for two years. Since lockdown I have been really grateful to be able to continue them three times a week. They have been very beneficial mentally and physically in this time of uncertainty. His instructions are easy to follow and there is never any pressure as his program is designed for the older adult. The social interaction online is very enjoyable, and Rod has helped us with the technology. I would encourage others to try them.'

– Peta

Rodney demonstrates techniques in his LLLS class

Information outreach

Our information outreach, support and referral programs enabled us to listen and respond to the concerns of older Victorians during protracted lockdowns. We received over 500 responses to a survey on how COVID-19 was affecting older people. Among the main challenges reported were social isolation, lack of family contact and the loss of usual weekly activities. Recognising the importance of telephone access to skilled information providers, we extended the hours of our free telephone service, COTA WISE, which provides crucial information on matters such as pensions and concessions, public transport, utilities and banking.

Navigating the aged care system

Our Aged Care System Navigator (ACSN) service was also very active, delivering individual support, community presentations and distribution of information at events and activities. Our staff, assisted by trained volunteers, provided advice on all aspects of the aged care system, helping to connect older people and their families with the support they needed.

The project targeted three trial areas: Cardinia/Casey, Dandenong, and a state-wide phone service. Valued support provided by community groups and organisations was essential for client referrals and the delivery of activities.

Volunteer Ruth Hosking helping out with the ACSN service in Bendigo



Supporting Sarina and Malcolm

'Confused and overwhelmed' is how Sarina described herself when she contacted our ACSN team.

Her husband, Malcolm, had a degenerative disease that was affecting his physical abilities. Sarina knew she needed to choose a home care provider for him – but trying to understand the ins and outs of the system was adding to Sarina's stress.

COTA Victoria's experienced aged care navigator was able to take the time to really listen to Sarina. Together, they worked out what would be helpful in the short term. They also talked about what Sarina would do when Malcolm's condition progressed.

Sarina agreed that getting a Home Care Package now would give them the chance to build a relationship with a case manager they could trust. That would make it easier to get more help when she and Malcolm needed it.

Sarina and the navigator settled on a short list of six potential service providers and came up with questions to help rate them. The navigator called each of the short-listed providers and reported back to Sarina, who decided to meet with two of them.

The meeting with the first case manager went well. Sarina's questions were answered, and she felt confident and comfortable about engaging the service.

Seniors Rights Victoria

Seniors Rights Victoria (SRV) provides information, support, advice and education to help prevent elder abuse and safeguard the rights, dignity and independence of older people. Despite the limitations of lockdowns and remote access, SRV had another busy year.

Our helpline and advice service are designed to prevent and respond to elder abuse. There were over 3600 calls to the helpline. Most calls were about emotional and psychological abuse (21%) or financial abuse (19%). We met the needs of most callers immediately. We referred some callers to other agencies, and offered ongoing assistance to others.

SRV is widely recognised for both our responsiveness and the effectiveness of our work. That's why callers most often heard about us from other agencies (more than 30%) or had past contact with us (16%).

A caller who has experienced abuse may be referred to our advocacy and legal service for

tailored advice. In 2020-21 we provided 619 advices to 367 people. When a person needs more formal legal or other assistance, we may take them on as a client. This year, we opened 226 new client cases.

These figures provide insight into the growing volume of activity we manage and the efficiency of our operations. For us, these calls, advices and cases represent an older person whose rights and quality of life have been affected by abuse. We never lose sight of the person and individual story behind each call.

World Elder Abuse Awareness Day

As well as helping individuals, SRV works hard to raise awareness of elder abuse and propose solutions. World Elder Abuse Awareness Day is an important communications and education opportunity. This year the focus of our *Stir a Cuppa for Seniors* forum was ageism, which is the main driver of elder abuse.



Speakers at the 'Stir a cuppa for seniors' forum. From top left: Nate Davies and Val Lynch from Lively; Jennifer Evans, Senior Achiever of the Year and SRV volunteer; Gerard Mansour, Commissioner for Senior Victorians and Ambassador for Elder Abuse Prevention; and Chandra Dissanayake, a member of the Sri Lankan community

Stirring conversation on ageing

SRV held its 2021 World Elder Abuse Awareness Day flagship event in June. The focus of the online 'Stir a cuppa for seniors' forum was ageism, the main driver of elder abuse. Attendees were urged to challenge ageist attitudes and stereotypes.

Facilitating a conversation on experiences of ageing, Commissioner for Senior Victorians and Ambassador for Elder Abuse Prevention, Gerard Mansour, discussed his report *Ageing well in a changing world*. 'The objective of avoiding elder abuse is to age well,' Gerard said, presenting some of the eight attributes of ageing well. These include connectedness; a positive attitude; being respected and respectful; and participating in a changing world.

Four panellists – Jennifer, Chandra, Valerie and Nate – brought a range of perspectives on ageing. Jennifer is a former Senior Achiever of the Year and Chandra is a Sri Lankan woman and community leader. Nate and Valerie are part of the Buds program run by Lively, a home care provider that employs younger people to

offer support to seniors. Nate, 23, has worked with Valerie, 76, to increase her confidence using technology. 'The window of opportunity is closing. However, I'm pushing the window back up because there's still a lot more to learn,' Valerie said.

Accepting the limitations of ageing without letting them overtake you is a fine balance, according to our panellists. Ageism can only be counteracted when older people are represented as valuable and contributing members of the community. And each of us has an obligation to challenge ageist attitudes so that younger and older people can live with dignity and respect.

Communication and education

We continued to improve our communications about elder abuse. We developed and launched a new SRV website combining news, information, research and case studies. This is a unique resource for anyone interested in tackling elder abuse and protecting the rights of older people.

Another education and communications development has been our partnership with Dementia Australia, which has seen us working together to deliver information for people with dementia and their carers. We produced videos on protecting the rights and wishes of people with dementia to prevent future distress and potential elder abuse. This partnership was funded through the Integrated Services Fund,



Still from SRV's 'Planning your future is in your hands' video

established by the Victorian Government and administered by the Federation of Community Legal Centres.

Lucy and Peter

In 2019, Mary and her adult children turned up at the home of Mary's elderly parents, Lucy and Peter. Mary told her parents that her family had nowhere to live, and asked to stay for a few weeks while they found somewhere to rent.

Eager to help, Lucy and Peter agreed to this short-term arrangement. However, once Mary and her adult children had moved in, it became clear that there weren't trying to find other accommodation.



Over 12 months, the situation worsened. Mary's belongings took over the house. She made no financial contributions and appeared to have no plan to leave. Mary was increasingly verbally abusive to Lucy and Peter, making their home a stressful place to be.

In 2020, Lucy and Peter came to SRV for advice. After this discussion, Lucy and Peter told Mary that she had no right to live with them, and that she and her children should move out. This inflamed Mary, who hurled abuse at Lucy and Peter. They telephoned SRV, which contacted detectives from the local Family Violence Investigation Unit.

To protect Lucy and Peter, a Family Violence Safety Notice (FVSN) was served on the spot to Mary and her children. In line with the conditions of the FVSN, Mary and her children were removed from the house and offered local emergency accommodation.

Lucy and Peter had initially been reluctant to involve police. However, trusting the advice and support of SRV empowered them to act. Lucy and Peter can now live in their own home safe and free from violence.

Thank you to our funders

COTA Victoria is a not-for-profit organisation reliant on funding and assistance from a variety of government, philanthropic and corporate funders. We are very thankful for the assistance, including in-kind support, we receive.

Victorian Government Department of Education and Training

Victorian Government Department of Health

Victorian Government Department of Families, Fairness and Housing

Victorian Government Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions

Australian Government Department of Social Services

Federation of Community Legal Centres

Australian Sports Commission

State Trustees Australia Foundation

Australian Government Attorney-General's Department

Victoria Law Foundation

Victoria Legal Aid

Delys Sargeant Memorial Fund

Australian Taxation Office

COTA Australia

JO & WR Wicking Trust – Equity Trustees

The Jack Brockhoff Foundation

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