



Victorian
Aboriginal
Legal Service

**ROBINSON
GILL.LAWYERS**

JOINT MEDIA RELEASE 30 January 2023

Statements from Veronica Nelson's family and their legal representatives

Statement by Aunty Donna Nelson, Veronica's mother

My name is Donna Nelson and I am Veronica's mother.

Veronica was my first-born child, and she was my best friend. She was kind, caring and compassionate. She was loved by her family, her community, and her friends. She was a proud Aboriginal woman who loved her culture. She never harmed a soul other than her own.

Veronica did not deserve to die in such a cruel, heartless and painful way.

I chose for a long time not to hear or watch the tapes of her final moments, but I finally watched them during this inquest. It ruined me, and has changed me forever. My daughter's pleas for help haunt me every night, and I can't stop hearing her voice.

To the law makers, I want you to sit and listen to Veronica's final hours. I want her voice to ring in your ears until you realise that our justice system is broken. Veronica should never have been locked up. You were supposed to change bail laws to stop a white male monster from killing people, but instead you filled our prisons with non-violent Aboriginal women like my daughter Veronica. Our bail laws need to change now.

To Correct Care Australasia, you tried to cover up my daughter's death. You silenced the nurse who tried to speak up about your doctors. I'm glad that you lost your contract. I'm glad that this inquest exposed you, and I pray that my daughter's voice will expose all the other times you covered up deaths in the past. My daughter's death will not be in vain, and she will continue to lead the way for justice for others in death as she did in life.

To the Department of Justice, you were supposed to review the doctors and nurses and tell the Coroner what went wrong. Instead, you listened to my daughter's pleas for help, and saw no wrongdoing. You too were exposed. You showed the world that your supposed independent reviews are self-serving and can never be trusted. That you too are a part of this broken system, and you too need to be held to account and change.

This inquest showed that Veronica was failed at every level of the justice system - from the moment she came into contact with police on 30 December 2019. When she travelled on the tram that Monday afternoon, the police saw an Aboriginal woman and beelined for her. It was this profiling that led to her horrific death where her final words at 4am were calling out for someone to help her. She called out for her deceased father. That's how much pain she was in. The response from the prison guard was to tell her to stop screaming as she was disturbing the other prisoners. As her mother, this will haunt me until the day I die. I hope it haunts all of you who didn't help my daughter when she needed you the most.

The system continued to fail her after her death too – the prison, Dame Phyllis Frost Centre, Department of Justice, Justice Health all said that my Veronica's death didn't need an inquest, that

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there was nothing to see here, business as usual. You patted each other on the back for a job well done in your debrief. Aboriginal women being incarcerated and dying in custody is so normalised that there would be no inquest if it weren't for the bravery and care of Coroners Court who saw that Veronica's death wasn't right.

To Coroner Simon McGregor, I thank you for listening to my Poccum. I thank you and your team for your bravery. I thank my legal team, Robinson Gill Lawyers, Ali, Rishi and Stella for standing by me and fiercely fighting for my daughter. I want to thank Meghan, Apryl, Crystal, Tarneen, Troy, Stacey, all the interested parties and the experts who helped expose this broken justice system.

I thank everyone who listened to my Poccum, and who have fought for her dignity and for justice.

I want you all to listen to my Poccum, and remember her voice, and to stand with me to demand a better justice system. Her death never should have happened, and I want you to fight with me and make sure that no other mother has to bury her child due to the racism and cruelty of individuals and the racism and violence of a broken justice system. I will not let my Poccum's death be forgotten. I urge you all to remember her too and support our family in our continued fight for change and for justice for my daughter.

My Poccum should not have been locked up. She should not have begged for her life. She should be here with me today. If we do not change bail laws today, it will be someone else's daughter tomorrow.

To the Premier Daniel Andrews, you should hang your head in shame. You need to do your job and get our daughters out of prisons. No more cover ups. No more unintended consequences. It's time to save our daughters. It's time to change the law. It's time for Poccum's law.

Aunty Donna Nelson.

Statement by Uncle Percy Lovett, Veronica's partner

Veronica was the love of my life. We were together for more than 20 years and we did everything together. She was a kind and loving girl, who would always help people, no matter who they were. She taught me everything I know about Aboriginal culture.

I came to court every day and now I know how Veronica died, how she died in pain, begging for help.

Every night, as soon as I shut my eyes, I can hear her crying out 'Daddy Daddy Daddy'. She's really hurting. I know every bit of pain she was feeling. When you've been with a person that long, you know how they bare pain.

The prison guards, doctors and nurses, and all the people in charge neglected her and let her die. They were cruel and racist. They lied to her, laughed at her, and told her to stop asking for help. All while she was dying. They treated her like she wasn't human. The other women in prison were the only ones who tried to help.

Veronica shouldn't have died. All she needed was to go to hospital. If she was at home, I would have taken her. Then she would be alive today. We would still be together.

Veronica should never have even been in jail in the first place.



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The police officer who arrested her was off duty. She was just walking down the street minding her own business. She wouldn't have been picked up if she was a white woman. The police target us Blackfullas.

I was in court when Veronica applied for bail. No one came up to me or asked me anything. The lawyer, Tass Antos, who was meant to be representing Veronica didn't do his job. The Magistrate had made up her mind before Veronica started speaking. No one listened to Veronica.

After she died, Correct Care and the Government tried to sweep her death under the rug. They didn't do proper reviews. They lied in their reviews. They said that they had done a good job even though they had all the evidence and all the tapes. Both Correct Care and the Government tried to stop us getting information about Veronica's death. We had to fight them for information.

I thank Nurse Stephanie Hills for coming forward and telling the truth about what happened to Veronica. I know she tried to help Veronica.

Thank you to Coroner McGregor and Counsel Assisting for properly investigating what happened to Veronica. Thank you for treating Veronica with dignity, for listening to her, and for telling the truth about what happened.

Now, it is up to the government and people in charge to listen. They need to make sure what happened to Veronica never happens again.

The organisations and people responsible for Veronica's death need to be held accountable. Us Blackfullas are held accountable when we do something wrong, so they have to be held accountable.

The prison officers, especially Tracey Brown, doctors and nurses, especially Dr Sean Runacres and Nurse Athaena George, who ignored Veronica, should not be able to work in a prison again.

The police officer who arrested Veronica should be investigated.

The barrister, Tass Antos, who didn't do his job shouldn't be able to represent anyone again.

Correct Care Australasia should be prosecuted for their role in Veronica's death and for covering up her death.

The people in the Government, who said nothing was done wrong, need to be held to account.

Corrections Victoria need to take responsibility for not caring for Veronica and for all the prison officers who neglected Veronica.

The Government needs to make big changes to stop this from happening again.

The Government needs to fix prison healthcare. These companies who just want to make profits off us shouldn't be involved in healthcare in prisons. Blackfullas should be able to get healthcare from the Aboriginal Health Services. They should have the same doctors and nurses as in the community.

The bail laws have got to be changed, they just have to. Veronica shouldn't have been in jail, she should have got bail. No one should be in prison for shoplifting.

The government needs to properly investigate deaths in custody and not let anyone sweep them under the rug again. They need to listen to families and stop ignoring us.



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Any changes to laws should be called Poccum's Law, the nickname for Veronica by her mother, Aunty Donna.

I want everyone to remember what happened to Veronica. The Premier, every government minister, every head of a prison, every prison guard, every doctor and nurse in prison, every police officer, every lawyer and every Magistrate. They have to see what happened to Veronica and to change. No one should have to die in prison. No one should die in pain. No one should die alone in a prison cell.

Thank you to all the people who have supported us. To Troy and the Koori Team at the Court, the women at the Coroner's Court, the Dhadjowa Foundation, all the people who donated food, and all the people who came to Court to support us. I especially want to thank Nari McGregor, mine and Veronica's old friend, who came to Court with her children every day.

I mostly want to thank my lawyers at VALS, Sarah and the team, and my Counsel, Andrew and Steph, for the amazing job they've done fighting for justice for Veronica.

Quotes attributable to Nerita Waight, CEO of VALS

The government needs to act immediately to fix the bail laws, to overhaul prison healthcare and to address systemic racism within the legal system that is seeing too many of our people being locked up in the shadows without hope and fearing for their lives.

The Director of Public Prosecutions must seriously consider the entirety of these findings and the failings of individuals, in performing her role in the administration of justice.

Victoria's politicians should look at the blood on their hands and decide to take a better path. They must act urgently to end the cruelty that led to Veronica's death and implement the family's calls for change. There is a crisis of Aboriginal deaths in custody in Victoria. It has been three years since Veronica's passing and 4 more Aboriginal people have died in custody. Since Veronica died, at least four women and one baby have died at Dame Phyllis Frost Centre alone. They may not have died if the Government had acted sooner.

Correct Care and the Government attempted to cover up Veronica's death and they both objected to calls for further information from the family. Correct Care hid crucial information from the Government bodies reviewing her death. Now that we have the full story, this conduct should send shockwaves across the State and send a message that these bodies cannot be trusted. There must be effective, independent and culturally appropriate oversight of all deaths in custody. It shouldn't fall on families and their lawyers to push for proper investigations into deaths in custody.

Quotes attributable to Jeremy King, Principal at Robinson Gill Lawyers

When you unpack the Bail Act today, you realise that women who commit petty crimes like shop thefts and possession of drugs are lumped into the same onerous bail test as alleged murderers and terrorists. The juxtaposition is nonsensical – we're punishing non-violent impoverished people in our quest to identify potential violent offenders.



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It is simply unfathomable that review officers within the Justice Assurance and Review Office (JARO) and Justice Health heard Veronica's chilling pleas for help and arrived at the conclusion that Veronica received adequate medical care.

It is gut-wrenching to think how many prisoners like Veronica have died in custody without proper scrutiny by way of an inquest from the Coroners Court, based on the misleading reviews of the Department of Justice.

Landmark findings mean nothing if the Victorian Government fails to implement those recommendations - have a look at the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody in 1991 where the 339 recommendations still remain shelved. The Premier must act now to stop these senseless deaths, just as the then Victorian Government should have acted 32 years ago.