

Blueprint for a Vicarious Trauma-Informed Organisation

Much like building a house, an organisational response to vicarious trauma requires vision, commitment, and a methodical approach that starts with laying a foundation and then builds up from there. This blueprint, informed by research and lessons learned from the field, was created by the US Department of Justice, Office for Victims of Crime's Vicarious Trauma Toolkit as a step-by-step guide to assist organisations in becoming more vicarious trauma-informed. It provides guidance on using the Vicarious Trauma—Organisational Readiness Guide (VT-ORG) to assess your organisation's current capacity as a vicarious trauma-informed organisation.

With permission from the Vicarious Trauma Toolkit team in the United States, this iteration of the Blueprint has been modified for the Victorian context.

This guide outlines three key steps:

<p>Step 1: Lay the foundation for success</p>	<p>Obtain the commitment and support of your organisation's leadership to embark upon this process and have them designate an individual or team to coordinate and guide the effort.</p>
<p>Step 2: Assess current organisational capacity for addressing vicarious trauma</p>	<p>Use the Vicarious Trauma—Organisational Readiness Guide (VT-ORG) to conduct an evidence-informed assessment of your organisation's current capacity as a vicarious trauma-informed organisation. Resources for this step include—</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sample emails to staff announcing the organisational effort to address vicarious trauma using the VT-ORG and <i>Preventing Vicarious Trauma website</i>, • VT-ORG Scoresheets, • an Action Plan template, and • a sample report to use as a model to present your assessment results and findings.
<p>Step 3: Determine priorities and develop an action plan</p>	<p>Discuss the VT-ORG findings within each of the five areas of organisational health and identify priorities and a timeline for addressing them.</p> <p>Create a realistic action plan that identifies specific tasks, persons responsible for those tasks, timeframes for completion, and a process for monitoring progress, which may include re-administering the VT-ORG to assess improvements.</p>

Step 1: Lay the foundation for success

Becoming vicarious trauma-informed requires—

- a commitment by leadership and staff to establish an organisational response,
- a designated individual or team to coordinate and guide the effort, and
- open communication between leadership and staff throughout the process.

As you get started, consider how your unique organisational structure, decision-making processes, and varied work and communication styles will inform your effort.

Task 1a: Obtain commitment to establishing an organisational response

This begins with agency leadership and staff discussing the importance and organisational responsibility of addressing vicarious trauma, including—

- understanding that vicarious trauma is a risk to employees' psychological health and safety, and organisational responses to vicarious trauma therefore fall under the guidance of the *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 (Vic)* and any associated regulations or guidelines,
- understanding the occupational challenges to the health and well-being of individuals throughout the organisation who are exposed to traumatic content,
- recognising the signs of the impact of exposure to traumatic content within your organisation,
- proactively identifying available resources to address vicarious trauma at all levels of the organisation,
- committing human and financial resources to organisational responses,
- identifying policies and practices already in place to address vicarious trauma, and
- learning more about the resources available through the *Preventing Vicarious Trauma* website.

Task 1b: Designate an individual or team to coordinate and guide the effort

Leadership should identify individuals within the organisation who have the ability and responsibility to help inform, reach out to, and solicit input from staff for the overall process. Who and how many to select will depend on your organisation's size and structure.

Consider individuals who—

- are knowledgeable about and responsible for the development of organisational policies, procedures, and programs (e.g., human resources, behavioural health, peer support, chaplaincy, training);
- have varying levels of experience and influence (e.g., recent hires, early career, seasoned professionals) and can lend different perspectives (e.g., supervisors/managers, direct services/frontline staff, volunteers, administrative support);
- reflect demographic diversity (e.g., in age, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, education level, sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, abilities);
- have been employed a minimum of 1 year (as the VT–ORG assessment tool is based on experiences in the organisation in the prior 6 months);
- are existing “champions” of formal and/or informal responses to vicarious trauma;
- are available for the duration of the assessment and planning process; and
- may represent more than one of the above demographics.

Whether those responsible will be charged with making decisions or recommendations, it is important that they have the authority to—

- meet regularly and complete tasks during work hours as part of their job duties,
- conduct the VT–ORG assessment and prepare findings,
- determine priorities and develop an action plan for approval and implementation,
- implement the action plan and monitor progress, and
- report regularly on progress to management and staff, reviewing and refining the action plan as needed.

Once identified and authorised to serve in this capacity, the individual(s) should meet and implement initial steps toward becoming a vicarious trauma-informed organisation. Commitment and active participation by the individual or team will help ensure greater effectiveness of the overall response and its sustainability.

Remember that ultimately, employers hold legal responsibility for providing protection against risks to employees' health and safety.

Suggested Agenda Items for First Meeting

Commitment of leadership.

Authorisation to perform necessary responsibilities and coordinate and guide the effort.

Introduction to the *Preventing Vicarious Trauma* website, including its purpose and contents.

Plan for using the VT-ORG to conduct an organisational assessment and monitor progress.

Plan for consultation and/or conducting focus groups to gain in-depth knowledge of employees' views.

Realistic timelines for the overall process and schedule of meetings.

Next steps: Become familiar with the PVT website; prepare for an introductory PowerPoint presentation for educating all staff about vicarious trauma and the VT-ORG.

Task 1c: Encourage open communication with staff

Keeping management and staff informed throughout the process is essential. See below sample email for an example of how to communicate about the organisation's plan to become vicarious trauma-informed using the VT-ORG.

Sample Email #1

Dear staff,

We know that regular exposure to traumatic content puts each of us at risk for a range of negative consequences, including vicarious trauma. We are committed to doing our best to understand and address the personal and professional impact of the work we do.

We currently have some initiatives in place to address vicarious trauma, and we want to improve upon them by becoming a vicarious trauma-informed organisation.

[INSERT THE FOLLOWING IF YOU ARE READY TO ANNOUNCE THE VT-ORG. OTHERWISE, INSERT IN TASK 2B EMAIL.]

The first step is to assess our current capacity to address vicarious trauma. Our hope is that all staff will help us identify what we are doing well and where we can improve. You will soon receive a link to a survey that I am asking all employees to complete to help determine our current strengths and our gaps. The survey is ANONYMOUS to ensure that you can be as candid as possible. Individual responses are not identifiable. The data collected will inform our next steps toward becoming a vicarious trauma-informed organisation. A report of the findings will be shared with all staff.

[INSERT THE FOLLOWING IF YOU ARE USING A WORKING GROUP.]

To accomplish our goals, we will be forming a working group to coordinate our efforts, determine priorities, and develop an action plan. More information about the working group will be forthcoming. [Indicate if you are looking for volunteers or will be appointing members.]

[INSERT THE FOLLOWING IF YOU ARE PROVIDING TRAINING.]

We will also hold a training session to better understand vicarious trauma, how it can affect us, and what is involved in becoming vicarious trauma-informed. You will soon receive more information about dates for the training.

We welcome your questions and suggestions. Please feel free to contact [NAME OF AGENCY CONTACT].

I look forward to working with you on this critical and collaborative endeavour.

Sincerely,

[NAME OF AGENCY LEADERSHIP]

Step 2: Assess current organisational capacity for addressing vicarious trauma

Becoming a vicarious trauma-informed organisation requires a focused and intentional effort to assess the organisation’s current strengths and gaps in five evidence-informed areas of organisational health. Findings can then be used to develop strategies to address vicarious trauma through policies, procedures, practices, and programs.

<p>Leadership and Mission</p>	<p>To address the impact of vicarious trauma, leaders in vicarious trauma-informed organizations proactively integrate strategies into workplace values, operations, and practices; maintain a clear vision that supports and articulates the agency's mission; and regularly model and promote open and respectful communication.</p> <p>What the research literature tells us:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Leadership can sustain staff by anticipating and responding to staff needs, showing appreciation, and creating safe forums for communication (McFarlane and Bryant 2007; Howlett and Collins 2014).• Advocates who received more support from supervisors, co-workers, and work teams experienced lower levels of secondary traumatic stress (Slattery and Goodman 2009).• Open and transparent communication regarding organizational mission, strategy, resources, and implementation of policies and procedures provides a strong foundation within the agency (Brondolo et al. 2008).• Greater access to the organization's strategic information lowers levels of vicarious trauma (Choi 2011).
<p>Management and Supervision</p>	<p>To fulfill their obligation to lessen the impact of vicarious trauma, managers and supervisors in vicarious trauma-informed organizations foster supportive relationships based on inclusivity, mutual respect, and trust; promote policies and practices that lessen the negative impact of the work; seek out and support staff following critical or acute incidents; and conduct performance evaluations that include discussions of vicarious trauma.</p> <p>What the research literature tells us:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Quality supervision—when staff feel safe and respected—enables staff to overcome high workloads and stay on the job (Slattery and Goodman 2009; Bednar 2003).



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having a structured protocol in place for case review, along with collegial team reflection and support, helps counter the impact of vicarious trauma and secondary traumatic stress (Howlett and Collins 2014; Geller, Madsen, and Ohrenstein 2004).
<p>Employee Empowerment and Work Environment</p>	<p>To promote and maintain a healthy work environment, vicarious trauma-informed organizations foster teamwork; encourage collaboration both within and outside the organization; create formal and informal opportunities for staff to connect with one another; and offer opportunities to diversify job tasks.</p> <p>What the research literature tells us:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive work environments provide quality service outcomes and decrease staff turnover (Glisson and Green 2006; Shim 2010; Strolin-Goltzman 2009). • Supportive work environments reduce the negative impact of vicarious trauma (Bell, Kulkarni, and Dalton 2003; Slattery and Goodman 2009).
<p>Training and Professional Development</p>	<p>To strive for professional competency, capacity, and staff retention, vicarious trauma-informed organizations promote continuing education, professional development, and networking opportunities; provide thorough orientation and ongoing training; enable access to resources; and support staff participation in on- and offsite learning opportunities.</p> <p>What the research literature tells us:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being trained in vicarious traumatization benefits both participants and the populations they serve (Gentry, Baggerly, and Baranowsky 2003). • Job-specific training strengthens confidence and competence in performance and builds networks (Saakvitne and Pearlman 1996; Bell, Kulkarni, and Dalton 2003; Howlett and Collins 2014).
<p>Staff Health and Wellness</p>	<p>To maintain the health and wellness of their staff, vicarious trauma-informed organizations recognize links between health/wellness and staff satisfaction and productivity; devote time and resources to promoting staff well-being; encourage and provide health and wellness activities; and incorporate wellness into policies and practices.</p> <p>What the research literature tells us:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mindfulness programs increase compassion satisfaction and decrease compassion fatigue (Thieleman and Cacciatore 2014).

Task 2a: Create a realistic timeline

Set a timeline for conducting the VT–ORG assessment that maximises the quantity and quality of staff responses to the survey, considering other surveys conducted recently, changes in leadership, or other organisational challenges.

This chart provides guidance on a sample timeline, to maintain momentum during the process:

Task	Timing	Lessons Learned	Resources
Head of agency informs staff of the organisation's effort to address vicarious trauma using the VT–ORG.	3 days before the VT–ORG link is disseminated.	Leadership requiring all staff to complete the VT–ORG promotes a higher response rate.	Sample Emails to Staff
Share the link to the VT–ORG, noting its purpose and the ability to respond anonymously.	Allow 2 weeks for responses.	Send the link early in the week rather than before a weekend.	Sample Emails to Staff
Remind staff of the deadline and reiterate to all the importance of providing input.	After 7 days, and 3 days prior to the deadline.	Ensure the deadline works for all staff and shifts.	
Announce the close of the survey, thank staff for input, and describe next steps and when the report will be provided.	1 day after the deadline.	Sharing details about next steps will keep staff engaged in the process.	Sample Emails to Staff
Analyse results and prepare findings.	Within 10 to 14 days after the deadline.	Calculate overall averages from individual responses.	VT–ORG Scoresheet, Sample Report of VT–ORG Findings

Task 2b: Conduct the VT-ORG Assessment

The VT-ORG assessment can be conducted in a variety of ways based on your organisation's size, structure, and needs. Implementation suggestions include:

- Distribute the VT-ORG across the organisation to management and staff at all levels; viewpoints will vary.
- Consider using survey software that provides anonymity for the respondents.
- The VT-ORG can be distributed to one division/unit at a time or organisation-wide.
- Use the VT-ORG questions and/or results as a conversation starter at a staff meeting or other forum.
- Hold roundtable discussions with representatives from different parts of the organisation.
- If you receive responses unevenly across departments or from less than 30 percent of those surveyed, consider distributing the survey again or making it mandatory to encourage participation.

The VT-ORG can be distributed in hard copy or by using survey software. The software can be set up to automatically ensure anonymous responses. If you are distributing the VT-ORG in hard copy, consider ways to ensure anonymity, including designating a secure place where staff can return their surveys confidentially. When entering VT-ORG data into survey software, maintain the fidelity of the VT-ORG assessment tool by using the same language and Likert scale for responses. You may choose to add additional items (e.g., demographics, department, job title), but be careful that items do not compromise the respondents' anonymity.

Additional safeguards to ensure confidentiality may include—

- assigning an individual(s) to compile survey responses who respect(s) the critical need for anonymity;
- having respondents create unique respondent IDs that they can use for future VT-ORG surveys;
- asking participants to identify their department only if its size is large enough to maintain the anonymity of its members;
- only sharing aggregate data (i.e., no individual and written responses) with department supervisors.

Consider the duty of employers to consult with employees under the *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 (Vic)*. Employers may need to conduct additional consultation alongside the VT-ORG.

Sample Email #2 [see Blueprint Task 2b: Conduct the VT–ORG Assessment]

Dear staff,

We are continuing our efforts to understand and address the personal and professional impact of our work with traumatic content. We are committed to doing our best to address the health and well-being of staff.

The next step is to assess our capacity to address the needs of our staff as a vicarious trauma-informed organization by using the Vicarious Trauma—Organizational Readiness Guide (VT–ORG). The VT–ORG assessment will help us determine our strengths and where we need to focus our attention to become more vicarious trauma-informed.

To complete the survey, go to [\[LINK\]](#) or download and complete the attached the pdf file. The survey should take no more than 30 minutes and can be done during your regular work hours. Your candid, anonymous feedback is central to determining our next steps for addressing vicarious trauma. Individual responses are not identifiable. If you do not know the answer to a specific question, or it does not apply to you, put a check mark under “N/A.”

I am asking each of you to complete the survey to help us determine our next steps toward becoming a vicarious trauma-informed organisation. Findings from the assessment and the priorities and action plan that follow will be provided to staff.

The deadline to complete the survey is [\[DATE AND TIME \(suggest 2 weeks from start\)\]](#).

If you have any questions, please contact [\[NAME OF AGENCY CONTACT\]](#).

Thank you for your commitment to this critical and collaborative endeavour.

Sincerely,

[\[NAME OF AGENCY LEADERSHIP\]](#)

Task 2c: Determine current capacity as a vicarious trauma-informed organisation

Use the VT–ORG Scoresheet and Action Plan to capture your assessment data. The Scoresheet automatically populates the Action Plan template with your data, within the spreadsheet.

1. As staff return their completed surveys, make sure each has a unique ID—either a unique respondent ID created by the employee or a code applicable to each one (e.g., R1, R2).
2. Using the Scoresheet, open the tab for Leadership and Mission.
3. Starting with the first survey (e.g., R1), enter the information for each statement under the Leadership and Mission heading, using the numerical value selected by the respondent (1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Always).
 - a. **Leave blank any responses that are not filled in or are filled in erroneously**—that is, if the response is not a number between one and five, do not enter a zero.
 - b. **Enter “N/A” if that is what the respondent indicated; do not enter a numerical value or leave it blank.**
4. Enter complete data for each survey before moving to the next survey.

The Scoresheet will automatically calculate the average (mean) score for each of the five areas of organisational health and for each statement within each area. The cumulative average for each area of organisational health will be transferred automatically to the tab on the VT–ORG Scoresheet labelled “Summary Sheet.”

NOTE: The VT–ORG Scoresheet is designed to assess capacity either organisation-wide or for a single department or program. Organisations that want to do a departmental analysis, and that have the relevant technological expertise to do so, can modify the Scoresheet for a department-specific analysis. Each department should then review its findings to determine next steps.

Task 2d: Prepare a report to share the VT-ORG Assessment findings

Use the Sample Report of VT-ORG Findings to summarise and share findings with staff, including—

- response quality and demographic information (if captured),
- average scores for each of the five areas of organisational health,
- average scores for each statement within each of the five areas of organisational health,
- any critical internal or external issues that may have affected data collection, and
- a summary of findings to guide discussions and next steps.

How to create the report using the sample

1. Open the Sample Report of VT-ORG Findings. Enter the name of your organisation and save the file under a new file name.
2. In Section I. Response Quality—
 - a. enter the number of responses received and determine the response rate using the total number of respondents you hoped would complete the survey as the denominator;
 - b. enter any demographic information you collected and note if it mirrors staff demographics in gender, race, age, and years of service; and
 - c. if a departmental analysis was done, enter responses by department and determine rate of response for each department.
3. In Section II. VT-ORG Survey Results—
 - a. open the Summary Sheet of the VT-ORG Scoresheet;
 - b. copy cells A2 through B6 (under Average Scores for Areas of Organisational Health) and paste them in the report under Average Scores for Five Areas of Organisational Health Across the Organisation.
 - c. If you have done a departmental analysis, enter average scores by department.
 - d. Return to the Summary Sheet and copy cells D2 through E78 (under Overall Item Scores) and paste them into the report under Organisation-wide Findings, Data by Area of Organisational Health and Individual Statements.
 - e. Ensure that the scale used is readily available to individuals reviewing the findings.
 - f. In the report, highlight the highest scores (strengths) in bold and the lowest scores (gaps) in italics, as shown in the following example:

Leadership and Mission	Management and Supervision	Employee Empowerment and Work Environment	Training and Professional Development	Staff Health and Wellness
4.2	3.23	2.1	3.35	3.17

- g. If a departmental analysis was done, present average scores for each of the five areas of organisational health, by department, and average scores for each statement within each of the five areas, by department.

	Leadership and Mission	Management and Supervision	Employee Empowerment and Work Environment	Training and Professional Development	Staff Health and Wellness
Direct Services	2.35	2.31	2.45	2.32	2.56
Outreach	3.64	3.21	3.03	3.27	3.21
Admin.	3.68	3.06	3.19	3.32	3.19

- In the Critical Issues section, provide potential context for the findings based on a snapshot of what occurred in the 6-month “look back” recommended for the VT–ORG assessment. For example, internal or external influences (e.g., employee layoffs, leadership changes, natural disasters, mass casualty events, staff injuries or deaths, other critical incidents) may affect how respondents completed the survey.
- In completing the Summary of Findings section, when looking at average scores, remember the scale used is one of frequency (i.e., how often the stated practices occur within your organisation.) Items scored in the 3.5–5 range occur “sometimes,” “often,” or “always,” and suggest strengths; items scored lower than 2.5 occur “rarely” or “never,” and suggest gaps.
- Consider emailing the report to staff along with information about next steps (e.g., that the designated individual/team will determine priorities and develop an action plan.)

Sample Email #3

Dear staff,

Thank you for completing the VT-ORG survey evaluating our current capacity as a vicarious trauma-informed organisation. We have concluded the VT-ORG assessment and are in the process of compiling and analysing the results.

We expect it will take approximately [NUMBER (two, if possible)] weeks to provide the results to you. The Vicarious Trauma-Informed Working Group will use the findings to determine priorities and develop an action plan to respond to the impact of vicarious trauma on our staff.

We remain committed to this effort and are grateful to each and every one of you for helping us become a more vicarious trauma-informed organisation.

Sincerely,

[NAME OF AGENCY LEADERSHIP]

Step 3: Determine priorities and develop an action plan

This step focuses on how to use the findings from the VT-ORG assessment to help identify the priorities that will inform the development of your action plan. You will need the VT-ORG Scoresheet and the Report on VT-ORG Findings you developed in step 2.

Task 3a: Identify areas of strengths and gaps

1. Review the scores entered in the Data by Area of Organisational Health and Individual Statements section of the report and determine—
 - a. strengths to maintain (average scores in the 3.5–5 range may represent strengths). Acknowledge and appreciate the policies and practices that contribute to your capacity as a vicarious trauma-informed organisation, and commit to maintaining them or enhancing them as needed.
 - b. gaps to address (average scores in the 1–3 range may represent gaps). Note those practices that occur infrequently or not at all, and determine which ones to address.
2. Open the Action Plan tab on the Scoresheet.
3. Examine the findings for each of the five areas of organisational health and highlight your strengths in green and the gaps you want to work on in red.
4. For each item, discuss the reasons why a practice may have received a particular score and enter them in the Rationale: Possible Reasons for This Score column.

Task 3b: Review the VT-ORG Assessment findings

The designated individual(s) or team should convene as soon as possible and create a process for building consensus regarding the VT-ORG report and next steps.

Suggested Agenda Items for First Meeting

Response quality: Discuss whether the response rate is adequate to inform next steps and whether it is a fair reflection of your staff as a whole. Consider opening it up again for additional responses, if it is not.

Critical issues: Discuss any internal or external influences that occurred during the assessment period that may provide some context for the results (e.g., employee layoffs, leadership changes, natural disasters, mass casualty events, staff injuries or deaths, other critical incidents).

Strengths and gaps: Begin to discuss priorities for maintaining strengths and addressing gaps.

Considerations for Setting Priorities

Which area(s) of organisational health pose the greatest challenges and why?

Are there existing policies or practices that can be easily maintained or enhanced with little additional effort? Are there new ones that can also be easily implemented (e.g. “low hanging fruit”)?

Remember that preventing vicarious trauma falls under the jurisdiction of the *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 (Vic)*, and that employers must consult with employees when making decisions about the measures to be taken to control risks to health or safety at a workplace under the employer's management and control or arising from the conduct of the undertaking of the employer (s. 35).

What is the timeline for addressing priorities? The timeline might reflect the assigned priority level and the amount of time and personnel needed to accomplish the tasks, including if some require short- and long-term steps, and whether they need to be implemented in a particular sequence or can happen simultaneously.

Can you use your organisation's mission and values to help you set priorities?

Task 3c: Create an action plan

Your action plan should include steps for maintaining/enhancing strengths and addressing gaps.

1. Review the highlighted strengths and gaps.
2. In the column labelled “Priority Level,” assign a score to each item (1 being the highest priority and 3 being the lowest priority).
3. Identify tasks to address each item, including identifying resources within the toolkit.
4. Identify a person(s) responsible for each task.
5. Assign a realistic timeline that will facilitate monitoring of progress.

See the following example:

Area of Organisational Health	Specific Item From VT-ORG	VT-ORG Score	Rationale (Possible Reasons for This Score)	Priority Level (1-3)	Tasks To Maintain or Build Capacity	Lead/Responsible Parties	Timeline (Month/Year)
Staff Health and Wellness	My agency offers services that support individual staff members (e.g., employee assistance program, contracted mental health providers).	4.5	Past efforts have taken hold and this level of support already provided.	1	<p>Maintain budget to support existing services.</p> <p>Ensure employees are aware of resources.</p> <p>Review HR policies regarding confidential nature of services.</p>	Executive Director, Human Resources Director	January 20XX

Task 3d: Share the action plan with staff

Consider the best forum(s) for communicating the priorities, tasks, responsible parties, and timeline for the action plan. This is an opportunity to emphasize that all tasks will be undertaken during regular work hours, staff's role in the process, and how it will ultimately address staff and the organisational needs.

Organisations can determine which of the following options works best for them:

- Discuss the action plan at a staff meeting, offering staff the opportunity to comment on the findings and the planned activities, and provide ideas regarding additional steps. **This is a requirement under section 35 of the *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 (Vic)*.**
- Convene a meeting with a select group of agency representatives to discuss the VT–ORG assessment findings and the action plan, help interpret the results, and generate ideas to inform next steps.

Task 3e: Evaluate organisational response

Build in a monitoring process for the action plan.

You may consider repeating the VT-ORG assessment after 1 year to determine if the areas where actions were taken show improvement in scores.