

COUNTERPART



Women supporting women with cancer

YEAR IN REVIEW 2023–2024



CONNECT

SUPPORT

INFORM

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About Counterpart

Counterpart is a statewide service of Women's Health Victoria, connecting, supporting and informing women with cancer from diagnosis, through treatment and beyond. Counterpart has been providing peer support, information and health and wellbeing events for women affected by cancer for over 20 years.

About Women's Health Victoria

Women's Health Victoria is a statewide, feminist, not-for-profit leading the pursuit of gender equity in health. We work with government, the health sector and the community to create better health outcomes for women (cis and trans inclusive) and gender diverse people.

We deliver vital support services to the community and empowering health information. We share evidence and recommendations to challenge bias in the health system. We build capacity in the health sector to achieve equitable health outcomes.

Women's Health Victoria is transforming the health system – doing whatever it takes to reach gender equity in health. For more information, visit whv.org.au

Acknowledgement of Country

Women's Health Victoria acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land we work on, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present and acknowledge their continued custodianship of these lands and waters.

As a statewide organisation, we also acknowledge and pay our respects to the past and present Elders and Traditional Owners of the lands and waters across Victoria.

We recognise that sovereignty was never ceded and that we are the beneficiaries of stolen land and dispossession, which began over 230 years ago and continues today.

CEO and Manager's message

Sally Hasler, CEO, Women's Health Victoria

Cindy Van Rooy, Manager, Counterpart



We are pleased to present our Counterpart Year in Review 2023–2024.

This year the Counterpart staff and volunteers continued to support Victorian women living with cancer. We provided peer support to 920 women through our Resource Centre, Bridge of Support hospital program, and at events. We also released 9 new videos of women sharing their experience of living with cancer. Thank you to all the women who have shared their stories with us.

A group of new Peer Support Volunteers joined our team this year. They have all undergone our new training program and many have already started to provide peer support. We are delighted that the Victorian Government has provided additional funding to deliver Counterpart Wellbeing Days across regional Victoria. With these increased resources, we are working closely with local cancer and health services to deliver Wellbeing Days, to provide wellbeing activities and an opportunity for women living with cancer to connect with each other.

None of the work outlined in this Year in Review would have been possible without the skills, passion and generosity of our staff, volunteers, and Counterpart Advisory Group members. Thank you. We also extend our thanks to our major funder, the Victorian Government, as well as our generous donors, sector partners, health professionals, wellness practitioners and individuals who refer women to our services and support our work.

We also wish to extend our thanks to retiring CEO, Dianne Hill for her passion and dedication working with Counterpart as the former CEO of Women's Health Victoria

We are looking forward to working with the Victorian Government to support implementation of the new Victorian Cancer Plan 2024–2028 to continue to support women living with cancer across Victoria.

Counterpart Advisory Group update

Trish Ferrier, Chair, Counterpart Advisory Group



I was pleased to become the Chair of the Counterpart Advisory Group in early 2024 and would like to thank Christine Evely, who was in the role before me. Christine is a passionate advocate for women living with cancer and I am looking forward to continuing to work with her as part of the Counterpart Advisory Group.

The Counterpart Advisory Group was established over 20 years ago and over this time we have provided advice and support to assist Counterpart to continue to deliver high quality peer support and relevant programs to Victorian women. Our members are women who have an experience of cancer, or health professionals, and both volunteer their time. Thank you for your ongoing commitment.

This year we met 4 times, providing advice on a range of issues, including the regional Wellbeing Days, Bridge of Support hospital program, the 'What's On' events program, and other general Counterpart services.

We are excited to see the Counterpart services continue to expand to support women living with all types of cancer, and across regional Victoria. We are looking forward to continuing to ensure that the voices of women with a lived experience of cancer remains central to the work of Counterpart.

How we provided peer support in 2023–24

Counterpart's service is centred around peer support – practical and emotional support that draws on lived experience – provided by Peer Support Volunteers.



Over the phone

We had nearly 700 conversations with people using our service. These were either through our Resource Centre, or with Peer Support Volunteers working from home.



In person through the Bridge of Support program

Every week, volunteers and a Counterpart staff member visits the Royal Melbourne, Royal Women's, and Sunshine hospitals. We provided peer support to 251 women attending the hospitals for treatment or other appointments.



In person at our Resource Centre and events

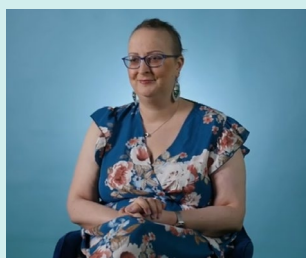
People using our service can also speak to a Peer Support Volunteer when visiting our Resource Centre, either attending a workshop, or morning tea for women living with advanced/metastatic cancer, or by prior appointment (to make sure a volunteer is present that day). See more about our events on page 8.

Peer Support Volunteers also provided peer support at our Regional Wellbeing Days.

Video series: You are not alone

With funding from the Victorian Government, in 2023 we created a series of 10 videos sharing stories of women with cancer. Having the chance to share their diverse experiences of cancer was healing for many of the women who shared their stories and provided an important resource for other women going through cancer. The videos allow people to hear what others experienced and felt, and in doing so, normalise their own feelings and feel less alone.

[Watch the videos on the Counterpart website](#)



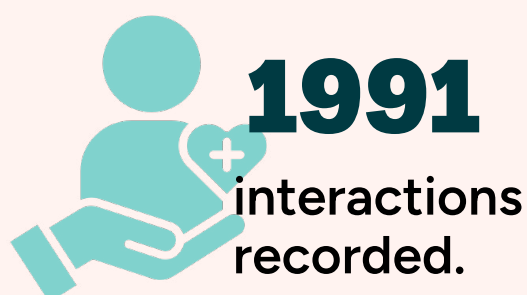
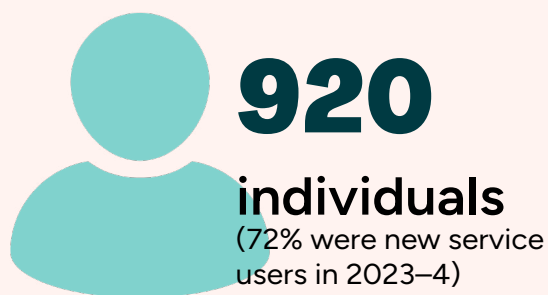
New ways of delivering peer support

In 2024–25, we will be working with service providers and women with cancer to implement our first regional peer support hub in Geelong. This is part of an ongoing project to strengthen the support available to women with cancer across Victoria.



L-R: Bridget, Ashleen and Khim on set of 'You are not alone' women's cancer stories video series.

Who we supported



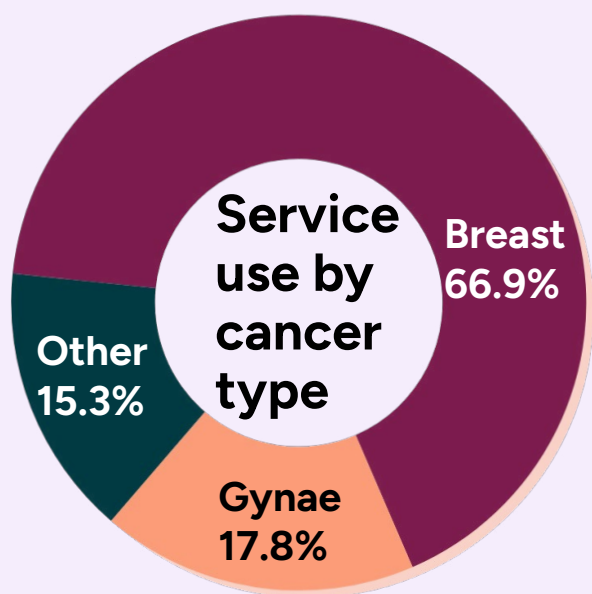
5 most spoken languages
(after English)

- Arabic
- Vietnamese
- Mandarin
- Persian
- Cantonese

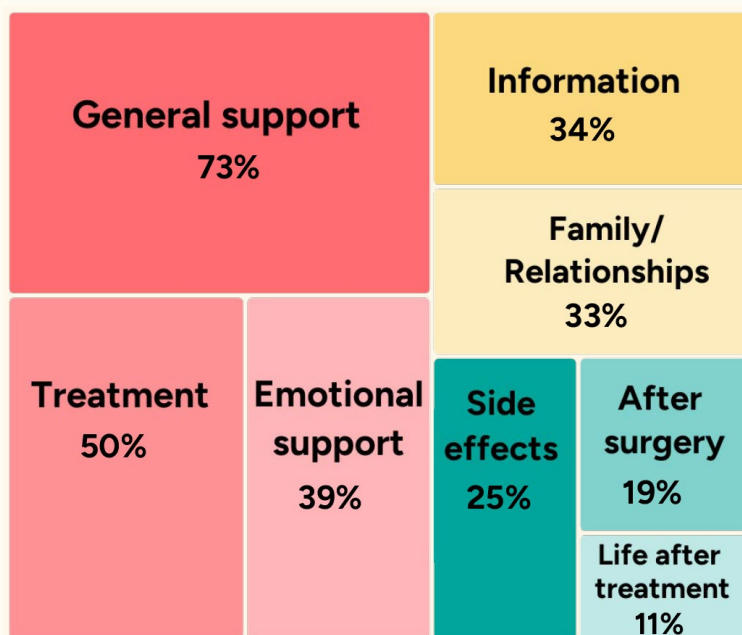


5 most common countries of birth
(after Australia)

- Philippines
- Türkiye
- Vietnam
- Indonesia
- India

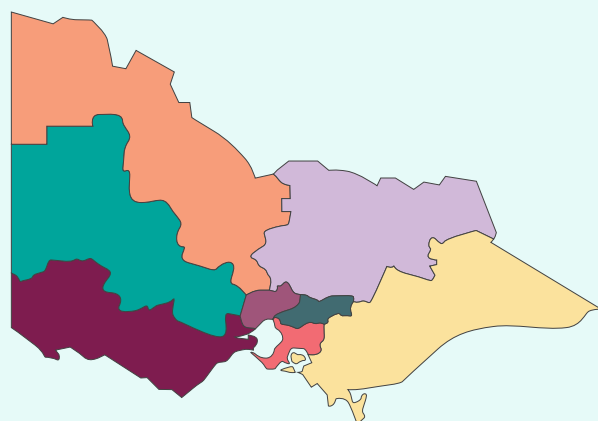


Most common peer support topics



Percentages of peer support interactions where this topic was discussed.

Service use by region



Northern and Western Metro	54.05%
Southern Metro	8.16%
Eastern Metro	7.47%
Barwon South Western	4.71%
Gippsland	6.28%
Grampians	4.21%
Hume	7.47%
Loddon Mallee	7.66%

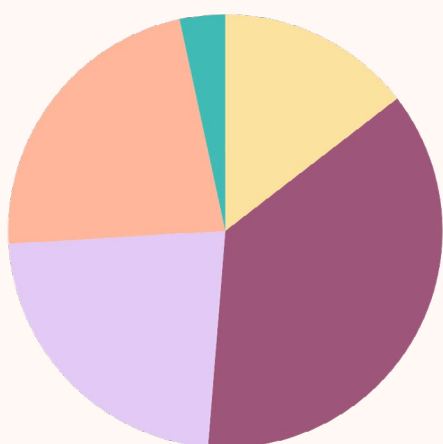
About our Peer Support Volunteers

Our volunteers in 2023–24

35 volunteers

1175 hours volunteered

How our volunteers spent their time



- Training
- Phone support from home
- Phone and in person support from our Resource Centre
- In person support at hospitals (Bridge of Support)
- In person support at regional Wellbeing Days

National Volunteering Week morning tea

In May 2024, we came together to celebrate National Volunteering Week. This is an important date in our calendar, as our volunteers are the heart of our service. It was wonderful, as always, for staff and volunteers to come together and reconnect over a cuppa and sweet treat (or 2!).



New online training

Peer support has been central to Counterpart's service since we began in 2003. In 2024, we welcomed a new intake of 12 Peer Support Volunteers. These women, who have a range of different lived experiences of cancer, are the first intake to do our new online Peer Support training with the learning platform used by other Women's Health Victoria programs.

This self-paced online course has made our Peer Support Volunteer role accessible to women in rural and regional areas for the first time, and we were pleased to welcome 4 new volunteers from outside metropolitan Melbourne. Once trainees complete their online training, they are mentored by more experienced Peer Support Volunteers, to ensure that they are confident in providing the quality support for which Counterpart is known.

We'd love to listen to you



We'd love to listen to you, to hear all your concerns, where you're at, what's happening in your life, not only just with the cancer you're going through, but everything.

'I think a lot of cancer patients tend to want to avoid putting pressure on other people and making them feel uncomfortable or putting emotional load on them. So they tend to always say, 'I'm good'.

It's very hard sometimes to be honest, and I think that's why it's great to have a service where you can come and talk to people and really be honest about what you're feeling.

And we're not going to be surprised by anything you say, or offended, or anxious, or worried. We're not going to judge you for what you're going to say. We're not going to pick apart what you're going to say until you think something else.

It's really important to be able to just talk to somebody without all of that – having that concern of protecting the family and protecting friends – you can let that go.

You are not alone because there is somebody out there at the other end of the telephone. If you can pick it up and just speak to us, we'd really love to speak to you.

We'd love to listen to you, to hear all your concerns, where you're at, what's happening in your life, not only just with the cancer you're going through, but everything.

We are really happy to talk about the whole thing because your life is a whole and it doesn't happen in isolation.'

Penny, Peer Support Volunteer

Regional Wellbeing Days

In 2023–24, Counterpart ran 7 Wellbeing Days across Victoria, with 168 service users attending. Each of these were run in collaboration with local cancer services, who provided local knowledge and contacts, while Counterpart provided logistical support. The program for each day involved a creative activity, such as art therapy, and a wellbeing practice, such as yoga or qi gong. Then a qualified health professional would present an information session on a topic relevant to women with cancer, such as cancer and nutrition, adjusting to a new normal or sexuality after cancer.

The Regional Wellbeing Days are an ongoing part of our service provision, supported by the Victorian Government.

Inverloch, Aug 2023

In partnership with McGrath Breast Care Nurse, Bass Coast Regional Health

Warrnambool, Sep 2023

In partnership with South West Healthcare, Barwon South Western Regional Integrated Cancer Service, Warrnambool Icon Cancer Centre and a community member

Nicholson, Oct 2023

In partnership with Bairnsdale Regional Health Service and the McGrath Foundation

Shepparton, Nov 2023

In partnership with the Peter Copulos Cancer and Wellness Centre, Goulburn Valley Health

Albury Wodonga, May 2024

In partnership with Albury Wodonga Health's Regional Cancer Centre Wellness Centre and the PanCare Foundation's PanSupport team

Shepparton, Jun 2024

In partnership with the Peter Copulos Cancer and Wellness Centre, Goulburn Valley Health

Bendigo, Jun 2024

In partnership with Bendigo Health

'The most beneficial part was connecting to stored emotions through creative and shared stories.'

- Shepparton Wellbeing Day attendee, Nov 23

'I really liked and thought it was all useful. As a result of attending today I want to look more into exercise, meditation and art.'

- Nicholson Wellbeing Day attendee, Oct 23

Events for women with cancer

253 attendees

23 events

12 online workshops with informative, creative and wellbeing-related topics

7 regional Wellbeing Days

2 morning teas for women living with advanced/metastatic cancer

2 webinars

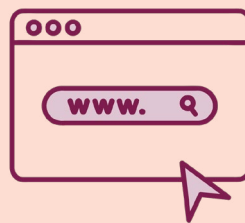
Supporting women with advanced/metastatic cancer

In 2024, we began a regular program of quarterly morning teas for women living with cancers that can't be cured. Women with advanced/metastatic cancer have different support needs to those with early-stage cancer, and having a dedicated space to connect with others with similar diagnoses has proved valuable to those who have attended.

Information

Improving women’s access to the information they seek remains an important part of Counterpart’s work. In 2023–24, we added 2 **new webinar recordings**: Nutritional support during cancer treatment and Medicinal cannabis.

Our **collection of resources** from a wide range of organisations continued to be shared with service users – not just being browsed in our Resource Centre, or posted to women, but also distributed at the Regional Wellbeing Days.



11.7k
website users



901
webinars plays

Most watched recordings

- Scars, cording and swelling
- Peripheral neuropathy
- Lymphoedema
- Medicinal cannabis
- Radiation therapy for breast cancer



Mailing list

11 editions of Counterpart connections were sent to over 3000 subscribers, providing a range of information and resources for women with cancer. We know that there are better outcomes for people affected by cancer when services collaborate, so we shared information and events from 38 organisations and research studies.

Communication activities

In addition to regularly sharing content on social media, we also promoted our service in a range of other ways, including:

- 4** radio interviews with Counterpart staff
- 6** newspaper articles about our regional Wellbeing Days
- 7** presentations about our service to health professionals and service providers
- 3** stalls at conferences or networking events.

The emotional and mental side of cancer

You feel very vulnerable. You're scared. And you get sent lots of information, but it doesn't prepare you for actually walking in there and doing it.



I am a 4-year survivor of endometrial cancer. I was diagnosed in 2020 with stage 3A Grade 1 endometrial adenocarcinoma. But I'm here, I'm still alive and I'm happy about that.

Leading up to my diagnosis in 2019, I was bleeding quite a lot so I went to my local GP. He sent me for an ultrasound that showed what looked like a big cyst on my right ovary. And within 30 days from that, I was in hospital having a biopsy and hysterectomy. And it just snowballed from there.

I didn't have the chance to have a consultation with the surgeon or with the oncologist because the biopsy did not go right. So I had the hysterectomy the same day as my biopsy.

I wasn't mentally prepared or emotionally prepared for that.

Then came treatment. As I got cancer in the year of COVID, I couldn't have anyone with me in the hospital. So that was really tough and scary, but I got through it.

You feel very vulnerable. You're scared. And you get sent lots of information, but it doesn't prepare you for actually walking in there and doing it.

I don't think anything can prepare you for that.

I had 23 rounds of external beam radiation, 6 rounds of chemo and 2 of brachytherapy, which is basically internal beam radiation. I got through all of that relatively intact and it didn't cause me too many side effects.

I think from the moment I was told I had cancer, I built up a brick wall and I didn't really want any support at that stage and I didn't ask for any. It's when treatment finished and I thought, 'what now? You can't just take me from having all these medical people all around me to nothing.' And that really did upset me. A lot.

I did fall apart at the end of it because I think by then I was left alone to sort of think about things and process it all and there was no one there to really pick up the pieces for me.

I saw a psychologist on and off to try and help with the mental side of it, because no one really talks about that. The emotional and mental side of cancer.

It takes a toll. A big toll.

Donna

Our people

Volunteers

Counterpart wouldn't exist without the dedicated women who volunteer their time. Thank you to everyone who volunteered in 2023–24.

Peer Support Volunteers

Ailsa	Jennifer	Meri
Barbara	Jo	Nikki
Branka	Judith	Penny
Bridget	Karen	Phultus
Caroll	Khim	Rachel
Claire	Larissa	Rhonda
Danni	Leanne	Robyn
Emma	Lesley	Rosanne
Evelyn	Lisa	Trish M
Glenda	Lyn	Trish F
Helen B	Margaret	Wilma
Helen D	May	

Program Volunteers

Bas	Diana
Catherine	Susan

Counterpart Advisory Group

Christine Evely (Chair, until December 23)
Trish Ferrier (Chair, from January 24)
Michelle Ainsworth
Monique Baldacchino
Danielle Carpenter
Carmel McCarthy
Alison Murphy
Simone Noelker
Kylie Stephens
Helen Blennerhassett
Dianne Hill, (CEO, Women's Health Victoria, until November 2023)
Cindy Van Rooy (Manager, Counterpart)

Counterpart staff

Visit the [staff page on our website](#) for a list of current staff members.

Our supporters

Our heartfelt thanks to the following people and organisations for their support in 2023–2024.

Your support helps us to connect, support and inform women with cancer to live well.

Major funder

Victorian Government

Project funding

2023–24 Volunteer Grant,
Australian Government

Donors

Emanuel Alfris	Margaret Maxwell
Sheila Byard	Massiny Ng
Grill'd	Robin Pietsch
Nina Macgeorge	

In-kind donors

Chloe Carr
Paul Magias
Carolyn McCaughan
Michelle McIntosh
Susan Parsons
Emma Wagdin
Tanya Wells

Friends of Counterpart

Attractor Solutions
Community Data Solutions
IT Strategic
Queen Victoria Women's Centre
Sirui Rao

Bridge of Support partners


The Royal Melbourne Hospital
The Royal Women's Hospital
Western Health
Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre. *We look forward to resuming BOS at the PMCC in 2025.*

COUNTERPART



Women supporting women with cancer

Contact

 1300 781 500

 info@counterpart.org.au

 counterpart.org.au

October 2024

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Content: Counterpart staff




Counterpart is a service of
Women's Health Victoria.



Counterpart is supported by
the Victorian Government.

 facebook.com/CounterpartSupport

 vimeo.com/counterpartsupport

 linkedin.com/showcase/counterpart-support

Now - lets get some movement happening!

Participants at
Albury Wodonga
Wellbeing Day,
May 2024.

