Amendments to the Victims Assistance Scheme designed to streamline court procedures, improve efficiencies, and better address the needs of victims were introduced to Parliament today by Minister for Justice and Attorney General Dr Peter Toyne.

Dr Toyne said the changes were sorely needed to curtail the spiralling legal costs associated with the scheme, and ensure the intent of the scheme – to assist victims – is maintained.

"The aim of the scheme is to assist victims through compensation to overcome the impact of the crime committed against them, but in recent times the scheme has been a victim of escalating legal costs, which has resulted in less compensation being available for victims."

"The scheme cannot sustain the jumps in costs seen in the past few years, where in the 1998-99 financial year 24% of the scheme went to legal costs, jumping the following year to 41%."

"In the same way, in 1996-97 payments to victims increased by 60% while legal costs increased by 523%."

"The needs of victims are of primary concern to this Government and we've clearly outlined this in our six-point plan on crime – we are about putting victims first."

"This year $4 million dollars has been allocated in the budget and I am confident the measures I have introduced to Parliament today will see the majority of this benefit scheme go to where it is intended – the victims," Dr Toyne said.

The proposed improvements to the scheme include:

- Reducing the legal costs payable under the scheme from 80% of the Supreme Court Scale to 40% of the Supreme Court Scale
- Streamlining and simplifying court procedures
- Removing the offender from court proceedings
- Allowing the Territory to seek recompense from offenders after an award to a victim has been made

The amendments introduced today address a number of recommendations made by the Crime Victims Assistance Committee in their 1997 report.

"To reinforce the Government's commitment to putting victims first the changes introduced today will be followed by a full review and overhaul of the Crimes Victims (Assistance) Act within the next year.

"This review will explore a range of options such as introducing a completely new system focusing on rehabilitation and counselling and the potential benefits of moving to an administrative rather than judicial system," Dr Toyne said.

This review will be open to public comment through a Discussion Paper and Draft Bill.