

VICTIM SERVICES AND
LAW ENFORCEMENT:
next steps



IMPROVING POLICE-BASED VICTIM SERVICES

The Police-Based Victim Services Focus Group

On February 10-11, 2003, the International Association of Chiefs of Police held a focus group on the status of victim services and law enforcement that was attended by law enforcement leaders, line officers, detectives, victim advocates, and victims themselves. The concurrent goals of the focus group meeting, which consisted of general and breakout group sessions, were to: (1) identify critical and emerging issues, barriers and challenges facing law enforcement regarding victim services; and (2) recommend strategies to resolve these issues, overcome barriers and meet the identified challenges.

The focus group evolved from the IACP's 1999 *Summit on Victims of Crime*, funded by the U.S. Department of Justice's Office for Victims of Crime, which brought together law enforcement leaders, representatives from the criminal justice system, victim advocates and victims to develop an action agenda in order to improve police response to victims. The participants of the summit identified seven critical needs of crime victims. These seven needs create, in turn, a set of criteria for *effective victim services*:

- *Access* – Helping victim feel comfortable contacting the investigating officer to obtain or offer new information in their case helps ensure the victim will not feel left out of the system
- *Continuity* – Coordination with local victim service providers and the prosecutor's offices helps to ensure continuous service to the victim after the initial report is taken
- *Information* – Availability of information in languages predominant in the community and in large print for the elderly should include resource sheets or brochures and relevant police and victim service contact numbers
- *Justice* – Cooperation, communication and support through the entire criminal justice process will help ensure the satisfaction of all parties involved in a case: victims, police officers, prosecutors, victim service providers, etc.
- *Safety* – Understanding the crisis reaction of victims and protecting the victim from future intimidation and harm helps enhance the victim's sense of security
- *Support* – Helping the victim feel comfortable to discuss the crime and letting the victim know that the police are concerned about their needs will create an atmosphere of support that may encourage improved cooperation with criminal justice agencies
- *Voice* – Allowing victims to express their needs and concerns ensures their feedback is addressed when agencies determine how to respond to future victims

Using these criteria as a starting point, focus group participants discussed not only the general obstacles agencies face in developing effective victim services, but also the specific needs of different levels of law enforcement leadership, including chiefs and sheriffs, middle managers, first-line supervisors, line officers and detectives, field training officers (FTOs) and recruit officers, and training and certification agencies. This report will clarify those needs and strategies identified by focus group members to improve victim services in law enforcement agencies and provide a directional tool for law enforcement to use in advancing its approach to victim services.

Generally, focus group members concluded that the biggest impediments to enhancing the effectiveness of victim assistance programs in law enforcement agencies are 1) negative institutional forces and 2) lack of training for all levels of law enforcement. Attendees recommended that law enforcement receive specific training on communication and sensitivity issues to address these hurdles. With respect to the roles of different levels of leadership, participants stressed that superiors must clarify their expectations of subordinates, and officers must be held accountable for providing quality services to victims. Additionally, attendees suggested ways law enforcement can have a positive influence on prosecutors to improve victim services and can engage the public in ways that will raise awareness about the need for effective victim services. Focus group participants also noted that departments do not need a victim services unit to provide effective victim services; assistance to victims can be offered in ways that are appropriate to individual agencies.

Obstacles Facing Law Enforcement Agencies

Institutional Forces and Training Deficits

Focus group participants identified two main areas that inhibit law enforcement agencies' effective provision of services to victims: institutional forces and lack of sufficient training and/or resources. Attendees noted the philosophy or culture in some law enforcement agencies that de-emphasizes service to victims. Put another way, law enforcement agencies may see their mission as "enforcement" and view serving victims of crime as secondary.

One reason for this attitude may be that law enforcement agencies fail to appreciate the potential pay off of a greater investment in victim services. Participants said law enforcement professionals need to understand that investment in victim services can yield, at a minimum, "more educated victims" in future cases, and at best, a reduction in crime.

Secondly, participants noted that many agencies lack the specialized training needed to provide effective victim services. Attendees said that agencies typically lack cultural competency training – or knowledge and understanding of different cultures – thus making effective provision of victim services more difficult. Participants cited a lack of diversity among personnel, culturally appropriate informational materials, and language translation capabilities as among the most pressing problems.

In addition to these institutional roadblocks, focus group attendees cited numerous other practical obstacles to effective victim services. These obstacles include difficult or unsuccessful recruitment strategies and staffing patterns, insufficient qualification standards and screening methods for hiring officers, departmental barriers to advancement, and ineffective supervision of police officers. Underlying all this is the problem of insufficient resources.

Since law enforcement agencies can do little without adequate resources, it was noted that departments need to be informed on how to access funding through the Victims of Crime Act. Attendees

recommended that this be accomplished through articles in publications such as the IACP's *Police Chief* magazine, as well as outreach to organizations including IACP, the Major City Chiefs' Association, the National Association of Attorneys' General, and the National Sheriffs' Association.

Institutional Change and Training Strategies

Focus group attendees identified several strategies to address the above-described agency obstacles. Among the first was laying an educational foundation. Victim services training must begin at the police academy level, and participants recommended that such instruction should expose recruits to policing with a victim service focus. Victim service issues should be woven throughout all lesson plans as well as included in all distance learning and in-service training sessions.

Agencies must also implement practical communication strategies to enhance their service to victims. Participants recommended that departments develop short- and long-term plans for communicating with victims who speak different languages. To do this, agencies should establish ethical standards for translators and interpreters, and translation and interpreter issues must be included in first responder training.

Attendees also suggested that agencies incorporate a victim services page on their Web sites, with a link on their main pages offering help to victims and directing victims to the victim services page. ●

This project was supported by Grant #1999-VF-GX-K006 awarded by the Office for Victims of Crime, Office of Justice Programs, US Department of Justice. Points of view in the document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the US Department of Justice.

Targeting Different Levels of Leadership: A Closer Look

To increase the chances for real improvement in victim services, it is necessary to go beyond the general obstacles and strategies all agencies face and identify the unique needs of each level of law enforcement leadership. Thus, focus group attendees analyzed the specific responsibilities of: (1) chiefs/sheriffs; (2) middle managers; (3) first-line supervisors; (4) line officers and detectives; (5) field-training officers and recruiting officers; and (6) training and certification agencies.

Attendees said that for all leadership levels, it was necessary to make victim services an integral part of the a victim-centered philosophy rather than just a “special topic.” To achieve this, they recommended that law enforcement leaders adopt a multi-faceted approach to implementing victim services. Goals of such an approach would be to:

- Improve coordination with community services;
- Identify measurable knowledge, skills and abilities on which to train and evaluate personnel; and
- Devise a system through which victims can follow-up on their cases.

By encouraging citizens to learn more about sheriffs and chiefs and their support for victim service programs, leaders will identify and cultivate potential partners.

“Police chiefs and sheriffs arguably have the most challenging responsibility of all...”

Chiefs and Sheriffs: Taking the Long View

Police chiefs and sheriffs arguably have the most challenging responsibility of all: shifting the culture of their agencies to implement permanent change, with limited resources. Focus group members said that chiefs and sheriffs must understand that the transition to a victim services philosophy will require changing the mind set of an entire agency and its executive staff, which will likely take time. Leaders must increase accountability among their personnel to ultimately create a consistent community perception of the agency as “victim friendly.” The goal is systemic change that will not be subject to erosion by a change in leadership.

Focus group participants recommended numerous steps to help leaders identify funding and other resources to support effective victim services. First, they suggested that a resource brochure be developed that explains funding sources at the local, state, and federal levels. The creation of local funding allocation plans is also important for engaging leaders in seeking revenue sources. Law enforcement executives should make victim-oriented policing a priority when requesting funding from local government bodies.

Chiefs and sheriffs can emphasize the importance of victim services through their state chiefs’ and sheriffs associations. Law enforcement executives, in collaboration with state association leaders, should explain how victim services benefit chiefs/sheriffs and explore ways to implement victim service programs for different kinds of agencies. As progress is achieved, leaders should be encouraged to write articles on victim service topics in law enforcement magazines. Victim services training should continue to be incorporated into the IACP annual conference as well as national and regional symposia.

Preparing and Training Middle Managers

Middle managers in law enforcement agencies occupy a unique position in that they need to be able to

balance directives from executives with responses from line officers. Middle managers must formulate their bureaus' responses and create action plans that implement victim services. Additionally, they follow-up by holding first-line supervisors accountable for the quality of victim services provided.

To prepare middle managers for these challenges, additional training should be available for those seeking middle management positions. Victim service issues must be incorporated into the promotion preparation process, which should include mentoring and coaching.

During their tenure, middle managers should participate in training programs on victim services policy and protocol. Where available, associations that support middle management should integrate victim issues and services into the range of topics addressed in existing training, and middle managers should be evaluated on the quality of their victim services and their knowledge of these issues. Eventually, model programs and best practices should be collected for dissemination to other similarly situated managers and agencies.

First-line Supervisors: Clarifying Expectations

First-line supervisors are in a similar position to middle managers in that they need the support of both command staff and line officers. However, because they more directly oversee the work of line officers, they must demonstrate a detailed understanding of victim issues and proper responses by subordinates. Participants said supervisors need to:

1. Exhibit sensitivity to victims,
2. Learn to work with victims,
3. Know how victims can be re-traumatized, and
4. Ensure that victims are dealt with properly.

In-depth training will help prepare supervisors for their responsibilities. Attendees said that if states have supervisor training classes, victim service topics should be incorporated into the curriculum. Victim services information should also be included regularly at roll call. Perhaps the most important practical step first-line supervisors should be encouraged to take,

however, is to clarify their expectations of line officers regarding effective response to victims.

“Line officers and detectives are possibly in the most important position...”

Line Officers: The Front Line of Victim Services

Line officers and detectives are possibly in the most important position because they are the ones with whom victims most frequently interact after a crime has been committed. Law enforcement officers would benefit from increased knowledge of trauma, sensitivity during evidence collection, and awareness of the inherent barriers victims face in trying to access help.

Attendees said that, during the academy, officers should be trained in the area of interpersonal skills to improve communication with victims. Following the initial training, officers should also have opportunities to reinforce and receive feedback in order to refine their skills.

Officers and detectives must receive effective, practical education and training, as well as support from their supervisors. Personnel should be trained on topics including:

- Recognizing the signs of victimization
- Understanding why some victims are reluctant to pursue cases against their offenders
- Allowing victims to set the pace of reporting
- Fostering trust in victims
- Recognizing the dynamics of trauma
- Acknowledging the impact of judgment and negativity toward victims, and
- Connecting victims with advocates
- Cultural sensitivity/competency

Participants said officers should also be educated about victim compensation. It is particularly important that officers be taught sensitivity toward victims, such as sexual assault survivors, who may be reluctant to apply for compensation. Officers must be instructed not to use compensation as a means to encourage cooperation from victims.

Finally, to promote effective, supportive interactions with victims and ensure accountability, victim services issues must be directly incorporated into the evaluations of officers and detectives. These professionals should also be recognized and rewarded for rendering effective victim services. Officers, like supervisors, must appreciate the importance of victim services and where it fits in the mission and values of the agency for which they work.

The Unique Needs of Field Training Officers and Recruits

Field training and recruit officers have the same needs as line officers and more, according to focus group members. Field training officers' knowledge of treatment of victims should be supported through ongoing training and testing that emphasizes policies and protocols on victim services. Whenever possible,

agencies should increase competition for FTO positions — in part through pay incentives — and include criteria for FTO selection that addresses victim services issues. Finally, agencies should make sure that FTOs are consistently teaching proper service to victims. Research should be conducted and techniques implemented that will encourage FTOs to want to improve services to victims.

Training and Certification Agencies: Looking Ahead

Training and certification agencies must fight for additional training time to more fully incorporate victim services, cultural sensitivity and ethics issues into all training topics. Law enforcement training organizations need to prioritize the inclusion of victim services and interpersonal skills in their curricula, and the term “victim services” should be re-framed as “crisis intervention” or some similar phrase to help bring a fresh approach and remove the negative connotations that may have formed around the former term. Law enforcement should work with national and state Peace Officer Standards and Training organizations to reinforce that victim services be required training. ●

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The Role of Other Players on the Continuum

Prosecutors

Focus group attendees also discussed the obstacles to effective victim services faced by other partners along the continuum of response to victimization. For example, prosecutors often share the distrust and frustration of law enforcement around a victim's hesitancy to participate in the criminal justice system. They also often lack knowledge of victim issues and needs, and their offices may not be able to provide culturally competent services to a diverse community.

Participants suggested ways in which law enforcement can play a role in ameliorating these obstacles. They recommended that law enforcement personnel and prosecutors cross-train with one another to provide consistent treatment, increase victim confidence, and strengthen outcomes. The curriculum should include practical, applied information on the psychological impact of trauma and the potential benefits of counseling. Attendees said that if law enforcement and prosecutors would increase inter-agency communication, they could ease the transition for victims moving from the law enforcement phase to the judicial phase of the criminal justice continuum.

Community

The community also faces obstacles to the provision of effective victim services that law enforcement may be able to influence. Like law enforcement, the community often lacks sufficient resources to serve victims and educate the public. The public's faith in the criminal justice system may need rebuilding, and they may be unable to define crimes or understand the law's limitations. Finally, agencies engaged in public education may not be successfully reaching sub-populations within the community, including the elderly, the disabled and non-English speaking persons.

Law enforcement can help the community build awareness around the needs and rights of victims by developing or participating in educational campaigns featuring tools such as public service announcements, open houses, and citizen police academies. These campaigns can be tied to a "victims awareness month" using promotions. For example, law enforcement can staff outreach tables during annual events such as National Night Out and First Night Out and invite personnel from the courts, prosecutors' offices, and probation and parole departments to participate. To help attract the public, law enforcement can conduct K-9 and mounted patrol demonstrations at the event. ●

Conclusion

By addressing both the institutional and training obstacles facing various levels of leadership within law enforcement agencies, and recommending strategies to address those obstacles, focus group participants have provided important direction to law enforcement for use in improving its approach to victim services.

Through specific training on communication and sensitivity issues, leaders' clarifying expectations of subordinates, and collaboration with prosecutors and the public, agencies can continue to improve law enforcement's service to victims.

IACP Efforts to Improve Services to Victims

From 2000 to 2001, the violent crime rate in the United States declined 10 percent, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics National Crime Victimization Survey. Moreover, during this same period, property crime declined 6 percent, continuing a more than 20-year decline. Every state in the United States has enacted victim rights laws and crime victim compensation funds. Thousands of victim assistance programs have been developed across the country. Crime-victim related state laws and statutes have increased in number from several hundred in the 1980's to more than 27,000 in 2003.

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A quick review of the above facts might lead one to believe that victims today need little extra assistance. However, none of these figures reflect law enforcement's effectiveness in rendering service to crime victims and their families. The IACP recognized the need for a quality response to victims, and has been working to improve law enforcement's services to victims for years.

In 1999 the IACP held a national *Summit on Victims of Crime*, funded by the U.S. Department of Justice's Office for Victims of Crime, which brought together law enforcement leaders, representatives from the criminal justice system, victim advocates and victims to develop an action agenda in order to improve police response to victims. The participants of the summit identified seven critical needs of crime victims: access, continuity, information, justice, safety, support and voice.

In the two years following the summit, the resulting IACP *Improving Police-Based Victim Services Project* has worked to implement the Victims Summit recommendations and offers the law enforcement community extensive services and products on the topic of services to victims. In addition to this focus group that was convened in connection to the OVC funded IPBVS project, hundreds of contacts have been made over the life of the project through national symposia, a survey of police-based victim service programs, no-cost technical assistance and IACP's Annual Conference. The IACP also offers agencies access to a quarterly newsletter, a customizable web page and brochure, electronic versions of a training curriculum, model protocol and procedures and summit report recommendations.

In 2003-2004, the IACP plans to expand current services to feature a Victim Oriented Policing leadership initiative that will include a long-range strategic plan designed to change the culture of law enforcement to recognize victim services as an integral part of daily department life. The systemic change IACP envisions is a parallel to Community Oriented Policing (COP) where America's law enforcement community experienced a sea change in policing philosophy, re-orienting operations toward meeting grassroots community problems. It is now time to build from the COP model to move toward a "Victim Oriented Policing" (VOP) approach. The VOP model envisioned by IACP would be complimentary to all COP efforts, and enhance those efforts by bringing stronger services to the community's most vulnerable members - those who are victims of crime.

For additional information on IACP's Victim Services programs or products, please email victim-services@theiacp.org or call 1.800.The.IACP. ●