Exploration of Challenges in Law Enforcement-Based Victim Services: Focus Groups with Victim Service Directors

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Introduction

The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) receives funding from the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) to serve as the training and technical assistance provider for the Law Enforcement-Based Victim Services (LEV) Program. Through the LEV program, IACP supports law enforcement agencies in either establishing new victim services programs or enhancing existing programs. As part of this initiative, IACP partnered with the Justice Research and Statistics Association (JRSA) through its Center for Victim Research to undertake the LEV Mapping Project, a set of research tasks to better understand the current state of law enforcement-based victim services programs. Those activities included a national survey of law enforcement-based victim services across the United States and a series of follow-up interviews with a selection of survey respondents.¹

After analyzing the results of the survey and interviews, IACP and JRSA identified a number of topics that might be appropriate for future training and technical assistance and which would benefit from preliminary exploration through focus groups. It was determined that victim services directors (VSDs) from agencies who received LEV or other VOCA funding would serve as participants in these focus groups.² IACP and JRSA chose three topics for this exploration:

- Victim services unit workload,
- Staffing, and
- Ethics.

Approach

Due to budgetary constraints, continuing pandemic-related travel restrictions, and the need to include a wide geographic range of participants, the focus groups were held virtually. This approach also encouraged participation by limiting the amount of time participants would need to be away from their duties. Because the focus groups were held virtually, they were restricted to three or four participants each to promote full engagement.

Prospective participants were identified through a review of survey responses and interview remarks from the previous LEV Mapping Project post-survey interviews. Individuals who had specifically addressed the issues of staffing, workload, and ethics were identified. A spreadsheet of those individuals was developed which included the individual’s title, state, agency type, geographic area (rural, suburban, urban), and agency size. IACP and JRSA determined that dividing focus groups by agency size was an appropriate approach and held three groups:

- Small agencies (fewer than 200 sworn personnel),

¹ For information on additional activities under this partnership, visit the LEV Mapping Project.

² For more information on Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) funding, see the OVC Fact Sheet on the Crime Victims Fund.
• Mid-sized agencies (between 200 and 500 sworn personnel), and
• Large agencies (more than 500 sworn personnel).

While four participants were recruited for each focus group, the nature of the law enforcement-based victim services job meant that some participants had to cancel at the last minute to respond to urgent needs. The smaller agency focus group consisted of three VSDs whose agencies were housed in county sheriff’s offices. The midsize agency focus group included two VSDs, one based in a state police department and the other in a municipal police department. Finally, the larger-agency group included three VSDs from a sheriff’s office and two police departments, one of whom had a family advocacy center where the victim services department was housed (though they responded to other forms of victimization beyond family violence). All participants were female. A summary table of the participants is presented in the appendix.

Focus group protocol was developed in consultation with IACP.

Results

The attempt to categorize participants by agency size was imperfect. One VSD in a smaller agency revealed that her victim services unit supported not only her agency but more than a dozen small law enforcement agencies across several counties.

Workload

VSDs were asked whether they had ever attempted to quantify the workload born by themselves or their staff. Half had attempted to, but none expressed satisfaction in their results. Tracking of time was very burdensome without producing much value; and no one felt their attempts to track their own time adequately captured the workload. One who attempted to describe her workload by task and percentage of time for a grant application found that she was not able to stick with that estimate given the “crisis management” nature of her job.

While they do keep track of the numbers of victims served and services provided for grant reporting, this was not considered a good indicator of workload. Depending on the agency, anywhere from about 20% to 80% of staff’s time is spent on direct services to victims. More than one director noted that the amount of time any victim interaction can take is highly variable; a phone call could take five minutes or an hour, depending on the particular victim and his or her needs.

One VSD from a small agency noted their call volume has increased 3 to 4 times in the past 3 years; a VSD from a mid-sized agency noted that in the past year the number of cases they respond to has gone down, but the cases they do have are “off the charts” and required more intensive services than they previously provided.
VSD 2 said that their agency has advocates who specialize in specific types of crime (e.g., domestic violence, child abuse). As such, their workload—in terms of the number of cases overseen—varies. For example, child abuse cases tend to have more ongoing work relative to domestic violence cases. The lower-level crimes (city-level offenses) were handled by interns. That agency does, however, track all services provided by each advocate, as well as the amount of time it takes to make contact with the victim(s). VSD 1 reported a less formal division of work but did state that she tried to keep in mind the workloads of her different staff, to understand who had the available time or mental space to take on the next case.

The victim service workload for some agencies also included crisis intervention with officers or deputies, responding to drug overdose cases or mental health cases, or responding to reported incidents that did not result in the taking of a criminal report but where an individual would benefit from contact by a victim services specialist.

VSDs also discussed duties outside of direct assistance, which consume a significant portion of their time. These ancillary activities include driving, meetings, serving on committees, managing volunteers, training, testifying in court and at the legislature, community outreach, writing grant proposals and reports, and collaborating with community partners. VSD 8 stated that while approximately 40% of her work still involves direct victim contact, she rarely participates in on-scene advocacy work anymore due to other responsibilities. Instead, on-scene work is handled by the agency’s only other victim advocate or by a volunteer. VSD 4, in contrast, was heavily involved in direct services, as well as reviewing all police reports, managing volunteers, training, speaking events, and other tasks.

VSD 1 reported keeping a log of her activities for a full week and then using that information to develop a memo for leadership, explaining the significance of all the activities. VSD 6 said her team constantly presents to leadership, local government, and the community, but they still don’t grasp all the work the victim services unit does.

VSD 2 and VSD 4 said they would like to know how other VSDs divide their caseload among staff. VSD 2 particularly expressed interest in having the ability to compare what her agency is doing with those in comparable agencies.

**Staffing**

The number of staff at each agency varied, with smaller agencies having one to three staff members (including the director), large agencies having between 6 and 14 staff, and both medium-sized agencies having two staff. A substantial percentage of the funding for the victim services units across all agency sizes comes from external grants (as opposed to some internal source). For example, VSD 3 stated that 10 out of 14 positions at her agency are grant funded and that they
have not received a new county-funded position for almost 20 years. VSD 6 reported that her local government leaders have said that without grants, there was no funding for the program, and they would cut the staff back to just the director. VSD 4 had a recent conversation with her supervisor in which they refused to hire a new victim advocate because they would only have a job for one to two years before the grant funding expired.

Some of the focus group participants stated that they had tried to convince administrators to move their salaries into the agency budget, but few have had any success. VSD 3 noted that it is significantly easier for sworn personnel to sell increased salaries and positions for uniformed officers compared to professional staff, including victim advocates, but that her program could use 10 more staff. VSD 7 stated that her program is VOCA-funded and that each year there is a threat of funding cuts, but any conversations to put victim services in the general budget have been “difficult and frustrating.”

VSD 8 stated that her agency’s staff salaries are part of the police budget, but because the city cannot pay as much as many positions funded by grants are able to, the salaries for victim advocates were so low that finding qualified candidates was quite difficult. Recently, however, she was able to get a sizeable pay raise for the advocates in her agency by researching what other agencies were paying and emphasizing the impact her victim services staff have on the department (e.g., reducing officers’ workload, meeting the service needs of victims). VSD 2 reported using data to increase her unit’s staffing by tracking how long it took for her staff to contact victims. She noted that if victims were not contacted within 3 days, their engagement with the process decreased 60%. As a result, their staffing level increased to provide victim contact within 24 hours.

VSDs were asked about their use of volunteers and interns as part of their staffing. The number of volunteers among the agencies represented in the focus groups ranged from zero to 40. Those who used volunteers described a wide array of duties that they performed, ranging from on-scene work similar to that of a staff advocate to administrative tasks.

A few of the directors noted the significant amount of time required to train and manage volunteers or interns and found that engaging them was not an efficient use of time. Some larger agencies are able to designate a salaried staff member to oversee their volunteer program, though this is not always possible at smaller agencies. To alleviate some of this pressure, VSD 4 asked one of her long-time volunteers to serve as the volunteer coordinator to oversee volunteer training and management. VSD 6 noted that even though they were volunteers, she was able to use them to cover on-call nighttime shifts, allowing her staff to concentrate on other duties.

The participants also discussed the importance of matching volunteers’ strengths/preferences with their duties. VSD 6 stated that some of her volunteers do not want to work as victim advocates but are excited about community outreach and are used to promote program awareness. VSD 4
stated that she tried to be flexible, allowing volunteers to say no to certain types of cases or to focus on areas of interest, whether that is on-scene work or administrative tasks. She credited that flexibility for helping her keep the same volunteers for many years.

Ethics

Only two of the focus group participants (VSDs 1 and 3) stated that their victim service program had an in-house Code of Ethics. However, because many VSDs and staff are also licensed social workers, participants noted that those individuals must comply with certain ethical considerations to maintain their licensure, including ongoing ethics training. One of the directors noted that when there are differences in perspective between law enforcement and victim services regarding how to address a specific situation, the VSD or staff refer to their social worker code of ethics to determine the best path forward.

Many of the focus group participants also mentioned that they train their staff (both paid and volunteers) on the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) ethical standards, a six-module training curriculum that is free and publicly available. The National Organization for Victim Assistance’s (NOVA) “Code of Professional Ethics for Victim Assistance Providers” is also publicly available and was used by a number of the agencies represented in the focus groups. Finally, participants noted that some states have their own victim services academies that all victim advocates must complete to become certified, and these academies have their own set of ethical guidelines that must be followed. Several VSDs also noted the helpfulness of regular ethics trainings.

For victim services providers housed in a law enforcement agency, situations in which (1) law enforcement officers contribute to the victimization or (2) law enforcement personnel are the victims, may present ethical issues and/or conflicts of interest. Some VSDs stated they have methods to "outsource" victim advocacy in certain situations involving their officers as a result of conflicts of interest that arise. In this instance "outsourcing" refers to referring victim services to outside victim services agencies. Other VSDs stated they have determined how to use internal staff in these instances.

Discussions of ethical issues included being victim-centered by protecting victim confidentiality to the extent possible. For example, focus group participants mentioned having regular discussions with their agency’s Public Information Officer about the need to consider the impact on the victim(s) from the public release of certain information about the crime. VSDs also talked about maintaining confidentiality by ensuring that their notes focused on the services provided to the victim and did not include extraneous information.

Implications for Research and Practice

The VSDs participating in these focus groups all shared experiences and concerns regarding workload, staffing,
and ethical issues. Their comments suggest a few avenues for training and technical assistance and further research.

**Workload.** Understanding workload and enabling a comparison of staff or director workload across comparable agencies could assist in budgeting, support funding requests, or aid in planning. However, accurately tracking time by task can be overly burdensome. In the case of law enforcement-based victim services, where staff are already under pressure to meet the real needs of victims in a timely manner, such time tracking may even interfere with priority tasks.

Additionally, developing a working group of VSDs to identify and define various activities for directors and staff could be beneficial. Then, the group might set a given amount of time (one day, repeated days over a month, one week, etc.) to collect this data across programs to identify the workload range. That group could provide an orientation or guidance to promote uniform tracking of time. The resulting data could be compiled to identify averages or ranges of standard workload and distribution of time across responsibilities.

**Staffing.** Obtaining sufficient staff is also a challenge for VSDs, with the need to make the case for retaining or adding staff positions to agency leadership, local government officials, or grant funding agencies. Compiling existing research or supporting new research that can quantify the benefits of law enforcement-based victim services would support those staffing requests. In addition, while a robust volunteer or intern program can reduce staffing pressure, some VSDs were intimidated by the burden of starting and maintaining such a program. Technical assistance or training materials on this topic could be disseminated widely to give those VSDs confidence and guidance in developing their programs. One existing resource that could be shared more broadly is the **LEV Template Package III: Student Interns & Volunteers**.

**Ethics.** Ethical issues are a regular challenge for all victim service providers and a special challenge for those serving victims of crime within a larger agency that has its own values. While the VSDs expressed support for existing guides, regular opportunities for continuing education could be supported for VSDs, ranging from a full training to a recurring newsletter column or blog post that addresses ethical questions. Because some VSDs act as trainers on ethics issues in their own states, they might be tapped to draft materials or lead occasional on-line discussions.
## Appendix. Table of Focus Group Participants

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<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
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<th>Agency Type</th>
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