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BRIEF

# PROMISING PRACTICES FROM VICTIM SERVICES PROVIDERS' COVID-19 RESPONSE

## PROTECTING VICTIMS AND THOSE WHO SERVE THEM

IN SPRING 2020, CORONAVIRUS DISEASE 2019 (COVID-19) began to spread through the United States, bringing illness, death, and disruption to communities. Almost every public institution had to pivot quickly to prevent the spread of the disease, including the criminal justice system. Conditions imposed by the pandemic and the public health responses to manage it have upended victim services providers (VSPs) in serious and significant ways. One significant concern has been the impact of stay-at-home and quarantine orders within jurisdictions that implemented such mandates. For example, many areas saw increases in domestic violence or family abuse situations. At the same time, stay-at-home orders made it more difficult to identify cases of abuse and for victims to reach out for help, and in some cases also affected partners that VSPs rely on to deliver services. Another concern is that the pandemic environment has made it less likely for victims to seek help because of fear of contracting COVID-19, assumptions that programs might have shut down, or the belief that others might need assistance more than they do. Simultaneous with these public health challenges have been national protests that have focused critical attention on the justice system and sought to advance justice reform.

Changes made by VSPs in delivery models, staffing, and services have made it possible to continue their efforts

during the pandemic, but the levels of need—and the expectation that those needs will only increase over the longer term—suggest that maintaining support for crime victims will get tougher over time. Furthermore, although the pressures for reform are not *focused* on service providers, the willingness of victims of crime to reach out for assistance is affected by trust and legitimacy concerns, meaning that the effectiveness of VSPs is *shaped* by the current environment.

To better understand how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the criminal justice system in terms of the challenges it created and how agencies adapted to those challenges, the Priority Criminal Justice Needs Initiative conducted a series of panel workshops with representatives of different sectors within the system.<sup>1</sup> One of the key goals of the discussions was to identify which adaptations presented promising practices that agencies should consider continuing beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. One such panel workshop brought together both justice agency-based and community-based VSPs and other experts to discuss how the pandemic has affected VSPs and their respective responses. In addition, a separate community workshop provided input on the broader effects of changes made by VSPs and the justice system more generally.



A project of the RAND Corporation,  
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## HIGHLIGHTS THE CHALLENGES

### THIS BRIEF

the COVID-19 pandemic created, describes how VSPs adapted to those challenges, notes which adaptations might hold promise even after the pandemic ebbs, and provides suggestions for evaluations to demonstrate the efficacy of such adaptations and the effect of other justice agencies' adaptations on VSPs.



# WHY WAS THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC SO CHALLENGING FOR VICTIM SERVICES PROVIDERS?

### The Pandemic Increased Stress on Staff

VSPs faced significant challenges protecting their staff because of difficulty getting personal protective equipment (PPE) and other supplies. Particularly early in the pandemic, VSPs were not prioritized as essential and therefore could not get PPE as quickly as some other justice agencies could. Responses to the fear of infection also increased staff burden and workload. At the same time, VSPs had difficulty recruiting during the pandemic, which made it even more challenging to maintain adequate staffing levels.

The effect of the pandemic on VSP staff members' mental health also has been a significant concern. Like others who work in the justice system and are exposed to second-order trauma, service providers hold jobs that are stressful under the best of circumstances. Under pandemic conditions,

provider staff have all of the added stressors of family, health, and other challenges, but the relatively low pay of frontline providers means that they might lack the financial resources to cushion the pandemic's impact. Working from



home increases the difficulty of separating work life from home life, potentially magnifying stress. Panelists also cited that the national protests focused on social justice and equity in the justice system affected staff members from minority groups in very personal ways, magnifying the stress associated with providing services during the pandemic. All of these stresses combine to create major pressures on a workforce that crime victims depend on to help them deal with their victimization.

### Some Critical Services Require In-Person Interaction

Many of the services provided to victims of crime are traditionally done in person—for example, sheltering in a domestic violence shelter, in-person counseling with a mental health practitioner, and the direct provision of food assistance. The face-to-face nature of these activities has been risky for both the individuals needing support and the paid staff or volunteers involved in delivering them.

Fear of disease transmission has meant that infection-prevention measures, such as requirements for masks and distancing, have not always been enough to make abuse survivors comfortable in shelter situations, even if that discomfort meant returning to live with an abuser. In addition, such safety measures as mask-wearing may traumatize certain violence victims because it leads to feelings of being restrained or claustrophobia. Panelists also cited mask-wearing as a cause of serious stress for some people of color because of concerns

about interacting with police and others with their faces covered and about how having their faces covered would be perceived.

For providers, even in cases in which services technically can be provided over the phone or via video, they may be difficult to provide well. For example, because of decisions made by hospitals to prevent the spread of the virus, some VSPs were restricted in their ability to contact victims at the point where their need was greatest and most salient. Panelists also emphasized the limitations of a virtual environment for making personal and emotional connections with the individuals being helped.

### The Digital Divide Can Limit Who Has Access to Assistance

As was the case for the transition to virtual court processes, the digital divides across the country and among different socio-economic classes affected the virtualization of victim services, causing concern about equity in access to assistance and services. For example, participants in both the victim services





You need to build in time to train personnel. . . . Just rolling out the software isn't enough. You need to teach people how to use it, teach them how to navigate through the system, really educate them on privacy settings or transfer of information and how to communicate that to the people that they serve in plain language.

—Victim services panelist

and community organization panels noted repeatedly that the digital divide is a problem for rural areas, where fast internet and cellular system coverage might be limited or even nonexistent, making virtual options for victim services moot. Even individuals who have access to technology might not have the expertise to use it effectively for high-pressure events, such as testifying at a virtual hearing, and efforts to assist individuals remotely are challenging. Non-English speaking populations also might not be well served unless virtual options are implemented multilingually.

Like victims, VSP staff faced challenges in accessing technology devices and reliable internet. As in other parts of the justice system, the transition to virtual operations was much easier for organizations that had made previous technology investments and were not starting from limited capability when the pandemic hit.

#### **Changes in Other Parts of the System Affected VSPs**

The ability of VSPs to provide victim services—even if the organizations themselves are not *directly* connected to or

part of criminal justice agencies—can be significantly affected by the decisions and actions taken by those other agencies. For example, many VSPs were affected by law enforcement agencies' decisions regarding responses to different types of crimes and how personnel were deployed.

Within the court system, practical changes to reduce COVID-19 risk had direct effects on service provision, such as victim advocates not being allowed to attend court hearings even though the right to such support is protected by law. Victims often assumed that because courts were closed it would not be possible to file for protection orders or restraining orders and therefore did not come forward. Advocates raised concerns that virtual court processes were not as impactful for victims as in-person hearings.

The court-centered changes that may have had the greatest effect on victims of crime are decisions about which crimes to prosecute and how accused individuals are managed after arrest. Some jurisdictions pursued major initiatives to arrest fewer people to reduce jail populations. Not having an accused person held for a time in jail—particularly in cases of interpersonal violence—takes away a window of time that service providers use to arrange for shelter for victims or remove them from the situation in which the harm occurred. In situations in which offenders were arrested, they often were released quickly because of pandemic limitations on jail custody. Notifying victims of such releases is required by law and required significant agility on the part of VSPs that were part of notification efforts.

#### **Funding Challenges**

Many VSPs receive funding from court filing fees or fines, which shrank during the pandemic. Other VSPs that bring in operating funds from community fundraisers or donations from private-sector organizations also have been hit hard by the economic damage of the pandemic, both in direct funding losses and because the lack of locally raised funds has made it harder to meet matching-fund requirements for some grants. The lack of experience in pursuing and managing federal grants has been a barrier to VSPs taking advantage of such funding streams as the Paycheck Protection Program or those in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. These pandemic-driven funding challenges have put the continued viability of many service providers at significant risk.

# HOW DID VICTIM SERVICES PROVIDERS ADAPT?

Victims of crime, who may be experiencing some of the worst periods of their life, rely on VSPs for support and assistance that is urgent and highly personal. Therefore, it has been critical for such agencies and organizations to continue to provide services during the pandemic. Given the challenges created by the pandemic, continued service provision has required significant innovation and adaptation. The following are some key efforts identified by workshop participants to adapt to the pandemic:

- Shelters that continued their operations have done so by implementing health protocols to reduce the chance of COVID-19 spread. In addition, provider coalition organizations have developed resources to help organizations implement safety protocols that work in their contexts.
- Because of infrastructure constraints, some sheltering operations shifted to lower capacity or added quarantine requirements to reduce the risk of disease transmission. In some cases, however, the quarantine requirements involved individuals staying at hotels before entering a group shelter, making it harder to rapidly respond to victims' needs.
- VSPs went to virtual and remote working models to continue to operate and reach crime victims during the pandemic, but panelists highlighted reservations about cybersecurity, the

ability to deliver services securely, and the effectiveness of some counseling and interventions delivered by phone or videoconferencing.

- To overcome the digital divide and ensure that victims know that services are available even during the isolation of stay-at-home orders, VSPs have turned to nondigital outreach modes, such as more extensive collaboration with law enforcement, to try to identify victims in need of assistance.
- Other agencies have explored different approaches to make it possible for victims to request help, including by adding contact information to boxes provided by food banks, posting flyers at grocery stores, and making public service announcements. One panelist noted an example of behavioral health staff joining medical providers in staffing a county COVID-19 testing site to ask abuse-screening questions of people who were coming to be tested.
- Some service providers (particularly those in congregate settings, such as shelters) used cohort models to keep staff and clients in stable groups to reduce the risk of virus transmission.

So we did . . . [public service announcements], and we ran them on kid-based TV programs and worked with the school district to be able to outreach to the children. Because again, we saw a big drop in the number of kids or child abuse cases.

—Victim services panelist

Most victims of crime will never interact with the criminal justice system. There are no charges filed, there is no prosecution. So if we're talking about victim services and access to the support they need and justice, as they define it, if we're only talking about the criminal justice system, we're missing most of crime victims.

—Victim services panelist

I think . . . [that the pandemic is] creating unprecedented times for us to adapt our programming . . . especially [because of] the burden that is placed on community-based organizations to respond, not just for a short period of time but for an extended period of time. This compassion fatigue and worker fatigue is a real serious issue that I think is going to be felt for years to come.

Community organization panelist

## PROMISING PRACTICES TO CARRY BEYOND THE PANDEMIC

VSP panel participants identified the following promising lessons from the pandemic that appeared valuable to carry forward:

- **Panelists noted the importance of partnerships and collaborations** in accessing resources and facilitating service delivery in ways that would not be possible for individual organizations. This includes community networks for accessing funding.
- **Some of the alternative methods that VSPs and others, including law enforcement, developed to reach victims were useful.** Importantly, one panelist pointed out that the criminal justice system is aware of only the crimes that get reported and thus only of those victims. So, if the goal is to serve all victims, efforts have to look beyond what police or court systems are doing. New approaches for reaching victims might be a starting point to find people in need of help who would not have been identified previously.

- **There was enthusiasm for some of the technological options that agencies pursued during the pandemic,** with the most interest focused on the use of telehealth and telecounseling options that could increase access to previously underserved populations. However, with respect to any virtual service delivery, whether such services are effective and viewed as satisfactory by clients remains to be seen.
- **Another technology opportunity** that panelists supported was the potential for virtual platforms to include on-demand impartial translation services so that non-English speakers would have more-ready access to translators who could facilitate their engagement with and involvement in the justice process.



# WHAT WILL BE NEEDED TO ENSURE THAT PRACTICES ARE FAIR AND EFFECTIVE?

Because of the significant pandemic-related adaptations required from VSPs, it will be critical to understand how changes made by other criminal justice agencies affected VSPs and how changes implemented by VSPs may affect both service providers and crime victims. The following are some examples of research and evaluation questions proposed by panel participants that would advance this knowledge base:

- Changes in victims' reporting behavior during the pandemic may cause future analyses of crime and justice responses to reach distorted conclusions. For example, if many victims delay reporting because of fear of COVID-19 or other reasons, crime at different stages of the pandemic may appear lower than it actually was. How can this be addressed in research and evaluation studies?
- Given concerns about the digital divide significantly affecting the ability of victims from locations with low broadband or little communications infrastructure to access services and participate in the justice process, can levels of true access be better mapped to inform assessment of the impact of virtual models?
- Can better strategies be identified to reduce infection risk in group shelters while keeping barriers to utilization low for clients? Such strategies should take into account resource constraints and the number of victims in need of shelter.

- How can organizations that might not have as strong a technology infrastructure as government criminal justice agencies more-effectively address information security and other concerns related to delivering services remotely? Are there challenges (e.g., with legal discoverability) with providers using personally owned devices in performing their roles?
- Are there strategies that VSPs can implement to ensure more-sustainable support and funding, given the vulnerabilities revealed by the pandemic and its economic consequences?

<sup>1</sup>The Priority Criminal Justice Needs Initiative is a joint effort managed by the RAND Corporation in partnership with the Police Executive Research Forum, RTI International, and the University of Denver on behalf of the U.S. Department of Justice's National Institute of Justice.

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