

OVC NEWS & PROGRAM UPDATES

VISION 21 IN ACTION



April 2014

Texting for Help

By Grace Call, Visiting Fellow, Office for Victims of Crime

Three years ago, in an effort to reach more young people in crisis, the Crisis Call Center (CCC) in Reno, Nevada, opened its 24-hour Texting Hotline. The Hotline complements the other services available at CCC, including 2-1-1 Nevada, sexual assault support services, and a 24-hour crisis phone line.

Kathy Jacobs, Executive Director of the Crisis Call Center, wrote, "In the world of crisis intervention, change is a way of life. The needs of our community change, and we must change with them. Technology is constantly evolving, and we must evolve with it. We have the opportunity to face our fear and our challenges, and the opportunity to become stronger as we move forward."¹

As a result of strategic partnerships, fundraising, and grants, CCC can respond to many types of crisis through the Texting Hotline. Individuals can contact CCC for crises related to suicide, domestic violence, bullying, sexual violence, difficulty in school, child abuse/neglect, and depression, as well as issues specific to coming out gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, or transgender. People in need can send a text message from anywhere in the United States and know they will get a response 24 hours a day. CCC designed the Texting Hotline to reduce barriers to individuals, particularly young people, in crisis.

Founded as an outreach program of the University of Nevada, Reno, in 1966, CCC became an independent nonprofit in 1985. Over time, the Crisis Call Center recognized that too many intervention programs were not reaching the young people who often needed them most. Ms. Jacobs notes, "Resources come and go, and we must become even more creative in helping to identify solutions to problems that can be unbearable. These solutions are not always what we hope for and, oftentimes, they are as difficult for us as they are for those individuals who are trying to hold the pieces of their life together."²

Through a partnership with Nevada's Office of Suicide Prevention, the University of Nevada, Reno, and several other collaborators, CCC developed the first text message support program in the United States.³ The Crisis Call Center and its partners found a way, through hard work and trial and error, to adapt the solid crisis intervention strategies used on the phone into text messaging. CCC developed policies and procedures that ensure a high-quality response to people experiencing crisis via text, the preferred means of communication for today's youth.

¹ 2010-2012 18 Month Report, Crisis Call Center/Nevada 2-1-1, <http://crisiscallcenter.org/documents/AnnualReport10-11-disasterspdf.pdf>

² Ibid.

³ http://www.crisiscenter.org/aboutus_nn.html

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MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR



From Left to Right:
Deputy Director
Marilyn Roberts
and Deputy Director
Kristina Rose.

This past fall, two new deputy directors joined the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC). Marilyn Roberts is the Deputy Director for the State and Local Programs Division. Marilyn also has oversight of OVC's administrative support functions. Kristina "Kris" Rose is the Deputy Director for the National Training and Program Development Division.

Before coming to OVC, Marilyn spent 11 years with the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), starting as a special advisor to the Administrator. She became the deputy administrator for programs in 2004. In that capacity, Marilyn oversaw the three program divisions of OJJDP. She was personally involved in developing several national program initiatives, including Internet Crimes Against Children, Missing and Exploited Children, National and Local Mentoring, and Juvenile and Family Drug Courts. Before joining OJJDP, she was the director of the Drug Courts Program Office at the Office of Justice Programs. Before her government service, Marilyn held several positions during her 18-year career at the National Center for State Courts, a private, non-profit organization devoted to the improvement of state court administration.

Kris spent much of her career with the Department of Justice, which included stints as the acting director for the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) from January 2009, through July 2010, and as the chief of staff for the Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) from 2001 through 2006. At OVW, Kris worked with the Bureau of Justice Statistics to develop the first national survey to measure the crime of stalking in the United States. Kris was recently the deputy director for NIJ, where she spearheaded an action research project on untested sexual assault kits and worked with OVC to develop the first telemedicine

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[Click here](#) to access previous issues of *OVC News & Program Updates* on topics such as responding to mass casualties, elder abuse, and serving children exposed to violence.

Another reality of the new culture of technology is the risk to individual privacy. The CCC enacted comprehensive policies to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the individuals who use the texting and telephone hotline services. These policies address safety, mandatory reporting, and procedures to follow in the event of life-threatening situations, including homicide, suicide, child abuse/neglect, and elder abuse.

CCC responds to about 500 text conversations a month. The need is clearly there. Although the Texting Hotline is based in Reno, Nevada, the service is available nationwide. To access the service, text the keyword **ANSWER** to **839863**.

Victims' Voices When Elder Abuse Hits Home

By Jeannie J. Beidler



Jeannie Beidler with her grandmother, Etta Jennings (family photo).

The sound of my alarm clock roused me from a deep slumber. Just as quickly as I could peel my eyes open, the burden of a heavy heart consumed me. I hit the snooze button in a futile attempt to postpone the horrific reality that loomed.

Three days earlier, my great-uncle, my husband, and my two children made an unscheduled visit to my grandparents' home 90 miles away. They found my grandparents in serious danger at the hands of an abusive family member, my uncle. Since my uncle moved in with them several years earlier, communication with my grandparents had dwindled from regular contact to almost none. At this point, the only way to ensure my grandparents' well-being was to intervene in person. My family did just that. What they discovered was beyond comprehension and nearly impossible to describe.

As my great-uncle and husband approached the home, they were overwhelmed by a revolting stench. The vile smell was a combination of urine, feces, and rotting trash roasting inside a dilapidated home. As they peered through one of the many broken windows, they saw floors littered with empty beer cans and mounds of trash throughout. Furniture and collectables were cast aside as though the home had been ransacked. My great-uncle remained outside and summoned my grandparents by name. Loudly. Repeatedly. There was no response. As the two men contemplated what to do, they inspected the exterior of the home and found my grandfather's car smashed into the side of the house causing obvious structural damage.

As they continued to survey the situation, my enraged and inebriated uncle emerged from the home to confront my husband and great-uncle in the driveway. He vehemently denied our requests to see my grandparents. His behavior was disconcerting, escalating violently by the moment. To avoid a physical confrontation, my great-uncle, husband, and children left the premises.

Troubled, they called the police. They were relieved by their prompt arrival, but would soon be disappointed by their inaction. Officers entered the home briefly and reported their findings. They confirmed the presence of three adults (my uncle and my grandparents) and callously cautioned them about the deplorable conditions inside the home. One officer suggested that someone contact Adult Protective

Services (APS) if they had further concerns. My great-uncle and husband were shocked by the officer's apathy for what was obviously a dangerous and potentially deadly situation.

Without the support of law enforcement, my husband and great-uncle had no choice but to once again leave the property. Neither said a word as they headed for the interstate. A few moments passed before my husband told my great-uncle, "If you want to go back to the house, just say the word." Pausing to consider the risks of such an action, my great-uncle accepted his offer stating, "This will probably be my last chance to see my brother alive."

My great-uncle entered the home while my husband stood nearby to ensure the safety of my children waiting in the truck. My great-uncle ignored my uncle's aggressive attempts to keep him out of the house. He was determined to lay eyes on my grandparents for what he believed would be the last time.

My grandmother was found in the fetal position on a tattered, moldy mattress with maggots swarming around her. She was filthy, disoriented, and unable to move (thus forced to lay in her own waste). My grandfather was found in their living room, scantily dressed in a torn undergarment. He was emaciated beyond recognition and could not maintain consciousness. His body and the area surrounding his chair were visibly covered in feces and black mold.

The house was hot; the air thick. There was no evidence of food in the home nor any indication of running water in the sinks or toilets. After a cursory check, my great-uncle was forced to leave the home because of the conditions and my uncle's increasingly threatening behavior.

They returned to share with me the details of their visit. Shocked, appalled, and infuriated that law enforcement had done nothing, I sprang into action. I immediately reported my concerns to social

services, law enforcement, and various elder advocacy groups. All day, every day, for 3 long days, I desperately pleaded with dozens of "helping professionals" to intervene but made no progress. On the second day, I convinced an after-hours worker to make a home visit only to learn that she did not find my grandparents to be "in acute danger" and therefore did nothing! I felt defeated and helpless. I was failing my grandparents. I lived nearly 2 hours away and lacked the authority to take matters into my own hands.

On the fourth day, when my alarm clock sounded again, I was forced to face my feelings of desperation and muster the determination to rescue my grandparents. I trembled with fear as I thought about my grandparents. How had they fared during another night of sweltering heat? Were they suffering? Starving? Scared? Sick? Were they still alive? I knew the likelihood of either of them surviving such atrocious conditions diminished with each passing hour. Something had to happen. Today!

That alarm clock chime did more than set my day in motion. It signaled the beginning of round one in what would be a ferocious battle. Little did I know, in a matter of hours, I would face the fight of my life to save theirs'.

I continued to call anyone who would hear my cries. Several hours later, I received a call from APS agreeing to an intervention that would take place that afternoon. I was invited to accompany the social workers, police, and medics to the home that afternoon. Of course I agreed to participate and elicited the support of a friend to come with me. Nothing could have prepared us for what we would see, smell, and experience that afternoon.

My grandparents were starving, filthy, confused, and suffering. My grandfather was immediately taken to the hospital as paramedics deemed him to be in grave condition. My grandmother, oblivious to the dangers of her circumstances, refused to accept medical transport to the emergency room. Hours of negotiating and begging her left us weary. At 5p.m., the APS social worker and her supervisor prepared to leave. In a panic, I questioned how they could leave while she is still trapped in this hell. They indicated that their day was over and this was now an after-hours matter. I fell to my knees on the front porch and wept. It was the gentle reassurance of a medic that gave me strength to persevere. I remember his words exactly. He said, "I will not leave you or your grandmother until this is done."

The after-hours worker arrived within the hour, assessed the situation, and fervently promised me this nightmare would end tonight. She obtained an emergency custody order from the magistrate, which allowed my grandmother to be removed from the home against her will and transported to the hospital.

My grandparents remained hospitalized for nearly 2 weeks to be treated for multiple conditions and severe malnourishment. During this time, I worked feverishly to obtain a protective order against my uncle on their behalf, assist in his arrest, and select a nursing home near me where I could oversee their care daily.

I learned that my uncle had stolen tens of thousands of dollars from my grandparents under the guise of paying their bills. In reality, he preyed on their dementia. He spent the money on alcohol and drugs

while they slowly wasted away, as did their home and everything they worked their entire lives for.

I quit my job as a social worker with a private foster care agency. It was quite apparent that my grandparents' situation required full-time attention. In the months that followed, their home was condemned by the city and sold for just its land value. Years of delinquent accounts were rectified, each requiring its own legal battle. I helped to prosecute my uncle successfully for two felony counts of abuse and neglect of an incapacitated adult and was appointed their legal guardian and conservator.

I said goodbye to my grandfather 4 months to the day after the intervention. Though his autopsy revealed that he died of natural causes, it's believed that the torture he endured hastened his passing. My grandmother enjoyed 15 months of health and happiness before joining my grandfather.

I once read, "You never know how strong you are until being strong is the only choice you have." I am not a hero but rather a granddaughter who made one simple choice, to be strong. That choice carried me through some dark valleys and up some steep hills as I worked tirelessly to protect my grandparents and prosecute my uncle. Every day brought me new obstacles and just enough strength to conquer them. In return, I received the most precious reward. For 15 months, I felt my grandmother's loving embrace, the warmth of her smile, and the joy of her laughter.

Don't minimize your ability to persevere, to invoke change, to move mountains. Listen to the voice that whispers, "Something just isn't right." While I am haunted by the horrors of my grandparents' abuse, I am not haunted by my choice to intervene. I know, without hesitation, that I saved the lives of two tortured human beings, providing them with peace and dignity in their final days.

Keep your eyes open. Connect with aging neighbors, your elderly aunt, or the widow or widower at church. Get involved in the lives of those around you. When the papers start to pile up in the driveway or when you notice someone's unexplained absence, don't be afraid to ask questions. I would rather appear intrusive than be ignorant to the reality of elder abuse and exploitation. If you have concerns, no matter how trivial, contact the local authorities AND social services. Then call again. And again. Continue to follow up until you are assured of the person's well-being. Follow your heart. Be a voice.

The Victims' Voices column is a recurring feature of OVC News & Program Updates. Let us know if you or someone you know would like to share a story with the field about the journey from crime victimization. Our hope is that hearing directly from victims themselves will educate and inspire others. Victims' Voices contributors may choose to remain anonymous. Contact William Petty at William.Petty@usdoj.gov for more information.

Game Changers That Are Making Victims' Rights in the Military More Meaningful

By Johanna Borkan, Communications & Community Development Director, NCVLI

Over the last few years, as awareness of sexual assault in the military grew, military leaders began looking for game-changing ideas. "We needed to reach out to folks outside the military, and [NCVLI] is right at the top when it comes to victims' rights," says Lieutenant General Richard Harding, Judge Advocate General of the Air Force.

That search led the Air Force to reach out to the National Crime Victims Law Institute (NCVLI) in fall 2012 for assistance in expanding its response to sexual assault victims in the Air Force and helping them seek justice. In December 2012, NCVLI's Executive Director, Meg Garvin, flew to Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama to train nearly 60 Air Force attorneys on what it means to be a victims' rights attorney. The following month, the Air Force's Special Victims' Counsel (SVC) Program launched with newly trained lawyers ready to represent victims and protect their rights, and with NCVLI ready to provide technical assistance.

Almost immediately, there was a chorus of cultural and legal objections, such as "victims do not need their own lawyers," and "victims do not have standing to assert their rights," and "even if rights are violated, there is no remedy." Undeterred, the SVCs fought for their clients and, in the months that followed, NCVLI continued to provide support for this groundbreaking program. That support included—

- Providing strategic advice and consultation to the SVCs.
- Filing amicus briefs to educate military courts on victims' rights.
- Training SVCs at Maxwell Air Force Base.
- Training SVCs at NCVLI's annual Crime Victim Law Conference in Portland, Oregon.

In July 2013, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces ruled in the first military victims' rights case brought by an SVC,

LRM v. Kastenberg. In this case, defendant Airman was charged with raping a female Airman. The victim was appointed an SVC, who entered his appearance in the court martial (which is akin to a criminal case) and asked to be provided copies of court documents regarding any rape shield and privilege issues so that he could be heard on behalf of his client when her rights were at stake. The military judge, Lt. Col. Kastenberg, held that the victim had no standing to ask for the documents or to be heard through her attorney.

At the SVC's request, NCVLI provided research and strategic assistance in drafting a motion for reconsideration of the military judge's order, which motion the military judge denied. The victim, through counsel, sought appellate review, and NCVLI participated as amicus curiae. The first appellate court to which the victim turned, the Air Force Court of Criminal Appeals, did not reach the merits of the case, holding that it did not have authority to hear the case. So the victim, through counsel, again sought review, and NCVLI again participated as amicus curiae. In the resulting decision by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces, the court ruled that victims have the right to have their counsel heard on their behalf about their rights, clarifying sexual assault victim's role is in the court martial proceedings against his or her alleged perpetrator.

At its core, this decision, and the diligent work of the Air Force during the past 12 months, means that military victims' rights are beginning to have meaning, because military victims now have an independent voice in court martial proceedings when their rights are at issue.

NCVLI's work with the Air Force helped the Air Force recognize that sometimes victims need counsel to protect their rights; that justice is best served when everyone's rights are protected; and that establishing an SVC Program ensures access to attorneys trained in protecting victims' rights in military courts. Also noteworthy is the strength of the survivor

in the *Kastenberg* case who, together with her dedicated SVC, deserves recognition for ensuring that victims' rights are meaningful for every sexual assault victim in the military.

Feedback from victims served by SVCs reveals the real difference victims' attorneys can make:

"I was utterly lost and afraid for almost a year until I was assigned my SVC. I did not feel like I had anyone on my side until my SVC showed up. She was an exceptionally good legal representative. She even stood up for me in regard to issues I was having with my chain of command. My SVC did everything possible to ease the burdens associated with reporting sexual assault."

Fortunately, change continues. In August 2013, the Department of Defense announced that each branch of the military would implement its own version of an SVC

In January 2013, the Air Force initiated the Special Victims' Counsel (SVC) Program to provide any Airman who reports being a victim of sexual assault with an attorney to represent his or her interests during the military justice process. The objectives of the SVC Program are to provide support through independent, professional, and knowledgeable counsel; build and sustain victim resiliency; and empower victims by enforcing their enumerated rights in the military justice process. The attorney's role may include advocating for the victim in the military justice system; attending interviews with investigators, trial counsel, and defense counsel; representing the victim in court as permitted by military judges; providing advocacy to other Air Force and Department of Defense agencies as appropriate; and advocacy to civilian prosecutors and agencies. A provision requiring all branches of the military to provide attorneys to victims of sexual assault was signed into law by President Obama in December 2013.

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Program by November. In December 2013, President Obama signed the National Defense Authorization Act, which includes more than 30 provisions of the Uniform Code of Military Justice related to combat-

ting sexual assault in the military. One of the provisions requires each branch of the military to have victims' counsels available to provide legal assistance to victims of sex-related offenses. NCVLI will continue to

assist in implementing this effort in any way it can, including a return visit to Maxwell Air Force base to train attorneys from the Navy and Marines on how to be an effective victims' rights attorney.

Spotlight on California: Research Partnerships and Lessons Learned

By Heather Warnken, Esq., LL.M., Legal Policy Associate, Chief Justice Earl Warren Institute on Law and Social Policy, University of California, Berkeley School of Law

In 2011, the California Emergency Management Agency in partnership with the California District Attorneys Association and the Chief Justice Earl Warren Institute on Law and Social Policy, funded the California Crime Victims Assistance Association, to conduct the first statewide needs assessment on the role of criminal justice system-based victim service programs in responding to violence against women.

The goal of the project was to understand the challenges to building the organizational capacity of the statewide network of Victim/Witness Assistance Centers (VWACs) to meet the needs of victims. This included: (1) identifying effective prevention-related services; (2) understanding the approach to collaborations and referrals between VWACs and rape crisis centers or other community-based responders; (3) describing "best practices"; and (4) analyzing the extent to which the Victims Bill of Rights (Marsy's Law) is being implemented locally.

Through an electronic survey instrument and followup interviews, the Warren Institute garnered responses from all 59 justice system-based programs in California. The study included site visits to a selection of nine county programs that represented diversity of size, population, geography, and service-delivery models (district attorney's office-based, probation-based, and community-based). The sites included the smallest, Alpine County, population 1,100, which handles only 2 to 5 sexual assault cases per year; and the largest, Los Angeles County, population 10.4 million, with 48,042 domestic violence (DV)-related calls to the police; 20,467 reported DV cases; and 789 rapes in 2010.

The study's 100-percent participation rate allowed for an unprecedented perspective on the challenges faced by programs throughout the state. Focus groups contributed to an immense body of information regarding victim services in California, helping to bridge the research-to-practice gap in the field.

The final report identified a lack of adequate financial support to deliver even the minimal rights and services mandated by law. Directors of a range of programs noted that funding plateaued or diminished while costs and the need for services skyrocketed.

Advocates reported having to "triage" using their most effective tools to meet the needs of victims: quality case assessment, face-to-face contact, and continuity of care.

Lessons Learned

The dramatic shifts in criminal justice policy on violence against women during the last 30 years transformed the criminal justice system, but the study found that state policy to equip service providers to meet victims' needs effectively did not keep pace.

California did not identify domestic violence as criminal conduct requiring law enforcement to arrest until 1986. Prior to this change, domestic violence arrests accounted for approximately 5 percent of California's assault arrests; by 2004, charges brought under Penal Code § 273.5 accounted for 45 percent of all assault arrests. Although the existing statistics indicate that domestic violence cases represent 30–40 percent of the victim services caseload, those numbers do not comport with this study's finding that domestic violence occupies 60 percent or more of the actual caseload of the programs studied.

There are many specific findings in this study. Some overall takeaways include:

- **Victim service programs and their staff lack support and recognition commensurate with the vital and incomparable role they play in the criminal justice system.**

The increasing identification and prioritization of certain types of crime make VWACs the first place to access services for many crime survivors. Recent legislative and political victories created invaluable tools to respond to victims' immediate and long-term crisis-driven needs. California is a national leader in passing legal and constitutional mandates to respond to *all* victims; it established the first Victims Compensation Program, administered through the Victims Compensation and Government Claims Board.

The study highlighted this gap between policy and practice and clarified the amount of work left to do. Increased education is necessary to ensure that legislators, criminal justice stakeholders, community partners, and the public understand the need to support victim services commensurate with the field's importance to public safety.

- **A comprehensive statewide needs assessment is invaluable for identifying the inequities resulting from unfunded mandates in victims' rights and services.**

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Spotlight on California: Research Partnerships and Lessons Learned •

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Without support, victories on paper often go underfunded or unfunded at the state and local levels. The study noted how the lack of funding for legally and constitutionally mandated responses to victims resulted in patchwork implementation and little accountability across the state.

Unfunded mandates drive issues of equity in victim services, and this “justice by geography” can usually be seen more clearly from a distance. Robust and individual program evaluation that allows for depth of understanding of the most effective ways to meet victims’ needs is critical; however, *breadth* of understanding is also necessary, not only for implementing evidence-based practices in context but also for addressing issues of equity. A comprehensive needs assessment reminds us that success in victim services is tied to the experience and dignity of every victim equally and is not weighted by ZIP code.

- **Overlaying quantitative and qualitative data is invaluable for heightened understanding in providing effective victim services.**

Stories and statistics are equally important. The strength of this study came from combining the two to amplify the voices from the field and identify ways forward.

Electronic polling results indicate that 97–100 percent of VWACs are performing the mandatory services required by the Penal Code; however, to build the capacity of the criminal justice system to respond to victims’ needs, policymakers must understand that the key question is not *whether*, but *how* to provide these services; and *how consistently* to provide them county to county, even to victims in the same county. How do the legislative victories align with the experiences of crime survivors?

This report gave program directors, particularly those with the largest populations of underserved victims, a multifaceted perspective and a set of findings to place their needs in context. It allows them to engage with local stakeholders and advocate for the tailored support they need.

Moving Forward

Building on these findings, the Warren Institute partnered with Californians for Safety and Justice (CSJ), www.safeandjust.org, a nonprofit organization dedicated to replacing justice system waste with commonsense solutions to improve public safety, create healthy communities, and prevent crime. Integral to those efforts are the 5,000+ victim members of their statewide network, Crime Survivors for Safety and Justice.

CSJ launched the first poll of crime survivors in California. The poll asked about the impact of crime, reporting practices, awareness of victim services, and the accessibility of such services. This provided a new source of data to supplement the Uniform Crime Report and National

Crime Victimization Survey, which are limited because they are not comprehensive or broken down by state.

On June 6, 2013, CSJ released findings from this effort, which painted a sharp picture of who experiences crime and repeat victimization most frequently, the impact of crime on and unmet needs of these survivors, and their views on criminal justice priorities.

The results emphasized the need to promote awareness and accessibility of services; nearly half of those who received services found them difficult to access. Four out of five services available to crime victims in the poll were unknown to the majority of victims. For example, 65 percent of respondents were unaware that assistance was available to help pay expenses they incurred as a result of the crime.

Building on this quantitative snapshot of the state, CSJ and the Warren Institute are partnering to further explore how to meet the needs of underrepresented crime survivors by executing qualitative research on questions necessitating further understanding.

Through focus groups with victims, providers, and other stakeholders, and paying special attention to polyvictimization (the occurrence of multiple types of victimization to a single victim), CSJ and the Warren Institute will release a second report in 2014. The research partnership endeavors to integrate the many perspectives necessary to recognize the challenges in the victim services field, empower crime survivors in ways that promote public safety, and strengthen the programs working to meet their needs.

The Warren Institute at University of California, Berkeley, School of Law, is a multidisciplinary, collaborative venture to produce research, research-based policy prescriptions, and curricular innovation on the most challenging issues facing California and the nation. The Violence Against Women Needs Assessment, A Complex and Compassionate Response: The Role of Victim/Witness Assistance Centers in Responding to Violence Against Women in California, can be accessed here: http://www.law.berkeley.edu/files/bccj/VAW_Study-FINAL.pdf

Californians for Safety and Justice, a project of the Tides Center, is a nonprofit campaign of more than 16,000 Californians from all walks of life joining together to replace justice system waste with commonsense solutions that create safe neighborhoods and save public dollars. At the center of CSJ’s efforts to achieve smarter justice in California are the more than 5,000 members of Crime Survivors for Safety and Justice, a statewide network giving victims and survivors of crime a voice in public policy.

The findings from the first survey of California crime victims and survivors, California Crime Victims Report, can be accessed here: <http://www.safeandjust.org/resources/2013-06-california-crime-victims-report>

Developing Resiliency and Addressing Vicarious Trauma in Your Organization

Part 1 of a 2-part series

By William Petty, Visiting Fellow, Office for Victims of Crime

Caring too much can hurt. When victim service professionals focus on others without practicing appropriate self-care, not only do they suffer but their professional effectiveness suffers as well. Apathy, isolation, depression, and substance abuse are just a few of the symptoms that may result when those in the helping professions become overwhelmed by the demands of their work and begin to suffer from vicarious trauma—also known variously as secondary trauma, compassion fatigue, or burnout. This article, the first in a two-part series, focuses on the need for organizations to understand and address vicarious trauma with strategies to help staff build resilience. The second article in the series will focus on effective resources for organizations as they seek to strengthen their support of employee wellness and self-care.

OVC recognizes the impact of the work-related stress specifically associated with working with victims of trauma. Victim service providers become well-versed in the pain, fear, anger, helplessness, and hopelessness suffered by their traumatized clients. All victims deserve fair and compassionate treatment, which requires that service professionals be wholly “present” when offering support and services. This requirement transcends specific settings for assistance, such as a crime scene, a crisis center, an emergency room, or a prosecutor’s office. No matter the location, a hallmark of the effective provision of services is the ability to convey to victims that you truly hear them.

It is essential for their continued well-being and effectiveness as service practitioners

“We have an obligation to ourselves, our colleagues, and our loved ones, not to be damaged by the work we do.” –Saakvitne & Pearlman (1996)

that they understand how ongoing exposure to the pain of others affects them both positively and negatively. “Compassion satisfaction” certainly can increase one’s capacity to feel and articulate empathy. It can also be very gratifying to know that one’s work is making a positive difference in the lives of people who feel otherwise shattered or broken. Hearing traumatic stories can come at a cost, however, if organizations do not recognize the need for resiliency programs to support staff in their work and help them recognize and recover from vicarious trauma.

A significant body of research characterizes and quantifies work stress in the helping professions.^{1,2} Social science research emphasizes the susceptibility to work stress among those who respond and provide support to traumatized people.³ Trauma research clarifies the mechanism for developing vicarious trauma or secondary stress as being a function of the body’s nervous system (neurophysiological), rather than a lack of personal character or will (characterological weakness)⁴ or failure to meet the demands of the work. Research on gender-based violence describes the stressful effects of working with victims of interpersonal violence on the lives and relationships of mental health professionals.⁵ Resilience research stresses that sound self-care techniques comprise a body of learned skills that should be made available to staff and regularly practiced in order to maintain a healthy outlook and professionalism. Victim

service organizations should play a key role in resilience training and development for the benefit of their clients as well as staff members and volunteers.⁶

In addition to what research tells us about work stress, victim service professionals themselves recognize the need to better understand the nature of vicarious trauma among their professional staff and seek information, training, and technical assistance in developing meaningful policies, effective programs, and useful procedures for integrating employee wellness. Requests for training and technical assistance on compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma, and effective self-care routinely rank among the top five topics submitted to OVC’s Training and Technical Assistance Center (OVC TTAC).

It is never too soon for members of the caring professions to look within themselves and consider whether they need assistance in coping with vicarious trauma. The negative transformation from a healthy outlook is evidenced in a shift in worldview from thinking of the world as basically a safe place and people as generally trustworthy to thinking of it as harsh and dangerous and people as uncaring, selfish, and dishonest. In its most severe forms, traumatic stress can manifest itself through instability in personal and family relationships, physical violence, family violence, substance abuse, and, in extreme cases, suicide. To protect the health and safety of victim service providers and other first responders, it is necessary to bring about a culture change in the victim services field.

Vicarious trauma manifests itself differently in each individual. Its effects are cumulative and can intensify over time. With multiple

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¹ <http://www.compassionunlimited.com/pdf/CrucibleofTransformation.pdf>

² <http://vaw.sagepub.com/content/15/3/362.full.pdf+html>

³ http://ohiocando4kids.org/sites/default/files/Osofsky_Putnam_&_Lederman_2008_Juvenile_&_Family_Court_Journal_1.pdf

⁴ Siegel, Daniel J., and Marion Solomon (eds.), *Healing Trauma: Attachment, Mind Body and Brain*, 1st ed., New York: W.W. Norton, and Company, Inc. 2003,

⁵ <http://vaw.sagepub.com/content/15/11/1358.long>

⁶ http://ovc.ncjrs.gov/ovcproviderforum/asp/sub.asp?Topic_ID=74

clients, it may become more pervasive, affecting many aspects of the service provider's life outside of their professional role, including their interpersonal and emotional well-being. In addition to its cumulative effects, vicarious trauma is also evident in the aftermath of mass violence and disasters such as hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, and the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, CT. In the whirlwind of activity performed by victim service providers, law enforcement officers, and other first responders on an emergency and longer term basis, those tasked with taking care of

the distressed, wounded, and bereaved may not be mindful of the impact that witnessing the large-scale anguish of others can have on them.

The enduring challenges presented by crime victimization will continue to require an unflinching responsiveness by victim service providers. In the second part of this series, the *OVC News & Program Updates* will focus on OVC's growing resources to help victim service organizations address resiliency for the essential well-being of staff, volunteers, and crime victims who depend on their professionalism for skilled, compassionate assistance in recovering from victimization.

Note: For definitions of vicarious trauma, secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, burnout, and other related conditions, please see the fact sheet, *Secondary Traumatic Stress*, and related resources at www.NCTSN.org/products.

Note: For additional information on resilience development, please see Lord, Janice Harris, and Kevin O'Brien, Chapter 10, *Developing Resilience*, of the Track 1, Foundation-Level Training at Module 10: *Developing Resilience*, National Victim Assistance Academy, 2007.

MESSAGE FROM DIRECTOR • CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

center to conduct adult sexual assault forensic examinations. Immediately before joining OVC, Kris spent 8 months as a victim advocate in the U.S. Attorney's Office in the District of Columbia. She hopes to use the hands-on experience she gained there to inform her experience at OVC and apply it to national policy and program development.

OVC is pleased to welcome these two tremendously accomplished professionals to our team. We look forward to benefitting from the wealth of their collective experience.

—Joye Frost, Director
Office for Victims of Crime

To receive *OVC News & Program Updates*, register via the National Criminal Justice Reference Service and select "Victims" as a topic of interest. Once you have registered, you will also receive important information from OVC and other OJP agencies related to—

- new funding opportunities,
- recently released publications,
- upcoming trainings and conferences,
- program initiatives, and
- much more!



ABOUT THE OFFICE FOR VICTIMS OF CRIME

The Office for Victims of Crime is one of six components within the Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice.

Led by Director Joye E. Frost, OVC is committed to enhancing the Nation's capacity to assist crime victims and to providing leadership in changing attitudes, policies, and practices to promote justice and healing for all victims of crime.

Established in 1988 through an amendment to the Victims of Crime Act of 1984, OVC is charged by Congress with administering the Crime Victims Fund. Through OVC, the Fund supports a broad array of programs and services that focus on helping victims in the immediate aftermath of crime and continuing to support them as they rebuild their lives. Millions of dollars are invested annually in victim compensation and assistance in every U.S. state and territory, as well as for training, technical assistance, and other capacity-building programs designed to enhance service providers' ability to support victims of crime in communities across the Nation.

For more information, visit www.ovc.gov.

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