

**Establishing or Enhancing Law
Enforcement-Based Victim Services –
*What are the Key Considerations?***

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Introduction

Research shows that victims of crime may experience a variety of short- and long-term challenges in the aftermath of the crime. They encounter multiple complex systems and may feel confused and overwhelmed. Victims who choose to participate with the criminal justice system are at risk for secondary victimization, which is an indirect result of the crime that occurs through the responses of individuals and institutions. Types of secondary victimization include victim blaming, inappropriate behavior or language, and indifference or disregard of victims' needs and wishes by criminal justice personnel or other organizations with access to victims post-crime. Victims who experience secondary victimization by law enforcement are less likely to continue participating with the reporting and prosecution process.¹

Historically, there have been concerted efforts to provide guidance for improving the quality and consistency of response to crime victims by practitioners. [Achieving Excellence: Model Standards for Serving Victims & Survivors of Crime](#) provides information to help agencies strengthen organizational capacity by focusing on *Program Standards*, *Competency Standards*, and *Ethical Standards*.² This information can be used to ensure response to victims is high quality, culturally responsive, and consistent.

There have also been efforts to assess law enforcement response to crime victims. [Enhancing Law Enforcement Response to Victims \(ELERV\) Strategy, Second Edition](#) encompasses an organizational strategy for law enforcement leaders.³ This tool highlights the benefits, challenges, methods, and responsibilities for enhancing law enforcement response to victims of crime. A key concept in this strategy are the seven critical needs of victims: *safety, support, information, access, continuity, voice, and justice*.

The U.S. Department of Justice, Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) launched the Law Enforcement-Based Victim Services & Technical Assistance Program (LEV Program) in 2018. The goal was to support law enforcement-based victim services program development in the United States, strengthen their capacity, and support partnerships with community-based programs. The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) serves as the training and technical assistance provider for the LEV Program. In this role, the IACP aims to enhance the capacity of law enforcement-based victim services by providing guidance on promising practices and policies to support victims' access to their legal rights and the services and responses they need. IACP works collaboratively with a team of project partners, including Unified Solutions Tribal Community Development Group, Inc. (Unified), the National Crime Victim Law Institute (NCVLI), and the Justice Research and Statistics Association (JRSA) to provide training and technical assistance. The IACP and project partners provide guidance for agencies and tribal nations to assist them

¹ Karen Rich and Patrick Seffrin, "Police Interviews of Sexual Assault Reporters: Do Attitudes Matter?" *Violence and Victims* 27, no 2 (April 2012): 263-279; Amy Hardy, Kerry Young, and Emily Holmes, "Does Trauma Memory Play a Role in the Experience of Reporting Sexual Assault During Police Interviews? An Exploratory Study," *Memory* 17, no 8 (2009): 783-788.

² Office for Victims of Crime, "[Achieving Excellence: Model Standards for Serving Victims and Survivors of Crime](#)," U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, June 2020.

³ International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) and Office for Victims of Crime, *Introduction to the ELERV Strategy, Enhancing Law Enforcement Response to Victims (ELERV) Strategy*, 2nd ed. (Alexandria, VA: IACP, 2020).

Law Enforcement-Based Victim Services – Key Considerations

in providing high-quality services (coordinated, collaborative, multidisciplinary, culturally responsive, and trauma informed) that address the broader needs and rights of all crime victims.

This document provides law enforcement agencies and tribes with key considerations for establishing or enhancing law enforcement-based victim services. Multiple models of service provision exist (system-based advocates hired through both permanent and temporary positions, community-based advocates serving agencies through informal agreements, community-based advocates hired through contracts, volunteer personnel performing duties for agencies through informal agreements). Variances in agency and community cultures, values, goals, service needs, and mandated responsibilities per state law, tribal codes, and federal statutes (related to concerns of abuse, neglect, or exploitation of minors and older or vulnerable adults) also exist. Though each agency's or tribe's needs may differ, standardization of common practices in victim services is needed.

As a companion to this document, [Law Enforcement-Based Victim Services – Key Considerations Checklist](#) can prompt conversations and inform decisions about victim services program development. Additional publications that explore key topics in more depth include—

- [Establishing or Enhancing Law Enforcement-Based Victim Services – Advocacy Parameters](#)
- [Establishing or Enhancing Law Enforcement-Based Victim Services – Documentation Standards](#)
- [Establishing or Enhancing Law Enforcement-Based Victim Services – Effective Partnerships](#)
- [Establishing or Enhancing Law Enforcement-Based Victim Services – Using Technology to Communicate with Victims](#)

To assist agencies in establishing or enhancing law enforcement-based victim services, the Template Package series provides sample victim services policies and forms agencies can adapt to state, federal or tribal jurisdictions, and agency requirements. The template packages should be used in conjunction with the topic-specific resources listed above. The Template Package series includes—

- [Template Package I: Getting Started](#)
- [Template Package II: Next Steps](#)
- [Template Package III: Student Interns & Volunteers](#)
- [Template Package IV: Pamphlets](#)
- [Template Package V: Training](#)

IACP developed a [virtual training series](#) to supplement the publications. Each topic covered has content intended for sworn and program personnel. This model promotes a thorough understanding of the intricacies of victim services at all levels of a law enforcement agency.

Definitions

Essential to the provision of high-quality services to crime victims is the need to adopt a shared understanding of frequently used terms. These terms were developed through a review of documents in the field, including those from existing law enforcement-based victim services programs.

Throughout this document series, the following definitions will apply:

- **Advocacy**—actions to support a cause, idea, policy, or position.
 - Individual advocacy—actions aimed at direct services for victims.
 - Systemic advocacy—actions to improve overall system responses and outcomes for all victims.
 - Community-based advocacy—actions by those who work for private, autonomous, often nonprofit organizations within the community.
 - System-based advocacy—actions by those employed by public agencies such as law enforcement, prosecutor’s office, or some other entity within the city, county, state, tribal, or federal government.
- **Agency**—refers to the police department, sheriff’s office, tribal police or public safety department, campus police department, district attorney’s office, state attorney’s office, or other governmental criminal justice entity that is employing victim services personnel.
- **Community-Based Organization**—a nongovernmental or nonprofit organization that may provide services to victims.
- **Culturally Responsive**⁴—refers to the ability of an individual or organization to understand, learn from, and interact effectively with people of different cultures, including drawing on culturally based values, traditions, spiritual beliefs, customs, languages, and behaviors to plan, implement, and evaluate programs and services. Related terms are “cultural accountability,” “cultural competency,” or “cultural humility.”
- **Procedural Justice**—an approach to resolving disputes and allocating resources that involves fair and consistent application of rules, inclusion of those impacted by decisions, and transparency of processes by which impartial and unbiased decisions are made.⁵

⁴ Center for Court Innovation, Casa de Esperanza, and the Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence, “[Cultural Responsiveness & the Courts](#),” in *Building a Culture of Justice: How Courts Are Improving Access and Understanding in Domestic Violence Cases*, Viewers’ Guide (New York: Center for Court Innovation, 2016); Marie-Elena Reyes and Ann Curry-Stevens, [Protocol for Culturally Responsive Organizations: Literature Review and Standards for Performance](#) (Portland, OR: Center to Advance Racial Equity, Portland State University 2014); Office for Victims of Crime Training and Technical Assistance Center, “[American Indian and Alaska Native Populations](#),” web module, 45 min., in Specific Considerations for Providing Victim Services online training.

⁵ Laura Kunard and Charlene Moe, [Procedural Justice for Law Enforcement: An Overview](#) (Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2015).

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- **Professional Personnel**—non-sworn or civilian law enforcement agency personnel (e.g., victim services, front desk, crime scene, records, communications/dispatch).
- **Trauma-Informed**—an approach involving educating victims, service providers, and the general community about the impact of trauma on the health and well-being of victims; attending to victims’ emotional and physical safety; and using resources, services, and support to increase the ability of victims to recover.⁶ To fully develop a trauma-informed response, all disciplines must be involved in response efforts (dispatch, patrol, investigators, supervisors, nurses, advocates, prosecutors, legal services, victim services personnel, and others providing services to victims) and acknowledge the impact of historical, intergenerational, and personal trauma.
- **Tribe**—any American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) Tribe, Band, Nation, or other organized group or community (including any Alaska Native Village or regional corporation as defined in or established pursuant to the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act ([85 Stat. 688], 43 USC § 1601 et seq.) who are recognized as eligible for the special programs and services provided by the United States to AI/AN individuals.
- **Victim-Centered**—an approach placing the victim at the center of all decisions regarding victim recovery and involvement with the criminal justice system, focusing on victim’s choice, safety, and well-being and how the needs of the victim are everyone’s concern.⁷
- **Victims’ Rights**—language included in constitutions, statutes, rules, and policies that vary by federal, state, or tribal jurisdiction and define legal responsibilities related to victims of crime, affording them independent, participatory status in the criminal justice system.⁸
- **Victim Services Personnel**—personnel (paid or unpaid) designated to provide law enforcement-based program oversight, crisis intervention, criminal justice support, community referrals, and advocacy on behalf of crime victims, witnesses, survivors, and co-victims.
- **Victim, Witness, Survivor, Co-victim**—any person (minor or adult) who directly experiences or is impacted by a crime or criminal activity.
 - Victim is an individual who is an independent participant in the criminal case under federal or state victims’ rights laws or tribal victims’ rights codes, denotes a person’s legal status (unavailable to the general public), and defines the level and extent of participation that the individual is entitled to in the criminal matter.
 - Witness is an individual who has personal knowledge of information or actions that are relative to the incident being investigated.

⁶ National Institute of Justice (NIJ), [Notifying Sexual Assault Victims after Testing Evidence](#) (2016).

⁷ NIJ, [Notifying Sexual Assault Victims after Testing Evidence](#).

⁸ Office of Justice Programs, “[About Victims’ Rights](#),” Victim Law, U.S. Department of Justice; National Crime Victim Law Institute, “[Law Enforcement-Based Victim Services: Victims’ Rights Jurisdiction Profiles](#)” (2020); Paul G. Cassell and Margaret Garvin, “[Protecting Crime Victims in State Constitutions: The Example of the New Marsy’s Law for Florida](#),” *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 110, no. 2 (2020): 99–139.

- Survivor is often used interchangeably with “victim” when conveying context related to resilience and healing.
- Co-victim is an individual who has lost a loved one to homicide, including family members, other relatives, and friends of the decedent.

Victims’ Rights

Unlike the rights of defendants, which are well-known and often recited, very few people know what rights are afforded to victims of crime. As professionals (e.g., law enforcement officers, prosecutors, victim services personnel) working within the criminal justice system, it is essential to incorporate knowledge of victims’ rights and plans for educating and assisting victims in exercising those rights. When establishing or enhancing law enforcement-based victim services, questions to consider related to victims’ rights include—

- Does your state or tribe have a statute, tribal code, or constitutional amendment related to victims’ rights?
 - If yes, are you knowledgeable about this statute, tribal code, or amendment?
 - Are there general state or tribal provisions that apply to all victims (e.g., a general right to privacy)?
 - Do you know which rights automatically protect victims and which must be requested by victims?
 - Do you have practices in place to help victims request access to specific rights?
- Have you established a consistent practice for informing victims of their rights?
 - Is law enforcement required by statute or tribal code to distribute victims’ rights information?
 - Do law enforcement personnel discuss rights with victims (beyond handing out pre-printed information?) If not, are there other personnel assigned to have a full discussion with victims about their rights and how to exercise them?⁹

“Not only law enforcement, but the public is familiar with defendants’ rights – in fact, most people can readily recite Miranda rights.

Victims also have rights yet very few people know them. We need to get to the place with victims’ rights that they too are common knowledge and afforded in routine practice. Law enforcement is the start of this practice.”

Meg Garvin

Executive Director &
Clinical Professor of Law
National Crime Victim Law
Institute
Portland, OR

⁹ For more information, see the National Crime Victim Law Institute’s [Law Enforcement-Based Victim Services: Victims’ Rights Jurisdiction Profiles](#) and [Know Your Rights](#).

Advocacy Parameters

To support integration of law enforcement-based victim services personnel within agencies, common myths and concerns about the respective disciplines and core functions should be openly discussed. Historically, law enforcement agencies voiced concerns that advocates will interfere in the investigative process, will be critical of law enforcement practices, and will convince victims not to participate in the criminal justice process. Historically, advocates cited concerns that they will not be allowed to be present for victims at critical points during investigations, will not be provided with information necessary to appropriately assist victims, and will be viewed and used as assistants to law enforcement personnel. Successful integration of law enforcement-based victim services personnel can be supported by understanding differences in communication and decision-making, primary responsibilities, and measures of success.

Many law enforcement agencies use a chain of command structure. This places value on situation-based outcomes, comfort with rank structure, and little emphasis placed on agreement by all parties in decision-making. Conversely, victim services personnel often focus on individual well-being within a social context and often rely upon consensus decision-making and communication—placing value on common goals, comfort with egalitarian structure, and a desire to seek agreements to support decisions.

Law enforcement primarily focuses on maintaining the role of objective factfinders while conducting bias-free investigations of reported criminal activity. Conversely, victim services personnel primarily focus on advocating for the rights and needs of victims regardless of the outcome of investigative processes.

“Our goal is to create a safer community and in order to do that we have to focus on more than ‘locking up the bad guy.’ We need to understand the impact of trauma and how to respond effectively to those who have experienced trauma.”

Curtis L. Graves
Commander of Strategic
Initiatives
Mobile Police Department
Mobile, AL

These contrasts may also be seen in how law enforcement and victim services personnel measure success. Often, the measure of success for law enforcement is the arrest of an offender for the highest level of crime followed by a conviction with the maximum allowable sentence. **Many victims do not experience resolution of reported crimes by these standards, so it is important to ensure access to advocacy and services for victims at every stage of the criminal justice process. Access to procedural justice¹⁰—which involves promoting a sense of fairness by establishing and maintaining unbiased resource allocation and transparency of the processes by which decisions are made—may be the only form of justice that victims receive through their interactions with system processes and professionals.**

Agencies can ensure procedural justice for victims by incorporating victim services personnel into agency operations—from initial report through transition to court and all the processes in between. To best serve

¹⁰ Kunard and Moe, [Procedural Justice for Law Enforcement](#).

victims, agencies should engage in thoughtful planning to determine the model of service provision and the parameters of service.

Models of Service Provision

Agencies must first determine how victim services will be provided. This early decision is a critical component of program development. It will dictate the parameters of the victim services role within the agency, how and where service provision can be documented, the level of confidentiality victims can expect from victim services personnel, and more. In general, three models of service provision exist:

- **Law enforcement-based victim services**—victim services personnel are employed by or contracted to serve a law enforcement agency (this can include student interns and volunteers) and service provision is for victims, witnesses, survivors, and co-victims of crime within the jurisdiction. These personnel are subject to rigorous background check processes and training, receive access to the agency’s record management system (RMS) and Criminal Justice Information Services (CJIS), and are representatives of the law enforcement agency.
- **Hybrid community-based victim services**—victim services personnel are employed by a community-based organization that is engaged in a formal agreement (e.g., contract and/or memorandum of understanding or cooperative agreement) with a law enforcement agency to jointly dictate the role of victim services personnel in serving victims, witnesses, survivors, and co-victims of crime who are engaged with the law enforcement agency. These personnel may have access to RMS and CJIS after a proper background check is cleared but are not representatives of the law enforcement agency.
- **Community-based victim services**—victim advocates are employed by a community-based organization and the community-based organization may or may not have an agreement (e.g., memorandum of understanding or cooperative agreement) with a law enforcement agency dictating partnership contributions. These advocates do not have access to RMS or CJIS and are not representatives of the law enforcement agency.



Span of Responsibility

Victim services personnel, particularly those in small, rural, and tribal agencies, are often expected to fill multiple levels of responsibility simultaneously. For instance, many victim services personnel are expected to manage grant funding and supervise other personnel (both paid and unpaid, sometimes for multiple programs) while also providing direct services to victims. This approach is not recommended as the skill sets for these respective responsibilities are different—just as it is not recommended for sergeants or lieutenants to routinely perform functions of patrol officers. It is also common for victim services personnel to be paid through grant funding, so attention must be paid to the parameters of that funding. Questions to consider related to span of responsibility for victim services personnel include—

- How are victim services personnel expected to provide services?
 - Phone contact?
 - Office appointments?
 - Letter, email, or text communication?
 - On-call response? If yes, by phone or in the field?
- What factors have been considered when determining how victim services personnel will provide services?
 - Lengthy travel time?
 - Intermittent or insufficient phone or internet services?
 - Minimal transportation options?
 - Equipment and technology availability?
- Is there a specific time frame for victim services personnel to make initial contact with victims (e.g., within 48 hours, the business day after the report was received, dependent on crime type and lethality factors)?
- Are victim services personnel expected to serve more than one law enforcement agency or jurisdiction (e.g., federal, state, tribal)?
 - If so, are formal agreements (e.g., MOUs) in place?
- Are victim services personnel expected to provide services to—
 - Victims of all crime types?
 - Those impacted by non-criminal crisis circumstances (e.g., suicide, traffic fatalities, family disputes that are not deemed criminal)?
 - Victims who reside outside of the jurisdiction?

- For tribal agencies, tribal members residing off reservation or out of the local area?
- For tribal agencies, non-tribal members residing on the reservation or in the local area?
- Has clear delineation been established between victim services and—
 - Peer support programs and services to employees?
 - Chaplain or spiritual programs?
 - Mental health or substance use co-response personnel?
 - Personnel assigned to conduct outreach to identified populations (e.g., community members experiencing homelessness, schools)?

Victim Intersection Points

Comprehensive victim response extends beyond on-scene contact with officers. Law enforcement agencies are encouraged to expand victim-centered practices to all victim contact points such as dispatch, front desk, during property return, and when obtaining copies of incident reports and receiving case updates. Victim response should be identified as an agencywide priority, and written policies and training should be developed to guide practice throughout the organization. Questions to consider when determining victim-centered practices at victim intersection points include—

- Have victim services personnel worked with other agency divisions to promote victim-centered response throughout a victim’s interaction with the agency (e.g., through cross-training or joint policy development), including during—
 - Initial contact (e.g., 911 calls, walk-in reporting)?
 - Investigative interviews (e.g., using soft interview rooms)?
 - Evidence collection (e.g., obtaining photographs of injuries)?
 - Property return (e.g., returning property to the family of a homicide victim)?
 - Records requests (e.g., victims requesting copies of police reports)?
 - Media involvement (e.g., agency press releases or conferences)?
- Have all personnel (both sworn and professional staff) received training on—
 - Victim services role?
 - Victim-centered, trauma-informed practices?
 - Cultural responsiveness?

Personnel Hiring and Selection

One area in which contrasts between law enforcement and victim services can be seen is through the hiring and selection processes of personnel for each of these disciplines. In law enforcement, having demonstrated longevity with prior organizations is seen as positive. Victim services personnel often choose to change organizations more frequently. Some want to broaden their professional experience since many organizations limit their scope to specific populations or services. It is also common in victim services for volunteers and student interns to carry primary responsibilities (e.g., direct victim contact).¹¹

There may also be differences in the skills necessary to complete core job duties. Law enforcement often focuses on mental, intellectual, emotional, and physical attributes that promote success in immediate high-risk circumstances. Victim services personnel often focus on trauma response, identifying barriers and solutions to system response, and crisis management. It is also worth noting that while activity performed by victim services personnel does not require behavioral health licensure, many personnel applying for these positions may have professional degrees and licenses (e.g., social work, counseling). Questions to consider regarding the hiring and selection of victim services personnel include—

- Have interview questions been modified for victim services personnel applicants?
- Are questions regarding applicant cultural responsiveness included in the interviews?
- Are there practices in place to recruit well-qualified victim services personnel reflective of the communities they serve (e.g., tribal members, people of color, people of all gender identities)?
- Are professionals familiar with the role of victim services included on the interview panel?
- Will the agency consider applicant experience in lieu of training or education?
- Do job duties align with education and training required for this role?
- Have background checks been completed for victim services applicants to access law enforcement records upon employment?
- Have victim services personnel completed required training for access to law enforcement and court records (e.g., National Crime Information Center [NCIC], Criminal Justice Information Services [CJIS])?
- Have selection processes been established for student interns and volunteers?
- Has the distinction between the role of law enforcement-based victim services and use of professional licensure (e.g., social work, mental health practitioner) been discussed?¹²

¹¹ For more information about incorporating student interns and volunteers, see [Law Enforcement-Based Victim Services – Template Package III: Student Interns & Volunteers](#).

¹² For more information about parameters for the use of professional licensure by law enforcement-based victim services personnel, see [Establishing or Enhancing Law Enforcement-Based Victim Services – Advocacy Parameters & Documentation](#) and [Considerations Regarding the Obligations of Law Enforcement-Employed Victim Advocates with Social Work Licenses](#).

Reporting Structure and Supervision Practices

When incorporating victim services, agencies should place victim services personnel in the organizational chart in a position that conveys importance and value to the entire department. Where victim services are placed in the organization (both on the organizational chart and physical location) and who is supervising the personnel have a direct impact on the implementation, acceptance, and success of the program. Questions to consider related to reporting structure and supervision practices of victim services personnel include—

- Who will be the direct supervisor of victim services personnel?
 - Does that person have authority to make victim services program decisions (e.g., to establish new victim services policies, to seek funding to hire additional victim services personnel)?
 - Does that person have training, experience, or understanding of the role of victim services?
 - Does that person have training or experience regarding the cultural norms and practices of the community?
 - Does that person have training on victim-centered, trauma-informed practices?
 - Does that person also supervise other units or personnel?
- Are there policies in place when victim services personnel report to supervisors with previously established relationships (e.g., relatives, friends)?
- What are the management and supervision expectations of victim services personnel?
 - Are victim services personnel expected to manage a program and provide direct services to victims?
 - Are victim services personnel expected to expand the program (e.g., serve additional crime types, build a student intern or volunteer program)?
 - Are victim services personnel expected to supervise multiple personnel (other staff, student interns, volunteers)?
 - Are these expectations consistent with expectations of other agency staff?
- How are supervision practices for victim services personnel structured?
 - Are there regular opportunities for discussions about job responsibilities, program growth, professional development, and performance standards?
 - Are there opportunities for supervision beyond incidents and crisis circumstances?

- Does the victim services supervisor have the required credentials and experience to supervise student interns (e.g., master’s degree in social work)?¹³

Ethical Approaches

As the field of victim services continues to develop, there is an emphasis on professionalizing the role and ensuring competent and responsible practice. Standardized practices across the field can help protect the public and those receiving victim services from exploitation and ensure they are receiving high quality, equitable services from agencies. Questions to consider related to ethical approaches of victim services personnel include—

- Do all agency personnel understand that the primary role and responsibility of victim services personnel is to serve in the interest of the victim?
- Do victim services personnel understand the difference between advocacy and activism?
- Do victim services personnel understand the requirements and limitations of confidentiality related to their communication with victims?
- Do victim services personnel understand their mandated reporting obligations per state law or tribal code (related to concerns of abuse, neglect, or exploitation of minors and older or vulnerable adults)?
- Do victim services personnel understand when and how to support the use of accommodations to meet victim needs (e.g., interpreters for victims with language access needs,¹⁴ assistive technology and services for victims with intellectual and developmental disabilities, adaptation of spaces for victims with physical disabilities)?
- Have cultural responsiveness standards been established?
- Do cultural responsiveness standards include requirements for initial and ongoing training?
- Have clear expectations been set for access to and sharing of restricted criminal justice records for—
 - Other government agencies (e.g., law enforcement, prosecution, probation and parole, Child and Adult Protective Services)?
 - Community organizations?
 - Victims, witnesses, survivors, and co-victims?
 - Members of the public?

¹³ For more information about credentials that may be required for supervisors of victim services student interns, see [Law Enforcement-Based Victim Services – Template Package III: Student Interns & Volunteers](#).

¹⁴ Interpretation services should be available in spoken and sign languages.

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- Have policies for victim services personnel been developed?
 - Do policies incorporate cultural considerations?
 - Have policies been established for referrals to other service providers?
 - Have policies been established for data collection (e.g., identifying what data victim services personnel will track, where this data will be stored)?
- Has a code of ethics for victim services personnel been developed?

Professional Wellness

Like other first responders, victim services professionals are at risk for experiencing vicarious trauma. This is the emotional and psychological impact on people working and volunteering in law enforcement, victim services, emergency medical services, fire services, and other allied professions due to exposure to trauma and violence. It can be difficult to hear victims' accounts of their experiences on a daily basis. If not addressed, vicarious trauma can lead to negative outcomes such as burnout, feeling disconnected from others, difficulty sleeping, issues in personal relationships, and physical and mental health challenges.¹⁵ One way to address the impact of vicarious trauma on victim services personnel is to prioritize professional wellness. Professional wellness is a multifaceted approach to promote a healthy work environment, build effective and collaborative relationships among employees, and maintain high-quality work performance.

Professional wellness is a partnership between agencies and their personnel where each share responsibility. Victim services personnel must attend to professional wellness as they would any other job responsibility. Some examples include maintaining appropriate professional boundaries and acting within the scope of their role, asking for assistance when challenges arise, and taking steps in their personal lives to maintain a work-life balance. Agencies can support victim services personnel in setting appropriate professional boundaries, securing equitable access to agency-based support services such as peer support and critical incident debriefings, ensuring job duties can be adequately covered when they take leave, and providing professional development opportunities to ensure they have the skills to feel competent in their role. An important place to start is by providing training to victim

“Victim services professionals have a unique set of skills, which affords them the honor of supporting victims of crime through their trauma. Maintaining an optimal level of wellness is a priority for our unit because our actions and emotions relate to our well-being, which influences how we operate both personally and professionally. Devoting time to wellness promotes a positive work environment by reducing stress, maintaining healthy boundaries, and increasing self-awareness, motivation, and engagement. Prioritizing self-care allows us to continue focusing on the people we serve.”

Nicole Carroll

Victim Services Unit Director
Louisville Metro Police
Department
Louisville, KY

¹⁵ Office for Victims of Crime, [“Glossary of Terms”](#) in *The Vicarious Trauma Toolkit*.

services personnel to help them understand vicarious trauma, recognize warning signs and risk factors, and learn ways to prevent and address its impact. Additionally, supervisors should discuss professional wellness routinely with direct reports.

Questions to consider when developing a workplace culture that promotes professional wellness include:

- Do victim services personnel understand the components and importance of professional wellness?
- Are victim services personnel encouraged to practice professional wellness through—
 - Agency-supported sources (e.g., employee assistance programs, peer support, wellness program activities, annual leave)?
 - Self-initiated activities (e.g., time with friends and family, exercise, hobbies, adequate sleep)?

Documentation Standards¹⁶

Victim services personnel should be prepared to accurately document activities performed in the course of their assigned responsibilities. Documentation supports effective service to victims, witnesses, and survivors. It creates a record of contact and provides useful information for others who work with the same victim (e.g., law enforcement personnel, prosecutors, victim compensation workers). It also provides a way to verify the actions or services provided in the event a question or concern is raised. Thorough documentation may also assist victims, witnesses, and survivors with the qualification process for services and resources they need (e.g., protection orders, public housing, public assistance, health and life insurance, crime victim compensation, immigration relief, resolution of landlord-tenant disputes). Accurate, succinct, and trauma-informed documentation can also reduce inadvertent harm to victims, witnesses, and survivors. Law enforcement agencies and victim services personnel are encouraged to determine—

- how interactions with victims are documented,
- what documentation standards are expected,
- where and how documentation is stored,
- who reviews the documentation (e.g., supervisor),
- who has access to documentation,

¹⁶ Victim services personnel's documentation is the written record of service provision and contact with a victim (e.g., in person, by email, or phone). Capturing audio, video, or photographs of interactions with victims or other activities that are investigative in nature are outside the scope of the role of victim services personnel and should not occur. Documentation is different from data tracking, which involves statistics of service provision (e.g., number of victims served, number of referrals provided). Documentation and data tracking are separate but complementary program activities.

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- when and how requests for information are handled, and
- when and how victims will be notified of documentation practices and requests for information.

Location

Law enforcement agencies must determine whether documentation will be kept only electronically or if paper records will also be maintained. The availability of both electronic and physical storage space will impact this decision. Agencies are encouraged to research various options and understand the pros and cons of each, with the understanding that victim services documentation is not optional. Questions to consider when determining where victim services documentation will be kept include—

- Can victim services personnel document in the same system as law enforcement personnel?
- Should a separate system be created and maintained for victim services documentation?

Content

As the role of victim services personnel and sworn personnel differ, so too should the content of each discipline's documentation. **It is critical that victim services documentation include only information regarding actions taken by victim services personnel and not a detailed restatement of the facts of the case or actions taken by others.** Documentation of the incident itself will and should be documented in detail by law enforcement personnel who receive the information first-hand. Any discrepancies may cause confusion during subsequent actions steps and potential prosecution of the case. Questions to consider when determining the content of documentation include—

- If a victim spontaneously discloses details about criminal events to victim services personnel that were not previously disclosed to law enforcement, are victim services personnel trained on how this disclosure should be handled and documented?
- Has the prosecuting attorney's office, tribal prosecutor, or U.S. Attorney's Office in the agency's jurisdiction been consulted to review documentation policies?
- Is appropriate language being used in documentation (i.e., victim-centered, inclusive language)?
 - Victim-blaming Language—It is often stated in law enforcement incident reports that the status of cases or lack of investigation are a result of "victim cooperation," or lack thereof. This use of language in the investigative process places blame on the victim without

"When we consistently document based on services rendered, we encourage trust in the overall system. If we, as Victim Services, are fearful or unable to document the support and services we provide – what does that say about the credibility of our role? What does that do to the credibility of the system?"

Caroline Huffaker
Victim Services &
Chaplains Director
Chattanooga Police Department
Chattanooga, TN

asking the reasons they decline to participate in investigations or exploring other investigative techniques.¹⁷

- Inclusive Language—Statements and expressions intended to be inclusive of many groups of people.¹⁸ This includes utilizing person-first language (e.g., using “a person who is blind or visually impaired” rather than “a blind person”) and refraining from using racist, sexist, or other discriminatory terminology (e.g., stating “I observed the victim to be shaking, crying, and having difficulty breathing” rather than “she was hysterical”).
 - Linguistic Avoidance—This common language pitfall occurs when language is used to deflect responsibility away from the perpetrator and diffuse responsibility by documenting in a way where there is no perpetrator (e.g., “Mary was punched and strangled” vs. “Dan punched and strangled Mary”).¹⁹
 - Language of Consent—Statements that imply consent without the context of physical or emotional force (e.g., “He had sex with her” vs. “He forcefully penetrated her vagina with his penis”) often portray an incomplete and inaccurate picture of what occurred.²⁰
- Do victim services supervisors routinely review and provide feedback on victim services personnel’s documentation?

Access

It is important for agencies to understand if, when, and to whom victim services documentation will be accessible. As government entities, case-related documentation by law enforcement agency personnel (both sworn and professional) will likely be widely accessible to multiple parties, including other law enforcement personnel, victims, prosecutors, defense attorneys, suspects, media, and the public.

Questions to consider when determining documentation content include—

- If victim services personnel are employed by a **law enforcement agency**—
 - Do victim services personnel explain to victims the potentially wide access to documentation?
 - Have policies been established to address victim safety concerns related to documentation and information disclosure (e.g., redaction)?
- If victim services personnel are employed by a **community-based organization**—

¹⁷ National Judicial Education Program, “[Raped or ‘Seduced’? How Language Helps Shape Our Response to Sexual Violence](#),” webinar, Legal Momentum (June 2013).

¹⁸ “[Inclusive Language](#),” Dictionary.com; “[UFCJIC Inclusive Language Guide](#),” University of Florida College of Journalism and Communications.

¹⁹ “[Raped or ‘Seduced’? How Language Helps Shape Our Response to Sexual Violence](#).”

²⁰ “[Raped or ‘Seduced’? How Language Helps Shape Our Response to Sexual Violence](#).”

- Are they following their employing organization’s guidelines for access to documentation?
- Do they explain these guidelines to victims?
- Do they understand that documentation may be inaccessible outside the community-based organization, including to law enforcement and that it will not be included in the criminal investigation (unless ordered by a court)?

Legal Intersections

Other common documentation considerations include intersections with legal requirements such as *Brady*, Health Information Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (Title IX), and Open Records/Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests. Agencies and tribes who receive VOCA and VAWA funding need to be aware of legal requirements related to documentation that are attached to those funding streams. Documentation should be completed with these intersections in mind, including long-term implications of documentation content. It is incumbent upon law enforcement agencies to work cooperatively with public information officers, prosecutors, agency legal counsel, and tribal leaders to understand local, state, tribal, and federal rules that impact access to victim services documentation. Questions to consider regarding legal intersections of documentation include—

- Do victim services personnel understand legal intersections between their documentation and—
 - *Brady v. Maryland*²¹?
 - HIPAA (e.g., documenting victims’ self-reported diagnosis information that may be sensitive and/or protected)?
 - FERPA?
 - Title IX?
 - FOIA?
- Have policies been developed and victim services personnel received training related to these legal intersections?
 - *Brady v. Maryland*?
 - HIPAA (e.g., documenting victims’ self-reported diagnosis information that may be sensitive and/or protected)?

²¹ The U.S. Supreme Court ruling *Brady v. Maryland* dictates what information and records must be shared between prosecution and defense during discovery and disclosure processes. As law enforcement-based victim services personnel are employed by law enforcement agencies, they are considered state actors and are likely subject to *Brady* disclosures. See National Crime Victim Law Institute’s [Law Enforcement-Associated Victim Advocates and Brady Disclosures: Legal Background and Considerations](#) for additional information.

- FERPA?
- Title IX?
- FOIA and records requests?
- Have policies been developed to notify victims of practices for releasing information (e.g., media requests, FOIA requests, trial-related discovery)?
- Do these policies include victim notification each time a request for information is received?

Subpoenas

Agencies that have victim services personnel often cite concerns about victim services personnel being subpoenaed. It is important to note that any person who may have relevant information related to a criminal or civil case is subject to a subpoena if they are within the jurisdiction of the court, including tribal courts. Documentation policies should be drafted with an understanding of subpoena law in the jurisdiction. Law enforcement-based victim services personnel are no different than their law enforcement colleagues in their obligation to provide testimony. Community-based advocates must follow the subpoena response policies of their employing organizations and should be prepared to testify within these parameters. Questions to consider regarding subpoenas include—

- Have victim services personnel received training on the process for responding to subpoenas?
- Do victim services personnel understand the difference between fact and expert witnesses?
- Have victim services personnel received training on providing court testimony?

Complex Documentation

It is the responsibility of victim services personnel to accurately capture victims' experiences and needs resulting from system interactions.²² At times, this may include guiding victims on how to address outcomes that do not meet their expectations. It is important that this information is captured as victim experiences rather than factual determination of events. For example, if a victim expresses displeasure to victim services personnel following an interaction with an investigator, victim services personnel should document "Victim reported (victim's description of events)" rather than "The investigator disregarded the victim and treated him rudely." Questions to consider regarding complex documentation include—

- Are processes for filing complaints (against sworn or victim services personnel) publicly posted?
- Are victim services personnel familiar with supervisory structure and complaint or grievance processes for—
 - Officers, investigators, and other law enforcement personnel?

²² Office for Victims of Crime, "[Achieving Excellence: Model Standards for Serving Victims and Survivors of Crime.](#)"

- Victim services personnel (within the agency and in other organizations)?
- Prosecutors, defense attorneys, and court staff?
- Forensic nurses and other involved professionals?
- Is there a statewide or tribal victims' rights compliance or enforcement system that victims can access?

Effective Partnerships

It is unrealistic for law enforcement agencies to meet all victims' needs. Moreover, victims benefit from connection to services and support that are separate from the criminal justice system and that are designed to promote long-term healing.²³ Victims are best served when there is strong collaboration both within law enforcement agencies and with external service providers. These partnerships are vital in upholding victims' rights and ensuring their ongoing needs are properly addressed.

Both internal and external evaluations can help agencies identify key stakeholders and opportunities for partnerships. Law enforcement agencies should review existing organizational structure and practices as well as community composition and availability of existing external resources and services. Data collection can also be used to evaluate whether the agency is effectively carrying out planned activities, whether the goals of established partnerships are being met, and the extent to which the agency is achieving its stated victim response objectives.

Internal

Response to the needs of crime victims should be a priority for all personnel within the agency. To further promote this shared goal, victim services personnel are encouraged to establish internal partnerships at multiple levels (patrol, investigators, supervisors, and command staff) and across disciplines (records, crime scene, SWAT, and dispatch personnel). This multidisciplinary model encourages collaboration and includes the voice of multiple internal stakeholders in decision-making.

“Internal partnerships are critical to the success of Victim Services. Law enforcement must understand that in the aftermath of an incident, we still have a responsibility to make sure victims are treated with empathy and understanding – Victim Services helps us meet that responsibility. Through this partnership, we’re able to build trust with our citizens, produce better case results, and provide a service beyond writing a report. In the end, this results in the community feeling both served and protected.”

Ryan Phipps
Chief of Police
Manor Police Department
Manor, TX

²³ Rebecca Campbell et al., “Preventing the ‘Second Rape’: Rape Survivors’ Experiences with Community Service Providers,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 16, no. 12 (December 2001): 1239–1259.

Internal Partners

- Agency Executives
- Command Staff and Mid-Level Management
- First-Line Supervisors
- Trainers
- Field Training Officers (FTOs)
- First Responders including Officers and Investigators
- Communications Personnel
- Crime Scene Investigators
- Public Information Officers (PIOs)/Specialists
- Records and Information Systems Personnel
- Planners and Analysts
- Other Professional Personnel
- Victim Services Personnel

Questions to consider when developing internal partnerships with victim services personnel include—

- Has cross-training occurred between victim services personnel and—
 - Patrol officers and investigators?
 - Dispatch and communications personnel?
 - Records personnel?
 - Crime scene personnel?
 - Public Information Officer (PIO)?
- Has cross-training occurred with patrol officers, investigators, sworn supervisors, and victim services personnel for on-scene response?
- Are patrol officers, investigators, sworn supervisors, and victim services personnel prepared to effectively communicate and partner with each other?
- Have victim services personnel sought input and participation from personnel of other disciplines and divisions when developing policies?
- Have formal agreements (e.g., standard operating procedures) been established for internal partnerships?

External

Law enforcement is not always the appropriate discipline to meet the varied and expansive needs of all victims. Therefore, learning how to partner and use available resources in the community is of the utmost importance. This may require changes to established practices and granting access to the agency in new ways. Partnerships should be mutually beneficial and centered around victims' needs. Agencies should maintain lists of organizations in their communities that serve victims and consider establishing routine meetings with these partners to stay informed.

External Partners

- Community-Based Organizations
- Faith-Based or Spiritual Organizations
- Private/For-Profit Community Organizations and Businesses
- Health Care Organizations and Providers (e.g., hospitals, forensic nursing programs)
- Child/Adult Welfare Agencies
- Schools and Institutions of Higher Education
- Legal Advocacy Organizations
- Legal Service Providers (e.g., victims' rights attorneys, immigration assistance)
- Research Partners
- Crime Victim Compensation Programs
- Other Criminal Justice Agencies (e.g., prosecution offices, probation/parole)
- Other Law Enforcement Agencies
- Community-Wide Initiatives
- Funding Administrators
- Media
- Community Members
- Victims, Witnesses, Survivors, and Co-victims

Questions to consider when developing external partnerships with victim services personnel include—

- Have partnerships been established with other agencies and organizations that help meet victims' needs?
- Have formal agreements (e.g., MOUs, cooperative working agreements) been established for external partnerships?

Agency Incorporation of Victim Services

Research shows that trained advocates who are present and available at each phase of the criminal justice process can have a positive impact on victims and the system as a whole. Victims who have the assistance of an advocate are more likely to receive supportive services post-crime, are more likely to remain engaged in the criminal justice process, and report lower levels of distress following interactions with the legal system.²⁴ Victims who experience support and feel empowered during their participation in the criminal justice process are also more likely to use these resources again if needed in the future.²⁵ Moreover, victims who receive services are more likely to experience additional criminal justice action, including law enforcement notification of investigation updates, offender arrest, or follow-up contact at later phases of the criminal justice system.²⁶

Victim services personnel play a significant advocacy role by providing crisis intervention, assistance with navigating the often-complex criminal justice system, and support for victims in exercising their rights as

²⁴ Rebecca Campbell, "Rape Survivors' Experiences with the Legal and Medical Systems: Do Rape Victim Advocates Make a Difference?" *Violence Against Women* 12, no 1 (January 2006): 1-16; Sharon M. Wasco, Rebecca Campbell, Holley Barnes, Courtney E. Ahrens, "Rape Crisis Centers: Shaping Survivors' Experiences with Community Systems Following Sexual Assault" (paper, Biennial Conference of the Society for Community Research and Action, New Haven, CT, June 1999).

²⁵ Lauren Bennett Cattaneo and Lisa A. Goodman, "Through the Lens of Therapeutic Jurisprudence: The Relationship Between Empowerment in the Court System and Well-Being for Intimate Partner Violence Victims," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 25, no 3 (June 2009): 481-502.

²⁶ Maria Koeppl and Leana A. Bouffard, "[The Burden of Victimization](#)," Legislative Brief no. 1 (Crime Victims Institute at the Criminal Justice Center at Sam Houston State University, 2012).

victims of crime. Victim services personnel can also mitigate secondary victimization by treating victims with fairness, dignity, and respect and providing information for victims to make informed decisions.²⁷

Incorporating victim services personnel within law enforcement agencies may benefit both the victims and the agencies serving them. Some benefits may include—

- Victims experience services that are responsive to their specialized needs.
- Victims have access to a reliable source of information for support, options, and resources.
- Victims may provide additional information that aids in case resolution.
- Agency personnel benefit from exposure to and collaboration with personnel who have specialized experience from different disciplines.
- Agency personnel with specialized experience are available to focus on—
 - Helping victims reduce risk of future incidents.
 - Addressing victim needs from a broader perspective.
 - Enhancing victim participation in the criminal justice process.

Strategic Planning

Strategic planning is a systematic process of envisioning a desired future, translating this vision into broadly defined goals, and developing a sequence of steps to achieve them. Agencies should dedicate time to develop a strategic plan specifically for the victim services program and use it as a guide for all future decisions. The victim services strategic plan should align with the agency’s overall strategic plan. Agencies are encouraged to think beyond existing resources to envision what the victim services program will ultimately look like (e.g., crime types served, services provided, staffing levels).

Strategic planning can be broken down into manageable steps:

- **Envision:** What is the desired future or end result?
- **Assess:** What is the current environment?
- **Set Goals:** What actions need to be taken?
- **Implement:** Who is responsible for each action? What is the timeline?
- **Evaluate:** Is the plan working? How do you know? What barriers need to be addressed?



²⁷ Malini Laxminarayan, “Procedural Justice and Psychological Effects of Criminal Proceedings: The Moderating Effect of Offense Type,” *Social Justice Research* 25, no 4 (December 2012): 390–405.

Strategic plans should cover about three to five years with longer-term goals in mind. They should be referenced often and reviewed and updated at least annually. Strategic planning should involve both agency leadership and victim services personnel at multiple levels (e.g., line-level, supervisors). This layered involvement can support personnel engagement and ensure planning occurs through a multidisciplinary lens.

Questions to consider when planning long term for victim services programs include—

- Has a strategic plan been developed specifically for the victim services program?
- Is there a process in place to regularly review, track progress, and update the victim services strategic plan?

Budget Process

A commitment to incorporating victim services personnel into a law enforcement agency requires financial resources. Many organizations start victim services programs through state or federal grant programs. When grant funding is used, a broad understanding of grant funding opportunities and effective grant management is strongly encouraged. A commitment to time-limited reliance on grant funding and a long-term goal of transitioning to the agency budget should be prioritized. Victim services personnel should document measurable outcomes associated with effective service provision to articulate growing need and effectiveness of the program. Common budgetary considerations include salary, benefits, equipment, and training.

Crisis Response Plans

During crisis response, agency personnel routinely activate necessary resources, including investigators, supervisors, crime scene personnel, and other specialized units like SWAT and hostage negotiators. However, with victim services personnel it is often routine practice for patrol, investigators, and supervisors to ask victims if they want victim services personnel to respond—frequently with an inadequate explanation of their role and responsibilities. To relieve the burden of determining the need for assistance from those who are directly impacted by the crisis event, victim services personnel and victim-centered practices should be incorporated into crisis response plans. This may include response plans for mass casualty events or incidents that require deployment of many agency personnel. Including victim services personnel in agency response to both day-to-day and major incidents will further legitimize the role of victim services personnel and ensure victims' interests remain at the forefront. Questions to consider when developing agency crisis response plans include—

“We’ve been looking for a way to secure funding that matched our goal of serving the victims. Our hope is that through demonstrating the value of Victim Services we can incorporate the costs of the program into our budget process. Victim Services holds value for both our department and the community.”

LaMar Brown

Grant Programs Administrator
City of Buckeye Police
Department
Buckeye, AZ

- Are victim services personnel incorporated into larger agency crisis response plans (e.g., mass casualty response plans)?
- Are victim services personnel knowledgeable of cultural considerations relevant to crisis response?
- Are victim services personnel involved in agency cross-training for crisis response plans?
- Are victim services personnel familiar with incident command policies and practices?

Workplace Culture Change

For some agencies, adding victim services personnel requires workplace culture change. Not all members of the organization will be in favor of the change as it will likely require adjustments in roles and responsibilities, redefining what success looks like, and changes in the balance of power in an organization. Internal buy-in may take time to develop. Agency leadership should expect resistance to the workplace culture change and plan for ways to address concerns raised. Agency leaders should also be intentional and consistent when conveying positive messages about victim services to the larger agency, including where victim services personnel will be placed in the organizational structure and even where workspaces of victim services personnel will be physically located. Other practical measures may include incorporating victim services personnel into policy review committees and other leadership meetings where agency decisions are made. Other ways to achieve internal buy-in may include—

- Listening and responding to concerns from law enforcement personnel (sworn and professional staff)
- Acknowledging and validating challenges through open communication
- Continuously reinforcing the benefits of the role of victim services personnel
- Keeping personnel informed about the positive impacts of victim services personnel
- Recognizing victim services through commendations and awards
- Engaging in cross-training with internal partners (e.g., attending in-service training together, attending conferences together)

In communities where collaboration is not a common practice, it may also be necessary to gain buy-in from external partners. Providing partners with information about victim response efforts will support mutual understanding and help agencies become more effective. Internal agency personnel at all levels, including sworn and professional staff, are encouraged to become familiar with partner organization locations, services, and key responsibilities. Face-to-face interactions outside of incident-related contact can also help accomplish this goal. Just as ride-a-longs and participation in citizen academies are encouraged as ways to learn more about law enforcement, law enforcement personnel are encouraged to participate in sit-a-longs or organization meetings and trainings with community partners to build

relationships and better understand partner roles in the larger system. Other ways to accomplish external buy-in may include—

- Involving partners early in program development
- Inviting partner ideas and responding to concerns
- Collaborating to resolve shared problems and make each other’s jobs easier
- Engaging in cross-training with external partners (e.g., attending conferences together, inviting external partners to agency-hosted training)
- Keeping external partners informed about the results of joint efforts and expressing appreciation for their work to support victims²⁸

Both formal and informal leaders within the organization should be included in implementation efforts. Personnel who have shown commitment to providing quality victim response should be provided the time and opportunity to invest in the work, thus ensuring that they can encourage, support, and monitor the ongoing progress within and outside the agency. Discussion of accountability measures for compliance with victim-centered practice and expectations should be conducted early and often during implementation.²⁹

Closing

Victims of crime are tasked with navigating complex systems in which they did not ask to participate. Victims’ abilities to meaningfully participate in the justice process are often further challenged by the short- and long-term impact of trauma. Victims are afforded legal rights and are deserving of culturally responsive, accessible services to assist them in exercising their rights throughout this process. Law enforcement is uniquely positioned to lead coordinated, collaborative, multidisciplinary, and trauma-informed response to victims and help ensure that their needs are prioritized. Including dedicated victim services personnel into law enforcement agencies can be a positive step toward achieving this goal.

²⁸ International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) and Office for Victims of Crime (OVC), “[Partnering](#),” in *Enhancing Law Enforcement Response to Victims (ELERV) Strategy*, 2nd ed. (Alexandria, VA: IACP, 2020).

²⁹ IACP and OVC, “[Partnering](#).”



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