

Addressing America's Forgotten Crime Victims:

Model Strategies and Practices for Rural Victim Assistance

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Introduction

Of the 40 programs that responded to the survey, 34 (85%) were private non-profit organizations. The majority of the respondents were from sexual assault and domestic violence programs. About half of them were in rural areas with populations of less than 50,000, while half were in rural areas with populations of over 100,000. Where there was a larger population, the geographic area that the agency was responsible for was always much larger (multi-county).

Most of the programs received VOCA funds (59%), Competitive Grants (59%), or VAWA funds (43%). Almost all of the programs had an established victim assistance program with an average of four (4) full time staff and 3.3 part-time staff. All of the programs had volunteers with an average of seven (7) full time and 16 part-time volunteers.

Referrals to the programs were mainly through direct victim referrals, other victim programs, and law enforcement. These programs primarily provided services for the victims of sexual assault, child sexual assault, and domestic violence.

Overall, this survey of rural programs seems to reflect a survey done by NOVA of urban programs almost 20 years ago. The major difference is that the major respondents at that time were victim/witness programs, while the major respondents in this rural survey were, as noted above, sexual assault and domestic violence programs. This appears to reflect the current VOCA funding priorities.

Services

These programs provided numerous kinds of services, but there were six services provided by a majority of them:

1. Court Accompaniment 98%
2. Referrals to Victim/Assistance Programs 90%
3. Referrals to Medical or Psychological Services 85%
4. Transportation to Criminal Justice-related Appointments 83%
5. Emergency Financial Assistance or Referrals 68%
6. Assistance in Preparing Victim Impact Statements 68%

Half of the programs provided outreach services to victims living in isolated jurisdictions, while 3% had satellite offices that were open at least on a part-time basis. Given the limited staff noted above, the number of satellite offices is higher than expected. It may be that volunteers are used at a high rate in these outreach facilities.

Needs Assessment

These agencies assessed the efficiency of their programs in two major ways. 98% utilized feedback directly from victims, while 93% solicited feedback from other victim advocates. The majority (80%) also acquired feedback from both the community and criminal justice agencies.

As in the urban study done almost 20 years ago, the basic agency problems were: a lack of funding and the resultant lack of appropriate staffing levels.

Agency Policies and Procedures

The majority (85%) of the programs had an established protocol for providing victim assistance, while 60% stated that the protocol was written. This survey would indicate that rural programs are required to work with other agencies more than urban programs: 63% participate on an interagency task force in their community. The most common task forces focused on child sexual/physical abuse and domestic violence. This networking obviously increases their professionalism and effectiveness as an agency.

As far as training and education, 63% of these programs provide domestic violence prevention programs in their community, and 43% also have community awareness programs. Overall, these programs have succeeded at networking at a high level: 90% had an excellent or good relationship with other community-based programs and 83% had an excellent or good relationship with criminal justice-based programs. Compared with the earlier urban study, this would indicate that rural programs today have a much more positive relationship with other victim service providers than 20 years ago. This is probably true today of urban programs also.

Victim Assistance/Needs Training

Over half (60%) of the programs provide basic in-house training for their staff, and 78% provide training for their volunteers. 78% also provide training for other community or criminal justice agencies. The following types of specialized staff training were also listed by some of the programs: special populations, victim advocacy, child abuse, compensation, and special populations.

There were numerous types of training that these programs wanted to see provided by their agencies. Other individuals and professionals would benefit from this training (especially on the issue of domestic violence): judges, district attorneys, police officers, medical and mental health professionals, and high school students. For their own staff and volunteers, the following additional areas of training were listed: crisis counseling, death notification, child victims, record keeping, survival skills, and running support groups.

Computer Technology

The rate of computer use in rural areas indicated by this survey was much higher than expected. This means that rural programs have greater access to technology than originally imagined. 88% of the agencies used computers primarily for caseload statistics, general office management, and the development of resources. About half of these agencies also used computers for case management and victim correspondence. However, 67% were not integrated into a larger system, and only 8% had an automated victim notification system. 60% had access to the Internet, but it was not clear exactly how many actually utilized this access. In general, the rate of computer usage was surprising, but it is evident that computers are mainly being used as basic word processors. Few agencies are using computers to network or to facilitate the delivery of outreach services. This could be due to a lack of training or sophistication, but it is probably due to the use of outdated equipment donated to the agencies.

Barriers/Challenges to Rural Programs

In this survey, there were some recurring themes presented by the agencies. The following problematic areas were delineated:

1. Multi-office Coordination
2. Transportation/Accessibility of Services
3. Phones
4. Isolation/Distance from Services
5. Literacy
6. Vocational/Employment Programs
7. Lack of Professional Referrals
8. Serving Restraining Orders (Isolation&Danger)

This list can be summarized into four major barriers to rural programs: isolation, lack of resources, privacy, and literacy and vocational issues.