



vision

Transforming Victim Services

FRAMEWORK



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The goal for Vision 21: Transforming Victim Services (Vision 21) is simple yet profound: to permanently alter the way we treat victims of crime in America. The Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) at the Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, and many others who work in the crime victims field recognize the need for a better way to respond to crime victims. We seek a comprehensive and systemic approach, drawing from a wide range of tangible yet difficult to access resources, including legislation, funding, research, and practice, to change how we meet victims' needs and how we address those who perpetrate crime. We have heard the call for a better way and it is our fervent hope that Vision 21 creates that path.

Vision 21 grew from a series of meetings sponsored by OVC across the country, to facilitate conversations about the crime victims field. These meetings brought together crime victim advocates and allied professionals to exchange information and ideas about enduring and emerging issues and how we treat victims of crime. What emerged from those intense and fruitful discussions was a common understanding about current challenges in the victims field and, most importantly, a shared expression of the urgent need for change. Vision 21 is the result of those conversations. We believe it can be our call to action—the motivation to address the needs of crime victims in a radically different way.

Our discussions and research centered on four topics: (1) defining the role of the crime victims field in the overall response to crime and delinquency in the United States; (2) building the field's capacity to better serve victims; (3) addressing enduring issues in the field; and (4) identifying emerging issues in the field. It was an ambitious agenda for a relatively brief timeframe, but one that was long overdue.

History

Vision 21 began with the perspective that the crime victims' movement is still a fledgling field—a phenomenon of the past 40 years. The movement

crystallized at the national level in 1981 with the proclamation of the first National Crime Victims' Rights Week to honor courageous victims and their surviving family members. The release of a groundbreaking report a year later—*The Final Report of the President's Task Force on Victims of Crime*—led to the passage of the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) of 1984. This landmark legislation established the Crime Victims Fund to provide stable funding for victim assistance programs and to change the landscape of a criminal justice system that was unwelcoming and all too often hostile to victims' interests.

The next major examination came in 1998, with OVC's release of *New Directions from the Field: Victims' Rights and Services for the 21st Century*, noting substantial progress made since 1981 with recommendations for improving victims' rights, services, and freedom from discrimination. By 2010, OVC leadership recognized it was time for the field to revisit those goals, assess the progress made toward reaching them, and chart a course for the future. At the same time, an outpouring of concern from victim advocacy groups and their allies illuminated a growing number of victims being turned away for lack of funding or the ability to provide appropriate services. The advocates detailed the additional challenges in reaching and serving victims of emergent crimes such as human trafficking, child commercial sexual exploitation, and financial fraud. Clearly, the time is here for a renewed assessment of the state of victims' services, which can only come from those who know it best—crime victims, victim service providers, and advocates.

The Vision 21 strategic initiative, launched by OVC in fall 2010, competitively awarded funding to five organizations: the National Crime Victim Law Institute, the National Center for Victims of Crime (NCVC), the Vera Institute of Justice Center on Victimization and Safety, OVC's Training and Technical Assistance Center, and the National Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center of the Medical University of South Carolina. For 18 months, the partners examined the status of the

crime victims field and explored both new and perennial challenges. Five stakeholder forums were held, with representatives of traditional and non-traditional victim service providers, from NCVC to a community rape crisis center, from sexual assault nurse examiners to prosecutors. They discussed the problems they saw in the field and recommended ways to advance the state of victim assistance in the United States. OVC and its partners also conducted a review of relevant literature, hosted interactive discussions at conferences and meetings with state VOCA administrators and other key constituencies and, through OVC's Web site, invited interested parties to join the discussion.

We at OVC hope that crime victim service providers and advocates embrace Vision 21 as their own. OVC and its partner organizations believe that it unites voices from the field, including crime victims and those who speak on behalf of victims who are not able to speak for themselves. The success of this vision lies with the field and its desire to overcome challenges—for only the field can drive transformational change.

Challenges

All who took part in Vision 21 quickly identified a great need to expand the base of knowledge about crime victimization. Although Vision 21 identifies some exemplary applications of current research, there is no comprehensive body of empirical data to guide policymakers, funders, and practitioners. We know that research is the road, not the roadblock, to victim-centered practice and policy.

Equally troubling was the absence of certain victims' voices and perspectives in criminal justice policy debates, which remain focused primarily on the prosecution and incarceration of offenders. OVC and stakeholders in the field, on the other hand, routinely heard from individuals who shared a different vision of justice. For those victimized by family members rather than strangers, as well as victims from Indian Country and crime-ridden city neighborhoods, justice is not always about a retributive system. These victims brought to the conversation a passion for promoting broader policies of

prevention and innovative public safety programs to hold offenders accountable and reduce recidivism while promoting healing for victims.

We grappled with the question of whether or not "victim assistance" includes allied practitioners—that is, professionals who do not self-identify as victim service providers, such as emergency room physicians, prosecutors, and court personnel. We agreed that we must cast a wide net to connect with the mental health, indigent defense, juvenile justice, and other fields that intersect with victim assistance. We discussed the historically low salaries for victim service providers who perform some of society's toughest jobs. We also acknowledged the inherent conflict between a focus on responding to a specialized type of victimization and the need to expand that focus—beyond the presenting victimization—to the holistic needs of the victim.

Although some violent crime rates may be decreasing, the incidence of other types of victimization in this country—including crime perpetrated in cyberspace, human trafficking, and crime committed against older people and those with disabilities—may not even be captured by traditional survey instruments or reported to law enforcement. A staggering 42 percent of victims never report serious violent crime to law enforcement.¹ We need to know why. Stakeholders described a maze of overlapping, complex legal issues facing victims; for example, a single victimization can involve immigration status, civil legal assistance, administrative law remedies, and rights enforcement.

The use of technology was woven through the Vision 21 discussions as well. Although it can drive new types of crime such as online child pornography and can facilitate other crimes such as stalking, technology can be a powerful tool in expanding victims' access to services. Web-based and mobile technology offer amazing potential for outreach and collaboration and increasingly can be used to bring services directly to victims. There are challenges: technology is not cheap, we must address privacy and confidentiality concerns, and too many organizations that already struggle with funding do not have the money to invest in technology. However, technology is critical to building the infra-

¹ *Victimizations Not Reported to the Police, 2006–2010*, National Crime Victimization Survey: Special Report August 2012, <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/vnrp0610.pdf> (accessed October 23, 2012).

structure for the systematic collection and analysis of victimization data and evaluation of programs. It also offers a potential solution to the increasing burden placed on providers by administrative and financial reporting requirements.

Overcoming these barriers, including the research gap, lack of a technology infrastructure, and obstacles to collaboration, means taking a hard look at the statutory framework for much of the victim assistance at the state and local levels—VOCA. VOCA is permanently authorized but has been amended infrequently since its passage. It remains rooted in the practices of the early 1980s: direct services focused on crisis response provided through a substantially volunteer workforce. VOCA is largely silent on the issues of prevention, research, and program evaluation; the use of technology; the need for collaborative and multijurisdictional responses to victims; and the capacity of organizations to provide increasingly complex and longer-term support to victims.

These challenges offer an unprecedented opportunity to craft a new vision for the future. Against this background, we present our vision for transforming victim services in the 21st century.

Recommendations

The discussions that formed the basis for Vision 21 demonstrated that only a truly comprehensive and far-reaching approach would achieve the vast changes needed to move the field forward. Stakeholders saw that a holistic approach to victims' needs is essential but will require unprecedented collaboration among service providers, an ongoing challenge for the field.

Vision 21's reach must extend to mental health, medical, indigent defense, research, homeless advocacy, juvenile justice, legal services, and other fields that play an integral role in promoting safe and healthy communities. Substantial, systematic, and sustained collaboration will be essential to fulfill the promise of Vision 21. Stakeholders' recommendations for beginning the transformative change fall into the following four broad categories:

1. **Conduct continuous rather than episodic strategic planning** in the victim assistance field to

effect real change in research, policy, programming, and capacity building.

2. **Support the development of research** to build a body of evidence-based knowledge and generate, collect, and analyze quantitative and qualitative data on victimization, emerging victimization trends, services and behaviors, and enforcement efforts.
3. **Ensure the statutory, policy, and programmatic flexibility to address enduring and emerging crime victim issues.**
4. **Build and institutionalize capacity through an infusion of technology, training, and innovation to ensure that the field is equipped to meet the demands of the 21st century.**

When OVC and its project partners first embarked on the Vision 21 process, we hesitated to use *"Transforming Victim Services"* as part of the Vision 21 title. We wondered if advocates and service providers in the field would interpret "transforming" as dismissive of the current state of practice or minimizing the extraordinary successes of the pioneering advocates in the field. Yet, we found that Vision 21 clarified that practitioners in this field, which began as a transformative movement, would not be content with maintaining the status quo or a less than bold exploration of the issues.

Now, 30 years after the release of the 1982 *Final Report of the President's Task Force on Victims of Crime*, we believe that we have another seminal opportunity in the history of the crime victims' movement. We must take the next step: turning today's vision into tomorrow's reality for crime victims in this country.

