

NEXT STEPS

State VOCA administrator agencies provided a broad range of crisis counseling; social, financial and emotional support; and referral services to September 11 victims. Their experiences reflect current best practices and identify areas for improved victim services. Their know-how lends valuable guidance to other state VOCA administrator agencies across the country and to decisionmakers for focusing expertise and funds on preparing Americans for mass criminal incidents. In addition, their input offers a framework for a strategic approach to developing multidisciplinary response protocols. The following outlines their identified next steps to ensure followthrough for enhanced services nationwide.

Develop a National Perspective on Consequences of Mass Criminal Victimization

Many government agencies have had emergency management plans in place that focus mainly on the safety and operational response to natural disasters but do not address the impact of a mass criminal crisis that can be felt over wide or multiple geographic areas. Recommended next steps include the following:

- ◆ Recognize the importance of comprehensive planning, despite the inherently unpredictable and uncontrollable nature of mass criminal victimization.
- ◆ Integrate a focus on victims' needs into national preparedness planning.
- ◆ Merge the response to natural disasters with approaches to managing criminal disasters.

- ◆ Promote mutual respect and collaboration among agencies with disparate focuses (natural versus criminal disasters) and modes of operation (handling safety and security versus handling people).
- ◆ Develop broad written procedural guidelines or models for a response to mass criminal victimization, and define required policies, procedures, and protocols and how they will be devised.
- ◆ Involve top leadership, particularly governors' offices, in gaining priority status for victims throughout a state's administration.
- ◆ Develop and offer disaster training that focuses on the human impact of mass criminal events as well as the physical effects.
- ◆ Act collaboratively as members of a community of responders, understanding that victim service organizations need to work in tandem.
- ◆ Address the geographical and territorial issues inherent in a national approach to assisting large populations of victims.
- ◆ Safeguard the integrity of services to all victims, and ensure that funding for mass criminal victimization does not proportionally outstrip funding for other victim services.

Prepare To Respond to Immediate, Intermediate, and Long-Term Needs

Survival, safety, food, and shelter are the primary response considerations during a mass violence incident, after which the desire for information

and the location and condition of family members and other loved ones are the immediate victim needs. State VOCA administrator agencies point to additional immediate, intermediate, and long-term services that can diminish the negative effects of mass violence among survivors. They suggested these next steps:

- ◆ Establish a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with individual state government and nonprofit organizations to provide immediate crisis assistance to survivors, their families, and community members.
- ◆ Look beyond states where events occur to account for all potential secondary victims and their ongoing needs and to assess where resources and services are dedicated.
- ◆ Design and deliver flexible services that do not conform to a one-size-fits-all approach.
- ◆ Develop a service implementation plan that adapts to ongoing and changing victim needs and allows for smooth adjustment of services.
- ◆ Build awareness of how post-event trauma unfolds over a period of time and how it demands a continuum of care for primary and secondary victims.
- ◆ Provide services over an appropriately long period of time because grief can unexpectedly return, even as survivors and families begin to stabilize their lives and cope with the impact of the event.
- ◆ Deliver services that address the financial and employment concerns that can impede recovery.
- ◆ Offer crisis counseling related to birthdays of victims, holidays, important family anniversaries, and the first anniversary of the event.

- ◆ Craft a community mental health intervention program targeted to reduce long-term impairment to those directly and indirectly affected by mass criminal victimization.
- ◆ Organize and schedule support groups for specific populations (e.g., parents who lost children), and expand services, such as offering childcare, to victims with highly specific needs.
- ◆ Educate police, fire, emergency personnel, and other responders about the potential effects they might experience from assisting victims of mass disaster and how these effects can last for years and have implications for responders' long-term reactions and the support services they might need.

Set Assistance Parameters

Mass criminal victimization generates a broad range of emotions, feelings, and physical symptoms that different individuals or groups can experience at different times. However, according to one state VOCA administrator agency, "If you're counseling 3 days a week 2 years later, it's not about this. Trauma-related things are more short-term than that. At some point, you need to draw a new line, because instead of helping people with recovery, you may be helping them relive their victimization." These comments highlight the difficult decisions state VOCA administrator agencies and victim service providers face as they help victims transition from immediate to long-term support and beyond. State VOCA administrator agencies recommended the following next steps:

- ◆ Develop personalized transition plans for moving from short- to long-term assistance, taking into account individual reactions to tragedy, grieving styles, and recovery rates.
- ◆ Incorporate a response to mass criminal victimization into existing service systems.
- ◆ Follow a realistic methodology for action that acknowledges that initial needs of victims might not be monetary but rather counseling, comfort, or support.

- ◆ Clarify which individuals and groups are eligible for expanded benefits and services (e.g., grandparents, grandchildren, in-laws).
- ◆ Delineate in advance who will offer financial support to victims as a first and last resort, what it covers, and at what monetary levels to avoid duplication of payments and ensure identification of unmet victim needs. Offer training and technical assistance to respective agencies.
- ◆ Formulate shared administrative systems between states and prominent charities, other state agencies, and federal sources of assistance so that information on payments to victims can be tracked and shared.
- ◆ Describe precisely what the mental health response to mass criminal victimization will be, as referral and long-term response can become problematic after the first few days following a crisis.
- ◆ Prepare a calendar for long-term services such as support groups.
- ◆ Determine appropriate intervals for followup interventions (e.g., 3 months, 6 months, event anniversary), and offer services such as crisis intervention and transportation associated with anniversary commemorations.
- ◆ Create “drop-in” sites for counseling and other services for citizens and rescuers affected by generalized fear (“walking wounded”) when they do not fit into traditional categories of victims eligible for funded services.
- ◆ Expand the categories of allowable activities under federal grant guidelines to include the provision of respite care for family caretakers of those injured.
- ◆ Forecast funding requirements beyond available grants and balance funding allocations and services equitably between victims of mass violence and other victims.

Formalize Response Channels

All state VOCA administrator agencies spoke of the value of formal, standardized practices and procedures to enable agencies within, and across, jurisdictions to work effectively in cases of mass criminal victimization. In fact, one state victim compensation board is now a member of a statewide terrorism task force headed by the state’s Office of Emergency Services. It includes the Department of Mental Health, Office of Criminal Justice Planning, Department of Transportation, and additional state agencies. Before September 11, the compensation board had no continuing relationship with the Office of Emergency Services. Afterward, the board gained widespread respect for having met the tremendous needs of victims. Now, as members of the task force, board representatives help inform and influence the planning and direction of disaster response.

However, other states report that while positive relationships among agencies were formed following September 11, there has been little follow-through. They formed relationships with people in mental health, emergency management, and other departments but not with the institutions. They are convinced that they would have to start from scratch in another mass crisis and that, while the personal relationships are advantageous, they would operate only if the same individuals were in the same roles. Therefore, state VOCA administrator agencies advised taking the following next steps:

- ◆ Hold a series of cross-agency meetings to develop objectives and identify strategies and methods for comprehensive disaster response.
- ◆ Draft a long-range implementation plan that clearly defines response roles and responsibilities to avoid duplication of services.
- ◆ Involve local disaster assistance in all planning activities. Federal and state preparedness and emergency management programs

notwithstanding, the immediate response to mass criminal victimization is generally carried out locally.

- ◆ Develop formal mechanisms for communicating with, hosting, and directing multidisciplinary teams of disaster response and victim service professionals and volunteers from other states.
- ◆ Integrate victim services formally into any emergency operations center used by public safety agencies to command and manage responders.
- ◆ Recruit and screen volunteers with the essential training credentials to perform specific jobs successfully, eliminating well-meaning but inexperienced or untrained individuals. Categorize and name the specific qualifications and skills sought.
- ◆ Develop volunteer guidelines to define responsibilities in relation to other responders and describe performance expectations of them during a mass criminal victimization.

Reach Out to All Victims

In addition to helping direct victims who suffered physical or emotional injuries related to the September 11 crisis, communities responded to secondary or other victims, many of whom lost their employment. However, state VOCA administrator agencies faced some difficulty in finalizing a definition of “victim” and in reaching some groups and individuals who ultimately were deemed eligible for assistance. They recommended the following next steps:

- ◆ Develop an instrument to identify potential victim groups resulting from specific types of mass crisis and their potential needs (e.g., evacuees from a chemical attack would not need long-term shelter, but residents displaced from a radiological attack might never be able to return home).

- ◆ Recruit and assign response personnel who are culturally sensitive to working with ethnic populations and who are trained to work with special populations such as children, older people, and people with disabilities.
- ◆ Establish standing contracts with diverse media to advertise hotline numbers, victim services, and other information important to victims once a mass crisis occurs.
- ◆ Activate an easily accessible national clearinghouse for information about charitable giving and services from corporations and foundations that offer scholarships, mortgage payments, counseling, children’s services, and other types of support to victims and families as well as ongoing donation opportunities.
- ◆ Write and distribute regular newsletters to victims and families to update them on the status of issues such as compensation, support organizations, meetings, and events.
- ◆ Disseminate information via a secure group Web site that also provides a chat feature allowing survivors and family members to communicate.
- ◆ Take an active approach to reaching victims by visiting community meetings, church services, fire departments, and other sites where victim assistance and mental health staff can interact with victims.
- ◆ Offer debriefing opportunities to emergency responders and victim service staff to prevent emotional burnout caused by exposure to intense human pain and anger.
- ◆ Recognize that some individuals choose not to take advantage of victim services and that outreach by letter, telephone, or other means should not become intrusive or overwhelming.
- ◆ Acknowledge that all participation in victim services must be voluntary and that there is a limit to what can be done to help people.

Monitor and Evaluate Interventions

Systematic data collection and evaluation are essential to determining the effectiveness of intervention on behalf of victims of mass criminal incidents. Similar to the continuum of care that state VOCA administrator agencies referred to in discussing the immediate, short-, and long-term needs of victims, a continuum of evaluation is a rational model for assessing whether benefits and services were helpful to victims and will contribute to decisions regarding the scope, nature, and duration of assistance delivered. Interviewees urged the following next steps:

- ◆ Plan for data collection before, during, and after incidents of mass violence.
- ◆ Obtain details about current and anticipated reporting requirements of federal agencies to plan for and set protocols to capture necessary data.
- ◆ Research and draft evaluation protocols and reporting requirements.
- ◆ Determine the nature, format, and usage guidelines for evaluation instruments.
- ◆ Capitalize on existing technology resources (e.g., DMV automated systems) to establish a comprehensive database of victims, inquiries, and needs.
- ◆ Conduct surveys and schedule focus groups with general and specialized victim populations and victim service providers to—
 - ❖ Identify program components or activities that merit continuation, fine tuning, or abandonment.
 - ❖ Explore whether victims still experience the physical and emotional symptoms typically associated with traumatic events.
 - ❖ Ensure services remain responsive to the changing needs of victims.
- ❖ Determine what is appropriate followup, for whom, and over what period of time.

Balance Planning and Response

All state VOCA administrator agencies concurred that despite extraordinary efforts and successes in addressing the incomparable needs of September 11 victims, focus on the human impact of mass criminal violence lags behind the concentration on prevention and intervention. They understand that institutions traditionally have a difficult time dealing with the needs of victims during a crisis and that it is easier, on many levels, to secure a physical target than to help people cope with mental anguish. A complete integration of victims' issues into emergency management has not been achieved. Some states report they have now just begun to catch up on September 11 applications for assistance and have not yet performed any disaster planning for future events. State VOCA administrator agencies suggest the following next steps:

- ◆ Incorporate victim services into disaster planning and response protocols, also taking into account the psychological consequences of such events.
- ◆ Establish a state emergency management or a governor's office antiterrorism task force as the lead agency to formalize planning and response channels and ensure built-in accountability.
- ◆ Encourage victim assistance and compensation staff to participate in developing and updating state preparedness plans.
- ◆ Assign equal importance to victim benefits and assistance and to safety and security issues in preparedness planning.
- ◆ Allocate funding evenly among law enforcement, fire, EMS, and other equipment-dependent activities, and crisis aftermath services.

- ◆ Revamp preparedness and response plans as community variables shift (e.g., housing trends, school trends, commercial versus residential distribution).
- ◆ Schedule regular training sessions for victim assistance professionals, mental health providers, and emergency management personnel to enhance collaboration among state agencies.
- ◆ Establish MOUs between state and local agencies and encourage participation of professional associations such as state chapters of psychological associations. Request assignment of individuals with specialized training in victim assistance, particularly those who have assisted families of homicide victims and have experience with death notification and funeral arrangements.