



Responding to September 11 Victims: Lessons Learned From the States



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SEPTEMBER 11 VICTIMS:
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MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

On September 11, 2001, thousands of people going about their daily lives became crime victims in a matter of hours. As an unprecedented demand for assistance and compensation services unfolded, victim service providers across the country began to address the complexities of responding to an overwhelming number of victims in need of swift, compassionate, professional, and coordinated assistance. In particular, staff from victim assistance and victim compensation programs in New York, Virginia, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and California realized that they would play an integral role in addressing victims' needs.

In the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks, the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) provided these states with approximately \$65.2 million in emergency and supplemental grant funds to assist victims, emergency responders, and their families. State Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) administrator agencies were awarded grants to administer the funds. The agencies provided myriad assistance and compensation services directly to victims, while coordinating with countless other agencies at the federal, state, and local level. State VOCA administrator agencies faced significant challenges and overcame numerous obstacles to provide comprehensive, timely assistance. Undoubtedly, valuable lessons can be learned from their experiences.

OVC and the state VOCA administrator agencies believe it is important for all state victim assistance and compensation programs, as well as other entities involved in responding to mass criminal victimization, to be aware of their experiences. To accurately document the states' challenges, lessons learned, and promising practices in responding to victims' needs, OVC supported the development of this report, which describes their efforts. OVC plans to use this valuable information to help inform program and policy development.

OVC knows that other state VOCA administrator agencies provided important victim assistance and compensation services that are also worthy of recognition. Thus, OVC would like to thank not only the state agency representatives directly involved in developing this report, but also all of the victim assistance professionals at the federal, state, and local level who devoted their time, expertise, and financial resources to assisting September 11 victims, emergency responders, and their families. We commend and thank you all for your valiant efforts.

John W. Gillis
Director
Office for Victims of Crime

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) awarded crisis response grants and subsequent appropriated funding to a number of state Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) administrator agencies to provide a broad range of services to victims of the attacks. At a meeting from December 7–8, 2003, those grantees had an opportunity to describe their experiences and the lessons they learned as they mobilized to meet the demand for victim assistance and compensation after September 11. This report reflects the frontline perspective on victim assistance services by these state VOCA administrator agencies and offers lessons learned to state, federal, and private decisionmakers for organizing effective responses to possible future mass criminal victimization.

Even though grantees had solid resources in place before September 11 for victim compensation and assistance, they were challenged by the severity and magnitude of victims' needs. They found that although there were similarities, the needs of victims of mass criminal events were unique compared with the needs of victims of other crimes. Displaced workers, individuals affected by subsequent economic fallout, and victims and responders who face unknown long-term health hazards require special services following mass criminal incidents. The grantees also discovered that existing systems for emergency management or terrorism planning were based primarily on a public safety model of disaster response that focused on saving lives and ensuring citizens' immediate safety. For the most part, these models were not developed to take into account the human impact of mass criminal incidents and did not recognize the social, psychological, and economic toll that might manifest itself in physical or emotional symptoms.

Furthermore, the grantees pointed to thorough planning and coordination of resources as vital components for enhancing victim assistance as well as a need for federal support to perform both.

Promising Practices

The state VOCA administrator agencies launched a variety of innovative strategies to quickly and efficiently meet victims' needs, and they credit several of these approaches with having a positive effect on September 11 victims' lives. From their perspective, the following practices brought substantial benefits to all victims of mass violence:

- ◆ Providing emergency training that combines preparedness for the physical, psychological, and emotional effects of a disaster.
- ◆ Assigning tasks before, during, and after a disaster that capitalize on the specific strengths of both professionals and volunteers.
- ◆ Setting up toll free hotlines for access to assistance, compensation, and referrals.
- ◆ Integrating victim compensation and assistance personnel into emergency operations centers.
- ◆ Establishing centralized victim resource sites at local family assistance centers.
- ◆ Adopting a case management approach to coordinating and delivering services.
- ◆ Supplementing compensation and mental health services with counseling on legal, financial, and other daily concerns of victims.

- ◆ Offering victims and emergency responders a range of stress management and psychological care techniques to use as the process of post-event trauma unfolds.
- ◆ Streamlining compensation processes to accommodate a high volume of claimants.
- ◆ Scheduling public events as outlets for community expressions of grief and opportunities for healing.
- ◆ Identifying and communicating with victims was hampered because VOCA administrator agencies could not share information about victims with charitable agencies and other government programs that provided similar services and financial assistance. This was primarily due to privacy and confidentiality concerns.
- ◆ The diverse needs, beliefs, and lifestyles of special victim populations had an impact on service delivery.

Lessons Learned

In responding to the extraordinary demand for victim services prompted by the September 11 terrorist attacks, state VOCA administrator agencies faced several challenges that warrant consideration for planning and implementing future response protocols. They identified the following challenges:

- ◆ Compared with emergency management and response to natural disasters, mass criminal victimization demands specialized response strategies that address the complex toll on people.
- ◆ The impact of the crisis and the scope of victims' needs were not anticipated, severely straining existing resources and jeopardizing effective compensation and victim assistance.
- ◆ Financial responsibilities of state agencies and local organizations toward victims were unclear because of the numerous governmental and charitable programs and resources available to victims.
- ◆ The lack of a centralized database that would provide information about payments made by government agencies and prominent charities complicated determinations of what expenses should be covered by state compensation programs.
- ◆ Victims who lived far from the attack sites felt isolated and confronted barriers to receiving services.
- ◆ Depression and fatigue affected victim compensation and assistance staff who had to balance the emotions and demands of September 11 victims with those of other victims.
- ◆ A lack of coordinated resources impeded smooth delivery of services to victims, and any collaborations that were formed after September 11 were based on personal relationships among service providers rather than on institutional procedures and/or agreements.

Recommended Actions

Input from state VOCA administrator agencies also revealed several potential actions that may improve the response to mass criminal victimization. Among the top recommendations were the following:

- ◆ Consider emergency management not only from a prevention or intervention perspective, but also from a standpoint that takes into account the aftermath of the crisis.
- ◆ Balance funding for prevention, intervention, and aftermath services.
- ◆ Set aside funding to support advance development of a disaster response structure.

- ◆ Integrate victim issues seamlessly into emergency preparedness planning, training, and implementation.
 - ◆ Adopt standardized emergency management procedures to formalize collaborative agreements that foster efficient service delivery and ensure a high level of accountability, particularly with state agency leadership.
 - ◆ Address the unique needs of victims of mass criminal events through continual care that is backed by rigorous planning, prompt victim identification, and thorough outreach.
 - ◆ Take prudent, measured action to ensure adequate but appropriate services to optimize response to victims' needs, rather than following a "one-size-fits-all" approach.
- ◆ Balance the needs of victims of mass criminal incidents with the needs of other victims.
 - ◆ Conduct data collection and evaluation to inform decisionmakers and providers about the nature, duration, and effectiveness of victim services.

Without exception, state VOCA administrator agencies agreed that carefully crafted federal action will complement and enhance the efforts of state agencies to provide comprehensive services to victims of mass violence and will further the capacity of all Americans to cope with any future domestic incidents.