

LESSONS LEARNED FROM STATE VOCA ADMINISTRATOR AGENCIES

Until September 11, 2001, the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City had been the largest scale terrorist incident on U.S. soil, prompting an extraordinary effort to help victims. One of the lessons agencies learned from this experience was that victims of terrorism share many of the needs of other victims of violent crime, but they also face unique challenges, as do the victim service providers and allied professionals who respond to them.

Promising Practices

During a mass criminal incident, saving lives and ensuring citizen safety are the preeminent considerations. Subsequently, the response shifts to treating the effects of violence, as victims seek a variety of immediate, short-, and long-term services. As state VOCA administrator agencies began to provide those services to September 11 victims, a number of practices emerged that were particularly effective in helping victims stabilize their lives and cope with the impact of the event.

Training and Responder Preparedness

Emergency response training traditionally has focused on response to and recovery from the physical impact of a disaster. Therefore, some emergency responders were insufficiently prepared to handle the significant human impact of the September 11 events. As one interviewee put it, “We were just completely taken by surprise.”

However, some states were able to launch a swift, efficient response to victims’ needs with resources that were already in place, highlighting the importance of thorough advance training for victim service providers and emergency responders. One state activated its existing crisis intervention

team whose solid training, professionalism, and performance enabled them to act as liaisons between victims and those who made decisions about compensation.

Other states rapidly mobilized post-September 11, capitalizing on professional alliances and personal relationships to set in motion a comprehensive response to victims’ needs. One state funded a daylong training session at which representatives from numerous agencies identified their particular areas of expertise. With visual support from a large map, agency personnel were matched with a specific victim’s family members based on geography and anticipated need. Another state trained military casualty officers who then supported agency staff in helping victims fill out applications for compensation.

In some states, training for emergency responders extended to addressing their own unique needs. Unlike direct victims, emergency responders are more likely to be exposed to the aftermath of a crisis for a longer time, which can build on past exposure to trauma. Also, emergency responders are not always taught how to cope with their own emotional responses to traumatic events and therefore may require more support services in the future. One VOCA administrator agency collaborated with a hospital to develop a series of training sessions about general health and wellness, which included both the physical and mental challenges facing rescue personnel.

Professional and Volunteer Alliances

All of the grantees relied on volunteers extensively to optimize victim assistance and compensation, particularly in the days immediately following the terrorist attacks. One state’s crisis response team represented a mix of professionals

and volunteers who were prepared to mobilize quickly to reach a crisis site with many victims. They also were trained to recognize and respond to the broad range of emotions, feelings, and physical symptoms that traumatic victimization can generate.

One VOCA administrator agency relied on personnel from other state agencies who volunteered their time to complete tasks such as data entry for compensation claims or to answer telephones until midnight or later. Each state, some in coordination with the state bar association, also offered pro bono legal services to victims and surviving family members.

Hotlines/Helplines

All of the grantees established hotlines, some almost immediately, to give victims access to assistance, compensation, and referral information. One VOCA administrator agency collaborated successfully with its state's Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) to plan, staff, and implement a hotline that was housed at DMV headquarters. Drawing on the DMV's extensive technology resources, the toll free line was established within 14 hours and could be staffed by up to 30 operators (both DMV employees and victim/witness agency personnel). DMV staff screened calls, making referrals as necessary to victim/witness staff, and developed a resource and referral list to direct callers to appropriate services. In addition, DMV's automated resources featured a database that reported hourly on the number of calls, the number of rings, the purpose of the call, and resolution of the call, as well as the name, address, and phone number of the caller.

Emergency Operations Centers

For police, fire, and medical personnel trained to respond to dangerous situations, setting up an emergency command center is common practice. However, because the September 11 events were also crimes, VOCA administrator agencies in states with crash sites worked with their respective state departments of emergency services, most for the first time, to establish disaster field offices. With federal, state, military,

and volunteer resources also on hand, victim assistance and compensation experts staffed emergency operations centers. They also coordinated data collection and ensured the number of claims received and paid was incorporated into daily situation reports for governors and federal agencies.

Family Assistance Centers

Three state VOCA administrator agencies described the family assistance centers that served as a positive precedent and model for consolidating services in one location. Set up in public or private facilities near the attack sites, family assistance centers gave victims one-stop access to a host of resources, including attorneys to assist with custody and probate issues, insurance companies, charities, personnel from the FBI and the Social Security Administration, and representatives from airlines. Clergy, therapists, therapy animals, childcare (while families completed applications and other paperwork), DNA draw sites (where DNA samples were collected from relatives to help identify the deceased), and onsite memorials were also available at the centers.

Equipped with computer terminals and Internet access, family assistance centers were staffed by compensation and victim assistance professionals, including those from urban areas and those with significant experience working with families of homicide victims. They linked people with grief counseling and made referrals to local victim/witness agencies, recognizing the anticipated need for ongoing counseling for some victims. Military personnel and victim/witness professionals from other states supported local personnel who were handling regular caseloads in addition to processing September 11 victim claims.

Case Management

State VOCA administrator agencies unanimously and vigorously supported a case management model with assigned case managers who advocated on behalf of victims, allowing them to bypass many complications and barriers to receiving comprehensive services. Two states cited the

effectiveness of a case management model for coordinating and delivering services to September 11 victims. Following an advocacy case management approach, state VOCA administrator agencies developed individual recovery plans to help victims return to predisaster status as quickly as possible by providing referrals to counseling, support groups, legal services, immigration services, job training, placement agencies, and other resources that matched an individual's specific needs.

Case managers also handled professionally many of the emotionally draining tasks that families faced. In addition to collecting DNA samples and transporting families to assistance centers and memorial services, case managers arranged for such basics as food, heat, and clothing when paychecks stopped and other assistance had not begun. They also assisted local police with death notification when the FBI confirmed identification of a loved one's body part. They helped families access the daunting array of charitable organizations that offered financial assistance and other services, and they campaigned for scholarships and additional remedies for families with college-age children.

One state VOCA administrator agency appointed case managers to work exclusively with particular victim categories, such as people who were at the World Trade Center, or those who were directly affected by one of the plane crashes. Case managers worked closely with survivors, family members, and rescue workers to coordinate benefits and services with charitable organizations and alternative funding sources. They explained benefits and claims eligibility requirements, managed and attended peer support group meetings, facilitated pro bono legal assistance, and simply listened compassionately.

Counseling

Immediately after September 11, state VOCA administrator agencies, particularly those that followed the case management model, collected information about local, state, and federal resources that could provide practical assistance for victims. They identified financial support entities with whom they typically had not

worked and devised resource lists that included a broad range of services, from attorneys who would donate pro bono services for handling compensation claims or immigration issues to volunteers from benevolent associations who would rake lawns.

Two state VOCA administrator agencies commented that although the practical resources developed and the relationships fostered were beneficial to families, they were unique to the events of September 11 and in their current format would not likely be useful in the future. They suggested that states create more formal, comprehensive mechanisms for coordinating with other agencies in an effort to safeguard against misinformation or inappropriate victim referrals.

Mental Health Counseling, Support Groups, and Community Healing Rituals

No one who witnesses or is victimized by mass violence is untouched by it. Accordingly, all state VOCA administrator agencies facilitated mental health counseling for primary and secondary victims of September 11.

Because victims were vulnerable in different ways to stresses associated with the disaster and experienced distinct concerns and reactions, mental health counseling took various forms. In addition to contracting for crisis and individual counseling, states coordinated and scheduled support groups that generated a sense of closeness among participants. These groups were instrumental in helping victims deal with grief, guilt, and other repressed emotions and in understanding the impact of trauma.

In a pilot project, one state VOCA administrator agency collaborated with a university trauma recovery center to host a series of regional support group meetings, monthly at first and quarterly beginning in 2003.

Several states reported that the structure of support groups was important to addressing the needs of survivors who had been at the World Trade Center compared with sessions for grieving family members. The optimum structure was

found by presenting some components for all attendees followed by breakout sessions for subsets of the entire group. Other states pointed to the need to fund children's programs in the aftermath of a crisis. According to some state VOCA administrator agencies, local mental health experts continue to note behavioral issues among children who lost a parent and the importance of providing them with special support.

Mental health experts found that although survivors of mass criminal victimization react differently to the grief and stress produced by the tragedy, public or private rituals, spiritually oriented memorial services, grief seminars or educational programs, and nonreligious ceremonies such as military honors can significantly contribute to a victim's recovery. While none of the state VOCA administrator agencies reported sponsoring community healing events, one agency spearheaded state legislation in 2002 to allow the compensation board to pay families for wages lost during travel to and from memorial services or government events honoring victims. The agency also scheduled support group meetings to coincide with a statewide Day of Remembrance and anniversary memorials that included interfaith services.

Compensation

Victim compensation programs had been longstanding in each state. However, for victims of September 11, it was a challenge for states to process the extraordinary number of claims, especially in those states where the events occurred. Approximately 3 years after the attacks, payouts of up to \$25,000 per claim have exceeded \$10 million in one state, primarily for loss of support, but also for mental health counseling for survivors and those who were either physically injured or directly threatened by the attacks. Several states worked cooperatively for the first time as they identified which had primary and secondary jurisdiction for claims. Additionally, because state compensation schedules differed, it was imperative to determine which expenses (medical bills or loss of support due to physical injury or death) were to be reimbursed.

Having expanded customer service units, states assigned victim compensation personnel to staff family assistance centers where they helped victims complete applications and determine unmet needs. To ensure high-quality service to all claimants, one state developed the *9-11 Call Center Resource Guide* for customer service representatives and temporary agency staff. Another state dispatched its existing mobile compensation program to a crash site and supplemented its grant with emergency services funds that allowed the program to hire additional staff. All states streamlined their conventional compensation procedures to expedite September 11 claims, and one state instituted an abbreviated application for urban search and rescue workers who had been deployed to attack sites. Another state was successful in initiating a relationship with the governor's office to pass emergency legislation to expedite compensation payments to victims.

Challenges to Meeting Victims' Needs

As state VOCA administrator agencies and their colleagues addressed the complex needs of victims, they identified and implemented response models that not only contributed to the recovery of those victims, but also could be replicated for other incidents. However, despite the immediate and long-term positive impact these services had on the lives of victims, the experiences of state VOCA administrator agencies highlight several challenges that merit attention as planning and implementation go forward.

Different Requirements for Compensation and Victim Services

The inherently unpredictable nature of mass criminal victimization distinguishes it from many natural disasters and has implications for preparedness and response. Government agencies and nonprofit organizations, particularly those in high-risk meteorological or geological regions, traditionally have emergency management plans in effect, but these focus primarily on the safety and operational response to natural disasters and neglect to address the human impact of a mass

criminal crisis. State VOCA administrator agencies cited the need to recognize that mass criminal victimization and natural disasters generate distinctive circumstances and response requirements. As one interviewee remarked, “[We were] in uncharted territory.”

The events of September 11 prompted a response unlike any previous response to a disaster and presented a number of challenges for victim service providers. State VOCA administrator agencies discovered that even experienced mental health providers were not necessarily adequately trained to deal with people struggling with grief and posttraumatic stress disorder. In addition, the different requirements of mental health providers and compensation agencies proved problematic. Many mental health providers did not ask clients to divulge personal information to receive services. Compensation agencies, on the other hand, wanted specific information and documentation of victimization, as required by statute and grant reporting specifications, causing some clients to become angry or upset. Also, coordinating referrals was jeopardized in some states where unlicensed victim assistance providers who had training and experience in dealing with grief and posttraumatic stress disorder were unable to contribute to counseling projects managed by mental health organizations that required counselors to be licensed.

Difficulty Responding to the Massive Impact

Despite awareness of victim service efforts that were launched in response to the Oklahoma City bombing, the scale of September 11 overwhelmed localities. The terrorist attacks far surpassed the 1995 event in Oklahoma City, in impact as well as scope of victim services offered. State VOCA administrator agencies were called on to apply existing procedures, systems, and personnel to address an exponentially greater demand for services.

More than 700 residents of one state died, triggering over 600 claims for compensation. One state VOCA administrator agency distributed more than 400 applications at the family assistance center. Another served more than 350

residents, providing nearly \$4 million in reimbursement, mostly for loss of income or support, to survivors, family members, search and rescue workers, and victims of hate crimes that occurred after September 11.

Little experience existed to establish and guide appropriate services for terrorist-caused psychological trauma. As a result, federal and state agencies providing compensation for mental health services varied in terms of eligibility criteria, in particular, whether a documented physical injury was a prerequisite for support. Programs struggled with determining whether rescuers and responders were eligible for compensation, as they were not direct victims of the attacks. In addition, some state VOCA administrator agencies report that even now derivative victims such as rescuers are still coming forward to submit claims.

Lack of Uniform Standards and Criteria for Financial Assistance

The development of financial projections and identification of federal, state, and private funding resources is an essential component of a comprehensive response to mass criminal victimization. The importance of economic planning is underscored by the experiences of state VOCA administrator agencies that were forced to organize in a few days an effort that normally would take months or years. They pointed to the need for adopting standardized criteria for agency funding and financial assistance to victims.

In one state, existing homicide bereavement programs were called on to expand services without additional funds. While they were regarded as the state experts at providing direct services to survivors, these programs were underfunded even as mental health programs generally enjoyed adequate funding.

Also, as agencies sorted out financial responsibilities and payout procedures, some of the first victims to apply for compensation received generous payments, while those who applied later sometimes had difficulty gaining compensation. With no central database that included financial assistance provided by the plethora of charities,

federal agencies and funds, and other state agencies as well as victim compensation programs, it was difficult to determine whether a specific expense or bill was presented to different sources for duplicate payment.

Victim Identification and Communication Issues

Once state VOCA administrator agencies and their colleagues launched services for September 11 victims, they were faced with defining which populations actually needed assistance and the optimum methods for contacting people to announce service availability. Identifying victims was difficult, as victims' names were not always shared among agencies due to confidentiality concerns. One interviewee recalled how staffers resorted to reading local newspapers to obtain names and other victim information, aiming to identify individual victims and victim groups whose needs were unmet.

All of the state VOCA administrator agencies admitted to struggling with determining how to provide the services victims needed without compromising their privacy or overwhelming them. For their part, many victims felt they were falling through the cracks, but at the same time, expressed feelings of vulnerability and reluctance to disclose personal information. In one state that did not have a crash site, an airport became the default gathering place for victims' families; however, despite vigorous outreach, the state VOCA administrator agency encountered barriers to connecting people with resources.

While many states streamlined filing requirements and reduced application paperwork, government agencies differed from private organizations on the documentation necessary for obtaining benefits. The result was that individuals could use multiple providers, without documentation, or receive duplicate compensation. Also, from a management perspective, unanticipated supplemental federal reporting requirements added to administrative burdens of agencies as they balanced the priority of September 11 victims' claims with trying to avoid delayed processing of other victims' claims.

Barriers to Serving Special Victim Populations

A comprehensive response to a mass criminal crisis recognizes the social, emotional, psychological, and economic toll on victims. Several state VOCA administrator agencies found that services also need to be sensitive to the cultural, ethnic, and language considerations of the community and address the diverse and unique needs, beliefs, and lifestyles of affected victims. Particularly in communities with a wide variety of cultures and languages, certain ethnic or cultural groups can be vulnerable in unique ways and can experience distinct concerns and reactions that require specialized resources. State VOCA administrator agencies also addressed the needs of individuals and communities victimized by post-September 11 hate crimes.

Geographical Issues

Interviewees discussed a particular challenge in providing appropriate services to victims whose home base was far from the crisis center sites. Two state VOCA administrator agencies reported that due to their geographic distance from the September 11 events, victims within their states felt out of the loop and experienced a sense of alienation stemming from people who did not consider their state affected by September 11. With no critical mass of survivors and family members in their home communities, these victims felt isolated because others did not understand what they were going through.

In one large state with a greatly dispersed victim population, travel time was a barrier to victims attending monthly support groups. The other state VOCA administrator agency affected by geography also had to address providers' concerns about boundary or territorial issues related to handling referrals to victim services.

Emotional Impact

State VOCA administrator agencies had to manage the complex sensitivities that emerge in citizen/service provider interactions as they withstood, and often internalized, the force of victim emotions. Some victims felt that their status as

September 11 victims superseded the needs of victims of domestic abuse, homicide, or other victims. Likewise, those other victims, who were sympathetic at first, grew increasingly impatient as all attention was focused on meeting September 11 victims' needs.

All state VOCA administrator agencies reported that depression and fatigue, in varying degrees, affected staff. However, because people are often uncomfortable with terms associated with mental health and mental illness, it was important to put stress management and psychological care techniques in a context that made people receptive to them. For staff, training designed to help "take care of yourself" was a useful method of psychological intervention.

Fragmentation of Service Delivery

Mistrust or miscommunication among agencies within a jurisdiction can lead to fragmentation or unnecessary duplication of services and can even hamper service delivery. The majority of state VOCA administrator agencies cited collaboration and coordination of resources as having a significant impact on service delivery. They underscored the importance of coordination among disciplines and emphasized the need for organizations to actively commit to working together, drawing on the expertise of previously nonallied agencies to deliver timely services to victims.

In some states, victim assistance had not been coordinated with victim compensation and, at the same time, both entities found themselves working with emergency management personnel with whom they had virtually no history of collaboration. One state VOCA administrator

agency had to schedule meetings with federal agencies simply to gain access to buildings, particularly those not normally open to the public. State VOCA administrator agencies also had to work with federal law enforcement organizations to obtain victim lists that substituted for police reports and death certificates for families seeking compensation.

Because they often take different approaches to psychological intervention, state VOCA administrator agencies had to persuade some mental health professionals of the need for targeted counseling in the aftermath of mass victimization. Subsequently, mental health providers welcomed the opportunity to schedule training in crisis response and trauma and grief counseling, especially when they learned that the mental health departments and the state VOCA administrator agencies shared some clientele.

State VOCA administrator agencies agreed that relationships formed after September 11 were tied to individuals and overly dependent on particular personalities. Since then, however, formalization has been launched in some jurisdictions. One state has established a team of state agencies, coordinated by the emergency management agency and chaired by the state's victim advocate, to develop a protocol for working cooperatively in the future, addressing relevant issues, and assigning roles to handle immediate, intermediate, and long-term concerns. Another state reported that a similar collaborative model met with early enthusiasm but that recent disaster planning meetings were less well attended, casting doubt on whether awareness of victims' needs had been raised to the institutional level.