

Serving Survivors of Homicide Victims Instructions for Convening a Panel of Experts

Serving Survivors of Homicide Victims allocates 1.5 hours on the first day of training for a panel discussion among experts from various homicide-related fields. The purpose of the panel is to provide participants with the opportunity to learn about the unique aspects of criminal homicide and its effects on victims from a broad spectrum of perspectives, such as from survivors of homicide victims, law enforcement, and the district attorney's office. You will need to select and confirm these panel members well in advance of the training date.

Contacting Panel Members

Begin contacting prospective panel members as soon as your training request is accepted.

We recommend that you select two survivors of homicide victims, one representative from law enforcement, and one representative from the criminal justice system, preferably a prosecutor. A four- to five-member panel is ideal. If you choose to have additional panel members, be sure to monitor your time closely.

Survivors of homicide victims are a vital part of the panel discussion. They offer a real and personal perspective. To be effective, survivors must be able to tell their stories clearly and compellingly.

Recruiting Survivors as Panel Members

Many victim service agencies and community-based organizations may be able to assist in referring potential panel members. You also may be able to recruit survivors by contacting the following:

- Community-based victim support groups or chapters (e.g., Parents Of Murdered Children, Family and Friends of Murder Victims, MADD).
- Victim and witness assistance programs.
- Victim service agencies (e.g., rape and sexual abuse centers, domestic violence shelters, child abuse prevention organizations).
- Churches, faith-based communities.
- Funeral directors.
- Coroners.
- Law enforcement chaplains.

Not all survivors are well suited to speak to participants in homicide training. Consider the following when selecting survivors for your panel. Discuss any concerns, and make appropriate modifications:

- Have the survivors spoken about their experiences before? If not, telling their stories for the first time in a panel discussion may be upsetting for them.

- If the survivor has a court case pending, what is the status of the offender in that case? Use caution if survivors have a court action pending. A discussion could jeopardize the case.
- Is the survivor emotionally ready to speak about the case? Emotions are natural and appropriate, as long as the survivor can focus on and communicate the impact of the crime. If the survivor is not emotionally prepared to “relive” the crime, he or she should not be expected to participate on the panel.

Providing Logistical Information

When contacting prospective panel members explain:

- The purpose of the training.
- How the panel members’ discussion will contribute to the content.
- How the panel will be conducted (e.g., moderated questions followed by questions from participants).
- The length of the panel discussion.
- When and where training will take place.

Appendix A – Serving Survivors of Homicide Victims Expert Panel contains all the above information, which you may duplicate and distribute to potential panel members.

Preparing the Panel

Confirm prospective panel members at least one month in advance of training.

If a prospective panel member agrees to appear, ask if the panel member has any special needs or requirements.

When selecting a location for training, be sure the room is large enough to accommodate a table and chairs for the panel members, and can be set up so that all participants can see the panel.

If panel members will need to pass through security or if they will need other assistance finding the training location, arrange to have someone posted at the facility entrance.

Confirm each panel member’s participation 2 weeks before the training. Provide directions if they are not familiar with the training location. Emphasize the importance of the panel discussion, and the value that their contributions will bring.

Preferred introduction (e.g., “victim” or “survivor,” use of first and/or last name)

Ask panel members to provide short bios describing their backgrounds and a little about their experience as the survivor of a homicide victim or as a professional in the victim services field. Please send an electronic copy of the bios to the OVC TTAC point of contact, Crystal Park, at cpark@ovcttac.org. OVC TTAC will reproduce the bios and insert them into the Participant Manuals.

Present names and bios of all panel members to OVC TTAC at least 2 weeks before training.

If you have any questions regarding the panel, please contact cellis@ovcttac.org or cpark@ovcttac.org for more information.

Acknowledgements

It is critical for panel members to be acknowledged for their participation. Some survivors relive the crime each time they speak. Other panel members may have taken the day off from work, time away from their family, or spent their own money to travel to the training facility.

Panel members often appreciate being acknowledged by class participants. Allow participants to verbally thank the panel members after class. Facilitators should also follow up with a personal thank you letter or an official department recognition letter.

Appendix A

Serving Survivors of Homicide Victims Expert Panel

Thank you for your interest in *Serving Survivors of Homicide Victims*, a 2-day training presented by the Office for Victims of Crime, Training and Technical Center (OVCTTAC). OVC TTAC works under contract for the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) within the U.S. Department of Justice. Among other services, OVC TTAC produces instructor-led and online training for crime victim advocates and service providers.

Serving Survivors of Homicide Victims is an instructor-led training focused on the unique issues victim service providers must understand to effectively support individuals and families who are dealing with the homicide of a family member or close friend. The overall goal of this training is to help victim service providers develop deeper knowledge and more specific skills to provide better services for survivors of homicide victims. While the training is designed specifically for victim advocates and other victim service providers, participants from other disciplines, such as the criminal justice system and law enforcement, may attend as well.

The first day begins with brief introductory activities and basic terminology. The remainder of the morning addresses the emotional and psychological toll that homicide takes on survivors. Several testimonial videotapes are shown, and participants complete activities that help them distinguish among symptoms of grief and various types of trauma.

Participants return from lunch at approximately 1:00 p.m., at which time the panel begins. The panel lasts from 1.5 to 2 hours. For about 45 minutes, one of the instructors poses questions to the panel. The remaining 45 minutes to 1 hour is open to questions from participants.

As a panel member, you provide unique and credible insight which will greatly enhance our participants' learning experience. While we value your open and honest participation, we understand there may be questions or topics you prefer not to address; in that event, we encourage you to politely decline to respond.

Panel members may leave after the panel discussion ends, although training continues.

The second day of training covers practical assistance that victim service providers can give to survivors on notification and within the weeks and months following notification. There is no panel on the second day.

If you have any questions about the training or your role as a panel member, please contact:

Crystal Park
Office for Victims of Crime
Training and Technical Assistance Center
cpark@ovcttac.org

Appendix B

Serving Survivors of Homicide Victims Suggested Panel Questions

Survivors

1. In your own words, please tell us about the homicide that affected you:
 - a. When and where it occurred.
 - b. Who was murdered, and your relationship.
 - c. How the homicide occurred.
 - d. If the offender was apprehended.
 - e. If the offender was tried, and the outcome of the trial.
2. How were you notified of the homicide, and who notified you? How did you react on notification?
3. Did you receive assistance from a victim service provider shortly after notification? If so, was the assistance helpful over the short term and the long term?
4. Was there a “turning point” at which you felt you were going to be able to cope and move forward with your life? If so, can you please describe it?
5. Did you seek any supportive assistance, such as through a homicide survivors group? If so, can you please describe?
6. If a trial has occurred, did you attend? If so, what were your feelings during the trial?
7. Did you make a victim impact statement? How did you feel writing or giving that statement?
8. What assistance did the victim service provider give you during the trial?
9. What was the outcome of the trial? How do you feel about it?
10. What are your feelings toward the offender today?
11. How has the homicide affected you long-term? (*Emotionally, financially, spiritually, etc.*)
12. Looking back on the experience, was there anything that you did or could have done that may have eased your grief? Was there anything that made the situation even worse than it already was?

Law Enforcement

1. What types of homicide do you see most frequently in your area, and why?
2. Are the police responsible for notifying the family when a homicide occurs? What kind of training do police officers receive for delivering compassionate notification?
3. How do the police interact with surviving family members in the immediate aftermath of a homicide?
4. If a suspect is arrested, how are survivors notified?

5. Do you work with victim advocates? If so, in what capacity
6. When is a victim advocate called in to assist?
7. Professionals who work a homicide case often have different areas of focus. Police are primarily concerned with apprehending the criminal, while victim advocates are concerned with the needs of the survivors of the victims. How can these different perspectives cause issues when working together?

District Attorney/Legal Professional:

1. What types of homicide do you see most frequently in your area, and why?
2. What is the D.A.'s relationship with the victim/witness advocate?
3. What is the D.A.'s relationship with the surviving family members?
4. Do the courts allow the survivors of victims to attend trials? If so, what are the restrictions, if any?
5. Do you feel victim impact statements have a significant bearing on the outcome of a trial?
6. Are survivors allowed to attend parole hearings? If so, what are they allowed to say?
7. As a legal professional, what do you think is the most difficult aspect of the criminal justice system for survivors to deal with?