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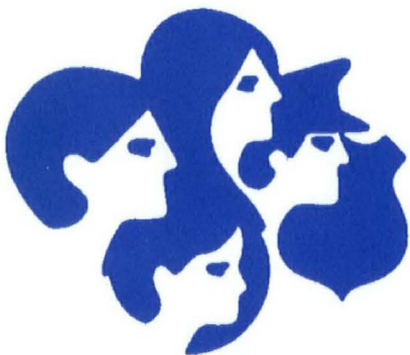
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RCMP Community Policing

Establishing
a Police - based Victim
Assistance Program



Canada

Establishing a Police-Based Victim Assistance Program

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PREFACE

This document should serve as a guide for RCMP detachments interested in setting up a Victim Assistance Program. It is not meant to be comprehensive but simply a background material to establish a police-based victim assistance program.

It is hoped that this document will serve to inform those interested in planning or setting up such a program.

HOW TO GET THINGS STARTED

There are several steps that must be followed in order to assure the victim's services program is comprehensive and appropriate to the community it is serving. These steps include:

- the identification of community needs,
- the identification of the services needed,
- volunteer recruitment and training,
- interagency cooperation is imperative to the efficient running of the victim services program.

Assessing Community Needs

When determining the need for victim services in the community, it is essential to first define victim assistance. A common definition of victim assistance is "**a service that helps people who are victims of crime come to terms with the effects of the offense committed against them.**"

Once an established understanding of what victim assistance is reached, it is important to assess whether there is an identified need for this type of service within the community. This "community need" can be established by conducting a community survey to determine some sense of crime levels, attitudes about victims, and community concerns, by analyzing your crime statistics, by meeting with special groups (teens, elders), by organizing an interagency meeting to find out what is currently being done in the community for victims of crime to arrive at a focused community approach.

The contribution of volunteer citizens and agencies from the community is crucial to the development, implementation and maintenance of effective victim assistance programs. If your community does not have either of these resources available, it may be very difficult to go any further in creating a victim assistance program. However, police services have an advantage since they already have extensive interagency cooperation.

Once the community needs have been assessed, you can now determine what role to play in delivering these services to the community. It is also important at this stage to determine the needs and costs of the program (ie: desks, supplies, vehicles, wages etc.) and then structure a budget based on these needs.

Types of Victim Assistance Services

Community based: provide various victim assistance services through the use of a single agency: the community.

Court based: are most often found in the office of the Crown prosecutor. This program provides services to victims involved in the Criminal Justice System by providing information on their legal rights, updates on case progress and support counselling and court orientation

for witnesses.

Police based: this document will specifically focus on this type of service.

What Police-Based Victim Services Offer

Before integrating such a program, it is essential to consider the role this service will be playing in the community. Since each community varies in population size, cultural diversity and other characteristics, each police-based program will vary. Most victim assistance programs offer practical and emotional support to victims of crime, crisis intervention and response, follow-ups and information on cases, referrals to other agencies (such as sexual assault support), court familiarization, accompaniment and transportation. Other services include assistance in filling out forms such as victim impact statements and criminal injury compensation applicants, providing information about the justice system in general, death notification, and crime prevention information.

Some victim assistance programs offer more specialized services such as teen hot-lines, suicide prevention/support groups, elderly support groups, family counselling (family violence), and victim compensation programs.

Most police-based victim assistance programs require only two paid positions (the rest are volunteers). The coordinator of the program is usually a regular member of the force and would be the officer in charge. The officer in charge would be assisted by a crisis intervention coordinator and the two would work very closely together in the planning and running of the program. Teamwork is a fundamental aspect of the program.

Police-based victims assistance programs have been quite successful in various communities. The basic idea behind this type of model, is one of referral to other existing agencies. The referral model usually includes on-the-spot crisis intervention, victim support and a follow-up contact. This model can easily be adapted to meet the needs of most communities.

Where do you find volunteers?

Volunteers for police-based victim assistance programs typically are high school students, college or university students (undergrads, masters, or PhDs), recently retired people with more time on their hands, people with flexible work schedules or perhaps persons seeking employment. Volunteers give many reasons for their volunteering. For instance, most volunteers have a desire to help others, like to work with people, learn from work experiences, to meet people, and to do something worthwhile for the community.

Further volunteers of various ethnic backgrounds must be considered depending on the demographics and diversity of population of the community being served.

Recruitment of Volunteers

When recruiting persons for the program, it is necessary to first decide on the role of volunteers, the types of volunteers wanted, the hours of employment and the range of services you plan to provide.

There are various methods involved in recruitment. For example, you may want to advertise in the local paper, or through a media release. Another way to recruit, which does not require any funding or much effort, is through an educational program which integrates the volunteering with high school or post-secondary credit.

A system of screening procedures for the volunteer applicants should be set up. It is important for the volunteers to have certain skills or qualifications necessary to perform their duties. The volunteer should possess many of these qualities:

- desire to help others
- common sense
- interest and genuine concern for others
- empathy
- active listening skills
- open mind
- ability to be supportive
- sense of humour
- exhibit a positive attitude
- flexible

These qualities can be assessed during the interview process. It is at this stage where a screening process can be helpful. The following are some reasons given for screening out potential volunteer applicants:

- too much stress in the applicant's life
- judgemental attitudes
- a lack of warmth and ability to be empathic
- a tendency to give advice or want to control others
- lack of initiatives
- too strong or intensive a religious, political or moral motivation
- immaturity
- recent or traumatic experience of victimization (this may negatively affect their performance)
- negative attitudes towards the system

Volunteers who have the appropriate criteria for the job, are to be given a security check and measures should be taken to ensure confidentiality in handling documents.

Training

It is imperative that the volunteer be fully prepared, trained and provided an explanation of their responsibilities in order to properly perform their duties. Without proper training, volunteers will become confused, dissatisfied, and eventually lose their enthusiasm for the work. Therefore, practical training is necessary. Each police-based victims assistance program will have to establish practical training in order to suit their own needs. The length of the training sessions will vary and depend on the various services being provided to the community. On-going training should continue throughout the volunteers' time with the program.

Such training may consist of introductory training, in-service training, and hands-on training. Introductory training would consist of providing information about victim needs, the aims and goals of the program, orientation and information on the criminal justice system, information about other social service agencies, and specific crisis intervention activities which would include learning the proper procedures, mediation and security issues as well as counselling and referral skills.

In-service training would involve periodic training sessions to reinforce and enrich the introductory training and to expose volunteers to new information which will help them perform their jobs more efficiently.

Hands-on training involves informal personal guidance and help during the first few months of their involvement in the program. It is important in these first few months of involvement that the volunteers coordinator be available to help, inform and advise the volunteer participants while on the job.

Other training may include report writing, communication skills, interviewing skills, professionalism and confidentiality in the workplace, suicide prevention courses, sexual assault and abuse programs.

It is important that the volunteers perform meaningful duties throughout their time in the program. Without such meaningful work, volunteers may become dissatisfied or unenthusiastic. They therefore become an unproductive resource.

Advantages of Volunteers

Volunteers for police-based victim assistance programs provide many important and needed services and, are therefore, advantageous to such programs. Further, volunteers are cost efficient because they do not require a salary, they provide a much needed link to the community, have an objective viewpoint about victim services, are interested and committed to improving the quality of life of those in need, and they can devote their time and energies to the program.

Advantages of Police-Based Victim Services

- more direct and easy access to police services and information
- more direct contact with investigators and case summaries
- easier development of good working relationships with other personnel in criminal justice system.

Disadvantages of Police-Based Victim Service

- clients may feel threatened or uncomfortable with a police environment
- the real possibility that understaffed or over worked police detachments may not be able to provide adequate or efficient services
- being part of the government can create some bureaucratic barriers in relating to some community agencies.

Suggested Reading materials:

Artic Public Legal Education and Information Society. **Victim Assistance - A Guide for Communities in the Northwest Territories.** May 1991.

Barr, Diana. **Victim Assistance Training Program.** 1991.

MacLeod, Flora. **Volunteer Management Victim Support Worker Handbook.** British Columbia Ministry of Attorney General. 1991.

The Nepean Police Service. **The Next Step - Setting up and Operating Victim/Crisis Services.** June 1991.

The Edmonton Police Victim Services Unit. **The Edmonton Police Services Unit Policy & Procedure Manual.** January 1990.