**Outreach, Training and Communication**

An effective outreach strategy is crucial in helping as many victims as possible know about their opportunities to seek financial assistance. If victims don’t know about compensation, they can’t obtain it. For an individual victim, this lack of knowledge can be tragic, since it can result in unnecessary financial hardship or an inability to obtain needed care. Programs have a clear obligation to “get the word out” about their programs to as many victims and survivors as they can.

Yet there may be no other activity that may be more out of the control of individual managers and their programs, at least in terms of the eventual result. Reaching out to victims must occur almost entirely through intermediaries – police, victim-witness personnel in prosecutors’ offices, victim assistance programs such as domestic violence shelters and rape crisis programs, hospitals, counseling centers, and therapists, to name some of the most important. Compensation programs rarely encounter victims directly to provide information about their programs. They must work through people who do see victims as a regular part of their jobs. Without their help and cooperation, outreach fails.

Necessarily, then, programs must focus their outreach efforts on training people who can help victims apply. While public service announcements, posters, and brochures have their place in a multi-faceted outreach strategy, programs have found that the efforts that bring the best results are in getting the people who can talk to victims to understand how important it is to inform them about victim compensation.

Another obstacle to outreach is that it’s difficult for many programs to allocate sufficient time and resources to this task. Most programs must rely on personnel within their offices who have other duties in managing or processing claims. Fewer than a handful of states have staff devoted exclusively or even primarily to outreach and training activities. Most programs, out of necessity, must fit outreach initiatives in and around claims processing work. The very smallest programs often must choose between processing claims and doing outreach, since the same person is responsible for both.

It’s therefore imperative for programs to be realistic about available time and resources in planning and evaluating their outreach strategies. They also must keep in mind that the more effective that their outreach is, the more work will be generated for the program, as measured by more applications to process and pay. This may cause some difficulty if the program doesn’t have the staff to process an increased volume of claims, or lacks the money to pay more applicants. This isn’t to suggest that programs should curtail or abandon outreach activities; but programs also must work to ensure that they can meet the greater demands on their staff and funding that effective outreach entails.

It’s important to note, however, that good outreach, training and information sometimes can result in *better* applications, meaning, applications that take less work to process. If those who help victims are trained to make sure applications are accurate and fully completed, that appropriate documentation is attached, and that victims and advocates are prepared to respond readily to further requests for information, outreach may result in *less* work rather than more, at least for some applications. Some programs have found that good training can even reduce the number of “bad” applications – the claims that are clearly ineligible – and this can result in reduced work for staff.

Three major activities can be defined within an effective outreach strategy:

* Providing information and training to professionals who work with victims, and to a more limited extent, doing outreach directly to victims.
* Building relationships and improving mutual understanding with victim service groups and criminal justice personnel.
* Communicating effectively and sensitively with victims who have made contact with the program.

Each of these activities will be explored in greater detail below.

**Training and Information**

***Training***

The main strategy most programs pursue is to provide training to groups and individuals that routinely come in contact with victims and can inform them about compensation. Trainings may be offered at conferences either sponsored by the compensation program itself, or by one or more of the targeted groups. Individual training sessions for specific victim assistance programs, police departments, hospitals, citizen groups, and other entities also are an option.

Among the most important groups for which training should be provided are the following:

* Victim service programs, such as
  + Prosecutor-based victim-witness
  + Police-based victim-witness
  + Domestic violence
  + Rape crisis
  + Child victim
  + Elderly victim
  + Drunk driving victim
  + Statewide coalitions and networks
  + Other “grassroots” victim organizations, like local chapters of Parents of Murdered Children (POMC)
* Police officers or criminal investigators at the local, state, federal, and tribal levels
* Prosecutors, including U.S. Attorneys and military and tribal prosecutors

Pennsylvania’s victim compensation program funded its domestic violence coalition to develop specialized training materials for people who work with victims of family violence. The coalition produced a volunteer advocate training curriculum; a curriculum for facilitators to use with victims in support or education groups; and a handbook for battered women’s advocates.

Among the other groups and individuals that could be considered for training are the following:

* Judges and court officials, including those in the federal, military and tribal systems
* Correctional officials, including probation and parole officers
* Funeral directors
* Hospital and medical personnel
* Mental health professionals
* Child advocacy agencies and governmental family service officials
* Community organizations, especially in high-crime or underserved areas
* Schools and colleges, focusing on disciplines like social work, law, and criminal justice
* Clergy
* Lawyers, through bar associations, law firms, and law schools
* Collateral source groups, like insurance companies and federal benefit administrators
* Large-scale employers, who might include information in employee manuals
* Key legislators and their staffs

While every program must develop its own training focused on its specific requirements, benefits, and eligibility parameters, a generalized training outline may be useful as a template. The adage that “less is more” should be kept in mind: The goal should not be to make every professional in the field an “expert” in the nuances of your law and operation, but rather to emphasize the importance in informing victims about compensation opportunities, and helping people apply for benefits. A simple fact sheet may be all that is necessary to provide sufficient basic information about a compensation program.

***Brochures and Other Written Materials***

Every compensation program has a basic informational brochure. Many programs have taken care to design a visually appealing as well as informative brochure. While eligibility requirements, benefits, and procedures are covered, the brochures do not try to detail every nuance, but rather serve to make victims aware of the program’s existence, and to encourage them to apply. In an effort to get victims into their programs, a few programs even have a tear-off panel on the brochure for individuals to complete and mail in to start the application process. Many programs also have versions of their brochures in Spanish.

Other written materials that programs have found effective are the following:

* “Claimant handbooks,” providing detailed information about benefits, requirements, and procedures, and containing application forms and other materials useful to victims and advocates.
* Patrol officers’ cards, providing contact information for the compensation program and other victim services.
* Merchandise items, such as key rings, pens, shirts, and calendars, publicizing the program and its purpose.

***Posters***

Posters that draw visual attention, provide basic information, and include a contact number to call also have proven effective. Programs have placed the posters in hospital emergency rooms, in post offices, in police departments, and in numerous other locales where victims or members of the general public congregate. Some programs also have produced posters in Spanish.

***Public Service Announcements***

Public service announcements (PSAs) have been tried by a number of compensation programs, with varying degrees of effectiveness. While every program with sufficient resources should make the effort to use PSAs, most programs have reported little or no discernible increase in applications as a result. Programs with more limited capacities may consider carefully whether the expense and effort to produce and distribute a PSA will be worth it, and may opt instead to focus on training and other activities with more proven results. Programs with more expansive capabilities may regard PSAs simply as one component in a full range of outreach activities.

Programs can contact NACVCB for a radio PSA that may serve as an example.

***Other Media Efforts***

Programs can contact radio and television stations to request that programs focus a story on or do an interview with the compensation program. It should help to have at least one victim willing to provide his or her story that would show the importance of receiving victim compensation, since media constantly look for the “human-interest” side to a story.

While there’s no guarantee of publication, programs can issue press releases marking important developments, or highlighting statistics. Some programs have found some success in smaller media markets with information on the number of victims receiving benefits in the locality.

One related strategy is to send information to state legislators about the number of claims and amount paid to victims within their districts. This could help in efforts to get media attention within that district.

It’s a good idea to know in advance who your designated media contact within your program or agency will be when a call comes in from a reporter. Allowing anyone within your program to respond to a reporter may not be wise, since you cannot control the message; it’s best to funnel calls to an individual with some experience and expertise. Obviously, programs within larger agencies need to check with their supervisors to establish protocols for handling media inquiries.

***Web Sites***

Nearly every compensation program maintains a Web site providing information on its services. These sites can provide essential information on requirements, benefits, and procedures. Some programs’ sites allow victims to download applications, and a few programs are working toward allowing electronic submission of claims.

A few programs now authorize designated and approved providers or programs, and even victims, access to “status screens” providing “read-only” information on claims. This access may cut down considerably on phone calls from hospitals, counseling centers, and therapists, and other service providers seeking to know whether claims have been approved, and when payment might be expected. Considerable care must go into providing security to these systems.

Contact NACVCB for current information on states implementing read-only claims-status access over the Internet.

***Direct Victim Contact***

Contacting victims directly is rare among compensation programs. Most states find that crime is too frequent and widespread for them to mount any effective effort to contact most or all victims and to inform them of compensation opportunities.

Nevertheless, at least a few programs have procedures in place to contact every victim of reported violent crime in specific localities. Colorado’s compensation programs are located in each judicial district, and within that district, some have found it possible to gain daily access to police reports and send letters to each individual victim or family that might be eligible for benefits. While many recipients of the letters either do not have compensable expenses or choose not to apply, it’s clear from the high volume of claims received in these districts that these letters likely have a significant effect.

Some programs try to contact victims directly in highly publicized cases. One reason to do so is that these cases sometimes result in fund-raising efforts on behalf of the victim or family involved, and these people may not be aware that at least some of the financial burden could be lifted through crime victim compensation.

In cases of mass violence, such as school or workplace shootings, or terrorist incidents, programs have made direct contact with victims, or have ensured that each potential victim is contacted by some other victim service professional with a message about compensation opportunities. Because the aftermath of a mass criminal incident can be chaotic and confusing for victims, some programs have found it wiser to work through a “lead” victim service or governmental contact, so that victims are not faced with a multitude of agencies and people to call or get information from. In a school shooting, for example, the district attorney’s victim service director may be the person to rely on to get compensation information to victims and families, rather than try to establish a separate, direct link to victims.

NACVCB has developed and distributed to compensation programs a manual on handling mass violence crises, in hard-copy and CD format. Contact OVC for additional copies.

**Building Relationships and Improving Understanding**

The most successful compensation programs are those that have built strong relationships with their partners in victim services and criminal justice. A relationship of trust and understanding can go a long way toward keeping a useful flow of information going in both directions, benefiting victims in many ways. If victim service and criminal justice professionals believe that the program will make every effort to respond to the victims they refer to it, they are encouraged to bring more victims to the compensation program. In addition, the compensation program gets constant feedback from those working with victims, so it’s better able to improve its processes and services. It’s a “win-win” situation for all who are trying to help victims, including the compensation program.

The manager of the compensation program plays a key role in whether the relationship between the program and other victim service programs is a healthy and productive one. A personal commitment to helping victims and working cooperatively with other professionals in the field may be the most important factor in determining whether the relationship works. Of course, the performance of the compensation program will affect this relationship as well, but how others in the victim services field feel about the compensation manager always will be an important consideration.

There are a number of ways compensation program managers can help foster mutual understanding. Here are some means that have been effective:

***Advisory Committees***

A number of compensation programs have established advisory committees or other formal mechanisms for meeting and communicating with allied professionals in the victims field. These committees, councils, or advisory bodies are composed of key players, such as heads of domestic violence and sexual assault coalitions, representatives from local or state chapters of Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) and other nonprofit advocacy groups, police, prosecutors, court officials, and others in state government who are involved in helping victims, like state administrators of VOCA victim assistance grant funds. Meeting monthly, quarterly, or annually, the advisory body discusses problems and makes recommendations for improvement. A beneficial byproduct comes from advisers on the committee spreading information and news about the compensation program to the programs or entities with which they work.

***Direct Contact and Participation***

Even absent a formal committee, direct contact with leaders in victim services, such as domestic violence and sexual assault coalitions, and with law enforcement, the medical and mental health communities, and other groups with victim-related work or responsibilities, can make a big difference. Having lunch with such a leader or representative, or making periodic phone calls to discuss concerns, can help define perceptions of the compensation program as open to communication and suggestion.

Participating in conferences of allied professionals in victim services and law enforcement, as well as provider groups such as funeral home directors, hospital officials, and mental health therapists, can be helpful in keeping open lines of communication. A workshop on crime victim compensation may be welcomed at these conferences, or a table display of brochures and applications may be useful to participants.

Many compensation program managers believe it highly beneficial for their claims processors and other key staff to attend trainings providing education and information on domestic violence, sexual assault, the trauma of victimization, the criminal justice system, and a wide range of other victim-related topics. Many states have State Victim Assistance Academies that compensation staff can attend.

It also may be possible to arrange site visits of compensation staff to domestic violence shelters and other types of victim assistance programs. Staff might even consider doing volunteer work with such organizations.

Contacting leaders in the victims field informally, or surveying them in a more formal way, can be useful in assessing their relative satisfaction with the compensation programs’ performance. Seeking input on any legislative or procedural changes being considered is also a wise policy.

Programs that have Board meetings might consider inviting representatives of victims’ groups to attend and speak at such meetings. Moving the meetings around the state also helps more people to have an opportunity to attend.

***Victim Satisfaction Surveys***

A number of programs make use of “client” or “customer” surveys to assess the quality of services rendered to applicants. Most often these surveys go to victims whose claims have been approved, but even denied applicants might provide valuable information on how their claim was handled. The responsiveness and courtesy of program staff; the clarity of forms and instructions, and the helpfulness of the program in the victim’s recovery might be questions to consider asking.

***Awards or Recognition***

Some compensation programs make annual awards to outstanding individuals and programs who have been particularly active regarding compensation claims, or who have made their mark in victim services in other ways. Compensation programs may choose to make these awards during Crime Victims Rights Week observances in April each year.

**Communicating Effectively and Sensitively**

The content and tone of your program’s communication with others is crucial not only to the perception others have of your program, but also to the effective operation of your procedures. This includes forms, letters, and written materials used by your program, as well as communication by phone and in person between program staff and victims and service providers.

Many compensation managers emphasize the importance of clear, easy-to-read materials that are appropriately sensitive to victims who often may be suffering emotional trauma, grief, and serious disruption in their daily lives. Providing staff with expert training on how to handle phone calls from people in stress, and how to communicate effectively in direct contact with victims and providers, is also highly recommended.

***Application Forms***

It is hard to overestimate the importance of a clear and easy-to-read application form. If application forms are overly lengthy or complicated, or ask for unnecessary information, a program can waste valuable time seeking clarification from victims. Some victims may even be discouraged from applying, undermining the purpose of the compensation program, which is to serve as many eligible victims as possible.

A number of programs have been criticized for the length and the complicated nature of their forms. And many programs have shortened their forms by focusing on asking only for information that is needed and actually used. Is the information being sought really necessary to make a good decision on the claim? Is the victim the best source for that information, or do you rely on some other source for it? Asking these questions through a staff review on a regular basis can help keep forms from becoming cluttered, unwieldy, and ultimately ineffective, for victims and for programs.

This is not to suggest that programs need to drastically shorten forms, past the point where needed information isn’t sought. If processing staff must spend inordinate amounts of time following up with victims by letter or phone to get missing information, neither the program’s nor the victim’s interests may be served. Programs must balance the need for essential information to process the claim with the imperative not to discourage victims from applying.

It’s worth noting that some programs use a very short form to begin the application process – essentially a tear-off panel on a brochure, in which the victim provides only name and some other identifying information. When the program receives this form by mail, it then follows up with a letter or phone call seeking other information necessary to actually process the claim. At least one program manager feels that getting victims in the door through the short form is a worthy goal in itself, and that program staff can then fill in missing gaps in subsequent contact with the victim. Again, this is a balance each program manager must find.

***Telephone Communication Strategies***

Toll-free numbers are in use in many compensation programs, enabling victims and others to call without charge. Some programs designate these numbers for “victims only.”

Establishing a means to communicate with non-English speakers not only may serve victims, it also may be necessary to meet federal requirements regarding “limited English proficiency” (LEP) populations. (These federal requirements are not standard for every program; guidelines provide direction in meeting federal mandates but do not stipulate specific actions or procedures.) Some programs are making use of “language line” services that, for a small enrollment or per-usage fee, connect foreign-language speakers with translators, for instant communication. Larger compensation programs, or those with a high concentration of Spanish speakers in their states, have hired bilingual staff to help in communicating with victims.

LINK to LEP information

Lines to communicate with individuals who are hearing- or sight-impaired are also in use in many programs.

***Referrals to Victim Services***

One way compensation programs can broaden their help to victims is to provide referrals to victim service programs in their localities. Sometimes, victims may be making their first call for assistance of any kind, and program staff can direct them to other sources for help.

Obtaining a program directory from the state VOCA assistance provider, or from statewide victims organizations, can provide compensation staff with a needed tool to make referrals.