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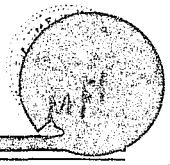

National Institute of Justice

Research in Action

James K. Stewart, Director

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Establishing and expanding victim-witness assistance programs

by Peter Finn and Beverly N.W. Lee

Experience has shown that the only way of ensuring that the needs of victims and witnesses are met is to have a separate unit solely dedicated to their assistance. The efforts of those [existing] units . . . shine brightly in the otherwise dim landscape of general institutional neglect of those on whom the criminal justice system relies.

—President's Task Force on Victims of Crime (1982)

Since the early 1970's, attention to the needs of crime victims and witnesses has grown steadily, propelled by a combination of grassroots and government concern. The movement was given strong visibility by the President's 1982 Task Force on Victims of Crime, which urged widespread expansion of victim assistance programs that were already proliferating. Today, as many as 4,000 programs are helping crime victims to cope with the hardships of victimization and to deal with the often troublesome demands of the criminal justice system.

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Beverly Lee conducted criminal justice research for Abt Associates for 4 years. In addition to work with Mr. Finn on victim-witness programs, she conducted research on court interpretation services and indigent defense systems. She now is an associate with The Berwick Group, a Boston management consulting firm.

A recent National Institute of Justice sponsored study—Serving Crime Victims and Witnesses[1]—examined the organization and operation of 25 programs nationwide, giving particular attention to programs in 6 jurisdictions (Figure 2). The study found that programs can vary widely in structure, in the number and type of services they provide, and in the groups they help—yet they can still effectively meet the needs of victims and the criminal justice system.

Despite these variations in program organization and operations, the study results suggest broadly applicable recommendations both for starting and improving a program. This *Research in Action* outlines the study results and recommendations.

Choosing services

The first and toughest planning decision is selecting or reevaluating the combination of services to offer—there is always more to do than any program has time to accomplish. In selecting services to provide, program staff have to balance the sometimes conflicting considerations of:

- meeting the most urgent needs of victims and witnesses in the jurisdiction;
- providing the maximum possible benefit to the criminal justice system as well as to victims and witnesses; and
- staying within the program's budget.

Table 1 shows the range of services a program can provide, along with the percentage of 25 programs contacted in 1986 that furnish each service.

Most programs give highest priority to crisis intervention,[2] followup counseling, helping victims secure their rights, and court-related services. Beyond this core of essential services, planners and administrators must decide for themselves which additional services are most needed.

For example, the Alameda County (California) Victim/Witness Assistance Program learned that victims were having difficulty getting back property kept as evidence, and finding out the status and outcome of their cases. The program therefore established property return and informing victims and witnesses about their cases as two of its major services.

Planners for the Minneapolis–St. Paul Crime Victim Centers telephoned 451 victims and witnesses during a 3-month period before the program began and again 9 months after the centers opened. The initial responses showed what kinds of assistance were needed while the followup findings indicated what improvements in service mix should be made.

While some services—such as counseling—are best provided by the staff of victim-witness programs, there are other services that the program should encourage and assist police, prosecutors, and judges to furnish as a routine part of their jobs. For example, police are best equipped to provide physical protection to threatened victims and witnesses; prosecutors can obtain victim impact statements and present them to judges as part of sentencing recommendations; and judges can help reduce intimidation by providing separate waiting areas for witnesses.

Table 1

Percentage of 25 programs providing specific victim-witness services

Services	Programs contacted in 1986 (N = 25)
Emergency services	
Medical care	8%
Shelter or food	32%
Security repair	40%
Financial assistance	44%
On-scene comfort	52%
Counseling	
24-hour hotline	28%
Crisis intervention	76%
Followup counseling	80%
Mediation	44%
Advocacy and support services	
Personal advocacy	92%
Employer intervention	96%
Landlord intervention	88%
Property return	96%
Intimidation protection	76%
Legal/paralegal counsel	44%
Referral	100%
Claims assistance	
Insurance claims aid	48%
Restitution assistance	88%
Compensation assistance	96%
Witness fee assistance	80%
Court-related services	
Witness reception	76%
Court orientation	92%
Notification	84%
Witness alert	68%
Transportation	84%
Child care	68%
Escort to court	100%
Victim impact reports	72%
Systemwide services	
Public education	92%
Legislative advocacy	84%
Training	92%

Fortunately, criminal justice professionals across the country are recognizing more and more that their obligation to meet the needs of victims and witnesses extends beyond working with or sponsoring programs. It includes being responsive to these needs in their own daily contacts with victims and witnesses and incorporating services as part of their normal operating procedures.

Limited resources may require program planners and administrators to establish priorities for assisting different types of clients and then periodically reassess these priorities. For example, most programs consider rape victims a top priority, while others make sure that spouses and children of homicide victims receive careful attention. The Victim Service Council in St. Louis County gives priority to indigent clients.

Staff can also choose to serve only victims who report the crime, only victims whose case is prosecuted, or all victims regardless of case status. However, the choice of clients to serve may dictate—or be limited by—a program's physical location. For example, Crime Victim Centers in Minneapolis–St. Paul can assist victims regardless of whether they have reported the crime, because the program has four storefront offices where victims can walk in off the street.

The type of clients served may be influenced by program sponsors. For example, programs sponsored by prosecutor offices generally restrict services to victims whose cases are brought to trial; these programs also offer limited on-scene crisis intervention and early contact with victims. On the other hand, prosecutor-sponsored programs find it easier to provide extensive court-related services to victims than do programs run by police, community-based organizations, and other groups.

Sponsorship can also influence how effectively staff can advocate for victims vis-a-vis the criminal justice system. In identifying services to provide and types of victims to assist, it is best to start with a fairly narrow mission and, if appropriate, expand later.

Starting with a highly targeted effort avoids the risk of doing many things poorly instead of doing a few things well. It also prevents raising unrealistic expectations—leading to disappointment—among funding sources, the criminal justice system, and program staff.

Selecting staff

Figure 1 summarizes the principal considerations in identifying and recruiting staff. Of course, the staff skills that are needed depend to some extent on the services to be performed—for example, if counseling will be provided immediately after the crime, individuals with experience in crisis intervention will be necessary. However, strict staff requirements concerning education or previous work experience are not usually necessary. Program planners instead need to identify potential staff who:

- have positive feelings toward the criminal justice system;
- can relate to victims in situations of stress without making judgments;
- have the resilience and flexibility to work overtime and to deal with a variety of problems on short notice.

A first-rate director is especially vital to program success. In addition to management and supervisory ability, a program director must also have skills in direct service delivery, public relations, and entrepreneurship.

Volunteers can save programs money and expand service delivery. By training volunteers to respond to victims of sexual assault, Portland's Victim Assistance Program can provide 24-hour crisis intervention to rape victims. Volunteers handle clerical assignments, court escort, witness notification, and witness orientation. With appropriate personal qualities, and adequate training and supervision, volunteers can also provide crisis intervention (as in Portland) and followup counseling.

Finding appropriate volunteers can be time consuming, and volunteers need considerable training to be effective in anything beyond simple clerical tasks. Some volunteers can be undependable or can lose interest quickly. Planners can minimize these drawbacks with careful screening, thorough training, and close supervision.

Timing is also important. It may be advisable not to involve volunteers until the program is well underway and paid staff have enough free time to recruit, screen, train, and supervise them properly. Staff may be recruited through newspaper advertisements and posting notices in college placement offices. Many programs hire former volunteers who have proven their worth.

The Alameda County program usually hires well-known staff from the agencies with which it has been working. As in many occupations, the single most common recruitment method is word of mouth.

Only on-the-job training can provide new paid staff and volunteers with first-hand experience in dealing with victims and witnesses. However, preservice training is just as important. Depending on staff assignments, the training should impart counseling and interviewing techniques, crisis intervention skills, knowledge of how to tap community resources to secure additional assistance for victims, and—for all staff—a thorough understanding of how the criminal justice system operates.

The most effective training includes role play that simulates actual cases. Observing staff during working hours ("shadowing") and assigning newcomers to one staff member as a "buddy" are also valuable. Figure 2 summarizes the principal features of the preservice and inservice training programs of six victim-witness assistance programs.

Networks

Planners need to develop close ties with criminal justice personnel and other human service providers to obtain help in serving victims and witnesses and to avoid duplication of services.

Developing networks also enables program staff to contact victims and witnesses in a systematic manner. The Alameda County program identifies more than 80 percent of its clients from charging sheets that the District Attorney's Office agreed to deliver routinely to the staff. In Greenville, South Carolina, the Law Enforcement Center forwards a daily offense bulletin to the Victim Witness

Choosing services and client groups

The **Alameda County** District Attorney Victim/Witness Assistance Program in Oakland, California, serves a population of slightly over 1 million, 18 police departments, and 8 courts. With an annual budget of nearly $331,000, offices in 2 locations, and 10 full-time staff members, the program focuses exclusively on victims, even though it is administered by the district attorney.

Program staff identify more than 80 percent of their clients from prosecutor charging sheets that are routinely delivered to the program. Police reports on all incidents involving sexual assault, child molestation, homicide, and domestic violence are automatically forwarded to the program.

Police and prosecutors also call the program directly with requests for assistance. Staff is available during working hours for telephone or walk-in consultation whenever victims require emotional support. Staff members also visit the homes of elderly victims and children.

Victim notification and orientation consists of explaining, by letter and telephone, each stage of the litigation process. Staff members may also meet with victims before a court session, show them the physical layout of the courtroom, explain the upcoming proceedings, and escort the victim during hearings and trials.

The Police Crisis Intervention Unit in **Scottsdale,** Arizona, is a police-based program operating in a city of 112,000. The city funds the program as part of the Scottsdale police budget. Funding in 1985 was $188,000, which supports a full-time staff of four. The program serves no witnesses, but in addition to helping victims, the staff also assists many people who are not victims of crime, including accident victims, families of runaways, and disoriented individuals.

Police referrals account for 80 percent of the unit's caseload. Officers drop off police reports with a request for assistance, and they bring victims to see the program specialists at the station. After working hours, police can still refer victims by telephoning the specialists at home or paging them on beepers. Most of the remaining caseload is the result of direct calls from victims and walk-ins.

The program's principal services are 24-hour crisis intervention, referrals, orientation to court procedures, and transportation. The staff also provides emotional support to many victims during municipal court proceedings, and city judges often call the unit when victims become upset in court.

The **Greenville County,** South Carolina, Victim/Witness Assistance Unit is a small program run by the District Attorney. The program has two full-time and five part-time paid staff, and a budget of $101,000. The program serves a 2-county area of almost 300,000 people.

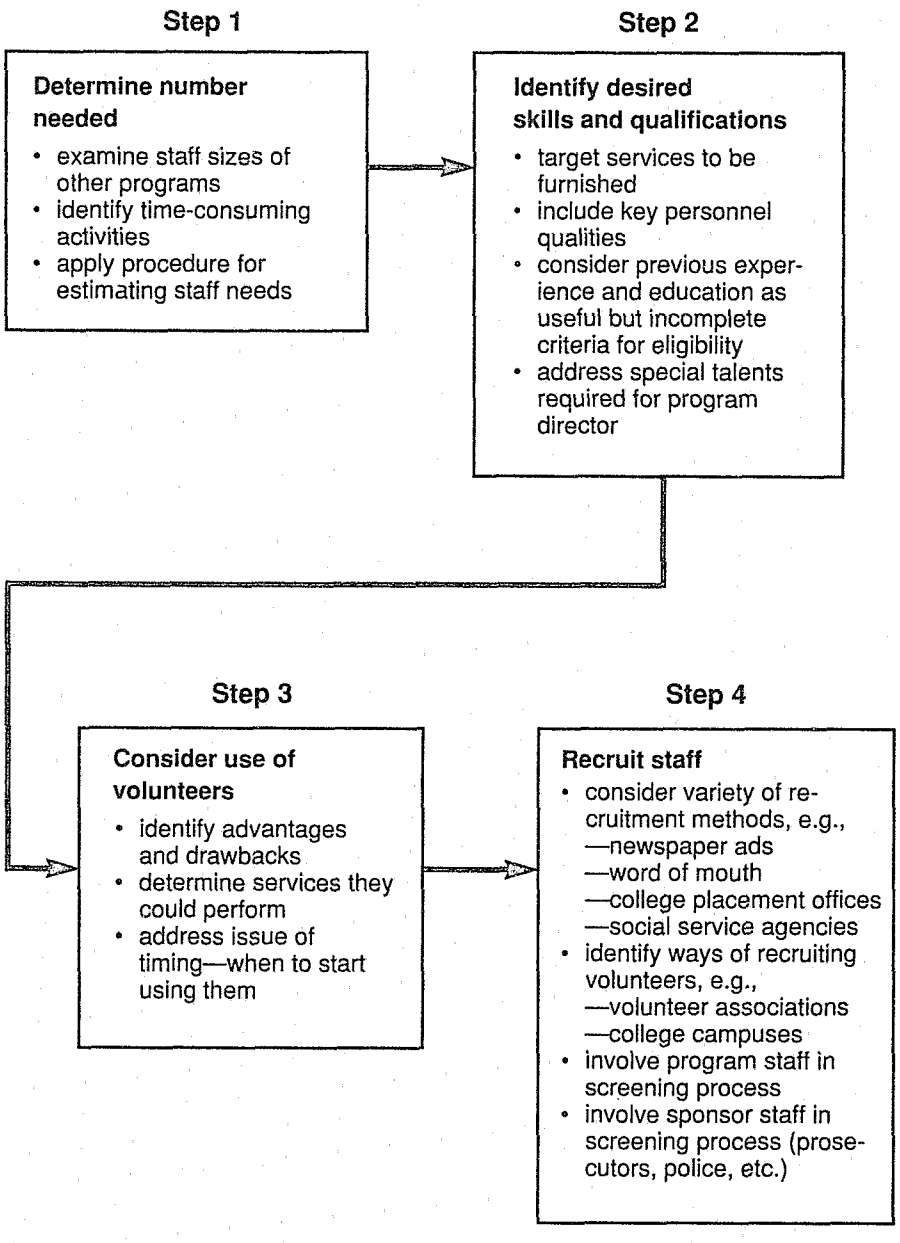
The program identifies 90 percent of the unit's caseload from a daily offense bulletin forwarded by the city and county police departments. Police also call the program two or three times a day for help in calming a disturbed victim, interviewing a child, locating a missing witness, or answering questions from victims and families of homicide victims.

The program's major services are witness notification, short-term counseling, victim advocacy, and orientation to the criminal justice system. The unit often helps prosecutors in witness management, such as securing the addresses and phone numbers of key witnesses, handling arrangements for out-of-State witnesses, and coordinating witness and victim arrival, transportation, and escort.

Finally, the unit acts as a buffer between prosecutors and victims who have questions or complaints about a case.

Figure 1

Summary of considerations in identifying and recruiting staff



Assistance Unit, listing all the previous day's criminal incidents by victim, location, and police officer involved. The Woman's Crisis Line in Portland, Oregon, refers rape victims to the Victim Assistance Program whenever court orientation will be helpful for the women.

Planners should expect to devote significant time and effort to establishing effective cooperation with other groups. Demonstrating ways in which the program can benefit police is effective in gaining police cooperation. For example, by calming people and addressing their emotional and financial needs, program staff enable victims to concentrate on giving accurate information to police officers and deputy sheriffs. Program staff can offer to save police time by taking responsibility for distraught victims at the scene after the officers have completed their investigation, by locating hard-to-reach witnesses, and by establishing a standby system for notifying police when they need to testify in court.

An important strategy for developing a relationship with police is to identify one or two key individuals in the department who are respected by their colleagues. Gaining their support can mean they will recommend the program to other personnel in the department. When possible, planners should involve these individuals in setting up the program.

Many programs also start out by honoring police requests for assistance with nonvictims to build a working relationship. Only later do they restrict their services to bona fide crime victims.

It is often easier to gain the cooperation of *prosecutors* because they benefit more obviously and immediately by working with a program. For example, prosecutors can devote increased time to strictly prosecutorial functions if program staff agree to take on responsibility for explaining court procedures to victims and witnesses, allaying their fears about testifying, and persuading them to see the case through.

Planners can also offer to contact witnesses to ensure that they appear in court—and on time—in order to reduce the burden on prosecutors for conducting this essentially clerical task.

Figure 2

Summary of training programs in six programs visited for onsite study

Program	Preservice		Inservice	
	Volunteers	**Paid staff**	**Volunteers**	**Paid staff**
Alameda County, California Victim/Witness Assistance Program	(already have the requisite counseling skills)	• overview of criminal justice system • introduction to key actors, including those in other agencies of the program's referral network • observation and work with "buddy"	• on-the-job on the program's procedures	• workshops and conferences (at least 3 per year per staff member)
Greenville, South Carolina Victim/Witness Assistance Unit	• orientation as part of screening		• workshops • on-the-job supervision • annual regional victim assistance conference	• on-the-job supervision • annual conference
Portland, Oregon Victim Assistance Program	• job definition • orientation from police, prosecutors, hospital staff • instruction on making referrals • assignment to "buddy" to observe, work side by side with	None (may consult with more experienced staff or director as needed)	• seminars • continuing legal education (for update on laws)	
Minneapolis–St. Paul, Minnesota Crime Victim Centers	given over six weeks	given over two weeks	• monthly lectures by representatives of other agencies updating staff on changes in case processing, client eligibility, or latest developments in the field to maintain and expand referral network	
	• reading assignments, including procedure manual • films • briefings on cases likely to be encountered • observation of staff in action • visit to shelters and hospitals • participation in police ride-alongs • role play			
St. Louis County, Missouri Victim Service Council	• reading materials • seminar on job definition (exercises, role play) • communications skills • criminal justice system orientation • office procedures forms • community resources • referrals • one-to-one training	N/A	• sessions on special topics (e.g., domestic violence or physical assault) or discussion of cases three times a year	
Scottsdale, Arizona Police Crisis Intervention Unit	N/A (no volunteers)	• orientation to criminal justice system and to agencies in the program's referral network • participation in ride-alongs • work with more experienced staff; accompany them on call	N/A	• seminars and workshops

Source: Interviews with directors and staff of the above programs conducted by Abt Associates, Spring 1982 and 1986.

Program staff need to arrange for *judicial* involvement in order to get permission to sit with troubled victims during court proceedings. Judges can also permit program staff to be present during sentencing to provide victim impact statements and recommendations for restitution.

The most valuable *human service providers* to work with are counseling groups, government social service agencies, legal aid services, and shelters.

Usually a quid pro quo can be arranged. A shelter in St. Paul is always ready to provide bed space for referrals from Crime Victim Centers. This is because women whom the shelter sends to the Centers for assistance always receive court followup, transportation, and assistance in moving their possessions into the shelter at any hour of the day or night.

Building a network of community agencies may also furnish opportunities to train other local human service providers to treat victims with sensitivity, generating referrals for the victim witness program.

Funding

Several guidelines are available for estimating program costs—or the costs of program expansion. First, planners can expect that the most costly services will be 24-hour availability, crisis intervention at the crime scene, multiple contacts with a client (rather than one-time only intervention), emphasis on direct service delivery rather than referral, and the allocation of significant resources to nonclient services such as research, training, public relations, and lobbying for statutory change.

Budget figures from existing programs provide another guideline for anticipating program costs. Most programs are willing to share this information. Table 2 provides the 1985 budget, staffing pattern, and services offered by the six programs visited for the National Institute of Justice study. As the table shows, programs have operated with vastly different budgets.

Budget figures are high for the Alameda County and Portland programs in part because of their extensive systems of victim notification conducted for the district attorney. Although it uses many volunteers, the Minneapolis–St. Paul program has a relatively large budget because staff serves two major cities with a combined population of more than 2 million. The program has the added expense of renting four storefront offices.

St. Louis has a smaller budget because its volunteers work long hours and perform many of the tasks paid professionals would otherwise have to do. Per-resident costs are relatively high for Scottsdale because the program provides services almost exclusively to victims, and victim services tend to cost more per client than do services to witnesses.

Programs can secure funds from a wide range of sources. In fact, over half the 25 programs contacted for this study combine funding from two or more sources. The most frequently used sources are State and local government.

Twenty-one States provide direct funding for victim services. The best source of information on public money is elected officials, who can provide contacts with appropriate public agencies. An effective selling point with some potential funding sources is a plan to use or to expand the use of volunteers.

St. Louis' Victim Service Council persuaded the city council to provide funds partly by demonstrating that the public would get one free dollar of volunteer time for every tax dollar provided.

Federal support

Through the 1984 Federal Victims of Crime Act (VOCA), the Federal government is another significant source of public funding. The act established a Crime Victims Fund of up to $100 million annually, with the money coming from fines and new penalty assessment fees on Federal offenders.

While up to half the money in the fund may be used to supplement State victim compensation programs, most of the remaining money is earmarked for victim programs. As of early 1987, 1,364 programs had already received some VOCA funds.

VOCA funds are distributed by the States based on Federal guidelines and additional criteria each State chooses to establish. For example, the Federal Government requires new programs to demonstrate that at least half their budget will come from other sources besides the VOCA grant. Existing programs must have one-quarter of their funding from other sources.

Supplemental funding

Even with government funding, most programs will have to supplement their budgets. Two potential funding sources worth exploring are the private sector and the courts.

- The Greenville Victim/Witness Assistance Unit sends letters to local businesses and to foundations and volunteer organizations requesting contributions. Grants have been secured from J.P. Stevens, the U.S. Jaycees, General Electric, and the Women's Legal Auxiliary.

- Las Vegas' Victim Witness Assistance Center arranged to receive $25,000 in fines assessed on a popular singer for violating customs regulations. Other creative funding ideas are provided in *Fundraising and Victim Services*, published by the National Organization for Victim Assistance, Washington, D.C.

Planners can also explore innovative ways to reduce the costs of services and equipment, or obtain their use without charge. The Greenville staff persuaded a lock repair service to provide locks at cost for indigent victims of break-ins. By assisting prosecutors with their paperwork in the complaint room and at arraignments, New York City's Victim Services Agency obtained access to a telephone, reproduction equipment, and work space at no cost.

As noted, using volunteers can lead to substantial savings in service delivery. Finally, by transferring some services to criminal justice agencies, programs can devote their resources to those activities that they alone can effectively provide.

Table 2

Staff size in relation to selected program characteristics in six site programs[1]

Program	Staff size: Paid full-time	Staff size: Paid part-time	Staff size: Volunteers (full & part-time)	1985 Budget	Cost per person year[a]	Major Services	Annual caseload[b]	Population served	Cost per resident
Alameda County Victim/Witness Assistance Program	10	-	1	$331,000	$33K	• counseling • victim notification • court orientation • victim compensation assistance • referrals	2,600[c]	1,100,000	$ .30
Greenville Victim/Witness Assistance Unit	2	5	25	$101,000	$28K	• counseling • victim orientation • victim advocacy • victim orientation • public education	2,000	300,000	$ .34
Minneapolis–St. Paul Crime Victim Centers	4	1	30	$261,000	$60K	• onscene crisis intervention • victim advocacy • victim orientation • public education	3,000[d]	2,086,000	$ .13
Portland Victim Assistance Program	9	3	38	$325,000	$33K	• onscene crisis intervention (rape victims only) • court orientation • victim notification • counseling • restitution assistance • referrals • public education	13,616[e]	570,000	$ .57
St. Louis Victim Service Council	4	1	21	$105,000	$24K	• crisis intervention • victim advocacy • witness orientation • system advocacy • public awareness • court orientation	2,037	1,918,000	$ .05
Scottsdale Police Crisis Intervention Unit	4	-	-	$188,000	$47K	• onscene crisis intervention • referrals • victim advocacy	2,000	112,000	$1.67

[1] In examining this table, the reader should consider that no attempt has been made to judge the quality of services the programs provide. In addition, the programs are not strictly comparable, since programs do not keep similar data or assign their staff identical responsibilities. The data are intended to suggest the range of costs, caseloads, and services associated with various staffing patterns.

[a] Assumes each paid part-time staff person works one-third time. Does not include volunteers.

[b] Number of victims and witnesses to whom program provided some sort of assistance in 1985 beyond telephoning or writing to see if they needed assistance.

[c] Also provided verbal or written information to victims and witnesses on over 11,000 occasions.

[d] Involved spending at least 15 minutes of assistance.

[e] Involved spending at least 10 minutes of assistance.

Other sources of information

In starting or improving a program, program planners and administrators should turn first to other programs. To obtain ideas for setting up its own operation, the initiator of the Greenville program examined 70 requests for Federal funding of victim witness programs.

Other planners have telephoned the directors of successful existing programs for advice. The needs of victims themselves play an indispensable role in guiding program operations; victims' concerns can be identified through initial needs assessment and periodic followup surveys.

Advisory committees can provide expert information on starting or improving a program, and they can help identify resources in the local community and gain community support. Advisory bodies can often secure leads to funding sources, as well.

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The complete *Issues and Practices* report on *Serving Crime Victims and Witnesses* is another useful resource. A free copy may be obtained by calling the National Criminal Justice Reference Service at 1–800–851–3420, mentioning the title and the identifying number NCJ 097673. The U.S. Department of Justice's National Victims Resource Center (301–251–5525) provides descriptions of existing programs and names and addresses of people to contact for more information, bibliographies, and data base searches. The National Organization for Victim Assistance (NOVA) in Washington, D.C. (1–202–393–NOVA), is a membership organization that has published a number of valuable program planning and administration guides.

Notes

1. Peter Finn and Beverly N.W. Lee, *Serving Crime Victims and Witnesses*, National Institute of Justice, Washington, D.C., June 1987.

2. A recent study by the New York City Victim Services Agency fails to demonstrate that victims who receive crisis intervention or material assistance show any more psychological improvement or practical adjustment than do victims who do not receive such services. However, the study notes that the assistance may have benefited victims in ways that the evaluation did not measure. Furthermore, most victims who received an hour's counseling or material aid believed the assistance was helpful. See Robert C. Davis, "Studying the Effects of Preliminary Services for Victims in Crisis," *Crime and Delinquency* 33, 4 (1987): 520–531. Preliminary findings from another study suggest that many victims do not want counseling but do request material assistance.

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