

# Police-Community Relationships: *Strategies for Incorporating Law Enforcement-Based Victim Services into Agency Response and Practices*



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## Victim-Centered and Trauma-Informed Practices

Despite progress in establishing federal and state crime victims' rights legislation, only a small percentage of victims and co-victims obtain the information and services they are entitled to receive.<sup>1</sup>The criminal justice system has historically focused on apprehending, prosecuting, adjudicating, and punishing offenders – often leaving the critical needs of crime victims and co-victims unmet.<sup>2</sup>

Victims and co-victims may experience trauma from the crime itself, their injuries or losses, and their involvement in the criminal justice process. Additionally, previous trauma may affect their current experiences. Law enforcement agency personnel should follow a victim-centered, trauma-informed approach to address victims' and co-victims' needs.<sup>3</sup>

Law enforcement agencies are encouraged to expand victim-centered, trauma-informed practices to all contact points experienced by victims and co-victims. Effective response should be an agencywide priority and written policies should be developed to guide personnel actions.<sup>4</sup>

**Victim-centered** – placing the crime victim's priorities, needs, and interests at the center of the work with the victim; providing nonjudgmental assistance, with an emphasis on self-determination, where appropriate, and assisting victims in making informed choices; ensuring that restoring victims' feelings of safety and security are a priority and safeguarding against policies and practices that may inadvertently re-traumatize victims; ensuring that victims' rights, voices, and perspectives are incorporated when developing and implementing system- and community-based efforts that impact crime victims.

**Trauma-informed** – approaches delivered with an understanding of the vulnerabilities and experiences of trauma survivors, including the prevalence and physical, social, and emotional impact of trauma. A trauma-informed approach recognizes signs of trauma and responds by integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, practices, and settings.

*\*Definitions used in [OVC Model Standards](#)*

Community members are essential partners with law enforcement agencies in maintaining public safety. Crime victims and co-victims represent a significant segment of the community. Incorporating law enforcement-based victim services can lead to tangible steps that address victims' and co-victims' needs and enhance police-community relationships.

## Intention of Resource

The Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) partnered with the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) to hold a roundtable discussion at the IACP Conference in October 2023. Personnel from multiple law enforcement agencies and allied organizations were included in the discussion

<sup>1</sup> Heather Warnken "What Does the Data Tell Us About Law Enforcement-Based Victim Services?" *Police Chief Online*, April 4, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> [IACP ELERV – Introduction to the ELERV Strategy \(theiacp.org\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> [The Attorney General Guidelines for Victim and Witness Assistance 2022 \(justice.gov\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> [KeyConsiderations.pdf \(theiacp.org\)](#)

– ***Police-Community Relationships Roundtable Discussion: Strategies for Incorporating Law Enforcement-Based Victim Services***. This report provides summarized field input in the following discussion topic areas:

- Victims’ Rights and Agency Response
- Death Investigations and Notifications
- Evidence and Property Management
- Media Relations
- Funding and Agency Incorporation

Law enforcement agencies are encouraged to circulate this report to internal stakeholders and schedule opportunities for review and discussion of the additional questions listed throughout this resource. These discussions can support strategic planning efforts for the incorporation of law enforcement-based victim services personnel into agency response and practices.

OVC established a fellowship to further support enhanced law enforcement response to victims. Law enforcement agencies are encouraged to request cost-free assistance from the OVC Fellow to further guide stakeholder discussions and agency practices (see Appendix A).

## Roundtable Information

Strong relationships of mutual trust between law enforcement agencies and the communities they serve are critical to maintaining public safety and effective policing.<sup>5</sup> Collaborative strategies that encourage reciprocal understanding of roles and expectations can enhance this mutual trust.



**Chief Matthew Domenico** and **Victim Services Manager Kimberly Messina** of the Brighton Police Department in Colorado facilitated a discussion focusing on specific strategies that highlight the incorporation of law enforcement-based victim services as a complementary approach to effective police-community relationships.

OVC and IACP staff, law enforcement leaders and personnel, agency victim services personnel, criminal justice and victim services stakeholders, and allied partners represented the 75 attendees in the room. Multiple personnel offered thoughtful contributions

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<sup>5</sup> [Importance of Police-Community Relationships and Resources for Further Reading \(justice.gov\)](https://www.justice.gov/importance-of-police-community-relationships-and-resources-for-further-reading)

throughout the discussion. Select attendees who were unable to contribute during the live event were offered opportunities to participate in scheduled conversations to ensure the inclusion of diverse perspectives in this report.



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“Including victim services within law enforcement agencies provides the opportunity to change the narrative for victims and improve relationships with our communities. Victim services not only provide better outcomes for victims and the community, but they also positively impact investigations.”

*Chief Matthew Domenico – Brighton Police Department (Colorado)*

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## **Victims’ Rights and Agency Response**

Victims and co-victims often describe mixed experiences with receiving information about and assistance with their statutory rights. Some victims and co-victims describe contact with agency personnel who readily assist them with specific desired actions. Others describe difficulty when trying to exercise their rights or lacking information about their rights until cases reach prosecution. One of the frequent comments heard from victims and co-victims, especially those in underserved communities, is that they were never made aware of victim compensation.

The following question was posed to all participants:

***How does your agency assist victims and co-victims in understanding and exercising their rights?***

Multiple participants offered that written information is frequently provided to victims during initial contacts by officers and deputies. Some participants relayed this information is provided to victims of specific crimes while others indicated that all crime victims receive this information. Providing victims’ rights information is often driven by statutory requirements, however, detailed discussions of specific rights or avenues to readily exercise those rights are minimal. Some participants indicated they primarily rely on victim/witness personnel in prosecution offices for discussions about rights. Other participants shared that written information is intended to guide victims and co-victims on all necessary steps and contact points if they want to take further actions related to their rights.

Participants verbalized the value in providing victims' rights pamphlets for future reference, but also recognized that many victims and co-victims can be overwhelmed when receiving written information with little help or guidance for how to best use that information to address their specific needs.

Multiple participants recognized the added value of incorporating law enforcement-based victim services personnel in agency responsibilities around victims' rights. Victim services personnel have specialized skills and specific roles that enhance communication with victims and co-victims about their rights and other resources that can help address identified needs. Some participants described the incorporation of victim services personnel as an effective means to relieve victims' rights responsibilities from sworn personnel. Other participants relayed coordinating discussions about victims' rights that include both sworn and victim services personnel to emphasize the importance of this topic. Still others shared that incorporating victim services personnel throughout agency processes ensured that victims' rights discussions were timely and effective. Some specific strategies mentioned were ensuring availability of victim services personnel for around the clock response to field locations and collaboration of victim services personnel and investigators during case activity.

Other promising practices discussed included ensuring the translation of written victims' rights information in languages used in communities, collaborative relationships between victim services personnel and records personnel to facilitate receipt of reports by victims, and the development of an app that victims and co-victims can download to access information, resources, and help with connections to victim services personnel. See [Victims' Rights and Agency Response](#) for more information.

Additional questions that can expand robust internal agency discussions include:

- Beyond providing a pamphlet, how does your agency assist victims and co-victims in exercising their rights at every phase of an investigation (i.e., initial contact, interviews, evidence review, case status updates, property return, case disposition)?
- How are law enforcement-based victim services incorporated into these efforts?
- What are the specific benefits of their incorporation – for cases? For victims and co-victims? For police-community relationships?
- What challenges are preventing law enforcement-based victim services from being incorporated into victims' rights policies and practices?
- Is there training for agency personnel on victims' rights to include crime victim compensation and how to connect victims and co-victims to these resources?

## Death Investigations and Notifications

Next of kin, co-victims, and other individuals impacted by unexpected deaths of family members and loved ones often describe mixed experiences with the justice system. Some describe not receiving information on their rights, having challenges with victim compensation, receiving no referrals to address their needs, and minimal communication with investigators. Others describe contact with agency personnel who are empathetic and committed to helping them seek desired case outcomes.

The following question was posed to all participants:

***How are victim services personnel incorporated into your agency's response during death investigations and delivery of death notifications?***

Circumstances involving unexpected death often require law enforcement personnel to notify individuals affected by the death. Notifications may be required in both criminal and non-criminal death investigations. Multiple participants discussed the value of incorporating victim services into the delivery of death notifications. Some shared this is limited to those associated with criminal death investigations, with a few participants offering that this includes mass fatality responses. Other participants shared that victim services are also incorporated for notifications associated with non-criminal death investigations. Circumstances involving infant deaths, suicides, drownings, and drug overdoses were cited as examples. While some participants shared that victim services staffing levels prohibit their incorporation into all death investigations and notifications, others offered that transitioning victim services from grant funding to agency budget funding allowed for the expansion of services.

Victim services personnel have specialized skills and specific roles that can enhance agency responses to next of kin, co-victims, and other individuals impacted by unexpected deaths. This can include effective communication, essential emotional support, and assistance with navigating complex processes. One specific strategy mentioned was embedding victims services in homicide units to encourage organic communication during investigative processes. One participant noted that state law in their jurisdiction specifies that notifications are completed by coroners. However, through embedding victim services into their homicide unit, they have established a collaborative relationship with the coroner's office. Another promising practice discussed included ensuring the availability of victim services personnel for around the clock response to field locations for continued collaboration with investigators during case activity.

The news of a death notification is often shocking, so being prepared to deliver it without causing further harm is essential.<sup>6</sup> Some promising practices include incorporating victim services into

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<sup>6</sup> [CVR Research Syntheses\\_Homicide Covictims\\_Report.pdf](#)

agency training practices and documenting their roles and responsibilities in agency policies. See [Death Investigations and Notifications](#) for more information.

Additional questions that can expand robust internal agency discussions include:

- According to statutes in your jurisdiction, who is responsible for the delivery of death notifications?
- According to victims' rights in your jurisdiction, who meets the statutory definition of crime victim related to death investigations?
- How are victim services personnel incorporated into your agency's response during cold case homicide investigations?
- How are victim services personnel incorporated into your agency's response during non-criminal death notifications?
- What are the specific benefits of the incorporation of victim services – for cases? For co-victims? For other next of kin and loved ones? For police-community relationships?
- What challenges are preventing law enforcement-based victim services from being incorporated into death notification policies and practices?

## Evidence and Property Management

Evidence and property items in the possession of law enforcement agencies should be collected, managed, and returned through victim-centered, trauma-informed<sup>7</sup>, and culturally sensitive<sup>8</sup> practices. This may include understanding the known traditional and cultural practices of the rightful owners whenever possible. Agencies should also be mindful of death and burial practices. Agency policies and personnel should be respectful of these practices to the extent that they do not interfere with investigations, lead to the possible destruction of evidence, or are detrimental to victims' interests. Agency personnel should afford opportunities for victim-centered, trauma-informed, and culturally sensitive services whenever possible.

The following question was posed to all participants:

***How are victim services personnel incorporated into your agency's policies for evidence and property management?***

Some agency personnel described establishing internal partnerships between victim services and property personnel to ensure that victims and co-victims are receiving appropriate and timely

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<sup>7</sup> See definitions used in [OVC Model Standards](#)

<sup>8</sup> See definition used in [Attorney General Guidelines for Victim and Witness Assistance, 2022 Edition | Office for Victims of Crime \(ojp.gov\)](#)

notifications related to property return processes. This included specific actions related to the return of items that are contributing to financial loss or obligations for victims and co-victims (i.e., correspondence related to release of vehicles) and preparation for the return of sensitive items (i.e., suicide notes).

The prompt return of property that is no longer needed for investigation and prosecution is often a right specified through state statutes. Several attendees who were unable to contribute during the live event indicated this is an area in need of further attention. Some relayed the minimal amount of victim services personnel in their agencies coupled with current caseload responsibilities as limiting factors for incorporation into these policies and practices.

Some participants recognized the added value of incorporating law enforcement-based victim services personnel in agency responsibilities around property return processes. Victim services personnel have specialized skills and specific roles that enhance communication with victims and co-victims about their rights and facilitate effective support during property return processes. See [Evidence and Property Management](#) for more information.

Additional questions that can expand robust internal agency discussions include:

- What are victims' rights in your jurisdiction related to the return of property belonging to victims and co-victims?
- How does the role of victim services personnel in your agency's evidence and property management policies specifically benefit – victims and co-victims? Police-community relationships?
- What challenges are preventing law enforcement-based victim services from being incorporated into evidence and property management policies and practices?

## Media Relations

Law enforcement agencies often seek media contact to encourage witnesses to come forward, provide information on specific cases, and address initiatives and inquiries. The media can help raise public awareness of crime, its impact on community members, and law enforcement agencies' efforts to respond effectively. Agency policies should clearly establish personnel roles and responsibilities while emphasizing the value of maintaining good communication with the media.

The following question was posed to all participants:

***How does your agency balance the public's right to know with victims' and co-victims' rights to privacy when engaging with the media?***

Some participants offered that their agencies have taken active steps to form partnerships between victim services personnel and public information officers. This can be helpful in reinforcing victims' and co-victims' preferences when engaging with the media, such as the use of preferred names and pronouns or the disclosure of sensitive information about family dynamics.

Some participants indicated this as an area in need of further attention. Some discussion occurred related to state statutes that impose specific time frames for the notification to victims and co-victims affected by release of body-worn camera videos. Some relayed the minimal amount of victim services personnel in their agencies coupled with current caseload responsibilities as limiting factors for incorporation into these policies and practices. There was also discussion of a need to become familiar with agency body-worn camera policies and the intersections of personnel wearing these devices with conversations involving victims and co-victims.<sup>9</sup>

Multiple participants recognized the added value of incorporating law enforcement-based victim services personnel in agency responsibilities around media relations. Victim services personnel have specialized skills and specific roles that can reinforce victim-centered, trauma-informed language in media releases and during engagement opportunities with the media.

Some specific strategies mentioned were including victim services personnel in review processes for press releases and media statements, notification processes to victims and co-victims prior to the release of personal or sensitive information to the media, and for accompaniment and support for victims and co-victims who participate in media interviews and press conferences. See [Media Relations](#) for more information.

Additional questions that can expand robust internal agency discussions include:

- What is the role of victim services personnel in media relations practices?
- What are the specific benefits of their incorporation – for victims and co-victims? For police-community relationships?
- What challenges are preventing law enforcement-based victim services from being incorporated into media relations policies and practices?



## **Funding and Agency Incorporation**

Law enforcement agencies should be intentional and strategic when incorporating victim services into all aspects of the agency (e.g., policy development, communications protocols, training, response practices). Determining how common victim services budgetary considerations (e.g.,

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<sup>9</sup> Additional information: [National Forum on Body-Worn Cameras and Violence Against Women \(theiacp.org\)](#)

salary, benefits, training, equipment, uniforms, supplies) will be funded is an integral part of strategic planning. Funding models may look different between agencies and may change within the same agency over time. Integrating law enforcement-based victim services can help promote victim-centered, trauma-informed practices throughout the agency and the community it serves, ultimately leading to enhanced public safety and community trust.<sup>10</sup>

The following questions were posed to all participants:

***How do you address agency personnel who are resistant to learning about or effectively incorporating victim services personnel into agency practices?***

Multiple participants offered that it is essential that agency leadership consistently communicates the value of victim services incorporation along with the expectation for agency personnel to collaborate and include them in assigned responsibilities. Some specific strategies mentioned were adding victim services education to academy and annual training opportunities and connecting victim services responsibilities to the agency mission, vision, and values.

One promising practice discussed was encouraging agency personnel to interact with victim services during the execution of their assigned responsibilities. For example, investigators can complete supportive handoffs to victim services and jointly explain their role during initial contacts. Another promising practice discussed was using staff surveys to identify gaps in response and services to prioritize the incorporation of victim services.

***If grant funds were no longer available, would there be support for incorporating costs for victim services personnel into your agency's budget?***

Grant funding is intended to enhance the recipients' abilities to address identified needs. It is not intended to be the sole long-term financial support for initiatives or activities that are within agencies' responsibilities. Multiple participants shared that after incorporating victim services, they have successfully transitioned all or some of the budgetary costs from grant funding to agency budgets. One strategy that supports these transitions includes capturing data related to the role of victim services and associated goals and outcomes. Another strategy involves consistent communication with internal and external stakeholders about the added value of victim services to the agency, shared responsibilities with partner agencies and organizations, and police-community relationships.

Some participants shared their confidence that agency personnel, government leaders, and the community would fully support funding for victim services. This support rests on the realization that victim services are essential to law enforcement agency responsibilities. See [Funding and Agency Incorporation](#) for more information.

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<sup>10</sup> [AgencyIncorporationofVictimServices.pdf \(theiacp.org\)](#)

Additional questions that can expand robust internal agency discussions include:

- If victim services personnel are eliminated from your agency, what changes will occur with – cases? Services for victims and co-victims? Police-community relationships?
- What strategic actions can occur to secure stable funding, ongoing availability, and expansion of victim services within your agency?
- What challenges are preventing law enforcement-based victim services from being incorporated into agency response and practices?



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“It’s really hard to wrap my head around a law enforcement agency not having victim services personnel. They are a part of everything we do. Without them, how are victims’ needs being met?”

*Participating Chief – Police Department (Texas)*

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## **Conclusion**

Law enforcement agencies interested in enhancing police-community relationships can use this resource to engage in focused discussions about the incorporation of law enforcement-based victim services. Victim services, whose primary responsibilities include advocacy for the rights and needs of victims and co-victims, can provide opportunities for more positive interactions with agency personnel. These positive interactions can augment the ability to protect individual rights, solve crimes, and contribute to public safety.



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“Times are changing and agencies are recognizing the value that victim services bring to improving police-community relationships.”

*Kristina Rose – OVC Director*

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# **Tailored training and technical assistance at no cost!**

## **OVC Enhancing Law Enforcement Response to Victims Fellowship Training and Technical Assistance Requests**

The goal of this fellowship is to engage with law enforcement agencies interested in applying the ELERV Strategy, developing in-house law enforcement-based victim services, and enhancing agencywide victim response. The OVC Fellow can:

- Assess agencies' victim response efforts
- Develop training and public outreach efforts
- Review agencies' readiness to implement law-enforcement based victim services
- Help agencies enhance capacity to provide trauma-informed victim services
- Identify and share model best practices
- Share knowledge of OVC initiatives

### **Amy Durall – OVC Fellow**

Amy Durall is an accomplished professional with extensive knowledge of victimization who holds a master's degree in psychology. She has served as a victim services director in law enforcement agencies to ensure a focus on rights, responses, and resources for individuals impacted by crime and crisis circumstances. She has served on local and national committees focused on multidisciplinary and collaborative response to victims, as a key member of assessment teams for law enforcement agencies exploring responses to violent crime and victim engagement, and as a consultant on projects aimed at justice system intersections and enhanced victim response.

Amy has documented experience working with law enforcement agencies, community service organizations, allied partners of various disciplines, and multiple federal funding agencies. She is often called upon to develop and deliver oral presentations, facilitate panel sessions, provide targeted technical assistance, and contribute to written publications for broad audiences.

Take advantage of this opportunity to build on your agency's capacity to enhance victim response efforts and meet complex victim needs!

## Appendix A – OVC TTA Flyer and Form

### OVC Enhancing Law Enforcement Response to Victims Fellowship Training and Technical Assistance Request Form

Complete and submit to: [Amy.Durall@usdoj.gov](mailto:Amy.Durall@usdoj.gov)

#### Point of Contact

Agency: \_\_\_\_\_

Name and Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Request: \_\_\_\_\_

Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Topic Areas of Interest

- [Enhancing Law Enforcement Response to Victims \(ELERV\)](#)
- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Leadership                     | <input type="checkbox"/> Partnering             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Training                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Performance Monitoring |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other (provide details): _____ |   |
- Law Enforcement-Based Victim Services: [Key Considerations](#) / [Key Considerations Checklist](#)
- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Getting Started                | <input type="checkbox"/> Victim Service Role |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Rights, Needs, and Services    | <input type="checkbox"/> Sustainability      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other (provide details): _____ |  |
- Agencywide Victim Response
- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Victims' Rights   | <input type="checkbox"/> Victim Compensation      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Multidisciplinary Team Participation                                | <input type="checkbox"/> Victim Response Policies |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Victim-Centered, Trauma-Informed Practices                          |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Specific Victimization Response (provide victimization type): _____ |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other (provide details): _____                                      |   |
- Consultation call (30 minutes to identify TTA needs) – topic: \_\_\_\_\_

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Representatives from multiple agencies participated in the **Police-Community Relationships: Strategies for Incorporating Law Enforcement-Based Victim Services into Agency Response and Practices** discussion through participation in the live event and through scheduled conversations.

Their thoughtful contributions are appreciated:

- Baltimore Police Department (Maryland)
- Brighton Police Department (Colorado)
- Chattanooga Police Department (Tennessee)
- Federal Bureau of Investigation Victim Services
- Harris County Sherrif's Office (Texas)
- Houston Police Department (Texas)
- International Association of Chiefs of Police
- Louisville Metro Police Department (Kentucky)
- Manor Police Department (Texas)
- Memphis Police Department (Tennessee)
- Milton Police Department (Georgia)
- National Center for Victims of Crime
- Norman Police Department (Oklahoma)
- Office for Victims of Crime
- Saginaw Police Department (Michigan)
- Tennessee Bureau of Investigations (Tennessee)
- Tulsa Police Department (Oklahoma)
- Vermont State Police (Vermont)

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<sup>1</sup> Cover images:

[victims-rights.jpg \(1200x800\) \(montaignecentre.com\)](#); [POLICE PROGRAMS AND SERVICES Halifax Regional Police Victim Services.jpg \(288x192\)](#); [FSA105.jpg \(240x180\) \(teex.org\)](#); [Police-evidence-compressed.jpg \(1688x1126\) \(elitereferralsdirect.com\)](#); [SABC-News-Reporters-R.png \(756x426\) \(sabcnews.com\)](#); [70893-saving-money-dollar-of-coin-stack.png \(800x485\) \(freepngimg.com\)](#)