

Preventing Re-Victimisation: The South Australian Experience

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This paper describes some of the basic requirements of systems that set out to meet victims' needs in ways that prevent re-victimisation. These issues can be reduced to ten key points.

Victim support programs offered by a variety of professional groups should as far as possible be 'victim driven'. It is important that all organisations which purport to offer victim services should have built-in guarantees that victims can express their opinions about services that are delivered and about the way in which the services are offered. It is also important to avoid victim support being hijacked by human service professionals, politicians or, for example, the 'law and order' lobby. Much has been written elsewhere about this possibility but agencies must be eternally vigilant to avoid the dangers of such a direction. In a recent article Richard Harding has been trenchant in his criticism of victim support agencies in Australia that have gone the way of 'offender bashing' (Harding 1994, p. 41). There is no doubt at all that such criticisms are well founded, even if in Richard Harding's case not accurately aimed. Victim service agencies which concentrate their efforts on tougher penalties and the reduction of offenders' rights will, in the long term, achieve little by way of creative structural change as they will be largely labelled, filed and ignored by the prime movers in the criminal justice system. Progressive police services cannot afford to be associated with such an emphasis nor can court or correctional service organisations. Victim support agencies that subscribe to the 'law and order' lobby therefore inevitably end up merely providing ammunition for the tabloid media to fire, usually with no long or even short-term effect. Such a direction may even be counterproductive in that it gives the general public a false

impression of who victims are and what they hope to achieve by way of justice. The unmitigated desire for revenge and punishment is uncommon enough amongst crime victims, and provides at best only short-term relief in terms of their loss.

Other pitfalls in this particular area include those of a political nature. One of the difficulties a movement which is beginning to gain momentum faces is that of being politically acceptable and therefore popular in terms of the ballot box. The proliferation of victim support services which have grown in Australia seem to be characterised by conservative and timid advances that are, by and large, not well funded. Most represent a political 'toe in the water' to gauge the interest of the electorate before real commitments are made and real progress achieved. Politicians must be encouraged to become involved with victim support. Victim agencies are unable to progress in a political vacuum or in a state of political naivety.

Effective prevention and support programs for victims must also involve non-government and government agencies who have 'open' agendas and who are determined to provide services accessible to victims at all levels in the community. The importance, for example, of police referral cannot be overestimated, and from a world perspective victim support agencies have undertaken a variety of responses to that particular problem. Our colleagues in the United Kingdom, for example, have achieved an excellent referral process where local police stations fax details of recently victimised citizens to the nearest victim support agency which in turn makes a decision as to how to offer service to that particular victim. In Europe, the United States, Canada and other jurisdictions there is a constant emphasis on contact with police services in order that operational police might regularly and accurately refer victims to appropriate services and support. In South Australia we have taken the opportunity to incorporate victim education into all levels of police training and the Victims of Crime Service has earned very high levels of access to such training programs. The fact that the South Australia Police Department has its own Victims of Crime branch which has a clear policy and education mandate, makes such access even easier.

Services for crime victims must be high profile media wise, well publicised and easily accessed by victims and their families. The obvious problem is that such programs are only relevant after a person has become a victim. People's unwillingness to consider the possibility of becoming a victim must be countered by a combination of comprehensive publicity programs combined with the establishment of reliable operational referral from police to victim support agencies.

Most victim support programs operate in the complex environment of the criminal justice system and must therefore continually face the challenge of working within the inevitable realities. In that sense police, court officials, correctional services officers and victim support people themselves must be flexible and adaptable in all situations. The danger of stereotyping victims and situations is always present as is the need to be capable of problem-solving that is based on lateral thinking.

Those seeking to support victims of crime and to free them from secondary victimisation should also realise the need for patience and realism as far as structural change is concerned. There are no 'quick fixes' in this situation and if change is to occur within well established bureaucracies such as court systems, they will be incremental and based on long periods of negotiation, study and compromise. Courts are amongst the most conservative institutions in our society. Independence from the political mainstream is an obvious necessity. Judicial re-education, particularly with regard to such issues as gender awareness, is a worthwhile goal that must be worked towards with patience, sensitivity and above all intellectual respectability. Such systems will not change in response to anger, abuse or constant carping criticism; they will only begin to evolve into victim aware systems as a result of sensible long-term negotiation, patience, tact and careful planning.

Victim support programs incorporating police, courts, correctional programs and victim support agencies must always be open to change and innovation within themselves. A great deal of energy must be conserved and directed towards continually pushing back the edges of the debate within such areas. It is equally important to encourage the participation of academic victimologists who are aware of local issues and who can become a focus for community discussion. Unfortunately, Australian victim support practitioners have far too little contact with academic criminologists and others. It is hard to think of an Australian academic victimologist who has made a significant contribution to the debate, although several criminologists from time to time express the product of their thoughts in this area. This is in marked contrast to that which occurs overseas. In the United Kingdom and particularly in The Netherlands, I am aware of the close working relationship between academics and victim support personnel to the point where academics write as a result of their experience as administrators within national victims support movements. This ensures a greater degree of rigour with regard to the evaluation and assessment of victim support programs. There is no doubt that we have reached in most countries a level of accountability where such assessment of outcomes is not only desirable but also imperative.

Victim support agencies should have a far more obvious role in crime prevention programs. Clearly, when operating in a support role, professionals and volunteers inevitably accrue large quantities of information about the effects of crime on victims and their families and therefore are able to make a significant contribution to prevention programs.

Programs involving crime prevention amongst elderly people have been developed within the Victims of Crime Service as a result of research done in Australia and elsewhere regarding high levels of anxiety amongst elderly people which sit oddly alongside low levels of criminal victimisation amongst this age group. In order to address such a need, VOCS in 1989 developed a pilot program which addressed a variety of factors affecting anxiety levels amongst our elderly population. The program is based on information dissemination and discussion not only concerning the effects of crime but also its actual incidence amongst the elderly. Importantly, it explores media reporting and the ways in which the

elderly might equip themselves in such a way as to become less anxious of crime and simultaneously less likely to be victimised.

There is a need to develop professional interfaces with and between a wide variety of actors within the criminal justice system. Victim support agencies need to be in constant conversation and exchange with judges, lawyers, police, correctional service authorities, academics and court administrators. As far as possible such contact should avoid confrontation, as such a tactic rarely results in significant, constructive organisational change. It usually closes doors, which may take some time to re-open. We must therefore be in the business of changing opinion in the hope that such change will bring about differences in practice, policy and structure. Academics have a significant role to play in such areas, particularly academic lawyers, criminologists and those whose major focus is victimology. We need to continually remind ourselves of the need to enhance our reputation as 'professionals', meaning that we approach issues of reform, change and enlightenment from more than a merely emotional point of view.

Victim support agencies must also operate within the political spectrum in order to bring about the changes we desire within the criminal justice system. In South Australia political change involving the United Nations Declaration of the 17 Rights of Victims of Crime, Criminal Injuries Compensation programs, victim impact statements and the protection of so-called 'vulnerable' witnesses have been an important part of the change we have achieved as we seek to prevent re-victimisation. Such legislative activity provides a framework for victim support and is also a good retrospective measure of any progress that has been made. Legislation, like almost any human achievement, matures, changes and becomes more effective and comprehensive with the passage of time. It is therefore essential that victim support agencies should be unashamed of the fact that they should become and remain politically aware and active in order to influence the criminal justice system at its very roots.

Once a person becomes a victim of crime they are public property. In Australia, as in any democratic country that enjoys the benefits of a 'free press', the media are largely unregulated apart from quasi self-regulation. They are always willing to exploit victims on the basis of the public's 'right to know'. In seeking to prevent such re-victimisation, victim support practitioners should not simply rely on the justness of our cause to bring about the change of behaviour amongst the media. We must respect the media's ability to ignore our sometimes high moral ground in the interest of getting their story. We therefore need to forge the relationships with media that will, in the long term, convince them that the changes in attitude and behaviour will not necessarily affect the profitability of their undertakings. At all times when dealing with the media we need to make our expectations of them crystal clear, setting our own standards by refusing to cooperate with media processes that we know will cause further harm to victims. In South Australia we have recently introduced a media awards program to which our State Governor has kindly lent her name. The Mitchell Awards for Excellence in Crime Reporting will recognise journalistic efforts that in turn recognise the needs and sensitivities of victims of crime in this State. We hope that in this way we will communicate our expectations clearly and recognise those who meet them.

Victims of crime must be considered important to the criminal justice system. Police services in particular must be able to follow their natural inclinations with regard to offering victims information and support that a decade ago may not have been acceptable as 'real' police work. In South Australia this readiness has been ably demonstrated by the creation of a Victims of Crime Branch within the Police Department and the appointment two years ago of specialist police victim contact officers initially in city locations and increasingly in rural areas as well. Police victim contact officers have the role of following up crime reports to ensure that victims of crime are receiving the services, support and respect that the Declaration of Victims Rights intends. They are also in a unique position to make referrals to victim support agencies and to ensure that such referrals meet the needs of the victims with whom they have contact. The effect of such police activity on the overall culture of the police service cannot be overestimated. The initial confusion that surrounded these appointments two years ago has been replaced by an acceptance of and cooperation with Victim Contact Officers by their operational colleagues. It is still clearly the case that a well supported, well informed victim makes the best possible witness for the prosecution and therefore it is in the interests of police departments to provide such services and support.

Conclusion

Ezzat Fattah expresses the concern that by providing sophisticated victim support, including counselling and advocacy, organisations might unwittingly delay the process of natural healing amongst victims (Fattah 1986). Most of us have too few resources to over-service crime victims, but Professor Fattah's warning is timely and well made. We are certainly living in a time when, as never before, agencies supporting crime victims are required to evidence levels of maturity and sophistication that entitle them to full participation within the criminal justice system. The only guarantee that such a level of sophistication and maturity can be reached and maintained involves being open to constant feedback from victims about the services and support offered to them. It also involves building bridges to other professionals, police, courts, corrections and academics who will assist us by their input in the continued process of preventing re-victimisation and restoring self-determination and freedom to those who have become victims of crime.

References

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- Harding, R. 1994, 'Victimisation, moral panics and the distortion of criminal justice policy: A review essay of Ezzat Fattah's "Towards a critical victimology"', *Current Issues in Criminal Justice*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 27-42.

