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STOP Grants Funded by the Violence Against Women Act: Executive Summary

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**IMPACT EVALUATION OF VICTIM SERVICES PROGRAMS:
STOP GRANTS FUNDED BY THE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN ACT**

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FINAL REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

Victims of sexual assault and domestic violence frequently suffer intense emotional distress following the crime and experience the need for a multiplicity of victim services. The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) of 1994 and the STOP Violence Against Women grants program funded with VAWA funds are important federal initiatives to help these victims. Our project investigated the effects of VAWA STOP funds with respect to the provision of victim services by criminal justice based agencies to domestic violence, stalking, and sexual assault victims.

The Violence Against Women Act of 1994 and the STOP Grants

The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), Title IV of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 (P.L. 103-322), is the result of years of advocating for the federal government to help stop violence against women and assist victims who experience such violence. It addresses legal protection to women who are victims of violent crimes in the areas of domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, and protection against gender-motivated violence. The Act addresses reform in the areas of legislation, rules of evidence, and in the operations and policies of law enforcement and the courts. It specified new offenses and tougher penalties for offenders, mandated victim restitution, and incorporated a number of systems reforms. It also supports efforts to prevent, educate, train, and develop record maintenance system on the number of violent incidents against women and to improve communication within the justice system (Burt, 1996).

As part of the VAWA legislation, the Justice Department created the Violence Against Women Grants Office (VAWGO) within the Office of Justice Programs (OJP). That office assisted states in applying for STOP ("Services, Training, Officers, Prosecutors") Violence Against Women grants that are intended "to assist states, Indian tribal governments, and units of local government to develop and strengthen effective law enforcement and prosecution strategies to combat violent crimes against women, and to develop and strengthen victim services in cases involving violent crimes against women". Domestic violence and sexual assault were identified as primary targets for the STOP grants along with support for underserved victim population. VAWA mandates that STOP subgrantees spend at least 25% of their STOP funds in three areas: (1) law enforcement, (2) prosecution, and (3) victim services while the remaining 25% is left largely to the discretion of the grantees.

During 1995, OJP developed the STOP program rules, solicited applications from states and territories, provided technical assistance to applicants, and helped states and territories develop their implementation plans due within 120 days after the award was made. During subsequent years, OJP instituted a timetable for grant applications, awards, and implementation plan submission.

METHOD

We surveyed two samples of program representatives to obtain information about STOP grant programs. The first was a sample of representatives of STOP subgrantee programs. The second was a sample of representatives of programs that worked in close cooperation with STOP subgrantees to

serve victims. The latter sample was gathered to gain an additional perspective on the STOP subgrantee and the program's impact on the local service community.

Sampling Procedures

The sampling frame for our project was defined as STOP subgrantees awarded to criminal justice agencies for delivery of services to domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking victims. We had originally proposed to select non-profit as well as governmental victim service programs. We had also intended to survey victims who received STOP funded services. Following a series of discussions with representatives of NIJ, it was decided to limit our study to governmental victim service agencies and agencies they work collaboratively with. It was planned that NIJ would subsequently fund another study to examine non-profit victim service agencies and to survey victims.

A search of the Urban Institute's database of 1996 and 1997 Subgrant Award Report (SARs) was conducted looking for STOP subgrantees that had been awarded to law enforcement, prosecution, and court organizations to provide services for victims. The search identified 182 SARs that met our criteria and that had a contact person and phone number listed.

Based on the distribution of the 182 SARs across states, we determined an interview quota for each state. That is, the interview quota for each state was proportional to the number of eligible STOP grants that each state had. Within each state, we ordered the eligible STOP subgrant programs using a random algorithm. For example, if a state had six eligible programs, we assigned each of the six a number between one and six. Then we began calling program contact persons starting with those with the lowest ranks. We continued calling programs in the order of their ranking until our quota was filled for that state. We had no refusals and were generally successful with each program we attempted to interview. The few exceptions were instances in which the program director was away for a protracted period or programs that were found to be other than direct service programs. (For example, we encountered some programs that were exclusively law enforcement training or law enforcement enhancement programs and did not provide any services to victims.)

In all, 62 interviews were completed with STOP subgrantee program representatives. An additional 96 interviews were completed with representatives of programs that worked in coordination with the 62 STOP programs.

Interviews with STOP Subgrantees

When we reached the contact person for a sampled STOP subgrantee, we asked to speak to the person most knowledgeable about the STOP grant. When that person was contacted, we identified the purpose of our call and asked to schedule a time when they would be available to participate in a twenty-thirty minute survey. In about half of the cases, an interview was conducted on the spot and, in the other half of the cases, an appointment was made. Interviews consisted of primarily closed-ended questions. Interview topics included:

Information About Subgrantee Activities

- Amount of STOP grant
- General purpose for which grant funds are being used
- Specific activities, equipment, or staff which STOP funds are supporting
- Number of additional clients served as a result of STOP grant
- If, and how, funds were used to reach underserved victims

Program Context Within Which STOP Funds Are Used

- Services areas in which program is involved (e.g. hotline, rape crisis, shelter, etc.)
- Number of victims served annually within each program area
- Types and amounts of non-STOP funds received by program
- Staff size and training

Community Context Within Which STOP Funds Are Used

- Other services for victims in locale
- The extent to which the STOP subgrantee program complements/overlaps with other services available to victims in the community
- Principal organizations which refer clients to program
- Other services to which program routinely refers clients
- Existence of a coordinated response to violence against women in jurisdiction

Advantages/Disadvantages of Program Aegis

- Advantages/disadvantages to locating victim services within criminal justice agencies
- How program staff handle conflicting interests of criminal justice officials and victims

Impact of STOP funds on victims

- Increases in number of victims served
- Change in types of victims served
- Increase in services to traditionally underserved populations
- Effects of funds on victim empowerment and psychological adjustment
- Effect of funds on children of victims

Impact of STOP funds on criminal justice system

- Effects on victim willingness to cooperate with authorities
- Effects on case outcomes in criminal justice system

Impact of STOP funds on community

- Did STOP funds help to complete range of services available in community?
- Did STOP funds broker changes in service delivery or criminal justice systems?
- Did STOP funds increase awareness of violence against women in community?

Interviews with Representatives of Programs STOP Subgrantees Collaborate With

During the interviews with the STOP subgrantee program representatives, we asked for information on programs that worked closely with the STOP subgrantee. We contacted the named staff person of the programs they coordinate with and administered a brief interview that included the following topic areas:

- How the coordinating program worked with the STOP subgrant recipient
- Effects of STOP funding on victims, the criminal justice system, and the community
- Whether the STOP funds could have been spent in better ways in the community
- Advantages and disadvantages of victim programs located within criminal justice agencies

CONCLUSIONS

The 62 STOP funded subgrantee programs surveyed were either based in, or affiliated with, the criminal justice system. Most were prosecution or law enforcement victim programs. The majority were fairly new programs and over one-third began with the receipt of STOP funds. The average amount of their STOP subgrantee award was \$47,626. Given the relatively small amount of their grants and their newness to victim services, it is impressive that these programs provided such a wide variety of services to sexual assault and domestic violence victims at many stages of the process. Even more impressive are the program changes and impacts reported by the STOP subgrantee program representatives, and the 96 representatives of coordinating programs surveyed who work with the STOP subgrantee programs, on:

- **Service delivery to violence against women victims.** The majority of surveyed programs reported that they were able to serve more victims, expand the type of services, and provide more comprehensive services *as a direct result* of the STOP funding.
- **Victims' well being.** A majority of STOP subgrantee respondents surveyed, and the vast majority of the coordinating programs respondents surveyed, believed that *STOP grants resulted* in empowering victims and improving victims' psychosocial well being. Improvement in victim's financial circumstances was also noted but by fewer program respondents than cited improvements in the areas of empowerment and psychosocial functioning.
- **Victims and the criminal justice system.** According to the majority of those surveyed, STOP grants had a direct impact on (a) keeping victims better informed about criminal justice actions taken in their cases; (b) improving the treatment of victims by the criminal justice system; (c) yielding more successful prosecutions; and (d) reducing the number of victims withdrawing their support from the prosecution. Some respondents also perceived that STOP funding increased the

number of domestic violence and sexual assault incidents reported to law enforcement and resulted in the imposition of tougher sentences.

- **Victims and the community.** The majority of STOP subgrantee program respondents surveyed, and the vast majority of coordinating program respondents, reported STOP funds impacted on the way domestic violence and sexual assault victims were treated by the community. STOP funds extended the range of services provided by community programs; increased the coordination of victim services; and increased awareness of violence against women issues.

In the opinion of those surveyed, STOP subgrantee grant awards yielded many positive results for victims. STOP funds substantially improved the lives of victims and their treatment by the criminal justice system.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Our research provides a preliminary picture of the impact of VAWA STOP funding. Based on the testimony of STOP subgrantee staff and staff of other programs with whom they work with to serve victims, STOP funding is positively changing the ways in which the criminal justice system and community programs respond to violence against women victims. But, while the interviews we have conducted suggest, they do not conclusively demonstrate the impact of STOP funds. Further research is needed. We suggest three possibilities.

One strategy could be to conduct community level analysis of key violence against women indicators to access the impact of STOP funds. The National Academy of Sciences argues that it is difficult to evaluate individual family violence programs because particular interventions take place within a community context (Chalk and King, 1998). That context includes local arrest and prosecution policies, public health programs, and services for victims of violence. The Academy's prescription for remedying this problem is to examine community-level indicators. This approach seems particularly appropriate for evaluation of VAWA STOP programs. Many of these grants are small and many used the funds to expand or support existing services rather than to create new ones. Violence against women programs need to be viewed within the context of the community's coordinate response to such violence. Under the approach we are proposing, investigators would sample a large number of communities across the country. They would examine the correlation between VAWA STOP grant spending and a range of violence against women indicators, including number of calls to law enforcement, arrests, prosecutions, convictions, domestic homicides, emergency room admissions, and so forth.

Another approach would be to collect data on victims served as a result of STOP grants. To determine how STOP subgrantee awards have affected services for victims, a representative sample of grantees could be drawn and site visits conducted. During the site visits, researchers could examine case records to calculate how many additional victims were served after the STOP grant was received compared with before STOP funding. The investigation could also examine the types of additional victims served as a result of the STOP subgrantee awards. That is, did the characteristics of victims served change after the STOP subgrantee award was made. Were there relatively more

Latino victims or more disadvantaged victims served, for example? Accumulating data from a wide sample of grantees would provide a good indication of how the STOP funds translated not only into intangibles such as improved coordination and greater awareness of violence against women, but also into tangibles such as number and types of victims served.

A final suggestion for future impact study is the use of randomized experiments. Many evaluation issues with respect to STOP subgrantee awards do not lend themselves to experimentation, but some do. For example, we encountered numerous programs that had used STOP funds to hire crisis counselors to respond to the scene with law enforcement officers. To test the benefits of this concept, a sample of cases could be randomly assigned to either receive on-scene intervention or a less expensive control condition in which outreach is handled via telephone or letter. The two groups of cases could be compared in terms of the proportion of victims who received services and in terms of the extent to which psychological and material needs were met. Because limited resources often precluded programs from responding to the scene for every case, randomization could be carried out without withholding available services from victims.

Our research indicates that STOP funds are having many positive impacts. Additional impact evaluations with a variety of methods are encouraged to further document the results of VAWA STOP subgrantee awards.

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