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ESTABLISHING VICTIM SERVICES WITHIN A LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCY: THE AUSTIN EXPERIENCE

by Susan G. Parker

The Austin Police Department's Victim Services Division is among a relatively small number of victim assistance divisions that work within law enforcement agencies. Being part of a law enforcement agency allows Division counselors to quickly respond to victims' needs, meet officers at a crime scene, and provide victims with a mix of immediate crisis counseling and practical advice. Until recently, victim services divisions within law enforcement agencies were relatively rare. Most victim services programs were located at nonprofit agencies or within prosecutors' offices, although only 21 percent of major crimes get to the prosecutor's office. This means that about 80 percent of crime victims may not have victim assistance available to them unless a unit exists within a police department, according to Chief Stan Knee of the Austin Police Department. "Our Victim Services people arrive minutes after the officer gets there, as the paramedic is wiping the blood off the forehead of a badly battered spouse,"

Chief Knee said. "They get a better perspective of the victim than from just reading a police report." The program initiates crisis counseling during or shortly after a crime has occurred, rather than weeks or months later. The Victim Services Division provides crisis and trauma counseling to victims, families, witnesses, and others, and assistance to patrol officers and investigators on cases.

Establishing a victim services program within a law enforcement agency makes sense for several reasons, advocates say. If victims receive support from victim services counselors, they may be more likely to report a crime or cooperate in an investigation. That support is an added tool for law enforcement agencies to increase their conviction rates. Victim services work complements community policing, which emphasizes establishing relationships with members of a neighborhood. Having a victim services counselor on the scene can free up officer time; the counselor can talk with a victim while the officer goes back into service. Also, the counselor can act as a liaison for a

About This Bulletin

Law enforcement sees more victims of crime than any other component of the criminal justice system. Most victim assistance is provided through prosecutors' offices, but only 21 percent of major crimes get to the prosecutor's office. This means that about 80 percent of crime victims may not have victim assistance available to them unless a victim assistance specialist or unit exists within the law enforcement agency.

The new OVC handbook titled *First Response to Victims of Crime* states that "how law enforcement first responds to victims is critical in determining how victims cope, first with the immediate crisis and, later, with their recovery from the crime." This response often influences the victim's participation in the investigation and prosecution of the crime as well as the victim's likelihood of reporting any future crimes.

Recognizing this critical role, law enforcement leaders are integrating victimization issues into their training for line officers and incorporating a strong victim assistance component into their agencies. Using the Austin experience, this bulletin describes the benefits to both victims and law enforcement for having victim assistance staff incorporated within law enforcement. Relevant to

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both police and sheriff's departments, this bulletin uses an actual case handled by the Austin (Texas) Police Department to illustrate how victim assistance staff function on the law enforcement team. It also recounts how Austin went about establishing and funding its first full-time victim assistance coordinator position, and how victim services grew from a one-person operation to its present four-unit Victim Services Division.

OVC recognizes that the majority of law enforcement agencies are much smaller than Austin's police department. We also recognize that most law enforcement agencies cannot financially support nor do they need a victim assistance division the size of Austin's. However, we feel that the information in this bulletin will be helpful to law enforcement agencies, regardless of size, that are interested in establishing a victim assistance component within their agencies as a way to improve their responses to victims.

child if a parent is being arrested and officers need to move to the next call. A law enforcement agency is also a natural entry point for victims to see advocates/counselors after they have been victimized.

The number of programs located in police and sheriff's departments is a small but growing part of victim services assistance in the United States. In 1999, Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) programs awarded victim assistance grants to only 209 law enforcement agencies out of 18,000 nationwide. In comparison, 428 prosecutors' offices received VOCA victim assistance grants in 1998 out of 2,500 nationwide. Still, the number of law enforcement agencies receiving VOCA grants has increased from 113 in 1997.

Victim Services Division

In its 20 years of existence, the Austin program has grown to include 35 full- or part-time staff and 300 volunteers. The Victim Services Division sees about 14,000 victims or witnesses a year with an average of two contacts per victim, according to Ann Hutchison, founder and former director of the Austin program. The Division has four units:

- Crisis Response Unit.
- Major Crimes Unit.
- Child and Family Violence Protection Unit.
- District Representative Unit.

In addition, an intake specialist takes care of walk-ins and cases that do not fit neatly into the four units mentioned above. The Victim Services Division also houses ALERT (Austin's Linking of Emergency Response Teams), a mass disaster critical response team set up to respond to incidents with multiple casualties. ALERT often receives calls from other cities, states, or national agencies to send staff and volunteers to help cities experiencing a crisis such as a school shooting. Using the following actual homicide case, each unit is discussed to exemplify how it functions within a law enforcement agency.

Around 2 a.m. on September 11, 1998, a frantic maintenance worker, Tom, called the Austin (Texas) Police Department. He told them that for several hours, he had not been able to reach his girlfriend by phone or pager. When he got off work, he drove to her house. Finding his girlfriend's car parked outside, he knocked on the door but received no answer. He told the police that this was not normal. He was always able to get in touch with

Cinda. A short time after Tom called 911, responding officers discovered the bodies of his girlfriend, Cinda Rae Barz, her 9-year-old daughter, Staci Mitchell, and Cinda's roommate, Frances Michelle Fulwiller. Cinda's 9-year-old daughter had been strangled, and the two women had been bludgeoned to death. Both women worked as juvenile probation officers and were well known in their community. As a matter of procedure, the officers did not give Tom the details of what they had seen; however, Tom knew that something was terribly wrong. The officers took Tom to the police station and interviewed him.

The two young women and the little girl had been killed and had left behind grieving family members, coworkers, and classmates. The difficult task of notifying relatives, friends, and neighbors about the deaths and of helping the survivors with their grief fell to the Victim Services Division, which has been part of the Austin (Texas) Police Department for 20 years.

Crisis Response Unit

The primary goal of the Crisis Response Unit (herein referred to as "Crisis Unit") is to provide on-the-scene crisis intervention for victims of crime and other trauma and to refer those individuals to the Victim Services Division's other units or outside social service agencies for followup services. The Austin Crisis Unit, which operates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week in 8-hour shifts, can respond to all calls of victims, including victims of sexual assault, robbery, assault, suicide attempts or threats, family violence and domestic disturbances, and child abuse and neglect, as well as survivors of homicide victims.

The Austin Crisis Unit teams are equipped with an unmarked car, a police radio, a "handi-talkie," and a Mobile Data Terminal, which is a computer network that

allows officers to communicate with each other through typed messages. Each team consists of a team leader (usually an employee of the Victim Services Division, although there are about 16 volunteers who are also trained as team leaders) and a community volunteer. Each team is assigned to a sector of the city. Between 7 p.m. and 2 a.m., six teams work throughout Austin. When a team arrives at a scene, they ask the officer in charge what he or she needs them to do. That might mean stabilizing the victim, doing an assessment, providing crisis intervention, and referring the victim to other services. A crisis team can spend anywhere from 30 minutes to 10 hours with a victim, depending on the case.

On the night of the triple homicide, Gary Makelki, a licensed professional counselor and Crisis Unit team counselor, was called by Austin officers to come and talk to Tom, the person who called the police and was the boyfriend of victim Cinda Rae Barz. Makelki noted that Tom was in shock—very worried, upset, frustrated, and angry. “He wanted to know what [was] going on at the scene. He was very, very angry and pacing. He was crying and then hitting the wall. He wanted to call his mother. He was not getting any information.” Although Tom felt entitled to more information, policy required that officers keep most of the information confidential until the killer or killers were found.

To calm Tom down, Makelki explained to him the police procedures and why the police were asking him so many questions. Makelki stayed with him and, through listening and reframing, helped him with his perceptions of responsibility and guilt. Makelki talked with Tom to assess whether he was suicidal. After about 5 hours at the Austin Police Department, investigators released him. Tom

had brought along a friend who Makelki also spent time talking with.

Makelki provided several important Crisis Unit functions to Tom. He made sure that Tom was not alone while detained at the police station for questioning. He reassured Tom that someone would be in touch with him the next day with resources and information about the case. Makelki also helped Tom calm down with exercises like breathing and internal dialogue. He also warned Tom that he might have other potential reactions including self-blame—that he should have gotten to his girlfriend’s house earlier. Makelki said, “Sometimes when you educate victims in advance about potential thoughts and reactions that they might experience, it can normalize the reactions when they do come, which improves a victim’s ability to cope.”

Major Crimes Unit

The following day, Dolores Litton, a licensed psychologist and homicide counselor in the Austin homicide unit, followed up on Makelki’s promise, checking in with Tom on how he was coping and giving him updated information on the investigation. The Major Crimes Unit has counselors in the homicide, robbery, sex crimes, and traffic fatality units of the department. The Unit’s primary goal is to provide counseling, advocacy, information, and referral to all victims, witnesses, and survivors of crime. These counselors provide followup services to cases that the Crisis Unit team has responded to the night before. They also assist victims who have not been seen by a Crisis Unit team. Counselors in the Major Crimes Unit work closely with detectives in relaying information to victims about a case, explaining procedures, and helping with details like funeral planning. The counselors can also get expedited approval for state crime victims’ compensation to

help victims pay for sudden expenses like funerals or cleanup services when a violent crime has taken place in their home. Counselors can assist when a detective’s questioning might make a victim distraught and unable to continue the inquiry. The Major Crimes Unit work takes place over a longer period of time than that of the Crisis Unit. Counselors contact victims at least four times after the initial contact. In unsolved cases, counselors may stay in touch with victims once a month for years.

When Litton received the call about the triple homicide, she began working on one of the most time-consuming cases of her career. Litton accompanied a detective to the home of Frances Fulwiller’s mother, who lived in the same neighborhood as her daughter. Litton had the difficult job of notifying the mother about her daughter’s death and of preparing the way for the detective to request a positive identification of the daughter. Litton recalled the mother’s initial response to the news: “This is a bad joke. Get out of my house.”

After the detective asked the mother questions for his investigation, Litton stayed behind to offer support and comfort. The mother, who was a grief counselor, told Litton that her husband had died just a year earlier. She owned the house where her daughter lived. Litton also helped shield the mother from reporters who were soon camped outside her house.

Litton then began notifying the family of the two other victims (Cinda Rae Barz and her daughter). Some time that afternoon, a detective in the victim’s house found an Iowa address that turned out to be where the woman’s parents lived. Litton enlisted the assistance of local law enforcement agencies in Iowa to ensure that Cinda’s parents were told of their daughter’s and granddaughter’s deaths.

Later, the family called Litton. "When they called me, they couldn't even talk," Litton said. "They finally said, 'Is this true?' I said, 'Unfortunately, yes, this is true. This is what the detectives know.' I told them the little things that we knew, that they were killed in the house and that officers were looking for the boyfriend of the other victim, who was a suspect."

The following day, Litton met with Frances' mother to assist her in contacting the funeral home and medical examiner. She also assisted in filling out crime victim compensation forms for funeral expenses and costs related to cleaning the house where her daughter had been killed. Litton also helped Frances' mother look for one of her daughter's cats that was missing after the killings. While the missing cat never returned, the mother located the other cat, which was still in the house. Litton also assisted Cinda's ex-husband, who could not afford to travel to Iowa for the funeral of his ex-wife and daughter. Litton helped arrange a viewing of the bodies in Austin.

In the months following the killings, Litton stayed in close touch with the victims' families, giving them updated information before it appeared in the media. A day after the killings, an arrest was made. The suspect was a friend of Frances'. He killed her, and then he waited for Staci and Cinda to return home and killed them.

Litton also frequently talked with Cinda's sister-in-law, who had children who were close to Staci. They were having a difficult time in school and had been depressed since Staci's killing. Litton told the mother not to be afraid to talk to her children about Staci's death, to be as honest as possible with them, and to get them into counseling.

At one point, Litton mediated a conflict between the two families. Frances' mother, who owned the house where the victims had lived, wanted to sell it but the family in Iowa had not yet come to Austin to collect Cinda's belongings. Litton encouraged the family in Iowa to pick up their daughter's things quickly. When they came, she helped them fill out a victim's compensation form and put them in touch with a support group for parents of murdered children in Iowa.

The needs of the families and friends of the victims resulting from this crime were tremendous, Litton said. "All of them wanted information. All of them were obviously very emotionally affected by it." The detectives would have experienced great difficulty with this case had Victim Services not been involved.

Child and Family Violence Protection Unit

The little girl who was killed, Staci Mitchell, had recently moved to a new school. The day after the murders, Victim Services counselors from the Child and Family Violence Protection Unit went to Staci's old school to talk with her classmates before they heard about the news on television. Staci's cousin also attended the school and was well known by her classmates. The Child and Family Violence Protection Unit provides family counseling, school counseling, and outreach services to children and families in violent homes and to children exposed to any violence. The Unit's goal is to create a centralized team consisting of investigators, attorneys, and counselors to provide comprehensive services in domestic violence cases. Counselors primarily work with cases in which no arrests have been made, such as a suspected batterer fleeing the scene. They assist victims of family violence in obtaining protective orders and with other legal matters. Counselors

also provide short- and long-term trauma counseling to victims of family violence and their children and help with safety planning. The counselors are the first point of contact when a victim calls or comes to this Unit. Referrals to Safeplace (a battered women's shelter and rape crisis center) and other trauma counseling services are a normal part of the Unit's services.

The Unit also provides counseling, advocacy, information, and referral for all child victims. The Unit is housed with investigators assigned to crimes against children and works closely with counselors from the Austin Children's Advocacy Center and Child Protective Services caseworkers. Counselors conduct videotaped interviews in documenting testimony of child victims. In addition, counselors assess victim and family needs, and provide short-term counseling and referrals to other social service agencies. Counselors prepare victims for court and act as a liaison between the court and victims.

Because the Unit works with school children, counselors from the Unit received the call to counsel Staci's classmates the morning after the killings. The school wanted to notify Staci's classmates before the news of the murders was reported so that the children would hear about it "in a softer and gentler way," said Connie Geerhart, a licensed social worker in the Child and Family Violence Protection Unit.

Geerhart, along with some coworkers, went to Staci's former school, where children knew her best, and spoke to the school counselors. Geerhart spoke to a class of fourth graders that had some children who knew Staci quite well. Geerhart introduced herself and asked how many children remembered Staci. She said that she was there to tell them that Staci and

her mother had been killed. She stopped talking, and the children immediately began asking questions. How was she killed? Does her father know? How about her cousin?

“One little boy started crying. He was just so sad. Then another little boy put his arm on this boy’s back.” Geerhart said that there was great respect in that classroom for people’s emotions. Geerhart was careful to use concrete language about the deaths with the children. She said, “A lot of people use euphemisms like ‘she passed away,’ or ‘she went to sleep,’ which is not a good thing. Saying that someone has gone to sleep can make kids afraid of going to bed.”

The counselors helped school officials write a letter about the killings for the children to take home to their parents. Geerhart encouraged the children to talk with their parents or to determine a plan to care for themselves if their parents were not home or they were not comfortable talking to their parents. One girl said that she could talk to her older sister. After talking to the class, Geerhart saw that three students were very upset about the news of Staci’s death. She pulled them out of class so that they could talk further with another counselor.

“When I talked with them briefly outside of the classroom, they were very supportive of each other,” Geerhart said. “They were hugging each other, and when they went off to see the other counselor, they held on to each other, sobbing and crying. They talked about specific memories of Staci and said what a sweet girl she was.” Talking to Staci’s classmates was an important part of their healing process, Geerhart believes.

With easy access to television, it was likely that the children were going to

find out about the murders. Geerhart stated that it was so much better for them to receive the information from a counselor first. She said, “For one thing it shows a lot of respect for kids that their feelings are important. It honors them rather than [pushes] them aside.”

District Representative Unit

As the reaction of Staci’s classmates illustrates, a murder affects many more people than victims and their families. The Austin Victim Services Division established the District Representative Unit to address community needs. The idea behind the Unit is that if a crime occurs in a neighborhood, the residents of that neighborhood are also victims and may need assistance in coping. In every crime, in fact, there is a ripple effect. For example, someone who sings in a church choir with a member who is raped may find herself suddenly depressed or anxious. The same feelings can arise in a coworker or the babysitter or the family two houses down the street. The District Representative Unit casts a wide net in trying to identify these other victims to provide them services. The Unit team works closely with law enforcement officers (assigned as district representatives) who work routinely with the community. The counselors bring their problem-solving and mediating skills to delicate situations and help police assess the needs of the community. The officers can provide safety and reassurance to counselors and crime victims in volatile situations. Through the counselors’ follow-up and intervention, they hope to reduce further calls to the police department and to solve the problems that led to law enforcement involvement in the first place. The counselors also do networking, outreach with neighborhoods, and collaborating with other social service agencies.

On the night that Cinda, Frances, and Staci were murdered, several neighbors heard and saw the police cars outside the victims’ house. TV crews soon swarmed the area. Residents of the middle-class neighborhood were worried. At first, it was unclear whether the killer was a stranger preying on the neighborhood or someone the victims knew. “All of a sudden, we had people calling trying to find out, was this a random act or was it a known assailant?” said Joel Atkinson, a licensed social worker and supervisor of the District Representative Unit. “People in the neighborhood look down their street, which is usually a calm street where kids ride their bicycles, and they see 20 police cars and crime scene tape.”

Atkinson and his colleagues started contacting neighbors. Early that morning, they spoke to the immediate neighbors who had heard the commotion of the ambulances, fire department, and police. The counselors told the residents that an incident happened resulting in a death and that the Unit would get more information to the neighbors as soon as possible. The 911 operators started getting calls from neighbors around the block, and the counselors decided they needed to broaden their outreach. In the next few days, counselors and volunteers worked a 14-block surrounding area, going to each house with a prepared release from the Austin Police Department. By this time, a suspect, whom one of the victims knew, had been arrested. Neighbors no longer had to worry about a stranger terrorizing the area where they lived, but many were still affected.

The counselors from the District Representative Unit held a community support meeting at a nearby church and at a school for anyone needing more intensive, individual work with a counselor. They held at least one community support

group each month for 3 months following the killings. “Some people went for information, but as you talked about it, you could tell that people were still hurting, grieving, and in shock,” Atkinson said. “We would talk to some of them individually and then, if needed, refer them for more help.” The Unit supports the belief that if those affected by a crime are counseled soon after the crime is committed, then healing can happen more quickly. Atkinson said that providing services quickly definitely reduces long-term psychological stress and anxiety.

The counselors also held counseling sessions for the women’s coworkers, who were in shock over the murders. Workers were told that they might not be able to concentrate at work for some time. Within a few days, several workers said they felt nauseated, which, according to Atkinson, most likely stemmed from their feelings of anger, grief, and loss. Coworkers’ anger was sometimes directed at the counselors because they felt inside information about the case should be given to them since they were part of law enforcement.

Initial Considerations

Initial issues to consider when establishing a victim services program within a law enforcement agency include defining the victim assistance program by identifying its goals, addressing funding possibilities, and stressing the importance of supporting a full-time victim assistance coordinator position.

Defining the Victim Assistance Program

Hutchison determined that the Austin Victim Assistance Program had two sets of customers: the victims and families, and the officers themselves. The first step

in developing the program was to define the program by identifying the program’s goals within the law enforcement agency. The overall goal of the Austin program was “to minimize the adverse emotional and psychological stresses resulting from being the victim/survivor of crime or trauma which included the victim’s family, witnesses, neighborhood, and public safety responders within 24 hours.” According to background information on the program, addressing these needs will facilitate the victim’s, witnesses’, and neighborhood’s willingness and ability to cooperate with the criminal justice system in the investigation and prosecution of the crimes.

Funding

Once a program has defined its goals, the next step is to find funding. Among the possibilities are grants from sources like the state Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) program or the state Violence Against Women Act program. Both are federal grant programs that the states use to provide funding for local victim assistance or domestic violence programs. The VOCA program funds approximately 4,000 victim assistance programs nationwide, including the Austin program. A number of different programs are also funded through the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and additional funding may be available from these agencies. More detailed information can be found on the Grants and Funding page on OVC’s Web site (www.ojp.usdoj.gov/ovc) or by calling the OVC Resource Center at 1-800-851-3420. Although grants are a good way to get started, it is important to eventually secure funding from the law enforcement agency so that the victim services program is seen as an integral part of the department.

Full-Time Victim Service Coordinator

In a larger law enforcement agency, the job of a victim service coordinator must be full time, according to Hutchison. Sometimes departments have a secretary take on the job part time, or an officer assumes the responsibilities. The program, however, is not likely to become established without someone whose full-time job is dedicated to making sure that the needs of law enforcement and victims are met.

Implementing a Victim Services Program

The tension of being part of law enforcement but also an advocate for victims is inherent when a victim services division is located within a law enforcement agency. Officers may be suspicious of these outsider “do-gooders” who may trample on their turf. Outside agencies may see victim advocates and counselors who work for a law enforcement agency as unable to truly advocate for victims, said Hutchison. To get to the point of providing such comprehensive services to the victims’ families, relatives, classmates, and coworkers in the murders of the two women and young girl took years of work.

The Austin Victim Services Program began in 1980 when the local district attorney received a grant through the federal Law Enforcement Assistance Act (LEAA) to hire three victim coordinators—one for the district attorney’s office, one for the county attorney’s office, and one for the Austin Police Department. The main purpose for the coordinators, from the original point of view, was to gain the support of victims in

pursuing criminal cases, hopefully leading to higher conviction rates. At the time, Hutchison had been working at the Austin Child Guidance Center with sexually exploited children. She helped the police take statements from young children so that they would not be re-traumatized. She was hired as the Victim Coordinator with the Austin Police Department. Like others in the field, Hutchison saw the program as a way to improve the quality of life and safety for victims and their families.

A year after the grant started, LEAA was eliminated, potentially jeopardizing the program at its birth. The police chief, however, supported the program and went to the city manager and city council for funding. Hutchison was hired as a member of the police department. As she built the Victim Services Division within the Austin law enforcement agency over the past 20 years, Hutchison developed an approach that could help others who want to start a similar program. Hutchison outlined three phases for establishing a victim assistance program within a law enforcement agency. These three phases emphasize the importance of understanding the law enforcement culture and being able to fit in, becoming an essential part of the agency, and developing staff and preventing staff burnout.

The First Phase: Understanding the Law Enforcement Culture

The first phase in the evolution of the Austin program, which comprised the first 3 years of the program, ensured the survival of the program. Hutchison was on call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. “I would come back to work any time to prove that it was viable,” Hutchison said. “As much as a police chief might tout it, if it isn’t in the culture and available, you won’t break through.”

In the first few years, the Austin program set up the Crisis Response Team and the Major Crimes Unit, both of which initially went out two nights a week because of limited personnel. The program learned from its mistakes. For example, a counselor who was assigned to the homicide unit was then pulled off by Victim Services to respond to other cases. The sergeants in homicide, however, wanted the counselor to be around and available.

Secure Support From the Top

Law enforcement officers and supervisors are used to seeing programs come and go, and so they are likely to be skeptical of anything new. Compounding this attitude is the fact that civilians are coming into a paramilitary organization. It is never easy for nonsworn people in a law enforcement organization to be listened to, according to Chief Stan Knee. That is why it is critical for the chief to be visibly behind these programs. Those working under the chief, like assistant chiefs and others who have political aspirations, will take a cue from the chief about whether or not a program is valued. “I had top management support from the chief,” Hutchison said. Therefore, a supportive supervisor is essential in establishing a victim services program in a law enforcement agency. “If [officers] see that the chief is not 100 percent behind the program, they get the message. If someone makes a cutting remark and the powers that be don’t stop it, then it is seen as okay to do that,” said Commander Billy Pence. “If the chief seems neutral or opposed, then that’s the green light to discount the program or to raid its funding.”

For those who want to establish a similar program, Hutchison suggests how to approach a chief. All chiefs struggle with the dilemma of not having enough patrol officers and having too many calls. Program advocates need to point out that

victim services counselors can help free up officer time by working with victims while officers return to pressing calls and investigations. Counselors can also bolster cases by helping victims feel more comfortable with law enforcement. Chiefs have a humanitarian interest in helping to make their communities safer and improving the quality of life, all of which support the goals of victim services.

Ensure That Victim Services Reports to a High-Level Supervisor

Victim services personnel should report to a high-level supervisor like a sheriff or assistant police chief rather than a sergeant or captain. When Hutchison first started working at the Austin Police Department, she reported to a captain in the major crimes division. The captain wanted her to stay around the office, and he could veto her working with patrol or training, which was part of the larger mission of the program. This made it more difficult for her to establish the program with line officers or other parts of the department. When she later moved under an assistant chief, she had more freedom to make program decisions with less supervision. Hutchison had the flexibility to work throughout the department, thus expanding her duties (e.g., training cadets, helping children in a narcotics sting).

Make Victim Services Part of Police General Orders

Another way to institutionalize the program is to put victim services work in the general orders that law enforcement officers must follow. General orders in a police department govern the conduct and responsibility of sworn officers. Requiring the use of victim services in the general orders also ensures that cadets will be trained from the beginning about the role of victim services in the police department. In the Austin Police

Department, the general orders require officers to involve the Victim Services Division in 14 types of calls, including homicide, child abuse or child death, aggravated robbery of a business, mass or partial disaster, hostage situations, aviation disaster, and sexual assault. Counselors may receive other calls by request from officers, emergency medical services, or the fire department, or by going to the call and standing by. The Victim Services Division recently had new general orders approved by the department that allow crisis teams to respond to any call and work with any victim or survivor after the officer's or detective's job is finished. If the scene is unsafe so that a counselor cannot stay at the scene alone and the officer is impeded from returning to service, then the counselor must move the victims to a safe location. If such a move is not possible, the counselor should leave information about available services for the victim to use later.

Get Key Officers Involved—Find the Informal Power Structure

When Hutchison began building this program, she quickly identified the most respected and influential officers. To do so, she went to every shift for every sector in the city and asked officers whom they would want as a backup in a dangerous situation. In each shift, the same two officers were always chosen. Hutchison went to them and told them that their fellow officers chose them as their most respected officers. She asked them to be part of a patrol officer committee that would write guidelines for exactly how a crisis response team would respond to calls and offer assistance to patrol officers. She could not pay overtime but offered compensatory time. In the end, 60 percent of the officers showed up for the committee and 98 percent of the platoons were represented. The process took 1 year from the initial discussion with patrol officers

to formally establishing the guidelines. "I never said, 'Should we have a crisis team?'" Hutchison pointed out. "I said 'How do we do this? What is the least threatening way and the most acceptable way to do this?'"

By having patrol officers develop these guidelines, they had some control over this program that proposed to send civilians into crime scenes. Once the officers were assured that they were still in control of their cases, they were willing to allow victim services to begin a partnership with them, working as a team.

Make Their Jobs Easier

Hutchison also rode out on countless shifts with officers and was called to help with cases by the major crime homicide unit, which has the highest status in the department. Hutchison was seen as a part of a team given access to the most guarded and secured scenes. Her presence demonstrated that she was accepted among those respected detectives. She also wanted to be visible to remind patrol officers that she was there to help them. In addition, Hutchison wanted them to see that she was careful and followed protocol around crime scenes. "The key is making their jobs easier," Hutchison said. "We needed to build trust. We not only saved officers' time, but we didn't muck up their cases. This was a criminal investigation, highly secure and confidential. We showed ourselves to be respectful of their power and domain of control. They were willing to give some power back and see us more as partners."

In any law enforcement agency, small or large, one way to get started is to find a part of the city where the commanders are willing to try this program. Sergeants need to be behind this as well as the chief. For patrol officers, their sergeants are more influential in their day-to-day activity than is their chief. If one or two

sergeants believe in the program, they can sell it to their officers.

Understand the Dynamics of the Law Enforcement Culture and Fit In

Hutchison says that it takes a certain type of person to blend into the law enforcement culture. Police are concerned about the security of their case and are wary of outsiders who might inadvertently ruin the investigation or evidence. Someone who is setting up a victim services division within a law enforcement agency needs to understand that culture and feel comfortable there. That may mean bantering with the officers while still pushing the program. Also, Hutchison emphasizes that the police department is not the same as working in a nonprofit advocacy agency. While advocacy is a top priority, victim advocates must also understand the law enforcement culture and blend in to attain the goals of meeting the needs of victims and officers. Hutchison gives the example: "A victim advocate may hear two officers making a joke at a crime scene away from others' ears, which may not be necessarily cold-hearted but just relieving tension."

Start With the Basics—Help Patrol Officers With Family Violence Calls

When the Austin Victim Services Program started, Commander Billy Pence was a patrol officer and part of the informal power structure that Hutchison had identified. Police had the attitude that "we're cops and you're not," Pence recalled. Patrol officers, however, also recognized that they had a problem they did not know how to solve. "The thing with cops is that we were making these calls for family disturbances and, back then, unless we saw the man assault the wife, we couldn't do anything," Pence said. "I remember making those calls and feeling really bad about leaving. When Ann [Hutchison] came up with the program,

it was an answer. It freed up our time. [In the past] there was a lot of time spent sitting with victims—that was time consuming and yet we felt bad that we weren't doing more."

Initially, the police chief wanted Hutchison to work on family violence cases. Most of the family violence calls came between 6 p.m. and 2 a.m. on the weekends when all the social service agencies, except rape crisis shelters and shelters for battered women (normally full), were closed. To have a trained counselor able to come to the scene immediately meant that an officer could get back in service faster and respond to other calls. An officer also had something more to offer a victim. Counselors could provide a sympathetic ear, crisis counseling, and practical resources for victims of family violence. (By the time the Austin Victim Services Program began in March 1980, the officer guidelines committee had recommended that counselors be available for all call requests.)

Victim services counselors started with providing basic services to patrol officers. If police were executing a series of search warrants and had to arrest parents, counselors would take care of the children so officers could go on to the next call. Babysitting may not be the favorite duty of trained counselors, but it often allowed them an opportunity to assess any trauma or problems that the children were having, thus demonstrating that the counselors were a valuable addition to the police department. They also established a goal of arriving at a scene within 15 minutes or less for 75 percent of calls so that the officers did not have to wait for them.

Assistant Police Chief Michael McDonald recalled an incident early in the Victim Services Program in which the counselors proved themselves. He was a patrol

officer at that time, and one morning at about 8 a.m. he received a call of a possible sexual assault. He arrived at an apartment and knocked on the door. A woman opened the door just a couple of inches. She was distraught and afraid. McDonald remembers her hands trembling. McDonald and his partner talked to her and tried to persuade her to let them in, but she would not open the door further. He worried that the assailant might still be inside and wondered whether he should force his way in. But he sensed that the woman was alone and did not want to traumatize her more by barging in. McDonald decided to call Victim Services. It was one of the first times he had asked them for help.

A female counselor arrived and talked to the woman for about 45 minutes. Then the counselor told McDonald that she thought the woman was embarrassed to talk to another woman about what had happened, which surprised McDonald. The counselor recommended calling in a male colleague, which the officers did. The man spoke to her and persuaded her to let them in the house. Four hours after McDonald arrived, the woman opened the door. Once inside, the woman told them that she went into her apartment building the night before when a man followed her, forced his way into her place, and raped her. From the description, it sounded similar to two other rapes that had taken place in the area. Police had a suspect, but none of the victims could positively identify him. From the look of this case, police had run into the same difficulty. The woman was reluctant to say much, and she had already taken a shower, thus destroying some of the evidence of the crime.

"We started asking questions and she froze up," McDonald said. "The counselors talked to her and said that they knew how bad it was for her but that it

was important to catch the person responsible for this. She shouldn't feel ashamed." The counselors explained to her that the officers needed to gather her clothes for testing, and she eventually told the counselors which clothes McDonald and his partner should collect from her bedroom. The counselors accompanied the woman to the hospital examination. The evidence that the officers gathered, along with her positive identification of the assailant, helped convict the suspect. "[The counselors] made a tremendous difference," McDonald said. "We didn't have to overreact and make things worse for her."

Address Problems and Conflicts Quickly

When problems occur, and they will, it is critical that the victim services coordinator address them quickly. For example, an officer might perceive that a counselor did not follow his or her requests. It is important for victim services counselors to have established good rapport with law enforcement officers so that officers will come to them when there are problems. Counselors need to listen to the officers' issues and validate their feelings and issues. According to Hutchison, every time she talked to an officer about a problem, it worked out well. All of the officers were more than willing to see both sides or accept Hutchison's apology, if necessary. In fact, most officers now are protective of the Austin counselors and want to work out differences quickly, according to Hutchison.

Second Phase: Becoming an Essential Part of the Agency

The second phase of the program is changing victim services from being viewed as a luxury to being accepted as an essential part of the law enforcement agency. In Austin, that took an additional 10 years. During that time, Hutchison

focused on program development and on ensuring that the staff delivered quality services. One of the difficulties for Hutchison was handing over power to her staff. For the first several years, she *was* the program, and she knew she could do the job. For it to grow and provide more comprehensive services, Hutchison had to delegate responsibilities and duties.

Add More Services

The program also concentrated on securing grants to add more services and on establishing performance measures and collecting statistics to back up the Division's usefulness. During the second phase, the program added the Children's Service Unit through a grant in 1984 and the Family Violence Protection Unit in 1989. In 1985, counselors also started formally offering debriefings for officers who worked on traumatic cases. From time to time, Hutchison would call together the patrol officers' guidelines committee to check on how the program was going and to make any needed changes.

"By 1990, we were seen as a strong, important part of the Austin Police Department," Hutchison said. "That doesn't mean that we are equals. That's just a reality. Civilians are support staff to law enforcement. But we are key personnel to advocate for victims, the community, and the officers."

Develop and Track Measurable Goals and Keep Good Statistics

Having measurable goals and keeping track of them is a way to monitor a program's progress and to demonstrate to law enforcement and to funders that the services are making a difference. Each unit of the Austin Victim Services Division has specific goals that are tracked every month. The program's highest number of calls are for family violence,

and it has a goal of reducing the number of calls to the same household or the recidivism rate with the families they work with to 10 percent; the national average is 55 percent to 65 percent. In 1998, the recidivism rate was about 20 percent on calls that Victim Services worked on in Austin. According to statistics compiled by the Austin program, if officers respond to four or more calls to the same address for family violence, it escalates the predictability of an aggravated assault or homicide by 75 percent. The Victim Services Division also has a goal of getting some services to 100 percent of all victims of violent crime. Counselors are reaching about one-third of the victims, Hutchison said. Those services can include having volunteers call victims who have not received services to see how they are doing and whether they need any emotional support. The Victim Services Division is also working on running public service announcements and putting up billboards so that crime victims will know about victim services. The Victim Services Division is establishing alliances with faith communities, who can help victims with needs such as transportation, house repairs, food, and rent.

Another important statistic to keep is the number of officer hours saved by providing these services. That statistic is a good way of quantifying to law enforcement agencies the impact of these victim services. In 1999, Victim Services Division Crisis Teams saved the Austin Police Department patrol officers 3,672 hours—time that they would have otherwise spent with victims. Instead, Victim Services counselors worked with victims in many ways, which included calming them down, taking statements, and arranging for transportation or services. This allowed officers to finish investigating a crime or to take more calls.

Third Phase: Maintaining Staff

Take Care of Your Own

In this third phase, the Victim Services Division took a step back and examined what they needed to do to take care of themselves as well. While they often held debriefings for officers involved in cases of traumatic deaths, they rarely did the same for themselves. According to Hutchison, the counselors were so concerned about proving to officers that they were tough enough to handle the job that at times they neglected their own well-being. Now, policies are in place to make sure that counselors take care of themselves and are taken care of. No one can handle more than three death cases per week without approval from a supervisor. Supervisors meet every other week with counselors, and the units hold staff meetings twice a month to see how people handle group interactions. Every counselor talks to a staff psychologist every 6 months for a checkup.

Hire Staff With Varying Backgrounds

When hiring for a victim services unit, it is important to hire skilled individuals who reflect the needs of the community. The Austin program has made special efforts to bring cultural diversity to the unit—to hire staff who speak Spanish, have specialized training in working with children, and have expertise in crisis intervention. The program hires mental health professionals with varying levels of experience who handle a variety of situations from crisis intervention to assessment. In addition, the Austin program has a number of staff who support victims through the criminal justice system by providing them information about the case and about their rights. Many programs choose to have victim advocates in this position. The Austin program utilizes other mental health professionals for this work.

Everyone who is hired or who volunteers first undergoes careful screening to ensure that they are suited for the often stressful work.

The program has also set up a structure for volunteers. At first, the program used volunteers who were criminal justice interns and undergraduates in mental health, but the cases were too intense and demanded too much immediate assessment for the students' abilities. Now, all volunteers must have a background in mental health or 2 years of counseling experience. They are given a criminal background check and must go through 60 hours of training over 8 weeks to be on a crisis team. Those who want to volunteer must go on an 8-hour ride-along shift with a police officer who gives input about whether they are well suited for this work. Volunteers also must commit to working one 8-hour shift a month for a year.

People volunteer for the crisis team because they want to use or develop their skills in crisis counseling. Not a lot of academic courses exist on crisis counseling, according to Steve Holifield, a licensed professional counselor who coordinates the training. Law enforcement personnel teach some of the volunteer classes, which is one way for them to become invested in the program. Paid counselors can nominate volunteers to be team leaders who drive the car, work the radio, and make all the same decisions as the staff. The program currently has 12 volunteers who are team leaders. Holifield keeps in touch with the volunteers by e-mailing them or calling to check in after each shift that they work.

Conclusion

Now that the Victim Services Division at the Austin Police Department is well established, the program faces the challenges of meeting the demands of a decentralized department. When Hutchison started 20 years ago, she knew virtually every officer in the department. That is no longer possible. Austin has grown from 250,000 to 800,000 residents in the past two decades. The District Representative Unit, which was set up in 1996, is one answer to that problem. Those counselors are also able to address the previously unknown victims—like a woman who sang in the choir or the coworker and kids down the street who were affected when someone they knew was killed. In the past, Victim Services may not have reached out to them.

In the months following the triple homicide, Victim Services counselors continued to provide services to the victims' families, friends, and coworkers. A little more than a year after the murders, the suspect, Louis Castro Perez, was convicted of murder and given the death penalty. Officers had found a palm print on a bloody tile floor, which matched a print of Perez that they had on file. Prosecutors never discovered a clear motive for the slayings. In the midst of this horror, the victims' families have had someone from Victim Services at their side, right from the start. "They had access to assistance that they otherwise wouldn't have had," said Delores Litton, the counselor in the homicide unit who worked most closely with the victims' families. "They had information about what would happen next in the investigation. They had some guidance on what to do next, like how to find counseling for their children. They did not have to worry about those details . . ."

Biography

Ann Hutchison is the founder and former director of the Victim Services Division of the Austin (Texas) Police Department. For more than 20 years, she has been a therapist and counselor and provided crisis intervention for trauma victims and family members. She has intervened on behalf of victims, survivors, children, and employees in events such as the Killeen-Luby Massacre, the Waco-Branch Davidian siege, and the Oklahoma City Murrah Federal Building bombing. Hutchison has been responsible for many projects and grants and their implementation to seed, expand, and build direct services for victims and survivors.

Hutchison's work has been recognized statewide and nationally. Hutchison's Victim Services Program in Austin, Texas, has been recognized by OVC as one of the top two law enforcement victim assistance programs in the Nation and by the National Center for Victims of Crime for "Best Model Crisis Team." Hutchison also has been featured three times on the *Rescue 911* television show for her Crisis Team Unit, Family Violence Unit, and for her work on debriefing officers by victims services staff. Hutchison has assisted law enforcement agencies nationally and internationally (including Japan, Canada, England, and Germany) in developing victim services programs. She has received the Governor's Award for Excellence in Victim Assistance in a Law Enforcement Agency in addition to the YWCA Women Leaders Award for Outstanding Achievement/Health and Human Services.

For Further Information

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About the Author

Currently a freelance journalist, Susan Parker has reported on violent crime, police misconduct, legal trends, and high-profile court cases and developed feature stories examining how crime and violence affect people's lives. Her articles on the conflict in Guatemala were published in *Time Magazine* and *The San Francisco Chronicle*, including a feature on an innovative program to help children cope with the trauma of war.

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