

New Directions from the Field:

Victims' Rights and Services for the 21st Century

Recommendations for the Faith Community

The recommendations below, which appear in the May 1998 *New Directions* Report, have been reformatted for replication and distribution.

Tens of millions of Americans call upon clergy and faith community leaders for spiritual guidance, support, and information in times of personal crisis. While the faith community has historically provided prison ministry programs, few religious institutions have developed programs to specifically serve and support victims of crime. However, religious entities and congregations working in conjunction with victim assistance agencies have the capacity to provide important services to crime victims. In an effort to increase awareness about the key role of the faith community in the delivery of comprehensive and sensitive victim support services, the following recommendations are set forth by the field:

1. The faith community should recognize that the victim is in need of aid, comfort, and spiritual ministry, and faith-based congregations and organizations should provide assistance to victims whenever possible.
2. Courses on crime victimization and crime victim assistance should be established in clergy educational institutions and theological seminaries, including both worship and pastoral counseling courses.
3. Continuing education on crime victimization and crime victim assistance should be provided for all clergy and religious leaders, including chaplains in hospitals, police departments, the military, and other individuals within the faith community who may come into contact with victims.
4. Religious institutions at all levels should cooperate with victim assistance agencies and organizations to offer joint services to victims of crime and to disseminate publications on crime victim assistance.
5. The clergy should provide training for victim assistance providers, criminal justice officials, State victim assistance administrators, compensation program directors, and other public officials about the important role they can play in assisting victims.
6. Requiring clergy to report suspected cases of child abuse should be seriously considered by religious institutions and governmental agencies, and appropriate policies should be developed to ensure children are protected. Even in cases involving confidential communications, the clergy should hold the needs of children paramount and recognize their moral responsibility to help and protect child victims.
7. Communities of faith should hold clergy and other religious leaders in positions of trust within their congregations accountable for crimes they commit, including sexual acts against adults and children. Policies and procedures should be developed to ensure that appropriate cases of clergy misconduct are referred to law enforcement agencies.
8. Religious and spiritual leaders should be encouraged to use their pulpits to educate and sensitize their congregations about crime and victimization issues.
9. Religious and spiritual leaders should be willing to serve in leadership roles on community crisis response teams providing services in the aftermath of mass violence and other crimes that have significant impact upon entire communities.