

**The National Evaluation of State Victims of
Crime Act Compensation and Assistance
Programs: Findings and Recommendations
From a National Survey of State
Administrators**

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The Office for Victims of Crime (OVC), which administers the Crime Victims' Fund established by the 1984 Victims of Crime Act (VOCA), has disbursed more than \$3.2 billion in formula grants to State victims' compensation and assistance programs since 1986. These funds have supported direct payments to victims for crime-related expenses, as well as thousands of local service providers across the Nation who assist victims of a broad range of crimes. OVC provided funding to the National Institute of Justice, which commissioned the Urban Institute, a nonprofit policy analysis group in Washington, D.C., and the San Diego Association of Governments to conduct a national evaluation of State victims' compensation and assistance programs supported in part with VOCA funds.

The evaluation has several phases and will gather information from State administrators, advocates, members of advisory bodies, local service providers, and victims. This paper, drawing on the first of several longer reports from this multiyear study, summarizes important grant administration policy and practice information obtained from a phone survey of State administrators and publicly available data and offers recommendations for improvements to State and Federal policies and operations.¹

Implications for Future Researchers

This ongoing project will examine policy and administration issues in more detail through site visits to selected State and local programs and through phone surveys and focus groups with victims served by compensation and assistance programs. Forthcoming reports will analyze key issues in grant program policy and administration in more detail, examine local service provision issues and practices, and assess how well compensation and assistance services meet victims' needs and how services could be improved. Future research projects should build on the findings from this research to deepen our knowledge of how best to use resources to address crime victims' needs.

Implications for Practitioners

Because State compensation and assistance programs are two distinct types of programs and have unique policy and administration issues, findings and recommendations are presented for each program in turn.

Findings

State Compensation Programs

The findings from program performance data and this survey of administrators indicate that compensation programs are generally financially sound and are functioning in accordance with identified goals and standards (National Association of Crime Victim Compensation Boards, 1996; OVC, 1998). In general, States seem to be performing the most essential activities to implement good financial planning, outreach, claims processing and decisionmaking, coordination with victim assistance programs, program administration, and training. More advanced activities could, however, be implemented in each of these areas to further enhance program functioning and services to victims, in accordance with recommendations from the

National Association of Crime Victim Compensation Board's and OVC's expert panels. Advanced activities include—

Financial planning. State legislatures and advocacy groups should support efforts to expand benefits in States with revenues that exceed payout needs and raise additional funds to better meet victims' needs in States with a funding shortfall.

Outreach to victims. States should consider making greater use of technology and other innovative means to reach out to victims. Efforts should also focus on reaching victim groups (defined by type of crime and victims' characteristics) who have not been well represented in claimant rolls. Working closely with groups who represent or serve these victims may be very useful in identifying and overcoming barriers to accessing compensation. Issues that may arise when one type of provider (e.g., victim/witness staff in prosecutors' offices) is the primary source of help in accessing compensation should be examined and addressed.

Claims processing and decisionmaking. Processing time could be improved by streamlining and resolving delays in verification procedures. Efforts to increase payment caps, where needed, such as for funeral expenses, should be supported. Special efforts may be needed to enhance the general understanding and improve how programs apply the concept of contributory misconduct.

Coordination. Coordination with victim assistance programs should move beyond communication toward active collaboration to further the goal of building a seamless web of support for victims.

Program administration. As State programs expand, additional efforts should be focused on strategic planning, needs assessments, and the promotion of innovative approaches to serving victims. Technical assistance from OVC and others with expertise in these areas may be needed to help administrators explore new areas in productive ways.

Training. Training efforts should continue to include members of the justice system and other professionals who work with victims, such as health and mental health care providers, funeral directors, school personnel, and representatives of Indian tribes and other ethnic or racial minorities. Informing a broader range of professionals about compensation should help reach victims who have not been well represented previously.

These activities could be supported under the VOCA administrative allowance. Increases in this allowance would facilitate States' efforts to undertake these expansions. Success in these activities would certainly produce more demand on funds for awarding claims, suggesting the need to increase overall allocations in conjunction with additional funding to enhance program operations. Better functioning programs would need more funds for awards because they would meet victims' needs more completely.

State Assistance Programs

Findings from the current research, in conjunction with input from State administrators (OVC, 1997), OVC priorities and guidelines, and recommendations from the field (OVC, 1998), indicate that State VOCA assistance programs are generally functioning well in a number of

areas. Although this is commendable, particularly in light of the difficult funding situations under which programs operate, a number of issues related to VOCA assistance program operations and management remain.

Funding allocations. The most pressing problem facing State administrators is the difficulty of long-range planning, given extreme fluctuations in funding levels from year to year. The 4-year obligation period certainly helps to relieve pressures on State administrators to distribute a variable amount of funds. The Federal caps of the past 2 years, although controlling fluctuations, have led to a large amount (more than \$724 million) being set aside for crime victim purposes, although it is not available for allocation. It is critical that policies be developed for putting these funds to work for victims in a timely way and in accordance with the legislative intent of VOCA. These policies should consider the possibility that Congress will continue imposing annual caps, as well as the possibility that the entire pool of funds may become available for allocation. Mechanisms for smoothing allocation fluctuations should be developed as needed. Involving State administrators and other critical stakeholders in policy development efforts might prove useful.

Strategic planning. Many States reported doing needs assessments, coordinating funding sources, working to increase revenues, and other planning-related activities. But only about half the States reported a strategic plan for victim services funding at the time of this survey. Such a plan can assist administrators in managing a complex grant program with a 4-year distribution period for each year's allocation and changing funding levels from year to year. Because strategic planning is clearly a priority for OVC, this seems to be an area in which it could provide critical support. Efforts to encourage those States with plans to share information on the content of their plans, how they were developed, and how they are implemented could be useful to those States without such plans.

Needs assessments. Although most States reported conducting needs assessments, their methods varied widely. Knowing what victims' needs are, and which victims and needs are underserved, is critical for funding decisions. A closer look at how needs assessments are being done, which methods seem more useful than others, and how the results are used could also be helpful to State administrators.

Outreach to service providers and underserved populations. As States' abilities to do long-range planning improve, additional efforts should be made to reach qualified service providers and victim populations not currently served by VOCA funding. Needs assessments should provide useful input on these efforts, and partnerships between State administrators and groups that represent underserved populations should be helpful in identifying barriers to service utilization and finding ways to overcome them.

Coordination. Coordination of the many funding sources available to assist victims of crime is important to eliminate gaps or duplication of services. While coordination mechanisms vary, more than three-quarters of the States make efforts to co-track at least some of the major Federal victim assistance funding streams and find these efforts useful. Coordination with the State compensation program is also common but is mostly limited to training efforts and distributing program materials. Ways in which VOCA and other assistance administrators, compensation

administrators, and Federal victim/witness personnel might work together more closely should be identified and supported.

Support for administration and training. The administrative allowance can and has been used to support many activities that OVC and leaders in the field have identified as crucial (such as strategic planning, needs assessments, coordination, and various outreach activities). Use of this allowance seems to be on the rise, and State administrators have stressed the need for greater support for administrative activities. Many administrators would also like to broaden the use of administrative funds to include prevention activities (which would require a legislative change), among others. Training funds are also being put to use, although some administrators would like them to be made more accessible by reducing or eliminating the 20 percent match requirement. Given the current funding environment and the gaps remaining between recommended and actual practices, OVC should consider the feasibility of increasing these allowances and expanding their uses.

Notes

¹ A copy of the full report is available at www.urban.org/crime/Nat_eval_VOCA.html.

References

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