

The Value of Victim Advocates at the Crime Scene

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Irshad Altheimer, Ph.D.
Ellen M. Granberg Endowed Full Professor | Department of Criminal Justice
Director | Center for Public Safety Initiatives
Rochester Institute of Technology
ixagcj@rit.edu

Vivian Contreras
Research Assistant | Center for Public Safety Initiatives
vsc1457@rit.edu

Introduction

Violent crimes leave lasting effects on victims and their communities (De La Rue et al., 2022). Often victims find themselves struggling with unmet pre- and post-discharge needs, some of which include mental health-related challenges (Guay et al., 2018; Patton et al., 2019; Rheingold et al., 2015). Following victimization, it is all too common that individuals alter their daily lives due to feelings of distress coupled with general difficulty transitioning back to the person they were before (Kagawa et al., 2020; O'Neill et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2020).

Recovering from violent victimization can be a challenge, and extant literature suggests victims require a variety of services to support them. For example, victim advocates are trained personnel that guide them in finding the programs that are best suited for them (Carmody, 2006; De La Rue et al., 2022; Lonsway et al., 2013; Wegrzyn et al., 2023). They are essential to addressing needs and connecting victims with proper services directly after their victimization, sometimes even at the crime scene (De La Rue et al., 2022; Hatten & Moor, 2010; Lonsway et al., 2013).

What are victim advocates?

Many programs that support victims' needs were developed by the United States Department of Justice, specifically, the Office of Victims of Crime (Evans, 2014; National Institute of Justice, 1998). With the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA), the programs have been provided with further funding, allowing for the introduction of victim advocates (Evans, 2014; Miller et al., 1993; Wesely & Dewey, 2022). Victim advocates are trained individuals who work with victims to inform them of various treatment options and support services (De La Rue et al., 2022; Lonsway et al., 2013). Advocates often arrive at crime scenes after police have

contacted them to provide support for victims (Hatten & Moore, 2010). Upon arrival, they can offer physical and emotional support while police address the scene (Hatten & Moore, 2010; Lonsway et al., 2013).

Victims can have their questions answered, and be connected with counseling, shelter, and financial assistance programs (Hatten & Moor, 2010; Miller et al., 1993). Additionally, educational information and referral to other resources are provided along with assistance navigating formal institutions and the paperwork that often comes from them (De La Rue, 2022). Beyond direct provision of services, advocates also spend their time talking with victims to better understand who they are, the trauma they have experienced, and what their needs are (De La Rue et al., 2022; Lonsway et al., 2013). With this approach, victims receive well-tailored care plans. Advocates provide victims with knowledge regarding the importance of their decisions and treatment, empowering them to speak up for themselves and their needs (Lonsway et al., 2013).

What do victims need from victim advocates?

Following violent victimization, victims can feel lost as they maneuver their way through different parts of their trauma, injuries, treatment, and in some cases, legal proceedings (Campbell, 2006; Kold, 2012). Patton et al. (2016) conducted research with 10 level 1 trauma patients who were all victims of gun violence and reported that many participants reported having difficulty speaking up about things, such as: the need for better support and communication with hospital personnel; not having their treatment needs met in full; struggles obtaining medicine after discharge; and, challenges with transportation for follow-up appointments. Other extant literature also identified the need for better access to mental

health resources, both in terms of provider availability and location of medical/mental health services (Hink et al., 2021; Patton et al., 2016).

The utilization of crime victim advocates permits the facilitation of a liaison system wherein needs communicated by victims are met by the advocate coordinating with service providers, both formal and informal, to ensure that their client receives the best treatment possible (De La Rue et al., 2022; Lonsway et al. 2013; Wegrzyn et al., 2023). This affords victims an outlet to address any unmet needs without feeling that they are being ignored or disregarded.

Mental health changes are a prominent issue that victims face. With exposure to violent crimes, some victims have expressed their need for therapy or access to more clinics to receive further help them after being discharged from the hospital (Hink et al., 2021; Patton et al., 2016). As a treatment plan is formulated with counseling services and advocates, it can take some time to ensure all the needs of the victim are met. A short-term option for victims is crisis intervention (Hatten & Moor, 2010). This is a role taken on by advocates as they support victims by providing them with a space to share their experiences, express their feelings, listen to their concerns, and provide validation about their responses to trauma (Hatten & Moor, 2010; Lonsway et al. 2013).

Even after receiving treatment, many victims have been found to experience post-traumatic stress disorder, acute stress disorder, major depressive disorder, substance abuse disorder, complex grief, depression, isolation, distress, and anxiety (Guay et al., 2019, 2018; Kagawa et al., 2020; O'Neill et al., 2020; Rheingold et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2020). These challenges can often be compounded as individuals struggle to find a therapist that fits all their needs (Hink et al. 2021; O'Neill et al., 2020). Victim advocates could of course help with this and

work with both provider and patient to ensure their client gets the treatment they need. To this end, victims often experience their trauma differently so when advocates listen to what they need they can develop a treatment plan with providers that fit their specific needs.

Benefits of victim advocates

Advocates provide victims with more than just brochures about programs. These are individuals who guide their clients through the various challenges they will face directly after victimization (De La Rue et al., 2022; Hatten & Moore, 2010; Lonsway et al. 2013; Wegrzyn et al., 2023). They play a key role in victims' interactions with the criminal justice system and medical/mental health professionals, facilitating connections that positively impact victims. By guiding a victim through their initial interactions with formal/informal services and service providers, an advocate can make a victim's experience with such institutions/individuals more positive. With victims being listened to and having all aspects of their lives -- trauma, well-being, injuries, needs, and concerns -- addressed in ways where they do not feel as if they are facing these challenges alone, an advocate can be viewed as a crucial piece in the healing puzzle (Gains & Wells, 2015). For example, in the case of a non-English speaking victim, an advocate would ensure that they have access to an interpreter for service provision and legal matters, if applicable (Carmody, 2006; Lonsway et al., 2013).

To this end, advocates ensure victims are aware of their rights (Lonsway et al., 2013; Wegrzyn et al., 2023). Victims who decide to pursue legal action can benefit from support from advocates as they ensure victims receive up-to-date information on meetings with prosecutors, arraignments, hearings, and court appearances while preparing them for trial (Gains & Wells, 2015; Lonsway et al., 2013).

Advocates can also support the family members of victims (Evans, 2014). For example, family members of homicide victims can be provided with financial reimbursement through VOCA, and advocates can gather the essential information to fill out the compensation forms (Evans, 2014; Wesely & Dewey, 2024). This reimbursement can go towards mental health and grief counseling, funeral and burial costs, medical bills, and lost wages (Evans, 2014; Wesely & Dewey, 2022).

All the complex changes and practices that an individual is exposed to post-violent victimization can become understandable and less challenging through the assistance of advocates. By having contact with advocates directly from the beginning at crime scenes, victims and their families can understand the steps that follow victimization. They can understand their options, be educated on the different processes, and begin preparing for future challenges. Advocates can ease victims into working with criminal justice personnel and medical professionals, thus taking away much of the distress they experience (Campbell, 2006; Kold, 2012; Lonsway et al., 2013).

Barriers that hinder victim advocates' support

Due to the overwhelming nature of being victimized and how chaotic the crime scene can be, victims have been found to decline police officers' offers for assistance from advocates (Hatten & Moore, 2010). Crime scene confusion can be compounded by communication and cooperation barriers between law enforcement and victim advocates, which hinders the latter group's ability to effectively connect with victims and their surrogates (Carmody, 2006; Gains & Wells, 2015; Lonsway et al., 2013). Additionally, there is a lack of awareness about the roles victim advocates play from the general public, so victims do not know to ask for them

(De La Rue et al., 2022). Moreover, speaking a different language or being of another culture can prevent victims from understanding the role of victim advocates and how they can help (Carmody, 2006).

Conclusion

Building the capacity to provide victim advocates to those individuals who have been violently victimized has the potential to positively impact victims and their communities. Advocates provide vital support and connection to resources that individuals need most often post-victimization. Having advocates at crime scenes would facilitate victims receiving immediate assistance whilst also offering provisions for more long-term, holistic support. Together, victims and advocates can develop a plan based on their discussions and begin the long process of recovery, potentially also, dealing with legal challenges.

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