

ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF HOMICIDE CO-VICTIMS IN OHIO



Landmark Needs Assessment & Policy Recommendations



Ohio Victim Witness Association
September 2021

Executive Summary

Every homicide creates more than one victim. In addition to the individual lives taken, each act of homicide creates a blast radius that forever alters the fabric of their families.

Almost 800 homicides were reported in Ohio in 2020, and as the number of homicides continues to rise in Ohio, so, too, does the number of families impacted by deadly violence in the state.

The current system for providing services for homicide co-victims must undergo changes if it is to effectively meet the needs of this group, which unfortunately grows larger by the day.

The Ohio Victim Witness Association has developed several policy recommendations based on surveys of homicide co-victims and service providers.

HOMICIDE CO-VICTIMS & SERVICE PROVIDER SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS

27%

*Homicide
co-victims
notified
about
crime
victims
rights*

47%

*Service
providers
whose
agencies
don't do
notification
training*



HOUSING ASSISTANCE FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

*Two biggest gaps identified
by service providers*

What We Can Do | Key Policy Recommendations

- 1** *Victim service providers need more training specific to homicide co-victims with regard to grief, trauma, and cultural responsiveness.*
- 2** *All agencies and providers working with co-victims should have detailed notification protocols in place so survivors are never in the dark.*
- 3** *Organizations should establish victim navigators to assist families after the homicide of their loved one.*
- 4** *The state should reevaluate the method it uses for awarding victim compensation as well as expanding funding for witness protection, emergency housing and more.*



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Background

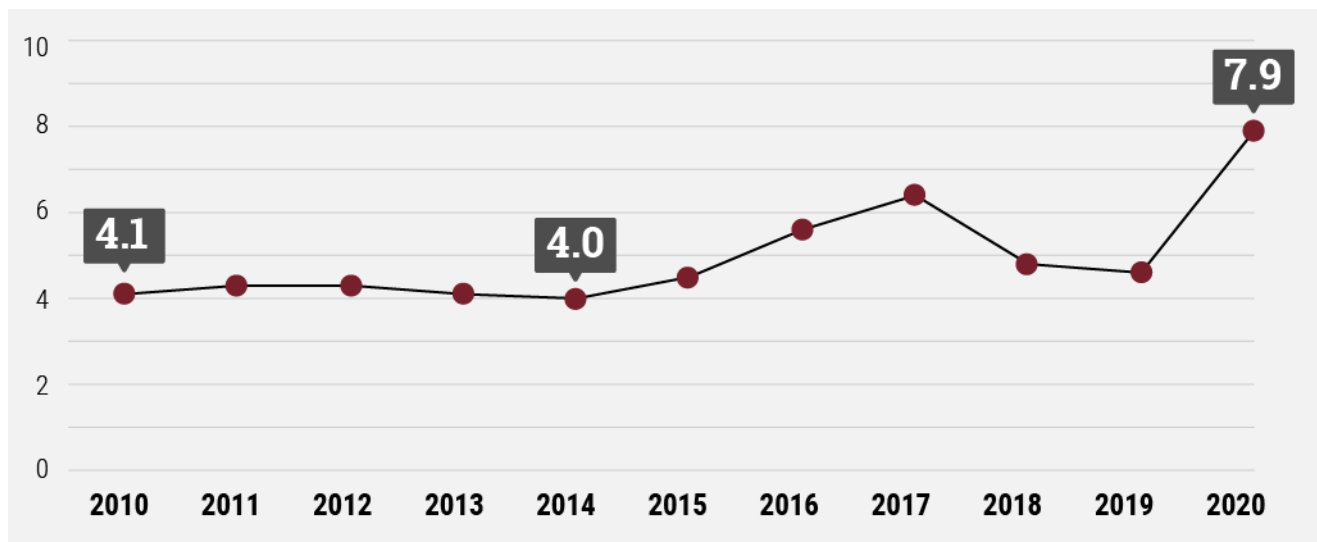
The homicide rates in many areas of Ohio have increased substantially over the last five years. The state homicide rate increased from 4.5 per 100,000 in 2015 to 6.4 per 100,000 in 2017. By 2020, the rate was 7.97 per 100,000 (Ohio Office of Criminal Justice Services).

These increases have been particularly severe in urban areas across the state. For example, the number of homicides in Cleveland rose from 129 in 2015 to 189 in 2020 (Cuyahoga County Medical Examiner’s Office). The 781 homicides reported in Ohio in 2020 represent not only 781 individuals who lost their lives due to homicide, but also countless families and friends who mourned, children who lost parents, and parents who lost their children – homicide co-victims.

This number also represents the growing number of individuals who experienced Ohio’s criminal justice system in one form or another, even in the event where the suspect could not be found.

At the same time that rates of lethal violence have risen markedly in Ohio, funding for services for victims of crime has declined dramatically. We conducted this project and corresponding white paper in response to the critical need to identify the gaps, needs, and barriers that exist in Ohio for homicide co-victims with the ultimate goal of developing and implementing a best practices guide for serving homicide co-victims throughout the state. ▶

Ohio homicides per 100,000 residents, 2010-2020



SOURCES: Ohio Office of Criminal Justice Services and Federal Bureau of Investigation



BACKGROUND CONTINUED

The structure of the Ohio Crime Victim Compensation Program, upon which many homicide co-victims rely to cover not only the unexpected funeral expenses but also the range of costs that arise in the aftermath of a homicide, creates numerous obstacles to co-victims receiving compensation through the program. The program currently includes extensive prohibitions on who qualifies for an award, making the program inaccessible to many co-victims who are then left to their own devices to manage the often-staggering bills that follow a homicide.

There currently exists no established minimum standard of services for homicide co-victims in the state. As identified by the needs assessment described below, the experiences of homicide co-victims in Ohio vary greatly. Changes are needed to ensure that all homicide co-victims receive quality services that meet their needs by identifying best practices for serving co-victims in the state of Ohio. It is critical that the problems and shortcomings of the existing system be addressed now as the number of co-victims continues to increase at the same time that funding for these services has declined dramatically. ||

Landmark Needs Assessment

A landmark needs assessment was funded by an Edward C. Byrne Justice Assistance Grant in partnership with the Ohio Consortium of Crime Science (OCCS) and conducted in 2020. Dr. Wendy Regoeczi of Cleveland State University lead the data collection effort. Data were collected from service providers and co-victims.

Service providers were defined as individuals working in non-profit, governmental, for-profit, educational, and other organizations whose primary function is to serve victims of crime or in an organization that includes staff dedicated to serving crime victims. Service providers were provided an on-line survey containing a mixture of 30 open-ended questions and questions with pre-defined answer categories. Homicide co-victims were given the option of completing an on-line survey or a virtual interview consisting of 39 questions.

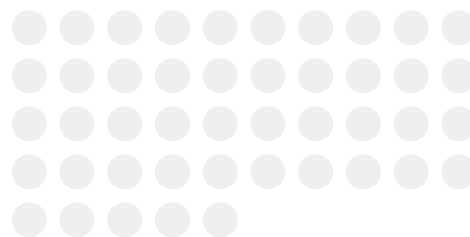
The survey and interview questions were developed in partnership with a Collaboration Board created by the Ohio Victim Witness Association (OVWA), reviewed and revised as a team to ensure the questions were comprehensive and accessible to the full range of potential respondents. OVWA Executive Director Liz Poprocki, with the assistance of the Collaboration Board, developed the list of respondents for the service provider survey and the entire collaboration board assisted with recruiting respondents for the co-victim surveys and interviews. These efforts were very successful.

A total of 47 service providers completed the survey. In addition, a total of 45 homicide co-victims provided survey responses and six co-victims participated in a virtual interview. All co-victims who participated in the survey or the interview were offered the opportunity to debrief with a professional from the Ohio Crisis Response Team. ||

■ Study participant details



SERVICE PROVIDERS: 47



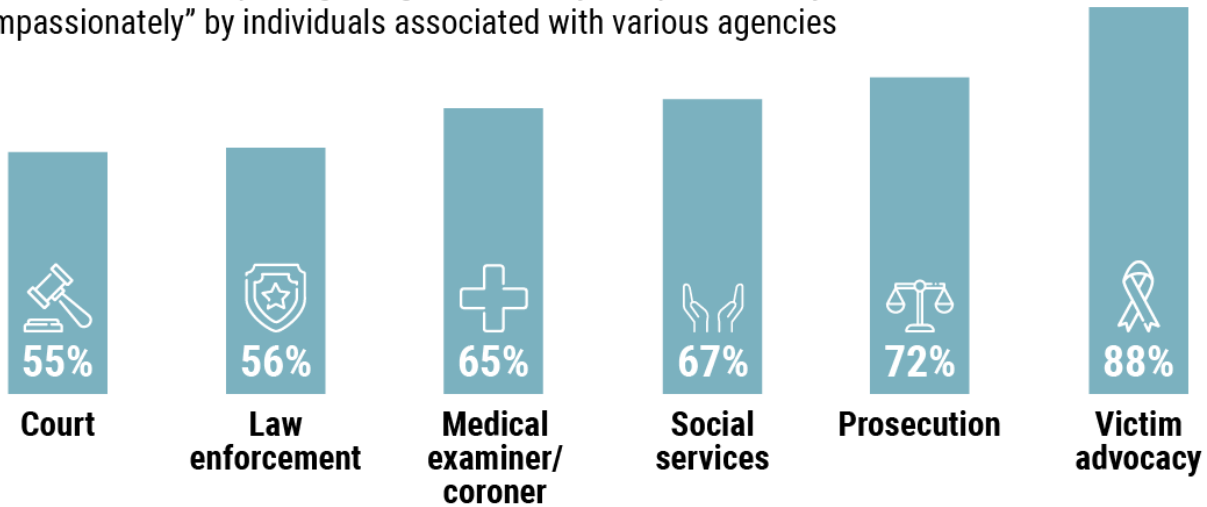
HOMICIDE CO-VICTIMS: 45

NEEDS OF HOMICIDE CO-VICTIMS

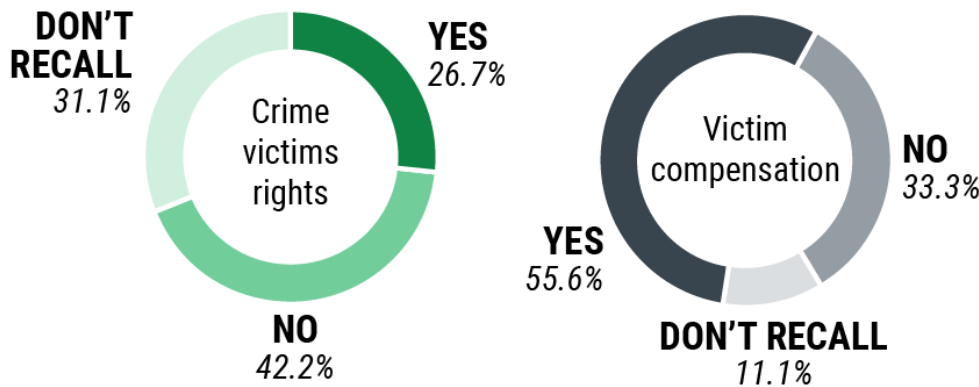
Survey of Ohio homicide survivors

Compassionate treatment varies; some agencies excel

Homicide survivors reporting being treated “very compassionately” or “compassionately” by individuals associated with various agencies

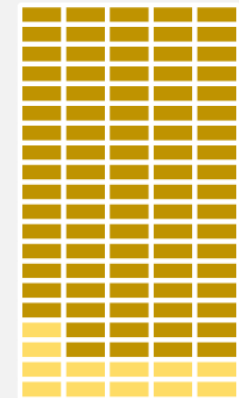


Notification about victims' rights & compensation



Media training lacks

Guidance on handling social media or press



Court-related experiences vary

Co-victims who got advanced notice of hearings



Co-victims informed about what to bring/not to bring into courtroom



Co-victims who had concerns about security when visiting courthouse



Problems & Concerns Identified by Homicide Co-Victims

A number of homicide co-victims reported they were not informed of their rights as crime victims. Ongoing education is needed for all professionals working directly with homicide co-victims to ensure they understand the rights of crime victims as mandated by the Ohio Constitution and Ohio Revised Code and are aware of the most current legislation in this area.

In addition, training is needed for how these rights apply to the unique situation of homicide co-victims and how to explain these rights in a trauma-informed way.

Many co-victims report not being told that they could apply for victim compensation. Some applied but were denied. Most commonly, when individuals were not awarded compensation, it was because the victim had a felony record. This serves to further penalize the most disadvantaged groups in our communities.

Victims with felony records are most likely to come from economically challenged neighborhoods where families do not have the financial resources to cover the expenses resulting from the violent death of their loved one and they are also unlikely to have any life insurance coverage or savings to pay for the funeral, medical bills, lost time at work, etc.

In one case a family was left to pay thousands of dollars in medical bills after being denied victim compensation because it was felt they had sufficient medical insurance. The family member's credit rating has since been significantly damaged by the debt accruing from the medical bills.

As the system operates on the basis of reimbursement, it is not structured to work effectively for families lacking resources. Applying for victim compensation appears to be particularly complicated in cases where a child has lost both parents.

The quality of the interactions co-victims had with individuals working in the criminal justice system varied considerably. While no agency was consistently identified as the most problematic, a number of co-victims reported a negative experience with the police or prosecutor's office. ►

Summary of the Problems & Concerns Identified by Homicide Co-Victims CONTINUED

There were exceptions, however, with some co-victims sharing a very positive experience, such as working with individuals who were very empathetic, caring, committed to helping the family get justice for their loved one, and who spent significant time with the family. A few have kept up relationships with these individuals for many years later.

Co-victims reported mixed experiences with the criminal justice system. Their responses made clear that their experiences are made better when they encounter kind, compassionate, supportive, professional individuals working in the criminal justice system, when they are kept informed and receive regular communication, when they feel like the professionals they encountered listened to them, and criminal justice officials periodically checked up on them.

Negative experiences with the criminal justice system included encountering individuals who lacked empathy and kindness, being denied access to information, feeling like the process was very impersonal, poor communication, and feeling like the offender's rights were given more importance than the victim's rights.

Many were not informed about what they could and could not bring to the courtroom. Court personnel sometimes assume family members know the protocols in spite of the fact they had never been to court before. When co-victims arrive at court with items relating to their loved one who was killed only to learn that they may not have these in the courtroom, this exacerbates their stress and anxiety.

A number of homicide co-victims received no referrals for services and thus they were left to figure these out on their own.

Most co-victims were not linked with a therapist or grief professional after their loss. Some were not provided information about support groups for homicide co-victims or services that were available for their children.

One reported only being provided referrals for their children and none for themselves. Another reported that the only information received was in a folder someone put on their door. Family members frequently found out about Parents Of Murdered Children or the Ohio Crime Victim Justice Center accidentally through an informal source like a friend or a stranger's post on Facebook, and this was often months and sometimes years after the homicide had occurred.



Summary of the Problems & Concerns Identified by Homicide Co-Victims CONTINUED

Co-victims identified numerous ways they felt re-victimized. Some related to issues around a lack of communication, including calls not being returned, feeling they were not listened to by criminal justice personnel, feeling they were not believed, being repeatedly asked the same questions, and being left with unanswered questions.

Many examples of re-victimization related to the court process, such as being talked into a plea bargain, feeling the sentence was inadequate, being instructed not to react in court, not being allowed in the courtroom after testifying, and having the autopsy photos shown in court (with no warning to the family members). ►

Summary of the Problems & Concerns Identified by Homicide Co-Victims CONTINUED

Others revolved around interactions with police and attorneys, including feeling the police were not being honest, fighting with prosecutors to hear all aspects of the case, feeling defense attorneys were lying, and feeling like the authorities were not trying to solve the homicide.

Very few homicide co-victims received guidance on how to work with the media or how to handle social media. This finding likely reflects that lack of training and education reported by service providers on how to work with the media and how to assist co-victims with media and social media.

As a result, it is not surprising that many co-victims reported negative experiences with the media, including being harassed by reporters, wrong information reported, the media being unkind, the media failing to use victims' names (referring to them instead by the homicide number they were in a given year), the media appearing uninterested in complete explanations (and desiring only quick answers), reporters walking straight into family's homes with other visitors, inappropriate portrayals of the victim and/or perpetrator, victim blaming, or the case receiving virtually no coverage at all.

A huge gap exists in support services for families experiencing a murder-suicide. This group seems to be particularly likely not to be informed about the resources available to them. These cases can also be tricky when the victim and perpetrator have an existing relationship, as this creates two families that know each other that have both experienced a loss.

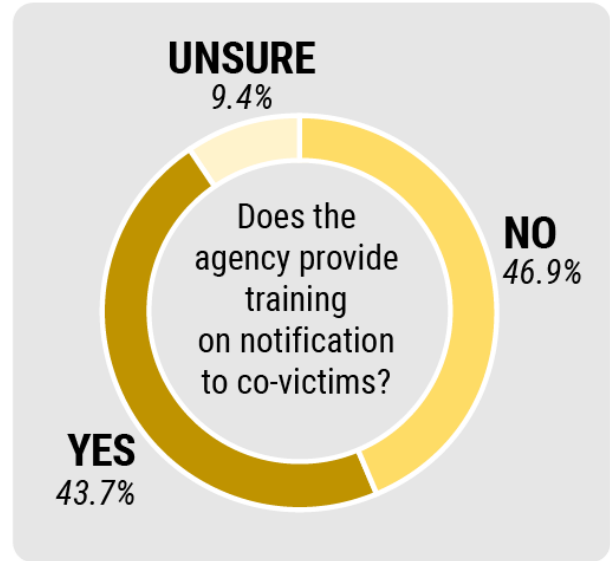
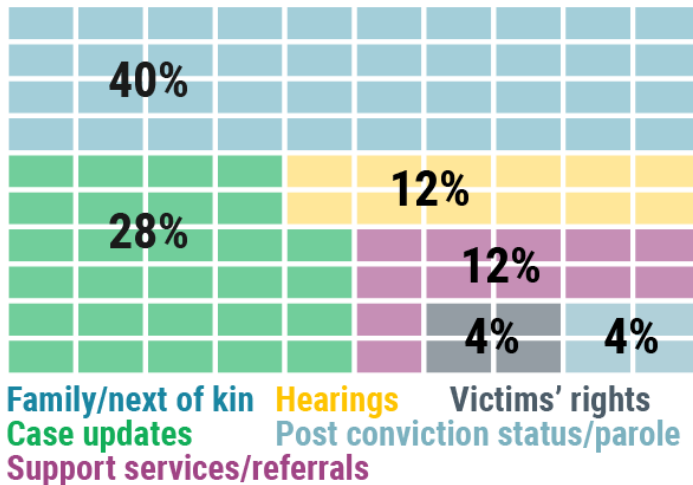
There is also a risk of perceiving the police are on the side of the perpetrator's family. Providing services and support to families involved in death penalty cases also present unique challenges given the particularly long timeframe of these cases as they go through the mandated series of appeals. Protocols for addressing the needs of these families are critical to ensure that they receive ongoing support in the years following the sentencing. ||

SERVING HOMICIDE SURVIVORS

Survey of Ohio service providers

Notification protocols & training aren't consistent

Presence of notification protocols varies depending on type of notification



Biggest gaps identified for co-victim services



Specialty training & protocols often lacking

Agency training on cultural differences and role it plays in serving homicide co-victims



Specific agency protocols for addressing co-victim needs in death penalty cases



Specific agency protocols for cases in which offender is not indicted



Problems & Concerns Identified by Service Providers

Nearly half of the service provider respondents worked for prosecution-based victim witness programs. Another 13 percent worked in other types of community based-advocacy, 11 percent were from state government-based advocacy, and nine percent worked within a law enforcement agency.

There was at least one respondent from each of the following other types of agencies: rape crisis center, child advocacy center, a combination rape crisis center and domestic violence shelter, trauma recovery center, clinical/mental health/substance abuse agency, legal advocacy, and funeral home. Problems and concerns identified by service providers across these agencies focused on notification protocols, training deficits, referrals, and gaps in services.

While some service providers are legally required to provide specific notifications to co-victims, fewer than half of service providers reported their agency had any protocols around notification to family and next of kin of homicide victims.

Agencies were even less likely to have notification protocols around hearings, case updates, post-conviction status and/or parole, and victims' rights. In addition, the survey results underscored a lack of protocols addressing needs of co-victims in death penalty cases. Some co-victims reported they learned about the homicide through the media instead of notification from a criminal justice or social service agency.

Improper notification can have a significant negative impact on the grieving process and longer term recovery of family members and next of kin and therefore it is critical that notification first be made by trained professionals. Fewer than half of respondents reported that their agency provided training on notification to co-victims.

Service providers identified a number of obstacles when using existing protocols. Most commonly these involved difficulties obtaining good contact information for co-victims and working to maintain open communication between family members and law enforcement. ►

Summary of the Problems & Concerns Identified by Service Providers CONTINUED

Other difficulties included the failure of law enforcement or the court to make notifications or to do so in a timely manner, unique circumstances of each case, protocols not specific to homicide co-victims, complications when multiple family member co-victims are in conflict with one another, the volume of cases to manage, and uncertainty and a lack of experience using the protocol.

Particularly striking was the lack of notification protocols for cold cases or when the offender is not indicted. In situations involving cold cases, this may result in co-victims going for extensive periods of time without any updates on the case and putting the onus on co-victims to constantly reach out to law enforcement to see what new information exists.

When offenders are not indicted, this can be particularly traumatic for co-victims who require timely and professional notification in such situations.

Service providers also reported a lack of training on cultural differences and their impact in serving co-victims. The majority of agencies did not have specific referrals for co-victims of color. Co-victims differ in their perceptions and prior experiences with the criminal justice system and also have varied cultural practices around grieving.

The lack of culturally diverse services specific to homicide can impact the ability of vulnerable populations to access services, to locate services that are culturally appropriate, and to address language barriers.

The most common referrals made were for counseling and therapy. Other frequent referrals included Parents Of Murdered Children, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, domestic violence services, services supporting basic needs, advocacy services, and the Ohio Crime Victim Compensation Program. The least frequent types of referrals made were legal services, rape crisis services, and crime scene assistance.

Respondents noted a number of referral service types lacking in their community, particularly financial assistance for those not eligible for compensation through the Ohio Crime Victim Compensation Program, grief counseling, housing assistance/relocation services, and support groups.

The mostly frequently mentioned gap in services concerned the lack of financial assistance for families who do not qualify for the Ohio Crime Victim Compensation Program. Respondents also identified a lack of procedures to address housing-related needs for co-victims and/or witnesses of homicide.

Summary of the Problems & Concerns Identified by Service Providers CONTINUED

It is also apparent from both the service provider survey and the survey and interview responses from co-victims themselves that there is a lack of services for families whose cases do not go through the criminal justice system, such as cold cases and cases of homicide followed by suicide.

While almost all respondents agreed that having specially trained advocates for working with homicide co-victims would be valuable, only slightly over half of respondents reported that their agency had such specifically trained advocates. ||



Conclusions & Recommendations

Increased training and resources are needed for victim service providers working with homicide co-victims throughout the state.

It is essential that all service providers have a solid understanding of trauma and grief relating to homicide, understand the importance of compassionate communication, and are knowledgeable regarding the range of services available for homicide co-victims locally and across the state. Grief and trauma training, along with education on cultural responsiveness, should also be offered to law enforcement, first responders, prosecutors, and advocates.

All agencies and organizations working with co-victims should have notification protocols in place.

Notification protocols are needed not just at the outset of a case with respect to death notification, but also to ensure that co-victims are kept informed of the status of a case throughout the police investigation and subsequent criminal justice process, as well as when cases are re-opened in light of new evidence, DNA, or a wrongful conviction inquiry.

Advocates, allied professionals and co-victims need better media training, and crime reporters could improve their understanding of victims rights

Crime beat reporters should work to improve their understanding of victims' rights, the critical need to report accurate information, and the importance of showing sensitivity to homicide co-victims in the way they do their jobs. At the same time, homicide co-victims need more assistance in dealing with the media, both in its traditional form as well as social media. Advocates and allied professionals would benefit from training on how to navigate the media in a way that supports victims' rights. ►

Conclusions & Recommendations CONTINUED

Best practices for working with homicide co-victims should recognize the value of creating a group of navigators to assist families and co-victims who have experienced a homicide.

These navigators would have extensive training regarding the availability of resources and trauma-responsive services and be knowledgeable regarding the legal and procedural matters that arise in the aftermath of a homicide. More generally, advocates specifically trained to work with this population and programs designed to address the unique needs of homicide co-victims are needed across the state.

A stronger foundation of financial resources is needed to help family members and co-victims pay for costs relating to the homicide including the funeral, retrieving personal property, medical care for the victim before they died, and estate issues.

Emergency funding should be available to assist families with these unexpected expenses. Current emergency housing programs need to be expanded to accommodate families who require immediate shelter after the homicide due to safety concerns and/or when residences become crime scenes. Greater investment is needed in witness protection services to improve safety for family members and those who are experiencing intimidation after sharing information with law enforcement and/or prosecutors. Funding is needed to expand programming across the state for children who have witnessed or experienced a loss from homicide. ►

Conclusions & Recommendations CONTINUED

The state should strongly consider making changes to the way victim compensation is awarded in cases of homicide.

In the case of homicide, it is not the victim per se, but the family members of the person killed, who are seeking financial assistance through the program. Families of homicide victims often experience significant and unexpected financial burdens as a result of the death of their loved one, including funeral expenses, medical and legal bills, fines and fees. Given that homicide victimization is concentrated among those individuals already experiencing the greatest economic burdens, the financial obstacles these families face in the aftermath of a homicide are enormous. To further penalize these families by holding them accountable for the criminal record of their loved one only adds to the trauma these individuals are experiencing.

Finally, counties should be encouraged to develop multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) to coordinate services and support for homicide co-victims and ensure that the unique needs of all of those impacted by the homicide are met.

These teams can also help identify and address existing gaps in services for homicide co-victims and improve collaboration among the range of professionals working with homicide co-victims. MDTs could also be an effective way to improve current services and support for those groups of homicide co-victims identified in the needs assessment as significantly underserved, including death penalty cases, cold cases, and murder-suicides. The creation of MDTs can improve the clarity of roles among service providers and allied professionals, making it possible for the different agencies to serve as liaisons to each other as well as the homicide co-victims they are serving, with improved communication as a result. Resources and funding should be directed toward the implementation and operation of homicide co-victim MDTs throughout Ohio. ||



Victim Services Funding & Its Impact

Victim advocacy services provide vital resources to homicide co-victims to aid in the recovery of their trauma and their victimization. The benefits of crime victim advocacy and services can, at times, be difficult to measure but become unequivocally clear when absent. Emotional healing, for example, is one of the lesser quantifiable outcomes of victim services and yet, is one of the greatest benefits that victims experience.

The advocate's primary role and focus of care are to assess and identify the immediate physical, emotional, psychological, and financial needs of the co-victim while establishing rapport. ►

Victim Services Funding & Its Impact CONTINUED

Direct advocacy services are a fundamental component of serving co-victims of homicide and generally consist of the following: ►

- 
- Ensuring the co-victim can exercise their rights as a victim of crime
 - Deployment to the scene of critical incidents/ mass victimization
 - Attending interviews with the co-victim
 - Protection order assistance
 - Victim impact statements
 - Crisis intervention
 - Court accompaniment
 - Explanation of the criminal justice process
 - Ensuring accessible and equitable processes
 - Accompaniment to parole board hearings
 - Provision of quality resources and referrals to co-victims and their loved ones
 - Case management
 - Housing and fulfillment of basic needs
 - Assistance with restitution
 - Assistance navigating the media

Victim Services Funding & Its Impact CONTINUED

The majority of co-victim services in Ohio are funded through the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) fund. VOCA funding is distributed to states through the U.S. Department of Justice and is a critical funding source for victim service agencies across the country. These funds allow programs to provide victims/survivors of crime with critical services after experiencing victimization.

VOCA grants are not funded by taxpayer dollars nor do the funds come from local or state prosecutions. The money available for VOCA grants has dropped dramatically over the last few years because the U.S. Department of Justice is entering into deferred prosecution and non-prosecution agreements instead of convicting offenders of these federal crimes.

Relying solely on the Crime Victim Fund and VOCA is untenable. Co-victims deserve to be able to access services at any time and not face the threat of losing much needed services due to the instability of these federal funds. **||**



Acknowledgments

OVWA wishes to recognize and honor this project's Collaboration Board, comprised of co-victims and service professionals:

SHERRY NOLAN Co-Victim, National Organization of Parents Of Murdered Children (POMC) | **CINDY KUHR** Ohio Bureau of Criminal Investigation (BCI) | **CHRYSTAL POUNDS-ALEXANDER** Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, Office of Victim Services | **CRYSTAL TURNER** Co-Victim, A Hand Up To Success, LLC | **OHIO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE NETWORK** | **CATHY HARPER-LEE** Ohio Crime Victim Justice Center (OCVJC) | **MARIAN STUCKEY** Columbus Public Health, CARE Coalition | **JANE MCKENZIE** Franklin County Prosecutor's Office, Victim/Witness Unit | **DEBBIE SCOTT** Co-Victim, Parents Of Murdered Children – Central Ohio Chapter | **SGT. ERIC PILYA** City of Columbus Police Department | **MATT JONES** Schoedinger Funeral Home | **CAPTAIN ALI PILLOW** City of Cleveland Police Department | **ROSEMARY CREEDEN** FrontLine Services | **GRACE LEON** Co-Victim, FrontLine Services | **EILEEN ZATTA** FrontLine Services | **DR. WENDY REGOECZI** Cleveland State University | **LIZ POPROCKI** Ohio Victim Witness Association

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