

## DA VOCA

### **Project Narrative**

#### **Project Abstract**

Following a violent crime, most victims feel powerless and vulnerable. Unfortunately, in the chaos which envelopes a crime victim during and immediately after the event, the criminal justice system can seem insensitive, intimidating, and frightening. Some victims even feel that they have been re-victimized by the police and courts that overlook their needs. However, research has shown that participation in the justice process aids victims in rebuilding their lives; therefore, it is crucial that they are provided with the proper support throughout the criminal justice process.

It is the goal of the Collin County District Attorney's (CCDA) Victim Assistance Division to facilitate victim recovery, reduce feelings of system re-victimization, and increase victim participation and satisfaction in the criminal justice process. The Victim Assistance Coordinator serves as a contact person for victims of serious or violent crimes filed with the District Attorney as they move through the criminal justice process, providing an array of victim-centered services specific to the unique needs of each individual to help crime victims achieve restoration of full physical, mental, and emotional health.

The Victim Assistance Coordinator stands with victims of crimes and offers personal support, connections to services that aid with healing and recovery, and assistance through investigative and legal processes. The program will help survivors stabilize their lives through empowerment, support and education. Providing crime victims' support in the early impact stage will be a crucial component of recovery and program. Assisting victims is priority for CCDA.

#### **Problem Statement**

From the moment a violent crime happens, the victim is forever changed. Unfortunately, the victimization does not stop when the actual crime is over, with crime victims suffering a tremendous amount of physical and psychological trauma, especially for victims of serious, repeated, or long-term crimes, such as child and domestic abuse. For victims, the trauma of the crime itself is only the beginning of what can often be a lifelong struggle. Victims of crime can find their world in chaos for years to come and feel firsthand the crime's impact on their physical, financial, and psychological wellbeing.

Following a violent crime, most victims feel powerless and vulnerable. Unfortunately, in the chaos which envelopes a crime victim during and immediately after the event, the criminal justice system can seem insensitive, intimidating, and frightening. Many victims feel that the criminal justice system places them in a passive position, providing them with little information and seeing them as little more than witnesses for a crime committed against the law or the state itself, instead of against the person. Some victims even feel that they have been re-victimized by the police and courts that overlook their needs.

Research has shown that to re-establish balance and begin to recover from the emotional consequences of crime, victims have a need to be heard and see justice served. However, lacking knowledge of the criminal justice system, victims often retreat to the background and their voices go unheard during investigation, prosecution, and sentencing. While our core mission is to pursue justice for criminal acts, which includes justice for the victims and witnesses of crime, how we treat those individuals has a huge impact on their confidence in the criminal justice system and their ability to heal and recover from crime. If a victim feels they are receiving inadequate or delayed services from the criminal justice

system, they are less likely to participate in the process of prosecution, creating a higher level of victim attrition and reducing the rate of offender accountability. A victim's cooperation, assistance, and safety are not only essential to the effective detection, investigation, and prosecution of crimes, but also to their ability to recover from the crime.

Most trials do not take place immediately after the crime. Law enforcement investigations can take anywhere from days to years before a case is filed with the Collin County District Attorney (CCDA). Once filed, the DA's office reviews the case with an additional delay of a month or more before charges are actually filed. Consequently, in most cases, the victim does not hear from CCDA for months, or sometimes longer, after the crime was committed. The time delay between the offense being committed and the filing of charges often results in victims moving, losing interest in prosecution, signing an affidavit of non-prosecution, feeling unnecessary to the judicial process, or becoming hostile to DA contacts. The longer the delay between the crime and a victim being contacted, the less likely the victim is to participate in the adjudication process, resulting in less desirable outcomes for the victim's recovery, the offender's accountability, and the community as a whole. Grant funding allows us to maintain a Victim Assistance Coordinator, which helps us make contact with victims as quickly as possible after receiving the case from law enforcement. Earlier contact should lead to more victims receiving services and assistance, which should ultimately result in improved recovery and healing for victims. The process can be overwhelming. While the final decisions about how a case moves forward are not always in the control of the survivor, the Victim Assistance Coordinator involvement from reporting to sentencing can help to ensure that survivors' voice are heard and rights upheld through the process. Survivors deserve Coordinators that can help and support them through the legal system and that defend as well as safeguard their interest.

### **Supporting Data**

Collin County's population increased 97% since 2000, from 491,772 to an estimated 1,064,465 in 2020 as stated in the U.S. Census Bureau. Which also shows an increase based on the Texas Department of Public Safety Uniform Crime Report: from 2016 through 2018, Collin County jurisdictions reported 9,287 family violence cases, 999 sexual assaults, 50 murders, 773 rapes, 731 robberies, 1,910 aggravated assaults, 5,360 burglaries, 30,949 larceny / theft cases, and 2,204 vehicle thefts. Not all of these investigations became cases filed with the CCDA. Family violence cases continue to increase with an average of over 3,000 each year for the past three years.

In FY 2020 and 2021, the Victim Assistance Coordinator served 2,816 unique victims representing 5,192 different types of victimization (some suffer multiple types of victimization). Of the victimization types, (n = 1,243) were family violence, (n = 51) were adult physical assault, (n = 22) were victims of child sexual abuse / assault, and (n = 59) were survivors of homicide victims. Victims of burglary, robbery, stalking/harassment and violation of a protective order represent about (409) and the remaining (175) were made up of victims of adults sexually abused as children bullying, child pornography, DUI / DWI incidents, elder abuse, human trafficking, identity theft, kidnapping and vehicular victimization. During the FY2021, the Victim Assistance Coordinator provided victim impact statement assistance 851 times (new and ongoing victims), restitution assistance 493 times, information regarding victims' rights and the criminal justice process 1,215 times, crisis intervention services 273 times, referrals to victim and other services / resources 2,108 times, and criminal or prosecution interview advocacy / accompaniment 227 times, as well as protection / restraining order assistance, personal advocacy, and assistance with shelter / housing.

1. "Collin County QuickFacts." State and County QuickFacts. US Census Bureau. [Accessed Dec, 11, 2021]. <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/48/48085.html>.
2. Texas Crime Report for 2000. Texas Department of Public Safety. [Accessed Jan 25, 2018]. [http://www.txdps.state.tx.us/administration/crime\\_records/pages/crimestatistics.htm](http://www.txdps.state.tx.us/administration/crime_records/pages/crimestatistics.htm)
3. Texas Crime Report for 2018. Texas Department of Public Safety. [Accessed Jan 25, 2018]. [http://www.txdps.state.tx.us/administration/crime\\_records/pages/crimestatistics.htm](http://www.txdps.state.tx.us/administration/crime_records/pages/crimestatistics.htm)
4. "Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) Performance Measures Report – Quarter 4 (562)." Report to Texas A&M University, Public Policy Research Institute, grant number VZ 2896602, Oct 2018.
5. "Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) Performance Measures Report – Quarter 5 (592)." Report to Texas A&M University, Public Policy Research Institute, grant number VZ 2896602, Oct 2019.
6. "Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) Performance Measures Report – Quarter 6 (614)." Report to Texas A&M University, Public Policy Research Institute, grant number VZ 2896602, Oct 2020.

### **Project Approach & Activities**

Being the victim of a crime can be a very traumatic experience. This is particularly true for victims of violent crimes. Victims are faced with financial difficulties and a confusing court system. Following the initial traumatic reactions to victimization, most victims begin the difficult task of rebuilding their lives. Unfortunately, the criminal justice system can be a complicated process, especially for victims who have experienced trauma. In many cases, victims will have to repeatedly tell and be questioned over their story in front of law enforcement officers, prosecutors, and/or while being cross-examined in a full courtroom. However, research has shown that participation in the justice process aids victims in rebuilding their lives; therefore, it is crucial that they are provided with the proper support throughout the criminal justice process.

It is the goal of the Collin County District Attorney's (CCDA) Victim Assistance Division to facilitate victim recovery, reduce feelings of system re-victimization, and increase victim participation and satisfaction in the criminal justice process. Division staff provides an array of victim-centered services specific to the unique needs of each individual to help crime victims in achieving restoration of full physical, mental, and emotional health. The Victim Assistance Coordinator serves as a contact person for victims of serious or violent crimes filed with the District Attorney as they move through the criminal justice process. Each case is unique, and the nature and extent of services provided may vary based on each victim's response.

Following a crime, law enforcement investigates before filing a case with the District Attorney, which can take days to years. Once a case is filed, the CCDA becomes aware of the victim(s) and can make contact. Thus, the time from the crime occurring and the Coordinator making contact could be very quick or may be years. The level and types of services needed may be dependent on this time gap. For instance, if it has been a matter of days, the Coordinator may provide crisis intervention or counseling; assist with safety planning; assess basic needs such as clothing, food, and shelter; and make referrals for community resources, including counseling, legal aid, criminal justice support, criminal justice system information, referral to assigned detectives, status of case information or other needed services. However, if an extended amount of time has passed since the crime, the victim may be more stabilized and need less immediate support and assistance.

Regardless of how much time has passed since the crime, the Coordinator comes along side to help victims understand what to expect in the criminal justice system, serve as emotional support, and ensure that victims know their rights and have the resources necessary to exercise these rights. All victims are provided with Crime Victims' Compensation (CVC) Fund information and application

assistance, as needed, and are encouraged to complete victim impact statements. A victim impact statement is a voluntary opportunity to describe the physical, financial, and psychological affects the crime has had on the victim personally. They are one of the few opportunities that victims have to be heard - putting a face with the victim and addressing the offender in court - which many victims find helpful in the journey of victimization. Describing the psychological and physical effects of the crime has been shown to be cathartic, benefitting the emotional wellbeing of victims, and promoting their recovery. In addition to helping foster healing, many victims report that making such statements improves their satisfaction with the criminal justice process.

The Coordinator also provides notice of court-related case events, accompanies victims to interviews with prosecutors and/or court, and helps victims navigate multiple or rescheduled court dates. The Coordinator acts as liaison between the victims and a variety of justice system departments and personnel, recognizes the impact crime has had on victims, supports the victims while advocating for their needs and wishes within the system, works to ensure victims are treated fairly and respectfully, and seeks to remove all potential barriers (physical, psychological, cultural, etc.) to services. Following case disposition, the Coordinator may assist the victim with CVC compensation of lost wages during trial and ensures completed victim impact statements are sent to the appropriate correctional entity. The Coordinator will assist the victim in filling out paperwork for CVC Compensation the following but not limited to: Medical Care; Loss of Earnings; Loss of Support; Child & Dependent Care; Funeral; Travel; Relocation; Dental Care; Replacement of Seized Property; and Mental Health Care. Division staff helps victims register with the TDCJ Victim Services Division and the statewide-automated victim notification system (Victim Information and Notification Everyday – VINE). The Coordinator may also assemble parole protest letters and packets by gathering case documents, offense reports, crime scene photos, and media articles from various sources, as needed.

<https://www.texasattorneygeneral.gov/crime-victims/crime-victims-compensation-program/costs-covered-crime-victims-compensation-program>

### **Capacity & Capabilities**

The Collin County District's Office has been providing direct, personal service to victims, witnesses, and their families since 1986. The mission of the Collin County District Attorney's Office is to pursue justice and protect our community. As an administrator of justice and advocate for the rule of law, the District Attorney employs those of the highest integrity, skill, and courage. All staff members are committed to accomplishing our mission through professional excellence, fairness to the accused, compassion and respect for the victims and witness, and respect for the court and opposing counsel.

The Texas Code of Criminal Procedure Article 56.04 mandates that every District Attorney's office have a Victim Assistance Coordinator to act as a liaison between the victim and the prosecutor handling the case and provide victims with information about their rights and the criminal justice system including ongoing information about the status of a case. The Collin County District Attorney's office has been providing direct, personal service to victims, witnesses, and their families since 1986. Our department partners with community organizations and service providers including CASA, Turning Point Rape Crisis Center, Hope's Door, Children's Advocacy Center, Emily's Place, Family Watchdog, Frisco Family Services, Genesis Women's Shelter & Support, Guardians of the Children, MOSAIC Family Services, Restored Hope Ministries, Samaritan Inn, Stronger than Espresso, and Victim Relief Ministries. Additionally, the CCDA Victim Assistance Coordinator works with local law enforcement advocates. Collin County District Attorney Victim Assistance Coordinators generally possess a Bachelor's degree in Social Work, Behavioral Science, Counseling or a related field and have a minimum of two years'

experience. Coordinators are expected to have knowledge of counseling practices, procedures, methods and techniques related to identification, interviewing, crisis intervention, and support of victims and/or witnesses of violence and criminal activities.

In order to best serve our victims in this capacity, the Coordinator attends trainings provided by the TDCAA which are specific to legislative updates, trainings hosted by the Office of the Attorney General, and other local victim-based organizations. Additionally, the Crimes Against Women conference is useful in coaching and educating the Coordinator to assist with domestic violence victims.

The District Attorney's Office will continue to develop formal and informal collaboration with other crime victim and social service providers to coordinate efforts in meeting crime victim needs. The following is a list of how it will be done: maintain a current list of community resources that provide victim-centered services; develop ongoing relationships with culturally specific program and resources to ensure access for victims; strategize together to leverage existing/available resources; establish and maintain a referral procedure in cooperation with other community agencies; collaborate to develop new ways of integrating and delivering victim-centered services; and participate in committees and work groups to increase effectiveness in a victim-centered response.

Best Practice Guidelines: Crime Victim Services, Office of the Justice Program, Nov. 2010.

### **Performance Management**

Goal: Facilitate victim recovery, reduce feelings of system re-victimization, and increase victim participation in and satisfaction with the criminal justice process.

Objectives:

1. Increase number of victims receiving information and referral services by 80%.
2. Increase number of victims accompanied to court by 90%.
3. Achieve minimum victim impact statement completion rate of 20%.

Measures:

1. Provide casework/non-licensed; individual advocacy or other support. Hours: Coordinator: 2,080 hours
2. Provide victim assistance services to 1,000 victims / survivors. Baseline: 300
3. Provide referrals for 1,000 victims / survivors. Baseline: 250
4. Assist 200 victims with developing safety plans (non-residential). Baseline: 50
5. Accompany 500 victims / survivors to court and to prosecution interviews (through the legal process). Baseline: 50
6. Provide 400 victims / survivors with Crime Victims' Compensation assistance. Baseline: 60

Client outcome measurements are used to establish and evaluate the program's progress in achieving service goals. The Coordinator analyzes the outcomes and an action plan is developed and implemented as needed to ensure that objectives are met. A program success is partly defined by the outcomes, but it must also be defined by the victim, the goals for the program accomplished on behalf of the victim (National Network to End Domestic Violence, 2013). Questions to be considered, as suggested by the National Act for End Domestic Violence include but are not limited to the following: Did the victim get what they needed from the program? Did the victim have a positive experience? Did they feel respected and valued? Did the program do everything it could to help the victim reach their goals? Goals will be defined individually for each victim and their program experience.

### **Data Management**

The Victim Assistance Division staff will collect and maintain victim assistance data in Collin County's criminal justice software system, Odyssey, maintained on the county's secure network and hard copy files. Additional case data is maintained in the Texas Office of Court Administration database. Data collected includes the number of visitors to the Victim Assistance Division; victim interactions via phone, email, and in-person contacts; number of victim impact statements completed; number of persons assisted with CVC applications; number of persons accompanied to court; program attended; type of service (individual or group therapy) and number of cases filed by crime type and disposition. The Victim Assistance Division analyzes the data. The data is used to produce reports on program outputs monthly, quarterly and annually to assess the success of the project. Any increase in needs or decrease in services are documented to review processes in order to better serve the needs of Collin County crime victims and assist them in their journey through the criminal justice system.

### **Target Group**

Victim Assistance Division staff serves any victim / survivor of serious or violent crimes associated with a case filed by the Collin County District Attorney. Per the Texas Department of Public Safety Texas Crime Reports for 2016 through 2018, Collin County jurisdictions reported 9,287 family violence cases, 999 sexual assaults, 50 murders, 773 rapes, 731 robberies, 1,910 aggravated assaults, 5,360 burglaries, 30,949 larceny / theft cases, and 2,204 vehicle thefts. Not all of these investigations became cases filed with the CCDA.

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### **Evidence-Based Practices**

The Collin County District Attorney recognizes the importance of incorporating current theory, best practices, and evidence-based service delivery for victims of various ages and from diverse backgrounds. As such, Victim Assistance Division staff maintains an updated knowledge base regarding effective skills and evidence-based practices (EBP) in a variety of subjects, such as counseling, advocacy, victims' rights, medical and mental health, and outreach and education. The program maintains a flexible approach to victim services and is willing to adapt practices to improve services and outreach. The Victim Assistance Division takes a victim-centered approach to services that is accessible and appropriate for every crime victim seeking assistance. While there are fundamental characteristics to the processes, services provided are driven by the needs of the individuals impacted by crime and violence.

The Coordinator has primarily worked with family violence victims, with (n = 1,243) of the 5,192 victimization types the Advocate served in FY 2020 and FY 2021 considered domestic / family violence. Of the 2,816 victims served during this time, (n = 1,717) were women. Correspondingly, assistance provided to these victims aims to empower women who have experienced intimate partner violence and link them to helpful services in the community utilizing the Advocacy Interventions for Women Who Experience Intimate Partner Violence EBP. This practice is rated “Effective” for reducing domestic/intimate partner violence by the National Institute of Justice CrimeSolutions.gov website. According to research, women who receive services through advocacy interventions experience significantly less physical abuse, compared with women in control groups, at 12- to 24-month follow-up periods.

Collin County District Attorney supports and empowers individuals who have been impacted by a crime, having them restore their dignity and safety. Assisting/working with victims’ inherent resiliency and self-determination, the Victim Advocate will encourage the victims to lead their path to restoring their personal power through many different avenues and venues. Making sure to support, identify and prioritize the needs of the victims at all times. Services, process, choices, rights, and safety will always be at the forefront.

1. National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs. Advocacy Interventions for Women Who Experience Intimate Partner Violence. Retrieved [3 February 2016] from CrimeSolutions.gov. <http://www.crimesolutions.gov/PracticeDetails.aspx?ID=55>

2. Best Practice Guidelines: Crime Victim Services, Office of the Justice Program, Nov. 2015.