

## DA VOCA

### **Project Narrative**

#### **Project Abstract**

Violence against women is prevalent throughout the world, Texas and Collin County. It invades upon the rights, privileges, and vital freedom of victims, of violence. Violence can have an overwhelming and shattering effect on the lives of victims. Violence against women remains devastatingly pervasive and persistent here in Collin County. Violence against women knows no boundaries.

Following a violent crime, victims feel powerless, helpless, weak, and vulnerable. In the disarray which shields a crime victim during and immediately after the event, the criminal justice system can seem insensitive, intimidating, daunting, and frightening. Some victims even feel that they have been re-victimized by the courts and police that overlook their needs. It 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.

The mission of the Collin County District Attorney's (CCDA) Victim Assistance Division is 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 will serve as the 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 program will help survivors stabilize their lives through empowerment, support and education. Providing crime victims' support in the early impact stage which will be a crucial component of recovery and program. Assisting victims is and will be a priority for the CCDA.

#### **Problem Statement**

Crime effects people from every age, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, religion, or gender. Whether a person lives in an affluent community or under a highway overpass, becoming a victim changes their life forever, often impacting future generations.

From the moment a vicious/violent crime happens, the victim is forever changed. Regrettably, 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 turmoil for years to come and feel firsthand the crime's impact on their physical, financial, and psychological wellbeing.

Domestic violence comes in many forms. The following are some examples but not limited to domestic violence:

- Physical assault
- Sexual assault
- Verbal abuse
- Social abuse
- Stalking

- Strangulation
- Threats to assault or do harm to someone close to that person
- Forced isolation
- Economic/financial abuse
- Using children
- Spiritual abuse
- Cultural and religious practices
- Technological violence

Victims feel defenseless, vulnerable, and weak. The criminal justice system can seem insensitive, intimidating, and frightening to a victim during and immediately after the traumatic event. 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 just 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.

Violence of abuse in any form has serious consequences for the victim (Institute of Criminology, Anthony Morgan, 2017). In order 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. 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 will allow us to maintain a Victim Assistance Coordinator, which helps make contact with victims as quickly as possible after receiving the case from law enforcement. Earlier contact will lead to more victims receiving services and assistance, which will 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's involvement from reporting to sentencing can help to ensure that survivors' voice is heard and rights upheld through the process. Survivors deserve Coordinators that will help and support them through the legal system and that will defend as well as safeguard their interest.

## Supporting Data

Approximately 95% of assaults on spouses or ex-spouses are committed by men against women. (U.S. Department of Justice) In a national survey of over 6,000 American families, 55% of the men who frequently assaulted their wives also frequently abused their children. (Family Violence Protection Fund) There are over 4 million reported incidents of domestic violence against women every year.

Violence against women has reached a devastating, disturbing and unsettling scale. Violence against women is widespread/rampant in every state, county and culture causing destruction to not only thousands but millions of women. Violence can be found in any home, anywhere. Domestic violence knows no economic, race, religious or geographic boundaries.

Family violence is the number one cause of injury to adult women, more than car accidents, muggings, and rapes combined. (United States Department of Housing and Urban Development).

The following are facts of domestic abuse but not limited to:

- On average, nearly 20 people per minute are victims of physical violence by an intimate partner in the United States. During one year, this equates to more than 10 million women (Project Sanctuary 2021).
- 48.4% of women have experienced at least one psychologically aggressive behavior by an intimate partner. (Intimate Partner Violence, CDC).
- On a single day in 2020, domestic violence hotlines received over 21,321 calls an average of almost 15 calls every minute (National Network to End Domestic Violence, 2021).
- In domestic violence homicides, women are six times more likely to be killed when there is a gun in the house (Project Sanctuary 2021).
- One in every three Texans is likely to be a victim of a family violence offense (Texas Council on Family Violence, 2021 (TCFV)).
- Two-thirds of victims of domestic violence go unreported to police (New Hope/Violence & Exploitation 2020).
- Women who are victims of intimate partner violence are most likely to be between the ages of 18 to 24 (Plan Street, 2021).
- Women who leave their batterers are at 75% greater risk of being killed by the batterer than for those who stay (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence).
- Women with disabilities have a higher risk of family violence (NCADV).
- 33.4% of the relationship between the offenders and victims were martial, either still married or divorced at the time of the incident's occurrence. Female partner/ex-partners were the victim of family violence in 13.1% of the reported incidents (TCFV, 2020).
- 40.1% of Texas women experience intimate partner physical violence, intimate partner rape and/or intimate partner stalking in their lifetimes (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2020).
- 1 in 15 children are exposed to intimate partner violence each year, 90% of these children are eyewitnesses to this violence (Apricot for Victims Services).
- 81% of women who have experienced stalking, rape, and physical violence suffer from long-term physical injuries and/or post-traumatic stress disorder (Plan Street, 2021).
- The National economic cost of domestic and family violence is estimated to be over 12 billion per year (Plan Street, 2022).
- HHSC estimates that funded agencies received 281,816 emergencies hotline calls in 2019.
- In 2021, 52% of victims seeking assistance were denied shelter due to lack of space, an increase over nine years of 31% (Texas Council on Family Violence).

- 75% of Texas 16-24 year olds have either experienced dating violence or know another young person who has (National Network to End Domestic Violence, 2021).
- On one day in 2020, domestic violence shelters in TX served 5,950 victims of domestic violence and received 1,563 hotline calls. 948 requests for services on this day were unmet due to lack of resources (National Network to End Domestic Violence, 2021).
- 1 in 3 women in the United States have experienced some form of physical violence by an intimate partner (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).
- 1 in 4 women have been victims of severe physical violence (ex. Beating, burning, strangling) by an intimate partner in their lifetime (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).
- 72% of all murder-suicides involve an intimate partner; 97% of the victims of these crimes are female (Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 2021).
- In 2021, Texas saw the highest number of family violence related deaths in recent history (Texas Council on Family Violence).
- Having a gun in the home where domestic violence is taking place increases the likelihood of a homicide by 500%. In fact, 72% of all murder-suicides stem from intimate partner violence (Plan Street, 2021).
- Those who have been abused by an intimate partner are at a higher risk for mental health problems such as depression,, suicidal thoughts, anxiety, low self-esteem, isolation, fear of intimacy, risk life behaviors, post-traumatic stress disorder, flashbacks, and poor physical health (CDC, 2021).
- Intimate partner violence results in more than 18.5 million mental health case visits each year (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence).

Collin County is the 6<sup>th</sup> largest county in Texas. Since 2010, Collin County’s population has grown from 782,341 to an estimated 1,190,111 as stated in the U.S. Census Bureau. Domestic and family violence has grown with the population. The Texas Department of Public Safety Uniform Crime Report 2022 shows crime increasing in Collin County with that population growth. Collin County jurisdictions reported the following for 2022: 863 assaults, 258 sexual assaults, 6 murders, 159 robberies, 1,465 burglaries, 11,086 larceny/theft cases, and 1,062 vehicle thefts. Not all of these investigations became cases filed with the CCDA. There were 1,597 family violence cases filed with the CCDA in FY2022 and this increased to 2,473 family violence cases filed with the CCDA in FY2023.

In FY2022 and 2023, Collin County DA Office, Victim Assistance Coordinator sent out 4,138 impact packets to crime victims. The Victim Assistance Coordinator also provided for victims during these two years for the following types of victimization cases, which were indicted or filed by information: Of the victimization types: (n =843) were family violence, (n = 441) were adult physical assault, (n =309) were victims of child sexual abuse / assault, and (n = 75) were survivors of homicide victims, victims of burglary (n=748), victims of robbery (n= 216), victims of theft/auto related crimes (n=104), and various other cases involving stalking, harassment, child pornography, DUI / DWI incidents, elder abuse, human trafficking, identity theft, and kidnapping. Also (n=309) protective order applications were filed. In addition to sending out and processing Victim Impact Statement packets during the FY2023, the Victim Assistance Coordinator also performed the following duties to assist victims: (1) Sent out 53 claims for Restitution; (2) Sent out 204 Parole Protest Letters; (3) Assisted 204 Victims who contacted or came by without an appointment “walk-ins”; (4) Made 4,067 telephone or email contacts with victims; (5) Accompanied 200 victims to court; and (6) provided a safe place for 905 victims waiting to go to court. She also processed U-Visa Applications, provided excuse letters and sat in on prosecutor interviews with victims.

The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) Reauthorization Act of 2022 was signed by President Joseph R. Biden which includes groundbreaking provisions to strengthen and modernize the law as well as bring financial assistance to many states, cities and counties.

### **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 provide 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.

The coordinator along with the team is dedicated to providing services useful and necessary to aid victims throughout the process.

Some of the services include, but are not limited to the following:

- Court Orientation
- Helping victims understand their rights
- Referrals (Counseling, Social Services, etc.)
- Emergency Services
- Escorting to Court
- Assisting with request for compensation
- Crisis Intervention
- Intimidation Protection
- Assisting with Victim Impact Statements
- Public Education

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 help 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 Attorney's Office has been providing direct, personal service to victims, witnesses, and their families since 1986. As an administrator of justice and advocate for the rule of law, the District Attorney employs those of the highest integrity, skill, and courage as well as specialized training and expertise and will be committed to handling victims with discretion and compassion. 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. Since 1986, the Collin County District Attorney's office has been providing direct, personal service to victims, witnesses, and their families. The Victim Assistance Coordinator plays a critical role in assisting victims by making contact as early as possible to

assess the needs and concerns and to connect them with the various community resources. The District Attorney's Office works through partnerships with various community agencies to ensure a coordinated multi-agency response to domestic violence in order to provide victims with access to all possible services and resources. The department partners with community organizations and service providers including but not limited to: 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. The Victim Assistance Coordinator also possess specialized training and expertise in this area/field.

In order to best serve our victims in this capacity, the Coordinator has specialized training and expertise, the coordinator is committed to handling them with discretion and compassion for victims. The team will also recognize that it is often difficult for victims to report intimate partner violence and they will be dedicated to ensuring that victims and their families will be protected and able to regain some control over their lives while their voices are heard in the criminal justice process. The coordinator will attend training provided by the TDCAA which is specific to legislative updates, training hosted by the Office of the Attorney General, and other local victim-based organizations.

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.

## **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 will serve any victim / survivor of serious or violent crimes associated with a case filed by the Collin County District Attorney.

"Victims" may also mean persons who, individually or collectively, have suffered harm, including physical or mental injury, emotional suffering, economic loss or substantial impairment of their fundamental rights, through acts or omissions that are in violation of criminal laws operative within the state, including those laws proscribing criminal abuse of power. (Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power, Human Rights Office of the Commission, Nov. 29, 2021).

Per the Texas Department of Public Safety Texas Crime Reports for 2021, Texas Counties reported 208 Murders, 1,920 Rape, 2,198 Robbery, 10,495 Aggravated Assault, 11,296 Burglary, 50,042 Larceny-Theft, and 9,636 Motor Vehicle Theft.

### **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 maintain 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 will continue to work with family violence victims. Providing to these victims the will and access to be able 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.

The presence of the advocate in court and in the magistrate office provides victims with emotional support, while also helping them understand and navigate the system.

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.
3. Best Practice in Criminal Justice, Liz Martinez, 2018,