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Expanding the Reach of Victim Services:

Maximizing the Potential of VOCA Funding for Underserved Survivors

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Promising change for survivors of crime

We are at a moment of extraordinary opportunity for victims of crime. In 2015, the federal budget for Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) funds increased by $1.6 million—from $745 million to $2.361 billion.[1] These funds represent the single largest source of funding for victim services in the United States. An increase of this size is unprecedented for VOCA.[2]

Now with an infusion of funds that—if sustained beyond 2016—will more than triple the size of the field, we have an opportunity to finally address the needs of victims of crime who have been excluded from services.[3] The new funds can help bring services to the neighborhoods most affected by violence and least supported in its aftermath, particularly low-income communities of color. And we can do so while at the same time expanding resources to essential existing programs that serve victims of crime.

We know expanded victim services can have far-reaching impact. Thirty years of advocacy for victims has brought about lasting, paradigmatic change in our culture's response to domestic and sexual assault, and reached millions of victims of these and other crimes. But despite the formidable work of many, the victim services field has not achieved equity in service delivery. Victims of certain crimes and from certain backgrounds are too often left out.[4] Whether because of limited resources, lack of information, implicit bias, or an emphasis on partnership with law enforcement, the field has struggled to reach many survivors including immigrants; young people of color; people with disabilities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people; and other historically marginalized communities.[5] When people belong to more than one of these groups, they are even more likely to be excluded from services.

Closing this gap will require, in part, correcting long-standing misperceptions about who survives crime. For instance, while rarely depicted as such in media, young men of color are among those most likely to be crime victims in the United States.[6] As discussed in Common Justice's issue brief, *Young Men of Color and the Other Side of Harm: Addressing Disparities in Our Responses to Violence*, data show that from 1996 through

2007, young black men were the most likely to be robbed every year, the most likely to be victimized by violence during six of the 11 years, and the second-most likely to be victimized during four of the 11 years.[7] Yet, men of color are virtually unrepresented among recipients of victim services. Reality and perception do not match. The failure of the current system to adequately engage the full range of victims means these victims are more likely to live with unaddressed symptoms of trauma, are less likely to get the help they deserve, and are less likely to recover.

In this report, we outline a way forward to make the best possible use of these new funds, with the particular goal of fostering greater equity in distribution. The report builds on a year of work on the ground learning from victim services providers across the country. Our team met with VOCA administrators, listened to crime survivors, and heard from seasoned advocates in the field. The case studies in this report are intended to serve as examples of organizations that stand to benefit most from the increase in funds. We then outline a range of challenges and recommendations to help maximize the opportunity at hand. It is our hope that this report supports VOCA administrators—and their partners in victim services—in making the greatest impact with the resources now available to them so that together we can help more crime survivors move from pain to healing.

The VOCA collaborative

Beginning in 2015, Common Justice, Equal Justice USA, and Californians for Safety and Justice began working collaboratively to ensure the greatest possible portion of the newly increased federal VOCA funding reached those most affected by violence and least served by existing services. Each group brings distinct, vital contributions to the collaborative.

Common Justice is working to identify groups on the ground that are providing, or are positioned to provide, comprehensive victim services that are responsive to survivors' cultural backgrounds. Our aim is to connect them with each other to further build the field, to help them

access and receive support from state-based VOCA administrators, and to advance their inclusion into the broader network of victim services providers nationally.

Equal Justice USA is helping these organizations build their capacity, and is providing technical assistance and training to both traditional victim services providers and other community-based organizations that can reach those most affected by violence. The group aims to help these organizations strengthen their infrastructures and programs to be best positioned to receive and manage new VOCA funds.

Californians for Safety and Justice is working to elevate the voices of individuals and communities who experience crime most often and whose needs typically go unmet. The organization is conducting nationwide polling of crime survivors, capacity building, and advocacy efforts to ensure victim services more effectively reach the full range of crime survivors.

Together, we hope to help ensure these increased funds will have the greatest possible effect on crime survivors.

Expanding the reach of victim services

Across the country, there are people tending to the pain of crime victims. Some of these people are in formal victim services agencies, but many are not. These other providers are the people who formed grassroots community groups in the aftermath of losing their loved ones to violence. They are the people who work in the neighborhoods they grew up in, addressing violence as it occurs and working to halt cycles of harm. They are the people who know and understand the cultures and experiences of those they are serving because they share those same cultures and experiences. They are innovative, committed, effective service providers working at the front lines of violence to address victims' pain. In many ways, they are the next generation of victim services providers, poised to continue the tradition of advocacy and innovation that formed

the victim services field, but all too often they are not seen as such. In order to be viewed as a victim services provider—or to see yourself as one—the people you serve have to be perceived as "victims." Narrow societal conceptions of who victims are rarely include some of the people who are most likely to be harmed—including young men of color. So many of these cutting-edge providers are all too often disconnected from the larger victim-serving field, vastly under-resourced, or not looked to for the leadership and insight they are positioned to provide.[8] These are the groups VOCA can help support.

The following case studies are examples of the kind of essential, effective organizations that could grow if people with a commitment to crime survivors work together to expand the reach of VOCA funds.

Case study 1: Innovative work in Central California

Fathers & Families of San Joaquin (FFSJ) promotes strong, healthy families and communities in which youth are nurtured and fathers are engaged in their children's lives. In their victim services work, FFSJ includes the full range of victims of crime, even those who typically are not seen—or do not see themselves—as such.

Organization: Fathers & Families of San Joaquin
Location: Stockton, California
Who they serve: Young people of color affected by crime.

Program overview: Based in Stockton, a city with one of the highest violent crime rates in the country, FFSJ addresses the needs of men, women, youth, elders, families, and the community as a whole by providing a range of social services to crime victims that reflect and respect their cultures. Services include case management to connect victims and families to resources in the community; assistance completing victims' compensation claims; support for crime victims who navigate the criminal justice process; emergency support services, including transportation; grief counseling; healing circles; support securing housing, food, and educational resources; rapid-response violence intervention and prevention services; and support groups for survivors. Crucially, FFSJ is also a certified Trauma Recovery Center in California. As such, the group serves as first responders

when violent crime occurs in the community.

A story from the work: George was referred to FFSJ by his probation officer when he was released from jail—not to address his own criminal history, but to address the victimization he experienced prior to his incarceration.[9] Before his incarceration, George was in the child protective system for years, was facing numerous challenges and losses, and was shot by someone in his neighborhood. He felt unsafe, so he began carrying a gun. Soon thereafter, he was caught and sentenced to prison for possession of a weapon. Not once before or during his incarceration was his victimization addressed by anyone in law enforcement or social services.

George came to FFSJ through their El Joven Noble ("The Noble Youth") program, which emphasizes character and leadership development for young people. While he was a regular attendee of the program, he was quiet and withdrawn from his peers. FFSJ worked with him one-on-one to get an understanding of why he was not more actively engaged. It was then that George disclosed his experience as a shooting victim and began—for the first time—to talk about its effect on him.

One of many lasting effects of George's trauma was that he found it difficult to engage with groups of people. FFSJ began to work with him individually to process the effects the shooting was having on his life. Staff offered a combination of supports, including referrals to mainstream counseling and therapy services. They also gave George the opportunity to participate in a sweat lodge and cleansing process, a long-standing, sacred Native American cultural practice used, in part, to help people move through change and pain. Over time, George became more and more comfortable and began to engage with the other young people in the program; he emerged as a leader among his peers. Today, he works as junior staff at FFSJ, where he helps other young men who have been harmed by crime.

Our work with the program: Our VOCA collaborative connected with FFSJ as they sought funds to enhance the services they provided to victims. We offered help integrating those services into their role as a state-designated Trauma Recovery Center. Our team provided technical assistance during the application process, as they were largely unfamiliar with VOCA funding. Our support included answering clarifying questions and assisting with shaping program language to best reflect the range of services they provide to victims. In this process, FFSJ was able to solidify their identity as a victim services provider. We expect FFSJ to apply in the

next cycle of funding made available in California.

Case study 2: Essential services in Washington state

The mission of Our Sisters' House is to provide supportive services that identify, reduce, and eliminate risk factors that impede safety, and to nurture the healthy development of people affected by domestic violence. The group prioritizes both women and their families, offering culturally competent support to victims of crime.

Organization: Our Sisters' House
Location: Tacoma, Washington
Who they serve: Women, youth, and children who are victims of domestic violence.

Program overview: Our Sisters' House provides advocacy, education, and support to victims with the aim of promoting self sufficiency, strengthening families, and stopping the cycle of abuse. Our Sisters' House operates a family-focused juvenile domestic violence program, a program that focuses on the effect of domestic violence on small children, and a self-sufficiency program. They also operate a domestic violence advocacy initiative that places advocates at two Department of Social and Health Services offices and at the Crystal Judson Family Justice Center.

A story from the work: Debra is the mother of two 8-year-old twin boys, an 11-year-old boy, a 16-year-old girl, and a 21-year-old girl. For 23 years, she was married to a man who verbally and physically abused her in front of her children. The abuse became so bad at one stage that her eldest daughter attempted suicide. It was at that point that Debra took her kids and left. Leaving was not easy, particularly because her husband was the sole wage earner for the family. But Debra was resourceful and resilient, securing public aid, stabilizing her family, returning to community college, and enrolling her eldest daughter in counseling.

But then her younger children began to react to the changes. Debra's 16-year-old daughter stopped talking, shutting down and refusing to leave her mother's side. Fortunately, Debra and her struggling daughter were engaged in the Women Empowered group at Our Sisters' House. Debra was able to attend, in part, because Our Sisters' House offered specialized childcare for children who have been exposed to violence; her twin boys

were well cared for while she and her daughter got the help they needed. Debra and her family attended the group every week, eager to learn and connect with others. They began to realize their self worth. After six weeks, the 16-year-old girl began to open up and become less fearful. She loosened her hold on her mother and even returned to school.

Meanwhile, the boys were going through their own struggles. Initially, they had visits with their father, but those were suspended when it was determined that the visits posed a threat to Debra's safety. Shortly thereafter, the boys began struggling with behavioral issues and acting out in school. Those shifted, too, as they began to look forward to the Thursday night group in which they engaged in play therapy and began to heal. Today, Debra and her family continue to attend Women Empowered. She said, simply: "I do not know where I would be without this program."

Our work with the program: A former VOCA grantee in Washington State, Our Sisters' House lost funding when the large collaborative they were part of collapsed. The current VOCA administrator expressed her unfaltering commitment to engaging underserved populations more meaningfully with the newly increased VOCA funds, which she saw as an opportunity to advance racial and social equity in victim services. Our VOCA team recognized this as a key opportunity to re-engage VOCA support for this essential work with women and families.

Our team helped Our Sisters' House more fully and accurately describe the full range of their work—including not only with women who survive domestic violence, but also with male survivors, child witnesses of violence, and more—and identify the additional resources they would need to implement their work. Our team also worked with the executive director to create a system to manage program activities and track victims' progress. Currently, Our Sisters' House is working with our team to start drafting an application in anticipation of Washington State's VOCA request for proposals.

Case study 3: New collaboration in Southern California

Faced with the reality of pervasive victimization in their South Los Angeles community, The Reverence Project saw the need for a collaborative effort to meet the urgent needs of underserved crime survivors and also saw the new VOCA funds as an opportunity to bring key partners together.

Their search brought them to Los Angeles Metropolitan Churches (LAM), which provided faith-based victim services primarily to low-income black survivors in South Central Los Angeles, and to Life After Uncivil Ruthless Acts (L.A.U.R.A.), which served the Latino population in their community. These three groups are working collaboratively, with The Reverence Project supporting the work of the other two groups by conducting outreach to underserved crime survivors. In the following case study, we explore what each of these groups contributes individually, and how they are working together to effectively reach survivors.

Organization: Los Angeles Metropolitan Churches
Location: Los Angeles, California
Who they serve: Underserved communities of victims, including Latino communities, current and former gang members, and low-income, black survivors of crime.

Program overview: LAM provides victim services through a community-driven, community-funded, multi-sector alliance that includes faith-based leaders, law enforcement, public defenders, business owners, community clinics, and a range of partners who provide access to housing, employment, schooling, and social services. These partners include L.A.U.R.A. and The Reverence Project, whose contributions are described below. Working in the South Los Angeles areas with the highest rates of violent crime and shootings, LAM's victim services are housed in its Ex-Offender Action Network. The group works to improve the likelihood of recovery for victims in the community and to increase service access for black and other underserved victims.

A story from the work: The summer of 2015 came to be known locally as the 100 days, 100 nights of killing. In one tragic incident, a family lost two members, one of whom was a child shot by a stray bullet while playing in a backyard. Recognizing the family's profound trauma, LAM reached out to offer support. Though there were few services available, LAM referred the family to the local Trauma Recovery Center. There, family members were able to receive mental health assessments, individualized treatment plans, and case management. Alongside the Trauma Recovery Center's support, LAM began to help the family meet their basic needs and ensure their safety by helping them obtain food stamps and identify new, safer housing.

For the next six months, LAM worked with the family to address the practical and emotional dimensions of their trauma in individual and group settings. In time, the family stabilized and began to heal. Today, members

of this family are victim advocates with LAM. Knowing first-hand what it is like to be victims of violent crime, they now help other families move through the healing process.

Organization: Life After Uncivil Ruthless Acts
Location: Los Angeles, California
Who they serve: Underserved victims of crime, including Spanish-speaking Latinos.

Program overview: L.A.U.R.A. is a non-profit organization dedicated to enhancing the quality of life of South Central Los Angeles residents by providing a wide range of social services to the community and victims of crime. L.A.U.R.A. was formed in memory of Laura Sanchez, who was murdered on March 18, 2007, while parking her family van in front of her home. She was described by her family as a loving mother of four and friend to many. She was the only child of Irene Cruz, who was shot and killed a decade earlier while waiting on her mother's front porch for Laura and her family to arrive on Thanksgiving.

L.A.U.R.A.'s victims' support program aims to create strength out of tragedy. L.A.U.R.A. connects families who have suffered devastating loss with the resources they need to come through their pain. L.A.U.R.A. takes a holistic approach to victim services, offering support and resources to the families of both the victim and the person responsible for the crime. First, staff members at L.A.U.R.A. serve as crisis responders, showing up at crime scenes to offer support to family members and ensure they have their most essential needs met. These needs include a safe space, water, clothing, medications, and support notifying extended family about the crime. The group also acts as a liaison between families and law enforcement.

Following the initial period of crisis management and stabilization, L.A.U.R.A. offers monthly support meetings during which victims' family members and loved ones are provided a place where they can talk, celebrate, and grieve their loved ones with other people who are experiencing the same pain of homicide. The resources L.A.U.R.A. provides to victims and their loved ones include access to financial support, mentoring for children or younger siblings of those affected by homicide, help for survivors who use substances to self-medicate their trauma, and a range of other targeted supports.

A story from the work: A 2-year-old child and his uncle were both killed in their backyard by stray bullets intended for someone else. The

family members were not fluent in English and were having a hard time navigating and accessing the supports they needed in the aftermath of their losses. When a family friend contacted L.A.U.R.A., program staff immediately went to the family's home, held a vigil, and prayed with the family. They served as liaisons and interpreters with law enforcement. L.A.U.R.A. helped obtain the police report and worked with a local law school to help the mother obtain her U-VISA, a form of immigration relief designed specifically for victims of crime. As the immediate loss and crisis passed, L.A.U.R.A. engaged the family in monthly group sessions to support them in moving through the healing process.

Organization: The Reverence Project
Location: Los Angeles, California
Who they serve: Young men of color in the Los Angeles area, including current and former gang members.

Program overview: The Reverence Project develops comprehensive wellness centers in urban communities to support those suffering from trauma. Using alternative healing technologies, the project serves crime victims throughout Los Angeles, primarily working with young men of color who are crime survivors, including current and former gang members. The project conducts outreach through a wide variety of non-traditional networks including cultural groups, community centers, and violence interrupter programs.

The project creates spaces in the community in which survivors of violence can share their stories and develop the tools they need to heal. Survivors are involved in group therapy sessions that meet twice a month and gain access to alternative healing modalities, including massage. Staff members provide advocacy support to crime victims and assist in making referrals to connect victims with services. The project works in partnership with violence intervention and non-traditional service providers within the city. In this collaboration, they will be conducting outreach to engage people in the services provided by LAM and L.A.U.R.A.

A story from the work: Henry was a father who had just come home after 12 years in federal prison. Having lost his left eye in a shootout prior to his incarceration, Henry thought finding employment would be difficult, because he had few skills, a felony on his record, and was disabled. He was referred to The Reverance Project from the city's Gang Reduction Youth Development program (GRYD) and, through counseling, began to heal.

When he came to the organization, Henry was staying at his mother's house, sleeping on an uncomfortable couch, navigating general assistance for his day to-day living, and coping with a system that said he owed tens of thousands of dollars for a child with whom he had no relationship. At The Reverence Project, Henry shared details about his childhood, as well as his passionate religious beliefs. It was clear he had experiences he needed to process with people who would not judge or shame him. The Reverence Project gave Henry the opportunity to see himself not only as a formerly incarcerated person, but as a victim himself. With the organization's help and through massage therapy and hydrotherapy, Henry learned to see his own value, talk through experiences, and find peace. Eventually, he wanted to become an advocate himself.

Our work with the programs: With the support of the VOCA collaborative, LAM, L.A.U.R.A., and The Reverence Project submitted a joint application for VOCA funding. Together, the groups were positioned to reach black and Latino victims, and to connect with grassroots outreach and crime survivor organizing efforts. LAM agreed to serve as the lead agency in the partnership. The VOCA collaborative team supported LAM in refining their victim services program model, highlighting the gap in services for black and Latino victims in their community, describing their work through a victim-centered lens, creating supplemental materials such as partnership agreements and organizational policies, drafting the proposal narrative, and creating a budget for the project.

The three-agency partnership was awarded $175,000 in VOCA funds in May 2016, which contributes significantly to closing the gap in services for victims of color in South Central Los Angeles.

Case study 4: Reaching underserved victims in New Jersey

Newark United Against Violence (NUAV) deploys outreach workers to the streets of Newark to engage victims in services and help interrupt cycles of violence. NUAV connects with and supports a range of crime victims whose needs may otherwise have gone unmet.

Organization: Newark United Against Violence, a program of Newark Community Solutions
Location: Newark, New Jersey

Who they serve: Young men and women in Newark's West Ward.

Program overview: NUAV is a violence-reduction program that targets high-risk young people between the ages of 18 and 30. Participants receive case management, cognitive behavioral therapy, mentoring, job-readiness training, and educational services. NUAV employs a street team based in the highest-crime areas of Newark to support individuals and families who have lost loved ones to homicide, and help interrupt cycles of violence.

A story from the work: While Mike was already receiving support from NUAV, his brother was murdered around Thanksgiving. With NUAV's guidance and Mike's previous work with cognitive behavioral therapy and mentoring, he was able to process his grief in a healthy way, stay safe, and remain employed through tragedy.

When Mike first came to NUAV in December 2013, he was 29 years old. In February 2014, he enrolled in the "Clean and Green" transitional jobs program which helped him eventually secure employment. Through ongoing engagement strategies with NUAV and Newark Community Solutions, Mike was able to not only get a job, but also receive ongoing therapy through the organization, helping him support his two sons in addition to himself.

Our work with the program: The VOCA collaborative introduced NUAV and its parent organization to VOCA and the opportunity it represented. Once aware of the opportunity, the program was able to draw on the resources of its parent organization, the Center for Court Innovation, to apply for funds. Our collaborative provided additional support by addressing key technical questions about financial matching requirements, board policies and approvals that would be needed for the grant, and clear, effective framing and language.

NUAV has applied for VOCA funds and is awaiting a response. If awarded, these funds will dramatically enhance their capacity to reach more underserved victims in their community.

Case study 5: A partnership in Michigan

Both Mothers of Murdered Children (MOMC) and Flip the Script in Detroit believed the lack of access to victim services in their community was unacceptable. They knew if they worked in partnership with each other, more victims could get the support they needed and fewer would fall through the cracks in their times of greatest need. By connecting MOMC's

transformative work—led by mothers who have lost their children to murder—to the larger programs offered by Flip the Script, the two organizations were able to create a partnership that began to close the gap in services for underserved victims in Detroit. In the following case study, we explore how MOMC and Flip the Script work both separately and collaboratively to aid crime survivors in their community.

Organization: Mothers of Murdered Children
Location: Detroit, Michigan
Who they serve: Crime victims including families of homicide victims.

Program overview: MOMC was founded by Andrea Clark in 2011, three months after her son, Darnell, was murdered. Based on the idea that grief must be shared in order for people to heal, MOMC expanded to include other family members and friends in their process. MOMC's support is unique because the members know firsthand what it is to lose a loved one—especially a child—to murder. MOMC offers ongoing self-help groups, helps survivors navigate the criminal justice system, and offers grief counseling and support with funeral costs. The organization is made up of mothers who are turning their pain into purpose and building strong legacies in the names of their children.

A story from the work: Regina is a mother of three who lost her only son, Larry, to murder. Larry, a college basketball player at Georgetown University, was home from school and attended a party at which he was killed in the course of a robbery. His daughter was one year old at the time. Regina began attending conventional counseling after Larry's death, but found she was not getting the help she needed from the therapist. She connected with MOMC and attended their annual "100,000 Walk for Justice," at which MOMC's director convinced Regina to attend a support group. At first, listening to the other mothers' stories didn't give her comfort, and she found she could not even say her son's name without crying. Over time, Regina became more engaged in the groups and began to allow others to support her, becoming more and more at peace when speaking of her son's murder. MOMC helped hold a candlelight vigil for her son and conduct outreach in her neighborhood to encourage people to attend. Regina attended MOMC events with her family, sometimes even with her young granddaughter. When she reflected on her process, Regina shared that the peer-to-peer support she received at MOMC contributed

most to her healing. Regina is now a speaker with MOMC, sharing her story with young men who have been charged with crimes and providing support to others who have been harmed by traumatic loss.

Organization: Flip the Script
Location: Detroit, Michigan
Who they serve: Low-income people of color between the ages of 16 and 30.

Program overview: A project of Goodwill Detroit, Flip the Script serves people throughout Detroit and Wayne County. In its men's programs, Flip the Script prepares young men for careers in skilled trades, building and construction, or green jobs. The program helps participants acquire math and reading skills while also working to build positive relationship development, fatherhood support, positive citizenship, and workplace ethics. The primary goal of the program is to enable men to become economically self-sufficient and positioned to support their families. Flip the Script recognizes that many of the young men in their programs have witnessed or been victims of violent crime, or lost loved ones to violence.

Flip the Script's women's programs help address the root causes, obstacles, and barriers that prevent women from obtaining and retaining meaningful employment. These issues include chronic trauma, domestic violence, poverty, previous incarceration, and loss. An integral part of the work was the development of Beyond the Tears, one of the fastest-growing support groups in Detroit. Flip the Script is working to expand its services to meet the needs of crime victims by providing referrals for women in its programs to agencies that offer grief support, criminal justice advocacy, and counseling, and by providing aid to victims seeking employment.

A story from our work: Charles was referred to Flip the Script by his judge in Wayne County court. Per the judge, he had to complete Flip the Script's diversionary program—not to address a criminal history, but to address the victimization he experienced prior to appearing in court. Charles had spent some time in jail and, having been raised with his sister by a single father, struggled to navigate the world outside his home personally and professionally. Flip the Script gave Charles resources intended to heal and transform his life, inclusive of obtaining a GED certification.

Charles was optimistic and enthusiastic during the first few weeks of the program, coming to class on time and prepared every day.

Unfortunately, during the latter portion of his enrollment, Charles was a victim of a shooting. He was shot multiple times and suffered serious injuries that caused him to lose two of his fingers. During the next few months, Charles had to go through rehabilitation, learn how to walk again, and learn how to use one hand for simple tasks. During this time, Flip the Script staff provided supportive services by visiting Charles at the hospital, checking up on him, and even bringing him his GED preparation homework. This allowed Charles to stay on track despite his victimization and trauma.

Currently, Charles continues to attend Flip the Script. He is still working to earn his GED, as well as his driver's license. He describes the judge's mandate as one of the best things to ever happen to him.

Our work with the programs: Flip the Script and MOMC recognized their programs would be stronger in partnership and began developing a vision for connecting their work. Because Flip the Script is part of a larger national organization (Goodwill Industries) and not fully autonomous on the local level, that partnership depended on MOMC to apply as the lead agency. Our team began to support MOMC in applying, helping the group hone its mission statement, identify and draft organizational goals and targeted outcomes, create a program logic model for victim services, and develop a preliminary organizational budget. Given the short turnaround between the state's request for proposal and the deadline to submit, MOMC was unable to get in place some key elements in advance of the deadline, including liability insurance and adequate capacity to manage all the extensive financial and reporting requirements of the grant. The VOCA team remains committed to MOMC's growth and will continue to work with the group during the next 12 months with the goal of making them self-sufficient during the next grant cycle.

Challenges and recommendations

Ensuring VOCA funds reach the full range of crime survivors is a vision we share deeply with our colleagues and allies in victim services and with VOCA administrators nationally. The following outlines the cultural, institutional, and technical barriers that make this shared vision harder to achieve and provides recommendations for overcoming those obstacles.

Certain populations are not seen as legitimate, "innocent" victims.

Our media, our culture, and even some of our statutes continually reinforce the idea that in order to be deserving of care, a victim of crime has to be innocent. All too often, the cumulative effect of biases deeply embedded in our culture means we see certain groups of people as in need and deserving of protection and care, and others as either impervious to harm, resistant to help, or responsible for their own pain.[10] In both spirit and practice, both intentionally and inadvertently, this idea of "innocence" excludes a wide range of people from services and limits the options and resources available to people who survive serious harm.

Recommendation:

VOCA administrators, service providers, and survivors can work collaboratively to help change culture, advance equity, and ensure every victim is met with care. When interpreting statutes that could exclude certain victims from services, VOCA administrators should always err on the side of inclusion.

Certain service providers are not seen—or may not see themselves—as belonging to victim services.

When certain people who survive harm are not seen as "victims," often those who help them—such as community-based responders—don't see themselves as "victim" service providers, even if they are in the daily business of attending to people's trauma. Instead, they see themselves as violence interrupters, GED teachers, counselors in community centers, concerned neighbors, volunteers in churches, or even alternative-to-incarceration or prisoner reentry specialists. Because they often do not see or represent their own work as victim services, it is hard—sometimes nearly impossible—for VOCA administrators to see them as such. Thus, these groups miss out on valuable funding that would help a greater number of victims find healing and support.

Recommendation:

Engage "cultural translators"—people who understand the work, culture, values, and practices of both non-traditional providers and mainstream victim services. This will help these groups see and express their work in a frame that is recognizable to the victim services field, while simultaneously helping VOCA administrators see new work as victim services even when it is non-traditional or not represented in familiar language.

VOCA administrators have a hard time identifying and assessing new providers to reach new populations.

Not all VOCA administrators make a concerted, affirmative effort to identify and engage new providers who can reach underserved victims.

And even those who do make the effort often find it difficult to identify groups, assess the quality of the services they provide, and engage them in the broader victim-serving community. This is often a result of limited networks, constraints on resources, or limitations during the procurement process. For many groups, there is no clear pathway to learning about VOCA or any clear avenues to building relationships with the administrators once they become aware the funding exists.

Recommendation:

VOCA providers should dedicate time and resources to make an affirmative effort to reach new providers and populations. Administrators should rely on partners in the community to support them in their efforts, work to broaden the reach of their public communications, and create explicit avenues for providers to learn more about VOCA and meet administrators.

The VOCA application process can be highly inaccessible or even prohibitive for smaller providers.

VOCA administrators balance a challenging tension between ensuring access and ensuring quality service delivery, while managing the constraints placed on their discretion by the federal requirements for VOCA expenditures. On one hand, they develop rigorous application processes to ensure they fund the best work and spend public dollars responsibly. On the other, their processes can create layers of bureaucracy and requirements that exceed what smaller providers without dedicated development staff can navigate.

Recommendation:

Streamline and simplify the application process however possible. Provide thorough, specific guidance to applicants with a robust question and answer period during the application process. Provide opportunities for all applicants to ask questions in a variety of ways, including by phone and

in person rather than solely via email. Give greater weight to the overall quality of services provided than to minor errors or omissions in an application. During the application process, give applicants a standardized opportunity to respond to concerns about deficits in their applications that may be the result of a misunderstanding of the requirements rather than inadequacy of the proposed work. Encourage current grantees to act as mentors and supports to new applicants, even when those applicants serve different populations.

Some community-based providers lack the infrastructure necessary to apply for and adequately fulfill the VOCA grant requirements.

It is not only the application process that can be challenging for smaller groups, but also the requirements regarding tracking and reporting data. Many smaller groups do extraordinary work with victims, but do not have sophisticated systems in place to track their activities. Whether it is lacking financial or case management systems, smaller organizations cannot always fulfill the reporting requirements, some of which are federally required, and some of which are subject to interpretation by the states. As such, even when they are doing the work proposed, they find it difficult to fully report it.

Recommendation:

VOCA administrators should take capacity into account when assessing an application and should support capacity building for applicants to help ensure the full scope and value of services are adequately reflected in their applications. Provide resources and support to smaller organizations to build their capacity. Work with community, foundation, and other government partners to support capacity building, particularly for those small organizations serving victims who are typically underserved. Encourage partnerships among smaller organizations and more seasoned grantees.

Some states require partnership with prosecutors and/or mainstream victim services providers as a prerequisite for receiving funds.

Few object to new providers having to demonstrate that they work collaboratively to provide the best possible services to victims. But when the requirements regarding that collaboration are too narrow, many groups can be excluded from even initial consideration for support.

Recommendation:

Requirements for documenting collaboration, when present, should be broad and equitable, and should never create potential conflicts of interest or exclusions.

The time between when grant opportunities are announced and when proposals are due is often very brief.

In many states, the window to apply for funds can be as short as 30 days. For seasoned applicants, that timing can be adequate. But for new applicants or smaller organizations that need to do more groundwork before submitting their proposals, the short turnaround can substantially diminish the quality of the applications they submit and may prohibit them from applying in the first place.

Recommendation:

VOCA administrators should extend the timeframe between the announcement of an application and the deadline to 90 days whenever possible. VOCA administrators should provide advance notification of upcoming solicitations so groups may begin preparing materials

and securing necessary partnerships before the request for proposals (RFP) is released. Understanding that the short timeframe between the announcement of the RFP and the deadline for submissions has implications for the equitable distribution of funds, administrators should take every action within their power to lengthen that window. Additionally, whether or not they can offer a longer window, administrators should provide application and capacity building clinics in multiple locations well in advance of the RFP release to support new applicant groups serving underserved populations.

The match requirements are often interpreted in a way that excludes many new groups, or diminishes the scale of what these groups can request.

The federal VOCA statute requires that new groups match the VOCA funds they receive at a level that excludes some applicants and requires other applicants to request less than the funding they need because of their inability to meet the requirements for a larger match.

Recommendation:

Ensure the federal statute requirements are clearly stated so they never appear more restrictive than they actually are. When possible, VOCA administrators can use other sources of funding under their management as the match. Administrators should interpret the statute as expansively as they can to ensure the widest possible range of groups can apply.

VOCA administrators lack the capacity to assess the needs of victims in their jurisdictions.

Doing thorough, effective needs assessments requires time, resources, and specific skill sets that not all VOCA administrators possess. Without the ability to fully capture the needs of victims in their jurisdictions, VOCA administrators are limited in their ability to strategically and responsibly target funding to the populations most in need of support. Moreover, even when VOCA administrators do have a good sense of the needs in their jurisdiction, they can have a hard time finding the right partners to meet those needs.

Recommendation:

The federal Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) should consider developing resources and guidance to help and/or require VOCA administrators to conduct regular, effective needs assessments (i.e. every 3 to 5 years). For these needs assessments to be successful, they should (a) be executed by an independent entity outside of state agencies, (b) emphasize work with communities with the highest rates of violence and victimization, and (c) include perspectives of service providers who may identify victims within their larger work, including those working in reentry, GED programs, youth programs, violence interrupters, immigration services, services for people with disabilities, and others.

The decision-making processes about the distribution of funds are often not transparent or accessible.

Even in states where decision making is guided by appointed councils, steering committees, or groups, underserved populations are often under-represented in these bodies, and so their needs are not adequately reflected in the guidance that emerges from them.

Recommendation:

Decision-making processes should be as transparent and inclusive as possible, and the people participating in these bodies should proportionately reflect the demographics of crime victims in the jurisdiction.

Many traditional victim services providers are not equipped to effectively meet the needs of underserved victims, while some less-traditional providers may be better positioned to do so.

Culture and identity profoundly affect how all victims internalize, process, and deal with violence, victimization, and trauma. When victims do not feel their identities and cultures reflected or respected in the places where they seek help, they are less likely to participate; even when they do participate, they are less likely to benefit from the services offered.[11] Understanding who victims are, what they believe, what they value, and how they perceive violence and healing is essential to engaging them in services and meeting their needs once they are engaged. What's more, culture and identity are not only factors that shape people's experience of harm, but they can also be profound supports to healing. Providers who share and understand the cultures of those they are serving can be best positioned to help victims achieve transformative change in their healing processes.[12]

Recommendation:

Applicants demonstrating the social and cultural competence necessary for working with the population they intend to serve should be prioritized in funding decisions over those without such competence. Lifting up this essential dimension of effective service can help ensure community organizations serving people of color have the opportunity to include specific cultural and social knowledge of their target communities as evidence of their ability to deliver quality victim services.

There is a lack of evidence-based programs for underserved populations.

In addition to an overall lack of services for these groups, community-based organizations supporting underserved populations may have approaches to victim services that are not evidence-based, yet are commonly used methods of supporting victims. Promising traditional and socially relevant healing practices may be central to recovery; however, these practices may not be represented adequately in the research and literature. Furthermore, for groups with small operating budgets (some of these groups are run by volunteers only) the cost of a quality evaluation can be prohibitive.

Recommendation:

All states should include an option of implementing promising practices for underserved populations in place of any requirement that demands evidence-based solutions. In addition, OVC and/or state-level VOCA administrators should explicitly identify healing practices and trauma-informed, culturally rooted processes as viable victim services activities, and should include language within its descriptions of acceptable victim services activities that acknowledges the value of cultural and social approaches to healing.

Providers working with populations that face barriers to compensation are placed at a disadvantage.

Assisting victims in applying for compensation is a required activity under VOCA. However, many victims of violent crime, particularly in communities of color, face barriers to compensation because they are reluctant to report the violence they survive and may not be seen by law enforcement as victims when they do.[13] When organizations working with these populations do not submit an adequate number of compensation claims because the victims with whom they work are apprehensive about applying, they risk failing to complete the terms of their grant contracts.

Recommendation:

Remove the requirement of assisting a certain number of victims with applying for compensation from the requirements for VOCA grant recipients.

Single-year grants limit programs' abilities to make the best use of VOCA funds.

One year of funding, particularly for new VOCA grantees, does not provide the level of stability necessary to enable programs to build services or hire new staff for positions that may not be funded in future years. Smaller organizations, in particular, may be reluctant to increase their staffing levels for fear that they will be unable to maintain them if VOCA funds are not renewed. Moreover, some new grantees for which VOCA funding represents a significant increase in capacity may need time to hire and train staff, design programs, and recruit participants. A single-year grant may not give them adequate time to demonstrate the efficacy of their intervention and achieve the targets laid out in their proposals.

Recommendation:

VOCA administrators should consider awarding multi-year grants. This would allow groups to identify different targets for the first year that reflect any necessary start-up activities, including the creation of new services and the hiring of new staff. The annual issuance of requests for proposals for new groups remain essential, as regular opportunities for new groups to apply are an essential dimension of increasing access.

Looking ahead

The increase in VOCA funding offers an unprecedented opportunity to reach survivors who have been excluded from victim services. Fortunately, the victim services field can productively draw on its history of successfully expanding and collaborating to reach new victims. Efforts to reach immigrant survivors of domestic violence, deaf survivors, survivors with disabilities, elderly survivors, survivors of sexual assault on military bases, and countless others have brought victim services to people who were previously not served, and transformed the lives of those victims.

Reaching more survivors will not only help us meet their needs, it will also help hone better policy solutions to advance safety and justice for the full range of crime survivors regardless of race, gender, status, or history. As a country, our understanding of what victims want in the aftermath of harm has been artificially monolithic, in part because there are victims whose voices have not been heard.

By serving a greater portion of the full range of survivors of crime, we stand not only to rise to the ethical demands to address the pain of those who have been harmed, but also to develop a better understanding of what policies will actually deliver safety and justice to the greatest possible portion of victims.

The increase in VOCA funding offers an unprecedented opportunity to reach all survivors. This funding will help us get closer to fulfilling the aspirations so many survivors express: to feel respected and safe, and to ensure no one else will have to experience a pain like theirs.

The path forward is by no means simple. There are cultural, institutional, and technical challenges that will make taking full advantage of this opportunity hard to do. But at this moment in our nation's history, this is an opportunity we cannot afford to miss.

Endnotes

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