



National Case Closed Project:

The Role of Victim Services in Shooting Investigations

This National Cased Closed Project (NCCP) brief presents information on the role of professional victim services within law enforcement agencies, with a specific focus on the personnel employed by agencies to support victims and co-victims of gun violence, including homicides and nonfatal shootings. The NCCP team actively partners with law enforcement agencies to identify and implement effective and sustainable practices related to agency operations, resources, investigator capabilities, and community relations. The NCCP team has found that the application of victim services to shooting investigations, including nonfatal, is an effective method of increasing victim and co-victim participation in the investigation process and improving case outcomes for these crimes. Recommendations in this guide are informed by existing research, findings from NCCP and other agency assessments, and practitioners with dedicated experience within victim services and criminal investigations.¹

The use of victim services personnel within law enforcement agencies has long been advantageous (Linares & Robinson, 2024) to providing a victim-centered and trauma-informed approach to the crimes of domestic violence, sexual assault, and child abuse, among other crimes. To strengthen approaches to victim services so they better support individuals affected by violent crimes and to increase trust within the community, law enforcement agencies are increasingly incorporating dedicated victim services personnel

Professional Victim Services within Law Enforcement Agencies

The Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics (LEMAS) survey found that in 2020, 27% of police departments and sheriffs' offices had a dedicated unit or personnel to provide victim services, which was a significant increase from 2013 when 13% of agencies had a dedicated unit or personnel (United States Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2015, 2023). This increase in professional victim services indicates that law enforcement agencies recognize the need for additional support in the communities they serve and the marked difference that VSPs can make during the investigative and prosecutorial process.

into their responses to homicides and nonfatal shooting incidents. The remainder of this brief will define the role of victim services professionals (VSPs) in fatal and nonfatal shooting investigations as well as outline key considerations for law enforcement agencies to review when integrating this type of multidisciplinary response into investigative operations.

¹ In this document, the term "victim" refers to individuals who have survived a nonfatal shooting. The term "co-victim" refers to individuals who have experienced the loss of a loved one from a fatal shooting or have been otherwise impacted by a nonfatal shooting.

Victim Services Embedded within Law Enforcement Agencies

Collaboration between agency personnel—both sworn officers and VSPs—is critical to achieving positive case outcomes and for providing adequate support to victims and co-victims affected by crime (U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2022). Law enforcement-based victim services (LEV) can advocate for the rights and needs of victims and co-victims as they navigate the criminal justice system. These individuals often serve as part of a victim or co-victim’s support network by explaining legal processes and options, assisting with victim compensation applications, completing service referrals, and providing supportive handoffs to partner agencies and organizations. VSPs can build a large network of external referral partners who can provide specific longer-term services—an identified goal for many programs surveyed in an evaluation of LEV VSP programs (Tibaduiza et al., 2023). Despite the size of a victim services program, these efforts can increase the capacity of law enforcement agencies to provide both short- and long-term support.

LEV VSPs can also serve as a liaison between investigators and victims and co-victims by facilitating communication and providing bidirectional information and updates (e.g., case updates to victims and co-victims, status updates about victim and co-victim participation to investigators). Victim services can often help victims and co-victims understand the criminal investigation process and manage the expectations portrayed by mass media. For example, they can provide realistic guidance regarding timelines for investigations. This increase in communication and engagement from victims and co-victims throughout the investigative process can potentially lead to improved case outcomes.



Furthermore, this collaborative approach to victim and co-victim engagement can take into consideration personnel workload by equitably distributing follow-up responsibilities between sworn investigators and VSPs.

Agency Highlight: Greensboro Police Department

The Greensboro Police Department (GPD) is a midsize police agency located in Guilford County, NC. In 2022, the GPD was accepted as a site for the NCCP. A distinguishing feature of the GPD was its incorporation of professional victim services into agency operations prior to the department’s acceptance into the NCCP program. In 2020, a VSP, commonly referred to as a victim advocate, was co-located with homicide investigators in their Criminal Investigations Division. This operational decision was made because both the agency and city leadership listened to the needs and concerns of the community as well as responded to the rising crime rate that Greensboro was experiencing at the time. The VSP was tasked with providing follow-up care, advocacy services, and support to families and individuals alongside investigators as they worked the cases in an investigative capacity. The agency also recognized that for the victim services programming to be sustainable, it needed to be incorporated into operations through other strategic measures. With this goal in mind, the GPD set out to incorporate the findings and recommendations from the NCCP assessment into key operational changes, including policy revisions, training curriculum updates, technology advancements, and staffing model revisions. The result is a comprehensive standard operating procedures policy for its agency-based victim advocates. By including victim services personnel into their larger operations planning, agencies establish VSPs and victim services within the life of an agency.

“[GPD’s victim advocates] have allowed us to bridge the gap between the often cold and impersonal investigative side, put a face and name of someone who genuinely cares and is there to come to their aid, and who really speaks to the humanity [that] so many of our victims and their families need.”

—Corporal Adam Crozier, Criminal Investigations Division, Greensboro Police Department

Immediate Needs for Victims and Co-Victims and the Role of Victim Services

In the immediate aftermath of a shooting incident, victims and co-victims are often asked to interact with law enforcement and other legal professionals (e.g., prosecutors). Although victims and co-victims may experience events through personal and emotional lenses, sworn personnel are required to complete objective, thorough, and offender-focused investigations—a dichotomy that can be challenging for distressed victims to embrace. LEV VSPs can support victims and co-victims as they engage in these conversations and help guide victims on what they can expect and how best to prepare. For example, they may inform victims and co-victims about what types of topics will be discussed during the interview.

In addition to speaking with law enforcement, some victims and co-victims may be asked to speak to the media—and often soon after they have experienced an unthinkable trauma. LEV VSPs can ensure that victims and co-victims are well-informed of their rights in this arena (e.g., what information is required to be released) and can help victims advocate for their requests. They can also support victims and co-victims in preparing for media engagement and provide guidance around managing media interactions, especially those on social media platforms.

In fatal shooting cases, victim services can navigate sensitive and difficult questions from co-victims

related to options for viewing decedents' bodies, the return of decedents' personal property, and whether autopsies will occur. They can also advocate for actions that respect traditional and cultural practices when possible. In explaining the evidence collection processes, victim services can help co-victims understand how evidence will be held in custody throughout the court process, including through appeals. Victim services can advocate for the timely (or expedited) return of nonevidentiary valued personal items to co-victims when they are determined to be the rightful owners, providing co-victims with a sense of connection to their lost loved ones.

Knowledge of relevant resources for co-victims of homicide is an important role for victim services. During the critical post-incident time as investigators are working leads, co-victims are focused on making end-of-life arrangements for their loved ones. The associated costs can compound the grief experienced by co-victims. Victim services can offer support by being knowledgeable about local services meeting community-specific cultures and traditions. Additionally, victim services can share knowledge about victim compensation, including eligibility criteria, and other financial resources to ease the burden. Victims of nonfatal shootings also have immediate needs, which will vary by person. This could include medical care, financial costs associated with medical care, and the need to secure adaptive equipment for medical needs, as well as managing safety concerns for themselves and their loved ones.

Agency Highlight: Chattanooga Police Department

The Chattanooga Police Department (CPD) is a midsize police agency located in Hamilton County, TN. Since 2016, the CPD has used VSPs throughout the investigative process for all manner of criminal investigations, including fatal and nonfatal shootings. The CPD has cited several case examples that demonstrate the value added when VSPs are a part of the investigative process. For example, in a nonfatal shooting case that rendered the victim paralyzed from the waist down, the assigned VSP worked collaboratively with the survivor and members of their medical care team to secure the proper documentation for them to successfully apply for disability benefits. Upon receiving their benefits and compensation associated with the injury they sustained in the crime, the survivor was able to apply for additional supportive services in their community, including transportation assistance that provided them with a means to travel back and forth to interview appointments and court appearances. This case example exemplifies how victim services can help to effectively remove barriers that might discourage victims and survivors from participating in the criminal justice and judicial process. These supportive services also contributed toward an improved case outcome for both the prosecution and the survivor's sense of justice.

"Having a Victim Services Unit within the Chattanooga Police Department, in my opinion, has been a game changer. Our officers and investigators do a really good job of doing everything in their power to solve and stop crime. At times, our victims of these crimes get lost in the work the officers and investigators are doing—Whether this is due to caseload management or the amount of time required to solve a case. However, our Victim Services Unit ensures that our victims are given a voice in the case, kept informed, provided resources, and have someone to walk hand in hand with during their case and long afterwards."

—Lieutenant David Franklin, Investigations Bureau, Chattanooga Police Department

Longer-term Needs for Victims and Co-Victims and the Role of Victim Services

LEV VSPs understand the complex nature of homicide cases and how barriers to engagement in the investigative process may arise. Victim services can provide a critical source of support through the lengthy investigative and court process. As cases proceed through the court system, judges, juries, and attorneys are often focused on the legal aspects of a case rather than the emotional ramifications and impacts. This can leave victims and co-victims feeling neglected (Cook, 2020; Janvier, 2020). Research has shown that access to information, a sense of control, and constructive exchanges with criminal justice personnel decrease traumatic bereavement for survivors (Malone, 2007). LEV VSPs can use empathic communication to allow co-victims to set the pace for desired levels of participation and avenues of contact. Recognizing that the court process can span years, victim services can maintain strong working relationships with the multiple agencies and organizations victims and co-victims may engage with throughout the investigative process. They can practice supportive handoffs to ensure that co-victims experience consistent support as they navigate through the justice system.

The need for referrals to supportive services does not end when the court process begins. Victims and co-victims often remain in the same geographic areas in which homicides or nonfatal shootings occur. This can contribute to fears of retaliation for reporting to law enforcement and continued exposure to violence. Additionally, in unsolved cases, victims and co-victims may have concerns about unplanned contact with offenders who reside in the same area they do. These components and other case-specific factors (e.g., lack of social support, witness intimidation, community distrust in law enforcement) may result in some victims and co-victims ultimately declining to participate in the legal process, avoiding service of process, or refusing to testify under subpoena. Victim services can facilitate housing and relocation assistance and provide referrals to counseling to minimize mental health concerns associated with anticipatory violence.

Victim Engagement

Victims and co-victims are more likely to remain engaged and empowered throughout the criminal justice process when they have a clear understanding of the various steps involved—including what may be asked of them at various stages, their options for proceeding, and the ways in which advocates can assist them (U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2022).

As is true with direct victims of crimes, co-victims often face challenges maintaining their employment, mental health, and even housing as they navigate their loss and the demands of seeking justice. Victims of nonfatal shootings may need ongoing support for the physical and emotional impacts of firearm injuries that can include medical and rehabilitative support needs if the violence resulted in an injury. For both victim types, victim services can make referrals for counseling, financial support, housing, and support groups that are focused on firearm violence survivor loss and victimization.

Community Engagement and the Role of Victim Services

LEV VSPs can also serve as a liaison between the agency and the community by engaging in activities aimed at healing families and communities after firearm violence has occurred. These engagements include maintaining rapport with victims and co-victims on key dates, participating in community-based events on community violence intervention and prevention, and forming relationships with support groups founded by co-victims of community violence and with organizations or programs dedicated to community violence intervention. LEV VSPs can be an important component of community engagement and outreach that improves outcomes for those impacted by firearm violence and builds relationships with the community.

Supporting Co-Victims

Many co-victims have expressed feeling forgotten or as if their loved ones have not been remembered. In addition to providing correspondence on meaningful dates and anniversaries, VSPs can serve as the central point of contact for co-victims, even providing regularly scheduled follow-up to individuals and families. These follow-up contacts can serve as an avenue for providing case status updates or simply checking on an individual's well-being. Mike McKissic from the Mikey23 Foundation (Milwaukee, WI) noted, "Even sending a card or a quick call on the victim's birthday can make a world of difference to a family. It says 'We haven't forgotten about you'" (Brinton et al., 2023).

In Greensboro, NC, the designated advocate for homicide cases at Greensboro Police Department (GPD) will send an anniversary card to the family, letting them know their loved one has not been forgotten. In recent years GPD has hosted an annual memorial event to remember victims. To bring remembrance and to serve as a crime prevention strategy, the department also participates in a community walk for unsolved cases in the area in which the homicide occurred.

Conclusion

The role of LEV VSPs can result in improved case clearance and improved well-being and health outcomes for victims and co-victims. Firearm violence can be a life-altering event in which co-victims and victims alike may need resources to reduce the impact on their emotional, physical, and overall well-being. The short- and long-term needs of victims and co-victims and their sense of security may impact their ability or willingness to participate in the investigative process. Enhancing victim services to include responses to fatal and nonfatal firearm cases provides an opportunity for ongoing engagement with victims and co-victims during investigative and court

processes. Building trust and rapport with victims is an underlying principle of law enforcement engagement that increases information sharing and participation in criminal investigations. The use of victim services during shooting investigations can complement the investigative process and respond to victim and co-victims' needs in a way that supports positive interactions and leads to improved case closure outcomes. Through a commitment to victim-centered, trauma-informed approaches, the work of victim services can reduce barriers to engagement and augment efforts to build community trust (Brinton et al., 2023).

Recommendations for Integrating Victim Services into Fatal and Nonfatal Shooting Investigations

1. Develop a plan that equitably distributes the responsibilities for follow-up among investigators and VSPs to ensure that families receive timely, accurate, and up-to-date case status information.
2. Develop a process for returning victims' property to families that is dignified, victim centered, and easy to follow.
3. Continually identify local resources specific to the short- and long-term needs of nonfatal shooting victims and co-victims of homicides.
4. Enhance the case management process for VSPs to document relevant updates and types of victim support provided within a case file.
5. Establish clear role of victim services in responding to or supporting these investigations.
6. Ensure a balanced victim services case load that is equitable among crime types.
7. Empower VSPs to develop relationships with external community-based and/or hospital-based intervention programs.
8. Support program sustainment through systematic data collection and formative evaluations that will limit funding-dependent responses (Maryfield et al., 2021).
9. Establish a case transition procedure when there are changes in staffing, whether this is due to investigator reassignment or turnover in VSP personnel.

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More Information

If you have questions or want more information on the National Case Closed Project, please contact us.

NCCP Helpdesk
caseclosed@rti.org

NCCP Website
<https://www.nationalcaseclosed.org/>

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