

IN THEIR OWN WORDS: CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSSES FOR VICTIM SERVICE PROVIDERS DURING COVID-19



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STUDY OVERVIEW

The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted victims of crime and community-based victim service provider (VSP) agencies were tasked with maintaining accessibility to their critical services. This research study explored (1) the challenges posed by the pandemic—including related societal changes; (2) how agencies pivoted to address these challenges; and (3) which innovations were successful in ways that warranted lasting changes in practice.

This study’s sample included eight county-level project sites that vary in geography, urbanicity, and the presence of VSPs serving victims of gender-based violence (i.e., sexual assault, intimate partner violence, human trafficking, and/or stalking). To answer the study’s research questions, we conducted (1) state and local policy assessments, (2) a web-based survey of all VSPs in each project county, and (3) eight in-depth agency case studies to explore more deeply the impacts of COVID-19 on individual agencies.

Findings revealed that, nationally, victim service providers adapted their services to federal, state, and local mandates and as well as critical infrastructure closures. In general, agency capacity was stretched to its limit, with organizations being asked to serve more clients, in greater distress, and with limited additional support. To continue to support survivors throughout the pandemic, victim service providers adjusted their service delivery models, sometimes in significant ways. Findings provide tangible strategies to support victim service providers as they continue to improve services for victims of crime.

This study’s web-based survey requested victim service providers share their greatest challenges and proudest moments experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. This brief provides an overview responses in their own words.



SUMMARY OF CHALLENGES AND PROUDEST MOMENTS

CHALLENGES

When asked to reflect on service delivery since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, victim service providers described a wide array of challenges to providing services to their clients. These challenges included staffing challenges, increasing victim demands, housing limitations, and closure or limited access to critical infrastructure or technology.

“Although our agency was able to provide all services, most of our services could not be completed in a timely manner due to government offices being closed for a longer period of time (2 years).”



Staffing issues



Increased victim service needs



Housing limitations



Closures & limited access to critical infrastructure



Limited client access to technology

“We’re proud of the innovation we were able to conceive and achieve that displayed how creative we could be when our commitment to clients was challenged.”

SUCCESSES

When asked to reflect on service delivery since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, victim service providers described what they were most proud of and why. This included continuing to provide services, pivots to remote service delivery, adaptability and flexibility, and staff resilience.



Continuity of care/services



Adaptability and flexibility



Pivot to remote & virtual service delivery



Staff resilience

CHALLENGES



When asked to reflect on service delivery since the onset of COVID-19, victim service providers described a wide array of challenges to providing services to their clients.



Staffing, including staff retention, hiring, and staff burnout, was a considerable barrier for many victim service providers. In fact, staffing was the most common response with nearly a third of responding agencies (30.5%) describing staffing as their greatest challenge.

*"We aren't able to have enough staff to be at our full capacity. Partly due to the hiring market and partly due to changes to our revenue streams (decreases).
Existing staff are struggling with burnout and lack of capacity."*

*"**Staff turnover and related disruptions** impair our ability to deliver services in a timely manner. This also impacts the workload distribution [among staff] and contributes to burnout or more turnover."*



Increased victim demands also presented challenges. Agencies described how victims experiences of violence were getting more dire. Simultaneously, victims' immediate needs were shifting to basic necessities.

*"Clients have great needs/expenses that **we aren't always able to assist** with. Like rent, utilities, and other living expenses."*

*"The number of survivors we work with annually has doubled since the onset of COVID-19 and **we just can't keep up**. We had to start a waitlist for the first time, and we don't have the staff to whittle it down."*

*"[Our biggest challenge was] an **increase in level of conflict**, lethality in DV cases."*

CHALLENGES (CONTINUED)



Housing was a victim need brought up by multiple agencies. However, lack of available housing presented barriers for many victim service providers.

*“The need for client housing outstrips the availability of units, leaving the DV shelter backed up with clients awaiting housing. **This puts the shelter in the position of being unable to accept additional individuals in need.** When motel funds have dried up, this causes the agency to have to refer clients to other DV shelters.”*



Closures or limited access to critical infrastructure like courts, schools, hospitals, and more, prevented victim service providers from supporting clients in ways they were used to. For many, this barrier could not be overcome and service delivery needed to pause until public health restrictions were lifted.

*“[Our biggest challenge was] the **ability to assist with protection orders was challenging** during this time. Not all clients felt comfortable using Zoom or didn't want to, but wanted support in filing.”*

*“Although our agency was able to provide all services, most of our services **could not be completed in a timely manner** due to government offices being closed for a longer period of time (2 years). For example, clients who needed to obtain state benefits or social security cards would have to **wait up to 4-8 months** to get the process completed from the government's side.”*



All of these challenges were made even more difficult by the fact that some **clients had limited access to technology** or limited experience with technology.

*“Covid **added barriers** for survivors who did not have access to technology.”*

*“Another challenge is representing people who don't have personal computers or smart phones so **they can't appear [in court] by Zoom.** We have had to make special accommodations for a number of clients who fit in this category.”*

SUCCESSSES



When asked to reflect on service delivery since the onset of COVID-19, victim service providers described what they were most proud of and why.



Continuing to provide services in some capacity was a great feat and something many agencies were most proud of. This was the most common response with 41.9% of responding agencies describing service continuation as their greatest achievement.

*"We didn't stop care or services. While it might have been clunky at times, **we were one of the few agencies that didn't temporarily stop care.**"*

*"We did not stop supporting clients in any way during the pandemic. **Services looked different, but were still available.**"*

*"We kept doing the same amazing work - **we just adapted.**"*



Agencies described how they were **adaptable and flexible** to meet the world's ever-changing circumstances and clients' ever-evolving needs. Agencies that innovated around these challenges were proud of their results.

*"We're **proud of the innovation we were able to conceive and achieve** that displayed how creative we could be when our commitment to clients was challenged."*

*"I am most proud that **staff was willing and able to be creative in finding solutions** and still absolutely dedicated to roles in keeping children safe and coming to work."*

*"[Staff and clients] had a **mutual understanding for one another that we were trying to make things work** and had to think outside of the box to make things happen. I personally would drop off groceries to my clients as an excuse to see them in person. This kept them engaged and willing to meet with me. I am proud of the innovative ways we tried to meet our clients' needs."*

SUCCESSSES (CONTINUED)



Many agencies were able to continue to provide services through **pivots to remote service delivery**. Multiple agencies cited this transition as their proudest moment. Agencies that had capacity for virtual service delivery prior to the pandemic noted how this contributed to their success of being able to continue to provide services.

*"We quickly **developed and were able to pivot our in-person programs to virtual** so that we could continue and even eventually expand our programs."*

*"Because we work statewide, we already offered a lot of services virtually -- phone-based support groups, phone-based individual counseling/support -- **so the transition for many survivors was seamless.**"*



Agencies lauded their **staffs' resilience** throughout the pandemic, and noted how proud they were of staff for being flexible and continuing to provide services under such extreme conditions.

*"The **resilience and adaptability that our staff** has been able to demonstrate through this process has been great to see and work with."*

*"Our advocates **truly stepped up and provided life-saving services** for our survivors, despite all that they were going through. Moreover, we ourselves were dealing with the rise of anti-Asian violence as well as helping our community grieve and plan for safety. That's a lot to take on and our team stepped up to meet these challenges."*

*"I'm most proud of our **fantastic, heroic staff** who continued to provide essential social services on the front lines during a global pandemic. Everyone contributed and we are so grateful to our Board for their support as well."*

Victim service providers were asked to support clients in new and challenging ways throughout the pandemic, often at the expense of their own safety and wellbeing. Yet through absolute adversity, victim service providers found ways to continue to provide services to their clients. Put succinctly by one agency, "We survived!"