

VISION FOR VICTIM SERVICES

Hotline Evaluation Study

Problem

Every year, victim service programs in PA have to do more with less. The demands on local program staff are increasing while the resources available to the programs are decreasing. Many local victims programs are struggling to sustain their local hotlines given the demands posed by these 24-hour a day, seven days a week services. While hotlines are without a doubt vital resources for crime victims, hotlines can consume a disproportionate amount of staff time and can quickly deplete already limited budgets.

Hotlines were one of the first services to be offered to victims of crime. They are mandated by the Department of Public Welfare (DPW) for all programs receiving funding to provide sexual assault or domestic violence services. Hotlines are an approved expense under the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) funding administered by PCCD and can be used to fund hotline services for victims of all types of crimes. In most of PA, hotline service for victims of crimes other than sexual assault and domestic violence is limited to counties where a sexual assault and/or a domestic violence program has expanded the scope of its mission to include service to other types of victims.

The costs of running a hotline are difficult to quantify and vary in part



upon how heavily the program relies on volunteers. When hotlines are staffed in whole or part by volunteers, the costs of volunteer recruitment, training, scheduling, recognition and turnover must be factored in. For the past decade it has become more difficult to attract volunteers to do hotline work. It does not provide social connection, requires sensitive training and has time slots (overnight) that can be difficult for those who work or go to school.

Solution

Both PCCD and the Department of Public Welfare (DPW) have an interest in examining the current hotline structure in the Commonwealth. A study will be conducted to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of the Commonwealth's current hotline services for Pennsylvania's crime victims. The ultimate goal of the Office of Victims' Services is to ensure hotline access for all crime victims, to provide appropriate support services and to ensure that victim hotline services are delivered in a cost effective and efficient manner.

This study will utilize these guiding principles:

- **Quality of Service Delivery** – An emphasis should be placed on the quality of service delivery, ensuring seamless assistance for crime victims, regardless of the offense.
- **Knowledgeable Referrals** – Referrals should be knowledgeable and appropriate.
- **Victim Safety** – Victim safety should be the number one priority, particularly with call tracking.
- **Confidentiality Protections** – Victims' statutory confidentiality provisions must be protected.
- **Existing Services** – Crime victims should not be without hotline services due to the nature of their offense or their geographic location.

Business Issues

At present, the Commonwealth is home to more than 120 victim service hotlines. The hotlines, owned and operated by public and non-profit victim service programs, provide distinct support services to select types of victims (e.g. sexual assault, domestic assault, DUI, etc.). However, a number of other crime victims and their family members subject to burglary, robbery, homicide and other offenses remain under-served and/or un-served by the current hotline network. This is a concern to many in the justice and victims service communities.

In 2009 DPW considered mandating a switch to a single provider of hotline

services for sexual assault and domestic violence programs. This would have eliminated hotline service for victims of other types of crime in the counties where it currently exists. After discussions with PCCD, DPW agreed to postpone its decision to form a statewide hotline while a study is conducted.

Results

The Philadelphia Health Management Corporation (PHMC) was awarded a grant in September 2010 as the entity to conduct the Statewide Hotline Feasibility Study. Justice Assistance Grant (JAG) funding in the amount of \$114,248 will fund the 18 month project.

PHMC will be focusing on the following goals during the project:

- Map the current hotline structure statewide and perform a gap analysis between available services and needs.

- Determine the strengths and weaknesses of the existing hotlines. What services are provided? To how many and what types of callers? What services are not provided?
- Assess the cost effectiveness of the current hotline structure.

The study from a professional evaluator, such as PHMC, will provide valuable and practical data to help answer the question what it takes to respond to victim calls whether they are a victim of sexual assault, domestic violence, or of other crimes. This is an opportunity to gather the data needed across the state to begin pursuing solutions both in terms of cost efficiencies and service.

