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Fran Danis, PhD, ACSW

Over the past 30 years, victim assistance services have become an increasingly important field of practice. Historically, volunteers provided services to crime victims; more recently, however, criminal justice institutions have directly employed victim assistance professionals. As the field becomes more defined, some important questions arise: If social workers are interested in working with crime victims, what knowledge and skills do they need? Can they build on the generalist social work competencies learned in the classroom? What specific knowledge and skills should be acquired through professional development and continuing education?

An expert panel of victim assistance professionals was asked to rate the relative importance of generalist social work competencies for practice with crime victims. The panel findings provide the social work profession with specific information on both generalist and specific competencies needed. The important role that continuing education can play in developing social work professionals for this field is discussed, and recommendations for specific workshop content is given.

The Crime Victim Assistance Field

In 2000, there were 25.9 million violent and property victimizations in the United States (Rennison, 2001). In each year between 1992 and 1998, an average of 2.6 million of the 10.2 million victims of violent crime in the United States were injured during the crime (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2001). The National Violence Against Women Survey (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998) estimates that there are 5.9 million assaults against women annually, with approximately 76 percent of those incidents perpetrated by current or former husbands, cohabiting partners, or dates. Five out of six people will be victims of crimes (or attempted crimes) sometime during their lifetime (Koppel, 1987).

These statistics fail to convey the depth of individual experience: how violence changed the life of a victim, along with those of his or her family and friends. Victims of violent crimes may suffer serious, debilitating, and often lasting, physical, psychological, social, and economic injuries. Crime victims/survivors and professionals in the field identified crisis and long-term mental health services as most important for work with crime victims (Crime Victims' Institute, 1999). The psychological impact of violent crimes may include depression, anger, embarrassment, helplessness, and fear (Brown, 1991). Victims may also experience post-traumatic stress disorder with symptoms such as recurring and intrusive recollections of the event, difficulty falling asleep, difficulty concentrating, hypervigilance, and exaggerated startle responses (Ochberg, 1988). In addition, the financial impacts are numerous, including emergency medical and rehabilitation bills, relocation costs, lost wages, and funeral costs, as well as mental health counseling.

During the 1970s, public awareness about the debilitating effects of crime grew, as public scrutiny about often-insensitive treatment of crime victims and witnesses by police, prosecutors, and judges increased. Crime victimization studies identified a large gap between the number of crimes reported to police and the number of self-identified crime victims (Kilpatrick, Saunders, Veronen, Best, & Von, 1987). There are many reasons why victims do not always report crimes to police. Some indi-

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viduals do not report crimes because they fear involvement in the criminal justice system. Rape victims frequently cite guilt and self-blame as reasons for not reporting incidents (Wiehe & Richards, 1995). People of color may not report crime because of historic distrust between some ethnic minority groups and police departments (Ogawa, 2000). Victims of domestic and sexual assaults are often reluctant to file reports against their intimate partners, spouses, and dates; when they did report, they were often met with a "blame the victim" mentality or ignored altogether (Schechter, 1982; Brownmiller, 1975).

As victim's rights groups were organizing and gaining momentum, law enforcement entities were also beginning to recognize the importance of involving victims and witnesses in the criminal justice process. Oftentimes, when witnesses come forward and testify, the quality of evidence available to prosecutors increases; thus the cases presented to the court are strengthened and a conviction is more likely to occur. However, witnesses who feel inconvenienced, distressed, or fearful of reprisals by the defendant are not likely to cooperate or appear in court.

The crime victims' and violence-against-women movements helped pass federal and state legislation focusing on victim assistance. In 1984, Congress passed the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA), which reestablished strong federal leadership in providing assistance to victims. This act provided funding to qualified victim assistance and state compensation programs. In 1994, the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) was passed (and reauthorized in 2000), providing federal funding to shelters for battered women, sexual assault programs, and a variety of other measures to combat violence against women.

All 50 states have passed legislation establishing victims' rights. Additionally, all 50 states, including the District of Columbia and the Virgin Islands, have funded crime victim compensation programs. Compensation funds reimburse costs for mental health services needed to help victims who have been traumatized by crimes. In some states, each

prosecutor's office and law enforcement agency is required to designate a crime victim coordinator or liaison (Crime Victims' Institute, 1999). While 32 states have adopted constitutional amendments requiring the provision of certain services to crime victims, a proposed amendment to the U.S. Constitution remains controversial (American Civil Liberties Union Freedom Network, 2002).

Victims' services are provided through criminal justice institutions and by local community-based agencies. Criminal justice institutions may include local law enforcement agencies, prosecutors' offices, probation departments, and state correctional institutions. Community-based agencies include domestic violence and sexual assault programs, as well as organizations that assist all victims of crime. Community support groups also may be available to assist victims and their families. Two such groups are Parents of Murdered Children and Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD).

A range of services is now available to victims, from those that respond to needs arising from surviving the crime to those that assist victims with participating in the criminal justice process (Tomz & McGillis, 1997). The National Organization for Victim Assistance has divided victim/survivor services into eight stages, beginning with assistance at the crime scene and ending with help in the post-sentencing phase (Tomz & McGillis, 1997). At the crime scene, or whenever first contact with the victim is made, victim assistance providers assess trauma and offer crisis intervention and emotional aid. In the 48 hours following the crime, victim assistance workers help to stabilize the victim by providing supportive counseling, information about the criminal justice process, and arranging for shelter, transportation, protection, and other referrals. They also assist family and friends of the victim/survivor. Resource mobilization continues until the victim is able to resume normal activities. Victim service providers may conduct follow-up and outreach visits to the victim/survivor; provide supportive counseling, information and referrals; and help the victim

reclaim property, file compensation claims, request emergency aid, take crime prevention measures, and address issues associated with employers, landlords, creditors, family, and friends.

After an arrest is made, prosecutors may consult with victims on charges to be filed, conditions of release, case scheduling, and case diversion. An arrest can trigger a traumatic response, which may require additional intervention services. Victims may also need information on how to file intimidation reports, and request relocation assistance, protective orders, and restitution. Before the case moves to court, pretrial services include orientation to court procedures, assistance with developing a victim impact statement, and aid with transportation, childcare, and employer notification. Orientation services may also be provided to family and friends who will accompany the victim in the courtroom. Facing the accused in court may also reawaken trauma in a victim or survivor, and raise concerns about media intrusion and intimidation by the offender. Thus, victim service personnel may also provide critical trauma intervention as well as information about handling the media.

After a guilty verdict is rendered, a victim/survivor has an opportunity to read his or her victim impact statement in court. The victim/survivor may have questions about restitution, probation, and civil entitlement issues that will need to be addressed. After the disposition of the case, the victim will need to be notified of parole hearings and support in providing testimony at those hearings, as well as notification and assistance at revocation-of-probation hearings and restitution collection. While the traditional criminal justice system views offenses as crimes against the state, the restorative justice movement views victims as the primary injured parties (Umbreit, 2001). Victim–offender mediation brings together victims and offenders to hold offenders directly responsible to their victims, allowing offenders opportunities to repair the harm they have caused (Umbreit, 2001). Victim assistance professionals and trained volunteers serve as media-

tors and advocates within this process as well.

Social Work and the Victim Assistance Field

Many of the functions of the victim assistance professional are similar to those of a case manager. The service provider must help the survivor negotiate a maze of agencies, personnel, policies, and procedures. He or she serves as the victim's advocate; indeed, the term "advocate" is often used in the title of such a professional. Like social workers in schools or hospitals, the crime victim assistance professional is working in a host setting and must consider the needs of his or her clients within the context of that setting.

The current expansion of professional development opportunities marks maturation of the field. The U.S. Department of Justice Office for Victims of Crimes (OVC) ensures access to expert trainers and consultants through its Training and Technical Assistance Center (TTAC). TTAC underwrites the costs of sending trainers and consultants to state and local programs. Since 1995, OVC and Victims' Assistance Legal Organization (VALOR) have cosponsored an annual National Victim Assistance Academy (OVC, 2002). The academy is a university-based, foundation-level, 40-hour course of study on victimology, victims' rights, and victim services. An advanced course of study has recently become available for graduates at the foundation level. Several states, including California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Michigan, Pennsylvania, New Mexico, South Carolina, Texas, Utah, Wisconsin, and Vermont have initiated their own victim assistance academies (DeHart, 2002).

Individual universities and colleges, such as California State University at Fresno and Sam Houston State University (Texas) are also developing degree programs in victim services and victim services administration (Dehart, 2002; O'Neill, 2000). These degree programs are associated with the criminal justice departments in their universities. Washburn University (Kansas), Kansas City, Kansas Community College, Southwest Missouri

State University, University of New Haven, and Red Rocks Community College (Colorado) are also offering certificate programs in victim assistance (DeHart, 2002), and most of these programs are also associated with criminology departments. To promote standardization of knowledge and skills across the field, OVC has contracted with the University of South Carolina to develop professional standards for victim assistance professionals and administrators (DeHart, 2002). The standards are being developed through the University's School of Social Work with the assistance of a national panel of victim assistance experts.

Although a few schools of social work have highlighted victim assistance, the field continues to have a low profile within the profession. Only 2.3% of professional social workers identify the primary focus of their work as "violence-victims assistance" (Gibelman & Schervish, 1997). This is surprising considering the prevalence of violent crime, the impact of victimization on the mental health of those involved, the number of clinically trained social workers, and the profession's focus on helping vulnerable and disenfranchised populations (NASW, 1997; O'Neill, 1999). Ironically, the profession has typically been more concerned with the needs of offenders in the criminal justice system (Gandy, 1997). While mediation between victims and offenders has been recognized as an emerging field of practice (Umbreit, 1993), the larger field of victim assistance has only recently drawn attention (O'Neill, 2000).

Crime Victim Assistance Expert Panel

In 1999, OVC funded "Crime Victims: A Social Work Response—Building Skills to Strengthen Survivors." An advisory committee was formed as part of the project, to assist in developing linkages between social work professionals and representatives from the victim assistance field. The author recruited these sixteen committee members to serve as an expert panel to rate the relative importance of generalist social work competencies for the field of

victim assistance. Three of the advisory committee members were directors of law enforcement-based victim assistance units in three urban Texas communities. Three members were directors of national or state victim advocacy organizations representing service providers in domestic violence, sexual assault, and victims of drunk driving. Directors and program staff of federal or state agency-based victim services units, such as the U.S. Attorney's Office, Department of Public Safety, Office of the Attorney General, also participated. One participant was a specialist in critical incident debriefing under contract with the Department of Defense.

Seven members had professional social work degrees. Of the remaining nine members: one member had a bachelor's degree in education; three had unspecified master's degrees; two had master's degrees in education; one had a master's degree in counseling; and two had unspecified degrees. Collectively, members of the committee had over 200 years of experience in the field. Individual experience ranged from three to 30 years, with an average of 14.5 years of service. Five members had 20 years or more of experience.

Committee members had extensive experience with all levels of government, from local to federal, and at all levels of practice, including volunteer, basic, specialized, independent, and advanced. Work experience included direct practice, supervisory, local and state agency administration, national direct service work, statewide advocacy, consultation, teaching, training, and research. They had experience with survivors of many different crimes, including domestic violence, sexual assault, hate crimes, homicide, terrorist acts, drunk driving, and child abuse. Some members of the panel were survivors of violent crimes themselves. During the course of their careers, panel members worked in a wide variety of practice settings, including police departments, medical examiners' offices, federal and local prosecutors' offices, hospital emergency rooms, college campuses, adolescent day treatment programs, crisis intervention hotline offices, domes-

tic violence shelters, probation departments, psychiatric hospitals, state law enforcement bureaus, veterans' hospitals, and sexual assault programs.

The Competency Exercise

Sixteen members of the advisory committee participated in the competency exercise. The responses

Table 1. Generalist Social Work Knowledge Needed for Crime Victim Assistance Field

KNOWLEDGE OF:	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Crisis intervention theories and techniques	15	5.00	5.00	5.0000	.0000
Advocacy theory and techniques	14	4.00	5.00	4.8571	.3631
Community resources and services	15	4.00	5.00	4.8000	.4140
Racial, ethnic, and other cultural groups in society; their values and lifestyles and the resultant issues in contemporary life	15	4.00	5.00	4.7333	.4577
Social and environmental factors affecting clients to be served	15	3.00	5.00	4.7333	.5936
Ethical standards and practices of professional social work	14	4.00	5.00	4.5714	.5136
Theories and methods of psychosocial assessment and intervention and of differential diagnosis	14	4.00	5.00	4.4286	.5136
Local, state, and federal laws and regulations affecting social and health services	15	2.00	5.00	4.2000	1.0142
Human growth and development and of family and social interaction	15	3.00	5.00	4.2000	.7746
Theories and behavior of organizational and social systems and of methods for encouraging change	15	1.00	5.00	4.0667	1.2228
Basic federal and state social service programs and their purposes	15	2.00	5.00	4.0667	1.0328
Theories of group interaction and therapeutic intervention	14	2.00	5.00	4.0000	1.0377
Casework and group work theory and practices	14	3.00	5.00	4.0000	.7845
Small group theory and behavioral dynamics	13	2.00	5.00	3.9231	.9541
Community organization theory and techniques	15	2.00	5.00	3.6000	.9856
Theories and concepts of supervision and the professional supervision of social work practice	14	2.00	5.00	3.5714	.8516
Sources of professional and scientific research appropriate to practice	15	2.00	5.00	3.5333	.9155
Basic socioeconomic and political theory	14	2.00	5.00	3.4286	1.0894
Community organization theory and the development of health and human services	15	2.00	5.00	3.4000	1.2421
Social welfare trends and policies	14	1.00	5.00	3.2857	1.3828
Theories and concepts of personnel management	15	1.00	5.00	3.2667	1.0328
Teaching and instructional theories and techniques	13	1.00	5.00	3.2308	1.1658
Concepts and techniques of social planning	15	1.00	5.00	3.1333	1.1872
Common social and psychological statistical and other research methods and techniques	15	1.00	4.00	2.9333	1.0328
Theories and concepts of social welfare administration	15	1.00	4.00	2.6667	.8997

of one member, a social work state licensure board member with no experience in the victim assistance field, was excluded from the final analysis. Each participant received the list of knowledge, skills, abilities, and values identified in the NASW Standards for the Classification of Social Work Practice: Policy Statement 4 (National Association of Social Workers, 1981) as needed to perform the basic tasks associated with professional social work practice. These standards serve as the foundation for social work practice and ensure that future practitioners are prepared to perform a range of tasks in a variety of host settings. The NASW Standards are used to develop core performance measures for practitioners in the field, and provide guidelines for the administration of education, training, and professional development (continuing education) activities.

From the list of knowledge, skills, abilities, and values, panel members were asked to rate each item's relative importance for social work practice in the field of victim assistance. The panel members assigned ratings to 61 items: 25 knowledge items, 12 skill items, 14 ability items, and 10 value items. Panel members were given a Likert-type scale to rate each item, with the following categories:

5 – Utmost Importance
4 – Important
3 – Somewhat Important
2 – Less Important
1 – Not Important at All.

The participants were also asked to provide information on knowledge, abilities, skills, and values specific to the victim assistance field. Their open-ended responses were collected along with their ratings of generalist social work practice competencies.

All responses to both the generalist and specific competencies were recorded anonymously. Responses were entered into SPSS, and the mean score for each item was computed. The mean scores were then listed in descending order. This article reports competencies in the knowledge and skills domains (37 items).

Findings

Of the 37 knowledge and skills competencies, all but two were classified as Somewhat Important or above. However, each of the competency items was rated as Important or of Utmost Importance by at least one panel member. All panel members considered "crisis intervention theories and techniques" the most important of the 25 knowledge items. The two items with mean scores below 3.00 were found in this category, and address research methods and theories and concepts of social welfare administration. Participants also identified a vast array of specific knowledge items as essential: (1) crime victims' compensation; (2) the culture of the criminal justice system; (3) the impact of crime on all aspects (psychological, physical, financial, legal, and social) of a victim's life; (4) post-traumatic stress disorder; (5) theories and interventions for trauma and recovery; (6) crime victims' rights; (7) cultural diversity and the grieving process; (8) community and group debriefing; (9) current laws and legislation at federal, state, and municipal levels; (10) criminal and family law codes; (11) dynamics of domestic violence; (12) rape trauma syndrome; (13) self-care and recognition of compassion fatigue; (14) victimization and different types of perpetrators (intimate partner, family member, acquaintance, stranger); (15) death notification; (16) the impact of violent crime on family dynamics; (17) the impact of crime on adults, adolescents, and children; (18) the impact of crime on spiritual beliefs; and (19) the roles of key service providers, including police, courtroom staff, and emergency room workers. Table 1 (on page 31) presents the generalist social work knowledge items as rated by the expert panel.

Table 2 presents the expert panel's findings with regards to the generalist social work skills needed for work in the victim assistance field. All members of the panel selected "skill in discussing sensitive emotional subjects in a non-threatening supportive manner," as the most important of the 12 items. Not listed in the generalist skills, but identi-

Table 2. Generalist Social Work Skills Needed for Crime Victim Assistance Field

SKILL IN:	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Discussing sensitive emotional subjects in a non-threatening, supportive manner	15	5.00	5.00	5.0000	.0000
Listening to others with understanding and purpose	15	4.00	5.00	4.9333	.2582
Engaging clients in efforts to resolve their own problems and in gaining trust	15	4.00	5.00	4.9333	.2582
Observing and interpreting verbal and nonverbal behavior and in using a knowledge of personality theory and diagnostic methods	15	4.00	5.00	4.6667	.4880
Creating innovative solutions to client needs	15	4.00	5.00	4.6667	.4880
Providing interorganizational liaison services	15	3.00	5.00	4.5333	.6399
Eliciting information and assembling the relevant facts to prepare a social history, assessment, and report	15	4.00	5.00	4.5333	.5164
Mediating and negotiating between conflicted parties	15	2.00	5.00	4.4667	.8338
Creating and managing professional helping relationships and using oneself in relationships	13	3.00	5.00	4.4615	.6602
Determining the need to end therapeutic relationship and how to do so	15	2.00	5.00	4.2000	.8619
Interpreting or communicating social needs to funding sources, the public, or legislators	15	2.00	5.00	4.0000	.8452
Interpreting findings of research studies and professional literature	15	1.00	5.00	3.2667	1.0328

fied by the expert panel as important, were:

(1) active listening
(2) crisis intervention techniques and mental health triage
(3) safety planning for victims/survivors
(4) assessing past trauma
(5) completing and filing crime victims' compensation forms
(6) helping victims deal with media
(7) working and surviving in criminal justice settings.

Discussion

What competencies do social workers need if they are to practice in the victim assistance field? Do the knowledge and skills of professional social workers match the knowledge and skills necessary for victim assistance practice? The expert panel responses suggest that there is an excellent fit between social work competencies and the needs of the victim assistance practitioners. All of the generalist social work competencies listed in the NASW Standards for the Classification of Social Work Practice: Policy Statement 4, were considered necessary in the victim assistance field. No item was identified as Not Important at All. All panel members agreed that "crisis intervention theories and techniques" and "skill in discussing sensitive emotional subjects in a non-threatening supportive manner," were the most important knowledge and skill items needed for practice in the victim assistance field. While many social workers have training and experience in these areas, their ability to apply these competencies to the crime victim field is not yet known.

This competency exercise should be considered an exploratory study. The small sample size (N= 15) makes it difficult to generalize the data and pre-

cludes an analysis of differences in responses between persons with social work degrees and those without. There was no attempt to differentiate competencies needed between bachelor's and master's level practices, and presenting professional social work competencies to expert panel members may have biased the responses. It is possible that allied professions may have similar competencies that would meet the needs of the victim assistance field.

Because victim assistance is an emerging field, it is not known to what extent social workers are aware of the opportunities this field offers for professional practice. Likewise, social workers may not be aware of basic crime victims' rights or of the availability of services for victims and the effectiveness of those services. Practicing social workers may not have received information on working with crime victims while pursuing their degrees, nor are the professional development needs of social workers currently in the victim assistance field known. These issues should be explored in future research and evaluation projects.

Implications for the Profession of Social Work

The panel's findings carry a number of implications for the social work profession. The generalist knowledge and skills of social work practice are an excellent foundation for competent practice in the victim assistance field. Social workers entering the victim assistance field will be well served by their academic preparation; however, they will need to incorporate field specific competencies into their knowledge base.

Social work educators can help facilitate a successful transition into the victim assistance profession by developing content and assignments that integrate the field specific competencies into the social work curricula. For example, information on the impact of crimes against people of color can be added to courses that include content on cultural diversity. Courses that address crisis intervention theory can use examples specific to crime victims. The rights of, and services for, crime victims can

be discussed in courses on social welfare policy. Courses that address issues in child welfare should cover the developmental trauma children experience when witnessing violent crimes against their mothers. Elective courses in victim assistance, with sections on the needs of victims of specific crimes, such as battered women, can also be offered in social work programs. Additionally, social workers practicing in the victim assistance field can serve as guest speakers and field placement supervisors.

Professional development programs that provide continuing education workshops should explore offering both basic and advanced skills training. The events of September 11th illustrate the importance of understanding the impact of violence upon individuals and communities. Workshop content can focus on crisis-intervention practice with crime victims, continuing work with survivors of crimes, and on providing culturally sensitive interventions. Continuing education programs can also help prepare practitioners for effective work within the unique host setting of the criminal justice system. Unlike host settings where the social worker works within a single institution, the criminal justice system is a complex grouping of independent agencies dependent upon one another for their success. Criminal laws and procedures oversee how individuals move through this system, and many social workers were not exposed to these laws and procedures during their professional degree programs. Thus, continuing education workshops that focus on understanding criminal law and procedures are critical for success in the field, and will assist practitioners in their transition from an educational setting to a specific practice setting.

Continuing education training should also focus on values and ethical dilemmas. The differences in goals and outcomes between the criminal justice system and the profession of social work often create professional dilemmas. The criminal justice system often measures success by the number of arrests and convictions. Historically, the goal of social work has been to prevent individuals from

involvement with the criminal justice system. Thus, social workers may not measure their successes in the same way as the host setting. Other potential continuing education topics include accessing compensation programs for payment of mental health services and overcoming secondary victimization.

In recognition of the fit between social work competencies and the skills necessary in victim assistance work, particularly with regard to the mental health needs of crime victims, continuing education programs should consider developing certificate programs in victim assistance or partnering with victim assistance training academies already in existence.

Conclusion

The social work profession and the victim assistance field have much in common, including the knowledge and skills necessary for assisting and empowering vulnerable people in dealing with societal institutions that may not recognize their unique needs. In this respect, the victim assistance field is not unlike other host settings where the role of professional social workers is to serve as advocate for

clients who would otherwise not have a voice. Equally important is the training in mental health services that social workers receive, as crime victims often need counseling as a result of victimization.

The competency exercise looked at the fit between professional social work and the field of crime victim assistance. The social work competencies identified by an expert panel, with notable depth and breath of experiences in the field, confirmed that generalist social work competencies are applicable to the victim assistance field. Thus, social workers who want to enter the victim assistance field will find that the generalist social work knowledge and skills they have been taught can prepare them for work in the field; however, they will need specific competencies. Continuing professional development has an important role to play in preparing social workers for entry into the victim assistance field. Professional development is also needed to help social workers practicing in other settings understand the impact of crime on individuals and their families, as well as the rights of victims and the services available to them.

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