Critical Analysis of the Relationship Between Police, Support Systems, and Victim’s Families Following a Homicide or Sudden Death

Final Report

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present project was to develop best practices for victim service workers when dealing with families of homicide and sudden death and to develop a guide to assist families of homicide in navigating the criminal justice system. A review of the literature was conducted, and surveys were administered to several police-based and community-based victim service organizations as a means of assessing the current state of victim assistance. Major positive findings include consistent provision of information to families, and assistance with virtually every aspect of the process following a homicide. However, some negative findings emerged, including an inconsistency in attending death notification, a lack of oversight and standardized training in Ontario and a deficit of community-based resources for families of homicide and sudden death in many communities. The findings have been translated into recommendations for best practices and a guide to assist families of homicide in navigating the criminal justice system. Limitations and future directions are discussed.

Keywords: Victim Services, Homicide, Sudden Death, Best Practices, Criminal Justice System
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KEYWORDS AND DEFINITIONS

**Acquittal**: a finding of not guilty

**Community-Based Victim Services**: non-profit or government funded organizations that provide assistance to victims of crime

**Court-Based Victim Services**: provide support for people who have become involved in the criminal justice process as either victims or witnesses

**First-Degree Murder**: the planned and intentional killing of a human being by another who has criminal intent

**Homicide**: the intentional killing of one human being by another; may be lawful or unlawful

**Manslaughter**: the killing of one human being by another under sudden provocation and without intent

**Notification of Death**: when a member of the police force comes to inform the family of the death of their loved one

**Police-Based Victim Services**: organizations situated within a police department that provide assistance to victims of crime

**Primary Victim**: a victim of a crime that has been committed directly against them (e.g. the deceased in a murder investigation)

**Secondary Victim**: a victim of a crime that was not committed directly against them (e.g. a family member of a murdered individual)

**Second-Degree Murder**: the intentional killing of a human being by another who has no intent (e.g. heat of the moment)

**Sudden Death**: the unexpected death of an individual

**Victim Services**: organizations that provide information, support and referrals for crime victims

**Victim Crisis Assistance and Referral Service (VCARS)**: a community-based victim services organization that provides information, assistance and referrals for victims of crime

**Victim Impact Statement**: a statement written by the victim to inform the court of how the crime impacted their lives

**Victim Quick Response Program (VQRP)**: a government funded organization that provides financial assistance to victims in the aftermath of a violent crime

**Victim/Witness Assistance Program (V/WAP)**: a court-based victim services organization that provides assistance to victims and witnesses of crime during the criminal justice process
INTRODUCTION

The sudden loss of a loved one is a tragedy which many individuals unfortunately must face. In 2011, 598 homicides occurred across Canada, demonstrating an 8% increase from 2010 homicide rates (1). Although statistics regarding the number of non-homicidal sudden deaths are more scarce, there are on average six times more suicide-related deaths and five times more deaths due to vehicular accidents than homicide per year across Canada (1). Not only do homicides and sudden deaths produce primary victims (i.e. the deceased), but secondary victims are also produced (i.e. family of the deceased) (2). Even more scarce than non-homicide related sudden death statistics, are statistics regarding the number of secondary victims associated with homicide. Kilpatrick et al., (1990) found that over 9% of adults from the United States had lost a family member, other relative or close friend to homicide (2).

The grieving processes following a homicide or sudden death are very different than the processes associated with other manners of death. The emotions associated with the sudden loss of a loved one are much more intense, persistent and complex (3). The grieving processes also differ between homicidal and non-homicidal sudden death. The landmark of grief associated with suicide, for instance, is blame. Families of suicide often question whether their loved one was provoked by something the family said or did, and whether or not the family could have done something to prevent the death. The belief that one is to blame for a suicide is a very traumatic feeling. The grief following a homicide is characterized as a "unique synergy of loss and trauma" (3). The grieving process is often associated with feelings of uncertainty, rage, losing the sense of control and helplessness (3). The criminal justice process complicates things even further, by essentially putting the grieving process on hold (4). Families must put their grief on hold in order to deal with the practical, legal and financial matters that arise following a
homicide (3). It is for this reason that the most intense part of the grieving process begins upon completion of the trial. Given the complex nature of the homicide and sudden death grieving processes, it is essential to have organizations and programs in place to provide front-line assistance to these bereaved individuals.

Victim service organizations provide a broad range of services to victims of crime, including emotional support, practical assistance, financial assistance, referrals to other community services and general information (5). There are various victim assistance delivery modes, including police-based, court-based and community-based organizations. Police-based victim services are located in police-detachments and provide support, assistance and referrals following a victim's first contact with the police (6). Court-based victim services provide assistance to victims and witnesses throughout their involvement with the criminal justice process (6). Community-based victim services provide emotional support, assistance and information, and are generally government funded or not-for-profit organizations (6).

The concept of victim services as a profession emerged in response to the victims' rights movement (7). It is a multi-disciplinary field encompassing law, mental health and social services (7). Although an extremely valuable profession, victim services is still considered a emerging occupational field in Canada, especially in comparison to well-established occupations such as law and medicine. (7). The Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) is a government organization that acts on behalf of victims by ensuring Ontario's victim services meet diverse victim needs, and remain effective and coordinated (8). The OVC actively supports and promotes the development of standards, education and ethical guidelines to facilitate the professionalization of victim service occupations (7). One aspect which is crucial in the development of standards is identifying best practices. Best practices are techniques which are
tested through research and experience, and have proven to be reliable. The Minnesota Office of Justice Programs has defined the commitment to using best practices as "a commitment to using all the knowledge and technology at one's disposal to ensure success" (9).

It is necessary to develop best practices for any profession; however victim assistance is a field in which best practices are especially vital, as victim service workers are dealing with psychologically frail individuals. Previous research has indicated that lack of information and insensitive communication towards victims are the most common complaints regarding victim service organizations (3). Homicide and sudden death are very emotionally sensitive topics, and thus best practices that are both sensitive and effective must be established. One area of immense struggle, specifically for families of homicide, is the criminal justice process. The investigation and trial take precedence over the grieving process, and families of homicide often feel frustrated by their experience with the criminal justice system (3). Not only do criminal proceedings inhibit the natural response to homicide (3), they often exacerbate the associated grief (4). Previous research has demonstrated that families of homicide who were very dissatisfied with their experience with the criminal justice system were twice as likely to consider seeking revenge (2). In addition, the criminal justice system was found to have a major influence on the extent to which families of homicide experience psychological trauma (2). These findings stress the fact that families of homicide require resources to assist them with their involvement in and experience with the criminal justice system.

Assisting families of homicide and sudden death revolves around a sensitive topic, and thus sensitive methods of interaction must be employed. These families have very diverse needs, and it is essential to ensure all needs are met. The current research is being conducted in conjunction with Trent University and the Peterborough-Lakefield Community Police Service
Victim Services Unit (PLCPS-VSU). The purpose of this research is two-fold: to develop best practices in dealing with families of homicide and sudden death and to develop a guide to assist families of homicide in navigating the criminal justice process.
METHODS

Data collection for this report was performed in several stages using a variety of methods. The first stage involved attending an annual conference hosted by Lean-On-Me, a community-based victim service organization based out of Hamilton, Ontario. Titled "Supporting Families of Homicide", this conference provided insight into the obstacles faced by families of homicide, including presentations by victim service providers, as well as family members of homicide victims. The presentations, which highlighted some strengths and weaknesses of the methodology employed by various victim service organizations, were key resources that provided an orientation to the subject matter of this project.

Next, a thorough literature review was performed on subjects such as the grieving process associated with homicide, professionalism and best practices for victim service workers, the criminal justice process in Canada and the differences between homicide and sudden death cases, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of current methods employed by victim service workers. The literature review consisted of academic journal articles, pamphlets from various organizations and internet sources.

After background research was conducted, an in-person interview was set up with the supervisors of this project from the PLCPS-VSU. Christie Christie and Alice Czitrom provide front-line victim assistance in the form of support, information and referrals following various crimes, including homicide. The PLCPS-VSU provided valuable insight into current strengths and weaknesses associated with the interaction between victim service organizations and families of homicide and sudden death. Following this interview, electronic surveys were distributed to various police-based victim service organizations in different jurisdictions with the same demographic as Peterborough, including Hamilton, Halton, London and Windsor. Various
community-based victim service organizations including the Canadian Resource Centre for Victims of Crime (CRCVC), Lean-On-Me (LOM), Canadian Parents of Murdered Children (CPOMC) and Peterborough Northumberland Victim Services (PNVS) also completed electronic surveys which were modified to account for differences in services provided by police-based and community-based organizations. The surveys sent to all victim service organizations, although slightly different, provided input on strengths, weaknesses and best practices for dealing with families of homicide and sudden death. All police-based and community-based organizations will be credited in this report by their initials, as a means of ensuring confidentiality.

Following the collection of 'best practice' data, information regarding the criminal justice system in Canada was obtained from Amy Chapman, a colleague conducting related research. Ms. Chapman's contribution, coupled with information from the literature review, provided input for the production of a publication titled "A Guide to the Homicide Criminal Justice Process" (see Appendix A) to assist families of homicide victims in navigating the criminal justice system. This publication will be included in a local resource package for families of homicide being developed by Ms. Chapman, which will be distributed by the PLCPS-VSU following a homicide in the Peterborough-Lakefield community.
RESULTS

BEST PRACTICES

Although an extremely valuable profession, victim services is still considered an emerging occupational field in Canada. An important aspect of professionalizing victim services includes the development of best practice techniques proven to be reliable through research and experience. Best practices are vital in the field of victim assistance, as the workers are dealing with individuals who are psychologically distraught and very sensitive. Homicide and sudden death are emotionally sensitive topics, and thus best practices that are both sensitive and effective must be established. Several police-based and community-based victim service organizations were surveyed as a means of assessing the current state of victim assistance (10, 11). Various strengths and weaknesses regarding current methods of victim assistance emerged.

Overview of Organization and Services

Strengths

An important aspect of ensuring an organization is functioning at maximum capacity is the establishment of oversight associations. Oversight serves to enhance effectiveness, productivity and integrity (12). The Alberta Police-Based Victim Services Association (APBVSA) is a not-for-profit organization which oversees all 126 police-based victim service establishments in Alberta (13). APBVSA offers program management and professional development training, group liability insurance, group benefits plan, as well as mentoring and support (13). APBVSA has greatly influenced the development of the victim services profession in Alberta. An organization to oversee police-based victim services across Ontario has yet to be established, however such an organization would strengthen the professionalization of the field.
Police-based victim services play a major role in victim assistance, as they are situated within police departments. The locale provides a very intimate setting where victim service workers can easily liaise with investigating officers, effectively increasing the victim service worker's access to information regarding a case. In addition, the victim service workers employed by the police are exposed to law enforcement daily; giving them inside knowledge about how police and the legal system operate. This knowledge is essential when providing victim assistance, as the victim service worker can effectively assist the family of homicide in their encounter with the criminal justice system. According to a family of homicide, "the power of information is key to any traumatic event" (14). Ontario currently has 7 police-based victim service organizations, all providing essential services and information to families of homicide.

Although training programs for victim service workers are scarce, several organizations are working towards developing such programs. Canadian Parents of Murdered Children, a community-based organization originating in Ottawa Ontario, is working toward developing an educational program titled "Dealing with the Impact of Murder on the Family Unit" with 5 modules to educate victim service workers on assisting families of homicide from the notification of death through to corrections. In addition, Hamilton Police offers a one hour video titled "Victim Services Overview" as part of police officer mandatory training. The Windsor-Essex branch of the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) offers a bereavement program which has support groups specific to homicide and suicide. These support groups are the first of their kind and are very beneficial to families of homicide, as the sudden loss of a loved one is a very psychologically traumatic experience. The grieving process following a homicide or suicide is more complicated than any other form of grief, and thus many families require assistance throughout their grieving process. Developing homicide and suicide support
groups within each CMHA branch would be extremely beneficial, as many regions lack such specialized support groups.

Regardless of the type of organization, victim services generally provide assistance based on a victim-centered approach. This approach suggests victim assistance should be driven by the needs of the individuals affected by crime (9). Chang et al. (2012) suggests the victim-centered approach includes safety, support, information, access, continuity, voice and justice (15). In addition, it is essential to allow the family member to express their emotions and have them validated in a supportive environment (15). Adopting the victim-centered approach is essential when working with families of homicide and sudden death, and this approach is consistently applied across different jurisdictions and different types of victim service organizations.

Oversight, liaising with investigators, establishing preliminary educational programs and following a victim-centered approach represent strengths within the field of victim assistance. Although these strengths are directing victim assistance towards professionalization, several weaknesses still exist.

Weaknesses

A significant weakness in the field of victim assistance is the lack of community-based organizations. Community-based homicide support organizations such as Lean-On-Me based in Hamilton, Ontario are essential in every community. These organizations are comprised of individuals who have been affected by familial homicide, and thus provide families with empathy rather than the sympathy offered by organizations such as VCARS, V/WAP and police-based victim services. Being able to network with other families who have experienced similar loss is essential to the grieving process. Magnussen (2004) indicates that families of homicide feel the need to share their stories (16). Many families have indicated that these support groups
are more effective than one-on-one therapy, and that speaking to someone who had a similar experience changed their lives (16). Support groups can be normalizing, in the sense that families can relate to others and realize that other families are experiencing the same complex emotions (4). Homicide and sudden death support groups should be structured as opposed to informal. Informal groups can blur boundaries and stimulate the formation of cliques. In addition, the group leader should be trained along standardized curriculum, a requirement which is not currently enforced (17). Community-based support groups are also beneficial in connecting families to one another, as police-based organizations are heavily restricted by privacy and cannot share the personal information of families they assist.

Although various organizations are in the midst of developing educational programs, standardized training among victim service workers is not currently in place. Workers academic backgrounds’ range from psychology to social work to law enforcement, and a post-secondary education is not an employment requirement. In light of this educational discrepancy, it is noted that the quality of service can differ greatly between jurisdictions (16). Similarly, some police-based victim service organizations indicate there are specific protocols to follow when interacting with families of homicide, while others indicate there is no standard protocol for anything, and every action they take is up to their discretion. Many organizations also lack a volunteer base, which is essential in easing the workload for police-based victim services. Overcoming these weaknesses is essential when attempting to develop best practices.

**Challenges and Accessibility**

**Strengths**

There is a general consensus among victim service workers that the key to providing effective support is to let families take control at a time when they feel they have none. The
period following the loss of a loved one is a very difficult time, and families often feel they have no control over their emotions or the outcome of the criminal justice process, for example (14). Providing support is about building the family's sense of control by allowing them to choose the services they wish to receive. Actively listening while allowing the families to take control is in line with the victim-centered approach, and is a strength within the field of victim assistance.

Another area where victim assistance is progressing is the use of "child kits". Children have increased difficulty with the grieving process and making sense of the homicide or sudden death. Therefore, it is essential to ensure measures are in place to aid children with understanding and communicating their emotions, as well as comprehending what has happened to their loved one. Many victim service organizations have special kits to assist children following a homicide or sudden death. The Hamilton Police have a child kit including traditional items like teddy bears and crayons, however a more novel idea is the inclusion of stickers of faces depicting various emotions. These stickers are extremely beneficial for children, as the child can explain how they are feeling if they are having trouble with verbal explanations. The stickers can also assist parents in communicating with their children about the death, as parents often struggle with discussing the topic with their children and turn to victim services for assistance. Lean-On-Me is also working towards developing a grief program for children based on the Rainbow's program (see www.rainbows.ca). Lean-On-Me is currently in the midst of training facilitators and coordinators and working with child and youth workers as well as social workers and other trauma experts to implement an effective program for assisting children following a familial homicide. Although the field of victim assistance is making progress in addressing the issue of accessibility, some challenges still remain.
Weaknesses

Many victim service workers have indicated that the information provided to families is sporadic and inconsistent (18). It is a fairly common belief that families are more likely to obtain necessary information regarding the case and services available to them if they ask for it, rather than being offered the information (18). In addition, where police-based victim services are not stationed, the extent of assistance families receive is often dependent on the police investigator (19). Referral is not an issue in communities with police-based victim services, since police are required to refer families of homicide to the victim services unit. However, in regions with only community-based organizations, officers do not regularly refer families to these organizations, and officer perceptions of the organization are often contributory factors (19). The officer is less likely to refer a family to a community-based victim service organization if they have a negative opinion of the organization. Another issue with officer discretion is that even if they have a positive opinion regarding the local community-based organization, the officer often decides which families would or would not benefit from victim services (3). Hatten and Moore (2010) found that police were less likely to make a referral if the family member is male and more likely to make a referral if the family member appears emotional (19). These findings raise issues, as males may simply express their emotions to a lesser extent, and simply because one is not outwardly expressing their emotions does not indicate they will not benefit from victim assistance. Along these lines, a mother who lost her child to homicide indicated that secondary victims are often not treated like victims (14). A primary victim of crime would never be denied the chance to receive support by police, thus it is essential to treat secondary victims as true victims of crime, and offer them the same support a primary victim would be privy to. Increasing public awareness of victim services via the media may mitigate this discrepancy as to
who is referred to victim services, and officer education regarding victim services may play a similar role.

**Notification and Preliminary Contact**

*Strengths*

A significant strength associated with a victim service worker's initial contact with a family is the provision of information in multiple formats. The inability to focus and retain information are symptoms associated with the grieving process following a homicide or sudden death, thus it is essential to provide families with information in many formats to ensure they retain the information or at least have it accessible. The majority of victim service workers stress that information should come from various sources (e.g. written and oral) and should be repeated at various points throughout the relationship with the family (18). Misplacing documents and disorganization is another concern among families following a homicide or sudden death, and thus information should be easily accessible in one package (e.g. co-worker's "Homicide and Sudden Death Resource Package" currently in progress) rather than providing the family with an excess of loose pamphlets and business cards. In addition to resources to assist with the immediate aftermath of the death, it is essential to include long-term resources as everyone goes through different stages of grief at different rates and may still require assistance in the years to come. Although the provision of information in multiple formats that are easily accessible is a significant strength in the victim assistance profession, various weaknesses associated with the initial contact still exist.

*Weaknesses*

One major source of weakness in the victim service field is the inconsistency in attending the notification of death. Many victim service workers acknowledge that it is "policy" for a
worker to accompany the officer to establish the initial connection, however many admit that this is not consistently practiced. A major advantage of a victim service worker attending the death notification is not only to provide support to the family but also to allow the investigating officer to move on to their investigative duties rather than hanging back to assist the family member. The manner in which death notification is performed has a large impact on the family (4). A parent who lost a child to homicide indicated that the "first interactions set the tone for the rest of the investigation" (14). Keeping this in mind, it is essential to ensure the death notification is as compassionate as possible, as this is the first encounter a family will have with the case. If the notification does not go smoothly, the integrity of the rest of the investigation and criminal justice process may be at stake, as the family may adopt a negative attitude.

Another source of weakness includes the use of insensitively designed publications. During the "Supporting Families of Homicide Conference" in 2012, a pamphlet from a victim service organization that will remain unnamed surfaced (see Figure 1 below). This pamphlet was shocking, as it involved a timeline of which emotions are generally felt throughout different stages of the grieving process; however, the timeline is represented as a pulse line, the font was frightening and the colour scheme was black and red. This pamphlet is an example of what victim service workers should not present to families who have just experienced a homicide or sudden death. Such an insensitively designed pamphlet may upset these families and contribute to their anguish rather than alleviating it. Thus, it is essential to make publications more "human" by utilizing friendly words and font as well as soft colour schemes, while remaining professional in appearance.
Forms, Phone Calls and Financials

Strengths

Many victim service organizations are very effective in providing families with practical assistance with filling out forms, paperwork and making phone calls on their behalf. Paperwork and phone calls can often pile up following a homicide or sudden death, as licenses and credit cards must be cancelled, funeral arrangements must be made and applications for financial assistance must be completed. The Criminal Injury Compensation Board (CICB), Families of Homicide Victims Fund (FOHVF), the Vulnerable Victims and Family Fund (VVFF) and the Victim Quick Response Program (VQRP) which provides financial assistance for counselling and crime scene clean-up are the financial packages victim services most often provide.
assistance with. Of all the families and victims that victim services assists, families of homicide are elite in the sense that they have many funds available to them. Although no sum of money could bring back their loved one, it is comforting to know that many financial packages are available to assist with practical expenses. However, families of sudden death unfortunately have limited funds available to them as the criminal justice process is not involved.

A very important form for a family to fill out is the victim impact statement (VIS). This is a statement about how the loss has affected the family emotionally and financially, for example. The VIS is read aloud in court, and the judge often takes this statement into consideration during sentence deliberation. Amendments made in 1999 to the Criminal Code of Canada gave victims and families the right to present a VIS, an advancement which has greatly increased the ability for families of homicide to have a voice in court. Victim services consistently aids families of homicide with assembling their VIS and preparing to present it in court. Although practical assistance is generally adequately provided to families of homicide and sudden death, some challenges still remain.

Weaknesses

As previously mentioned, VIS can be a very important form for families of homicide to complete, as it gives them a voice in court. Although victim service organizations generally provide assistance with completing the VIS, some victim service workers only provide assistance when asked. This presents an issue as the general public is typically unaware of their right to present a VIS in court. Families who have had frequent involvement with the criminal justice system may be aware of VIS's, however the average family whose involvement is limited to parking tickets may be unaware of their right. It is the job of victim services to ensure families of homicide are aware of VIS's.
In addition, there is a massive discrepancy as to when to address VIS's with families of homicide. Some police-based organizations believe the statements should be addressed during the first interaction, others believe it should be addressed before the trial and others believe VIS's should not be addressed until immediately prior to sentencing. There are benefits and drawbacks to addressing VIS's immediately and prior to sentencing. Addressing the statements immediately allows the family to keep track of how the death has impacted them, rather than retroactively thinking about how to write the statement. However, this presents an issue as the family may emotionally exhaust themselves by putting so much into writing the statement, only for it to not be read if a conviction is not reached. Alternatively, discussing VIS's prior to sentencing ensures the statement will be read since a conviction was reached, however it may be difficult for a family to remember their earlier emotions and challenges.

The Investigation and Court Process

Strengths

Although there is a discrepancy as to which organization generally accompanies the family to court, there is someone to fill this role in every jurisdiction. Some jurisdictions involve a police-based victim service worker attending court with the family, while other jurisdictions rely on the Victim Witness Assistance Program (V/WAP). In addition to consistent emotional support during court days, various other forms of support are provided. For example, a novel program developed by Lean-On-Me called "Nourishment for Survivors" provides families with food and refreshments while attending court. Many families of homicide do not have a social support system to take them to lunch and eating out throughout the length of the court process can be expensive. This program ensures families of homicide receive complimentary lunches and someone to talk to throughout their court experience. This type of program is very
beneficial as families feel more accommodated, which mitigates the common feeling that the accused has more rights than the family.

In addition to court accompaniment, victim services are generally very effective with coaching families of homicide on dealing with the media. The media is very influential in society, and can be both a positive and negative part of the criminal justice system. The media can raise awareness about victimization issues and can present information about crime trends, however many media outlets can twist stories and make the family or victim appear as the "bad guy" (20). In addition, information shared with the media can compromise the integrity of the trial (20). Many victim service organizations instruct families of homicide to avoid speaking with the media. Where the family insists on speaking with the media, victim services often suggest a distant relative or friend to speak on the family's behalf, as these relatives and friends are less emotionally involved than the family member. Police-based organizations are instructed never to act as a media spokesperson, as they are legally liable for giving false or misleading information (14). Although victim services is generally successful with accommodating families during court and media coaching, some challenges throughout the investigation and court process remain.

Weaknesses

Although there is someone to attend court with families of homicide in every jurisdiction, many police-based organizations do not provide assistance after the trial begins. Police-based victim services generally provide assistance during the investigation, however once the trial begins, they indicate the family will be contacted by V/WAP for trial support. This is a significant weakness of the victim assistance field, as it is very beneficial for a family to remain in contact with the same support person throughout the experience (14). In addition, police-
based victim service workers have a wealth of knowledge regarding the criminal justice system, and are thus more equipped to accompany a family to court than a community-based organization. Also, simply indicating the family will be contacted by V/WAP leaves room for uncertainty - something which families of homicide do not need. "How long until they contact me? Who exactly will I be meeting with? Will they even call?" These are questions many families have once they are told V/WAP will be contacting them. Therefore, to eliminate these questions, it is advantageous for the police-based victim service worker to attend court.

After the Trial

Strengths

Many victim service workers, including V/WAP, terminate assistance once the trial has ceased (14), thus there are currently not many strengths associated with victim assistance after the trial. However, a case study presented at the "Supporting Families of Homicide" conference (2012) described a parent's two year interaction with the same victim service worker following the death of the parent's child (14). The parent was very thankful this interaction continued after the trial, as the effects of crime are long term (14). Most victim service organizations are designed for short-term support (16), although the organization in the case study went above and beyond to provide support for their clients. It may be beneficial to employ a volunteer base to aid with the workload, facilitating this extended interaction with families.

Weaknesses

As indicated above, most victim support ceases after sentencing, even though post-sentencing is when most families need the most emotional support. The criminal justice system and the grieving process unfortunately run in parallel. There is no time for the family to grieve following the death of their loved one, as the investigation begins right away and the family has
many practical needs to take care of. The criminal justice process continues, and the family has not begun to grieve. It is generally not until after the trial has ceased and sentencing has occurred that families begin their grieving process and need the most emotional support. Malone (2007) indicates the family's "lives and feelings have been 'on hold' until this point" (3). Therefore, victim support should continue post-sentencing.

**Homicide Versus Sudden Death**

*Weaknesses*

Unfortunately, organizations to assist families of suicide and other sudden deaths are scarce. Police-based victim services are only required to provide assistance during the first 72 hours following the sudden death. Even though this is simply a requirement, the majority of police-based victim services do not continue providing services past the 72 hour mark. Very few communities have suicide support groups with facilitators trained in suicide grief counselling. In addition, there are no specialized support groups for non-criminal and non-suicidal sudden death, such as car accidents (aside from Mothers Against Drunk Drivers; MADD).

**THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE PROCESS**

Of all the challenges identified following a homicide, the main aspect families struggle with is the criminal justice process. Many families are unfamiliar with the criminal justice system, and are thus plunged into a whole new world at a very difficult time in their lives. Families of homicide must suspend their grievance in order to participate in the court process, and are often disappointed with their experience in court, stressing the fact that families of homicide require resources to assist them with the criminal justice system. Malone (2007) found that many families described very undignified experiences with the criminal justice system at a time when they needed to be treated with humanity and respect (3). Having a better
understanding of the criminal justice process can facilitate a better experience for the family, which will reduce their frustration and negative emotions. Police-based organizations were surveyed about their perception of which aspects of the criminal justice system families often struggle with (see Appendices A and B). This information was translated into a guide to assist families in navigating the criminal justice system, titled "A Guide to the Homicide Criminal Justice Process" (see Appendix A).
DISCUSSION

RECOMMENDATIONS

The strengths and weaknesses derived from the survey information were translated into recommendations for best practices. These recommendations represent the first attempt at developing best practices for victim service workers in their interaction with families of homicide and sudden death.

Overview of Organization and Services

1. *Develop an oversight organization for Ontario police-based victim services (13)*

   Oversight organizations ensure effectiveness, productivity and integrity of the victim service organization. Oversight organizations can contribute to the standardization of training and protocol for victim service workers. In addition, oversight may improve inter-organization communication, collaboration and information sharing.

2. *Standardize training (including ethics) and protocol for victim service workers*

   Standardized training of victim service workers ensures the quality of service is consistent across all jurisdictions. Providing support to families of homicide and sudden death involves a very sensitive topic, and thus victim service workers must be trained in ethics and how to provide compassionate but effective support. Standardizing protocol in the victim assistance profession ensures the most effective methods are being employed and that support is consistent across jurisdictions.

3. *Establish a local not-for-profit community-based organization for families of homicide and sudden death*

   Not-for-profit community-based homicide and suicide support groups remain scarce. These organizations provide empathy rather than sympathy, and facilitate the networking
of families who have experienced similar tragedies. Sharing their stories is essential to the grieving process, and families of homicide greatly benefit from structured groups.

4. **Develop a volunteer base to aid with the workload**

Many police-based organizations are not currently utilizing a volunteer base. Properly trained volunteers can assist with the workload immensely, as the average police-based victim services unit are "juggling" many families of homicide at a time. Using volunteers to assist with paperwork and clerical duties may free up resources for victim service employees to provide practical support to families.

5. **Ensure the model of support follows the victim-centered approach and includes a proactive, hands-on style of interaction (3)**

The victim-centered approach ensures the victim's best interests are being considered and their needs are being met. A proactive, hands-on style of interaction is more beneficial than passively assisting these families.

**Challenges and Accessibility**

6. **Ensure special programs for grieving children are available**

Children can experience even more difficulty in their grieving process than adults. It is essential to have proper programs in place specifically for children. Having "child kits" including stuffed animals, crayons and stickers representing emotional facial expression assist children in communicating their emotions and making sense of the situation.

7. **Increase public awareness/education regarding victim services through the media**

Many individuals are unaware of the existence of victim service organizations and their services. Public awareness can be raised by advertising victim services in public places such as physicians’ offices, community centres and public transit. Increasing public
awareness and education on the topic of victim assistance will ensure families are aware of the resources available to them and will facilitate more research and development.

8. *Facilitate the re-establishment of the family's sense of control*

The period following a homicide or sudden death is a very traumatizing time for a family, who generally experience a loss of control. Therefore, it is essential to provide families with a sense of control at a time where they feel they have none. Building this control can be facilitated through allowing families to decide which services they desire and by actively listening and responding to their needs following the victim-centered approach.

9. *Do not assume families have been provided with all information* (4)

It is the unfortunate a common belief is that families will receive more information if they initiate contact. Victim service workers should not assume families have all the information required, and should thus play an active role in providing information rather than waiting for a family to ask for it. Families are often unsure of what information is available, and often do not know what to ask.

10. *Avoid using clichés like "time heals all wounds" and making promises that cannot be kept, like "we'll catch the person who did this"* (4)

Unfortunately this is not common sense, and many victim service workers feel these comments are appropriate and helpful. However, the use of clichés and unreasonable promises can aggravate the family and cause them to distance themselves from victim service workers. Although these comments stem from good intentions, they can interfere with the healing process (4).
11. Avoid forcing closure upon homicide families (4)

Families of homicide are incapable of attaining closure, a goal that is too often forced upon them (4). Many homicide families report never attaining closure. Many feel that the criminal justice process can provide closure if a conviction is achieved, including the family, however this is a fallacy. Many families "put all their eggs into the criminal justice basket" thinking the system will solve their grief, however this is not the case. Even when a life sentence is arrived at, the family still does not experience closure.

Notification and Preliminary Contact

12. Always attend death notification

The family's first interaction with victim services sets the tone for the rest of the investigation, and thus it is essential to build a rapport from the start. Although policy indicates victim service worker(s) must attend the notification of death, this rarely happens. Ideally, the death notification should be done in person by two workers (one being a trauma psychologist), and the family member should not be left until social support arrives (4).

13. Police should always refer the family to victim services

Police perceptions of community-based victim service organizations and whether or not a family member would benefit from support unfortunately influence their decision to refer the family to these organizations or not. Officer discretion is not an issue in jurisdictions with police-based victim services, as these organizations are situated within police departments and thus the officers' perceptions of the organization are generally positive. However, in communities where police-based victim services are not available, officer
awareness and education regarding community-based organizations must be strengthened in order to ensure all families are referred to the available services.

14. **Provide all information in many formats**

It is essential to provide all the necessary information in multiple formats. Families have a difficult time focusing and retaining the information presented to them. Presenting the information in one comprehensive book may ensure the family is not overwhelmed with pamphlets and disorganization. In addition, providing follow-up resources on top of resources for the immediate aftermath of the death ensures the family has access to information and assistance for the years to come.

15. **Ensure publications are compassionate**

Victim service publications must be soft and compassionate while remaining professional. It is suggested to use soft images, fonts and colours rather than strong and bold font. It is also important to avoid terms like "murder" and use alternative terms such as "loss of the loved one". It may be beneficial to have a trauma psychologist review all publications prior to distribution.

**Forms, Phone Calls and Financials**

16. **Provide practical assistance with filling out forms for financial compensation and making phone calls for the family etc.**

Paperwork and arrangements can pile up quickly following a homicide or sudden death, and families often require assistance with these forms and phone calls. It is important to inform families of the financial assistance available to them, and to assist them in completing the applications. In addition, it may be beneficial to assist families with making funeral arrangements as this is often very traumatizing and confusing. It is
suggested that practical assistance with forms and phone calls be provided by trained volunteers to ease the workload of the primary victim service worker.

17. Discuss victim impact statements (VIS) immediately prior to sentencing

There is a massive discrepancy as to when to address VIS's. These statements should be addressed prior to sentencing. Although this requires the family to retroactively recall their early emotions and challenges, this ensures the statement is read in court as the conviction has been secured. It is very heartbreaking for a family to put their emotions into words, only for the statement to not be heard if a conviction has not been reached.

The Investigation and Court Process

18. All police-based victim services should assist families with their court experience

The majority of police-based victim services assist the family up until the trial begins, and then inform the family they will be contacted by V/WAP, however this is not best practice. There is comfort in knowing the same individual(s) will be assisting you throughout the period following the homicide or sudden death. Police-based victim services should stay in contact with the family and attend court if the family desires.

19. Increase victim accommodation during court days (e.g. create lunch programs, negotiate free parking with the city) so family feels they have similar rights to the accused

Many families of homicide feel the accused is given more rights than the family is, and it is difficult to explain that the person who stands accused of murdering the family's loved one deserves certain rights and accommodations. The only way to mitigate the effect of this challenge is to increase the family's accommodation during court days. Creating lunch programs similar to Lean-On-Me's "Nourishment Program" and negotiating free parking for the family with the city will ensure families feel more accommodated and
taken care of, which may alleviate some negative feelings regarding the accused's rights.

After the Trial

20. Continue providing support after the trial has ended

Unfortunately, the criminal justice process and grieving process run in parallel. The investigation begins immediately following the homicide, and the family thus has no time to grieve as they are suddenly plunged into the criminal justice system, which greatly impedes the families ability to grieve. Many families indicate that their grieving process finally begins following the end of the trial, however this is ironically when victim service organizations no longer provide support. Therefore, victim support must be continued after the trial has ended.

Homicide Versus Sudden Death

21. Develop organizations to assist families of suicide and other forms of sudden death

Police-based organizations are only required to assist families of suicide and other sudden deaths for the first 72 hours. Even though this is a minimum requirement, assistance generally does not exceed this time-frame. In addition, community-based support groups for families of sudden death are very scarce; some communities only have unspecialized grief counsellors for families to turn to. Community-based sudden death support groups should be established in every community to provide assistance and support to these individuals who often fall through the cracks.

As with any research, this study is not without its limitations. A significant limitation is the restricted access to professionals in the field of victim assistance. Of the police-based and community-based victim service organizations that were contacted, approximately 60% responded to the surveys. Some organizations failed to respond entirely and others could not
find time to complete the survey before the deadline. This presents a possible self-selection bias. A second limitation is the ethical inability to access families of homicide for personal interviews. This is a significant limitation, as the opinions of those who this research most deeply affects are perhaps not thoroughly accounted for. A third limitation is the use of electronic surveys rather than in-person interviews. More depth of information and elaborated responses may have been attained in a conversation setting as opposed to completing an electronic survey. Electronic surveys were employed, however, as a means of allowing the participating organizations to complete the survey at their leisure and for more efficient transcribing purposes.

The current study has paved the way for future research opportunities. One potential area for future research includes developing a local not-for-profit community-based organization to assist families of homicide. As previously discussed, these organizations provide networking as well as empathy rather than sympathy; something police-based organizations are unable to provide. As such, community-based organizations that assist families of homicide play key roles in the grieving process, and thus are essential in every community. Future research could also evaluate the availability of local resources to assist families of suicide and sudden death, as these individuals often fall through the cracks since the legal system is not involved. A final suggestion for future research includes documenting the development of victim services in the community; a component which was found to exceed the scope of the current research.

As a result of this project, various strengths and weaknesses in the field of victim assistance have been identified and have been translated into best practices for victim services when interacting with families of homicide and sudden death. In addition, a package titled "A Guide to the Homicide Criminal Justice Process" has been developed, as a means to assist families in navigating the criminal justice process following the death of a loved one.
REFERENCES

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11. Police-Based and Community-Based Surveys
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   Halton Regional Police Service - Victim Services
   London Police Service - Victim Services
   Windsor Police - Victim Assistance Unit
   Canadian Resource Centre for Victims of Crime
   Canadian Parents of Murdered Children
   Peterborough Northumberland Victim Services
   Lean-On-Me


13. www.victimsservicesalberta.com


Appendix A: A Guide to the Homicide Criminal Justice Process