

VICTIMS' RIGHTS BRIEF

For Arizona's Criminal and Juvenile Justice Administrators, Practitioners, and Advocates
Published by the Arizona Attorney General's Office of Victim Services

Helping People in Crisis Tips For Victim Service Administrators

Much of the information contained in this article is adapted from "Victim/Witness Crisis/Victimology Training" training materials, compiled and published by Viki Sharp, Pima County Attorney Victim/Witness Coordinator. For further information on this training, you may contact Viki at (520) 740-5525.

Criminal and juvenile justice administrators, especially those on the "front lines" in the fight against crime, often encounter people who can be best described as "in crisis." Victimization, after all, shatters one's faith in a safe society and leaves feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness in its place. Often, a victim advocate, social services worker, counselor, or another individual with the proper expertise can be relied upon to deal with crisis situations.

Frequently, however, discharging duties under victims' rights laws requires justice administrators to function as "crisis counselors." The information that follows is designed to equip an individual involved in the provision of mandated services to better assist a person in a crisis situation.

Recognition of Crisis Situations

A crisis occurs when *normal methods of coping fail to work*. Physical reactions often include shock, numbness, adrenaline, increasing heart rate, hyperventilation, clenching of the jaw and/or hands, a dry mouth, or dulled senses. People in crisis frequently behave selfishly and unpredictably, are irritable and frustrated, and feel a loss of control and identity. Some experience a withdrawal or an estrangement/

detachment from the incident -- sometimes, even amnesia results.

Victims' reactions to crises vary, depending on the severity, intensity and duration of the experience. Surprisingly, a victim may be in crisis after a seemingly mild incident or property crime. However, because personal pride and possessions are an extension of self, an emotional injury can be greater than a physical injury or loss of property. Feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness cannot be restricted to crimes that involve physical injury or a minimum dollar amount.

Generally, a victim who has been in crisis in the aftermath of a crime has begun the "reorganization" process about the time that the gears of the justice system begin moving. However, because rules of procedure often require the treatment of victims and/or their possessions as evidence, the process itself can result in re-victimization and trigger the feelings that caused the original crisis situation. Certain "routine" procedures that create victims' rights obligations can act as triggers, such as an interview with defense representatives, release of a suspect, a decision not to prosecute a case, or a judicial proceeding.

Some Simple Tips

There are many simple, swift actions that can greatly assist a person who is in crisis. One of the easiest is to immediately offer a glass of cool (not iced) water. Exercise also helps -- suggest a short walk with the person. Provide accurate information and a listening ear in response to irrational

fears, and offer small choices (a place to sit, copies of documents, etc.) to help the person in crisis to regain a sense of control.

Another effective strategy is to "expand the incident," which may be especially necessary when a person in crisis is having trouble recalling details. *Expanding the incident* involves removing the focus from a trauma that has just occurred and placing the incident in a larger context. For instance, when assisting an assault victim who is still feeling the effects of the attack, it may help to start at the beginning of the day, sparing no details. By asking the person to recount even the most mundane events (breakfast menu, morning commute route, tooth-brushing, etc.), his/her memory of the details surrounding the traumatic crime is likely to be stirred.

Communication Skills

The most important skill for someone helping a person in crisis is proper communication. Warmth, empathy and respect are the three most helpful characteristics to convey. It is important not to get defensive or give excuses for certain behavior, even if they are valid. Acknowledge the importance of concerns, reflect on feelings, apologize for misfortunes suffered, clarify requests being made, and promise (realistic) follow-up actions. As much as possible, help the person to arrive at his or her own solutions to identified problems. Pause frequently to reflect and paraphrase what has been said.

Continued, back page

Choice of words at this stage is very important -- focus on REACTIONS rather than FEELINGS, ask the person to TELL ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE rather than SHARE, refer to the CRIME, not the EVENT or INCIDENT and use NAMES instead of referring to a CLIENT, VICTIM or ALLEGED. The next columns provide more specific tips on what to say and not say to someone in crisis.

DO SAY:

"I'm sorry this happened to you."
 "These reactions are common."
 "I'm glad you're talking with me now."
 "You're safe now."
 "You're not going crazy."
 "It must have been really upsetting to..."
 "Things may never be the same but can get better."

DO NOT SAY:

"I understand how you feel."
 "You're lucky that..."
 "You'll get over it."
 "Be strong for..."
 "Calm down and try to relax."
 "It's not your fault."
 Mini lecturettes

MARK YOUR CALENDAR NOW!

The tenth annual *Arizonans Together • For Victims • For Justice* conference will be held Thursday, June 11, 1998 and Friday June 12, 1998 in Tucson, AZ.

Whether you are a new justice administrator or a seasoned veteran, you will benefit from the informative training seminars and keynote speakers.

**For more information, contact:
 Viki Sharp
 ACVS Conference Committee Chair
 (520) 740-5525**

Victims' Rights Week: April 19 - 25, 1998

April 19 - 25, 1998 has been designated by the U.S. Department of Justice's Office for Victims of Crime as "Victims' Rights Week." The theme of this year's recognition is *Victims' Rights: Right for America*. All cities and towns in Arizona are requested to issue proclamations recognizing Victims' Rights Week, and justice practitioners throughout Arizona are encouraged to work independently, or together, to undertake activities in observance of the week.

To assist with such activities, the National Victim Center has prepared a *Strategies for Action* kit, a resource guide that includes crime statistics, camera-ready artwork, posters, suggested activities, and many sample letters, press releases, speech bites, and proclamations. These materials can be accessed from each county Victim Witness program. You may also obtain a kit or receive further information about Victims' Rights Week by contacting the National Victim Center at (703) 276-2880, or visiting their web site at www.nvc.org.

Carol Mitchell, chair of the Arizona Coalition of Victim Services (ACVS) Victims' Rights Week Committee, encourages communities across Arizona to join in the observance of Victims' Rights Week. "This is an important opportunity," says Carol, "to send a strong message that services for crime victims, offender accountability, and and community safety are priorities for Arizona..." ♦

HAVE AN IDEA FOR AN ARTICLE? GIVE THE VICTIMS' RIGHTS BRIEF A CALL! CONTACT STEPHEN HART AT (602) 542-8463.

VICTIMS' RIGHTS BRIEF

© A 3-minute update.

ATTORNEY GENERAL'S OFFICE
 OF VICTIM SERVICES
 1275 West Washington
 Phoenix, AZ 85007



TO ADD OR DELETE YOUR NAME TO/
 FROM THE VICTIMS' RIGHTS BRIEF
 MAILING LIST, FILL OUT & RETURN:

Name: _____
 Title: _____
 Agency: _____
 Address: _____

Add Delete