

VICTIMS' RIGHTS BRIEF

For Arizona's Justice System Administrators, Practitioners, and Advocates

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Valuing Victims' Views

Asking for Feedback

A new fiscal year is fast-approaching, and, for many justice organizations, it can be a time for reflection, and a time for resolving to serve crime victims better. Both the Arizona Attorney General's Victims' Rights Funding Program and the Arizona Department of Public Safety's Federal Victims of Crime Act Grant Program require the recipients of their programs to solicit feedback from the victims to whom they provide direct service.

One of the best ways for agency personnel to evaluate the effectiveness of their victims' rights services is by asking victims for their feedback.

Some agencies have expressed reluctance to solicit victim feedback, purportedly out of concern that doing so might have a negative impact on or in some way re-traumatize victims. There is neither anecdotal nor empirical evidence to support this position, however. On the contrary, victims express appreciation for the opportunity and for having their views valued. Whether a victim gives positive or negative feedback, allowing them to do so - indeed, empowering them to do so - shows the utmost dignity and respect.

What do victims see, think and feel when they confront the justice

system? Why are their opinions important? What questions are most likely to net information that would be helpful to agencies wanting to improve their services? Are some ways of soliciting victim feedback better than others?

Information is Empowering

Just as giving information to victims can empower them to do what they want to, getting information from victims can empower justice agencies to do what they want to do. Without the kind of first-hand knowledge that only victims can provide, justice agencies have no basis for assuming that their services are effective. Conversely, asking victims what they think can provide power data on agency strengths and weaknesses, illuminate progress in achieving program goals and objectives, and increase public confidence and trust in the justice system.

Asking the Right Questions

"GIGO" - Garbage In, Garbage Out - is an expression commonly used in the high tech world. Within the legal sphere, the importance of how questions are asked and what questions are asked is well recognized. When a witness is on

the stand, phrasing of questions is often tuned to ensure suppressed evidence is not mentioned. In the low-tech world of victim opinion surveying, asking the right questions is of no less importance.

The starting point for asking "good" questions, (i.e., questions that will elicit useful information) is to determine what it is you want to accomplish (for some agencies these are articulated as goals and objectives in strategic plans). For example, if one of the things you want to do for victims (perhaps because you are required by law) is to provide timely notification of court proceedings, you might ask:

"On a scale of 1 (rarely) to 5 (always) was the written notification that you received timely and accurate?" Similarly, if one of your objectives is to treat victims with dignity and respect, you might ask: *"On a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much so), did the officer who responded to your call treat you with respect and dignity?"* If 100% compliance with victims' rights mandate is your goal, you could simply ask: *"Yes or no, did the responding officer give you a victims' rights form including the cream colored information for Arizona's Victims of Crime sheet?"*

Comparing Methodologies

Not only must the questions to be asked be carefully selected because it will affect the usefulness of the results, the approach used to ask the questions can also affect the quality of the results and the response rate.

There are at least three systematic approaches to soliciting victim feedback related to their experience with the justice system. There are *Dialogues or Focus Groups*; *mailed surveys*; and *telephonic or in-person surveys or interviews*. Each approach has its advantages and disadvantages.

Within each approach the nature of the questions may also vary. Questions may be open-ended and/or qualitative; they may require scaled (1 – 5) responses or simply yes/no responses; written surveys may consist of five questions and room for comments, or a five page document. Again, each has advantages and disadvantages.

Monetary cost, time required, probability of obtaining victim participation, and diversity of views elicited will each be more or less, depending on the approach used, and the nature of the questions asked.

Timing can also affect survey results and response rates. Waiting too long can mean victims will have moved or forgotten details. Asking too soon may result in too many “not applicable” answers, as

the victims have not experienced that aspect of the system yet.

Most agencies use written surveys to solicit victim feedback, and are thereby able to produce quantitative results. Victim “comments” written on the returned surveys provide additional specific, qualitative information. One justice entity, however, the Arizona Supreme Court, as part of its effort to increase public trust and confidence in the courts, convened a series of dialogues to solicit victim views. The “results” of those dialogues, while qualitative, have been categorized and prioritized and have facilitated problem solving.

Caveats on “Satisfaction”

Victims of crime are impacted in ways that affect their experiences with, and perceptions of, the justice system.

For some, the impact of crime is so severe that “satisfaction” is not reasonable in the context of the very ways in which crime takes its toll on victims. The causes of victim dissatisfaction in some cases are irrevocably tied to what crime does to people. Victims’ journeys toward healing, by definition, are not happy ones, and satisfaction, unfortunately for some cannot surface. For victims who are suffering in this way, neither compliance with victims’ rights, nor a case conviction will be completely satisfying. Nonetheless, the justice system will

benefit... *One of the most important messages that those who work within the justice system convey to crime victims when they solicit their opinions, is that their unique perspective is valued. It’s one of many ways we can treat victims with dignity and respect.*

~ NOTICE ~



Starting July 2004, we will no longer provide the Victims’ Rights Brief via U.S. Mail. The Brief is available on the Office of the Attorney General’s website at www.agaz.gov. As an alternative, the Brief will be available via e-mail in Microsoft Word 2002. If you wish to receive the Brief via e-mail, please fill in the request form below.



The Victims’ Rights Brief is published every other month by the Arizona Attorney General’s Office of Victim Services who remains wholly responsible for its content. The goal in distributing it is to promote justice and healing for crime victims by sharing information and fostering sensitivity within the justice system. Questions regarding content can be directed to Sarah Lynne Vasquez at (602) 542-4911. To learn more about victims’ rights via the internet, visit us at www.agaz.gov.

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