



The National Mass Violence & Victimization Resource Center

READINESS • RESPONSE • RESILIENCE

SUMMARY REPORT

Combined Focus Group of The National Association of VOCA Assistance Administrators & The National Association of Crime Victim Compensation Boards

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Charleston, South Carolina

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The NAVAA and the NACVCB are Partners of the National Mass Violence & Victimization Resource Center

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Introduction

Mass violence incidents are occurring at increasing frequency. Effective and coordinated actions by state victim assistance and crime victim compensation programs are critically important to identify and meet the needs of survivors and communities.

The **National Mass Violence and Victimization Resource Center** (Center) was created in 2017 to improve the nation's capacity to serve victims and survivors of mass violence through research, planning, training, technology and collaboration. The **National Association of VOCA Assistance Administrators (NAVAA)** and the **National Association of Crime Victim Compensation Boards (NACVCB)** are national partner organizations in this Cooperative Agreement, established between the Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC) National Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center (NCVC) and the United State Department of Justice (USDOJ) Office for Victims of Crime (OVC).

Three focus groups were held in May 2018 with select state Victim Assistance Administrators (VOCA) and Victim Compensation Directors (COMP) whose states have experienced mass violence incidents (MVIs) to help clarify their roles in assisting states with **readiness, response and resilience**. We sought to be diverse both geographically and by incident type. The goals of the focus groups were to:

1. Identify the roles, responsibilities and most effective strategies of state administrators to prepare for and respond to mass violence incidents (MVIs) in the immediate-, short- and long-terms.
2. Describe the benefits of and challenges to forming partnerships and collaborative efforts to prepare for, respond to and assess responses to MVIs.
3. Document "lessons learned" from past experiences of state administrators to share with all victim compensation and VOCA assistance programs nationwide.
4. Identify issues to inform a survey of all VOCA assistance and victim compensation programs about planning and responses to MVIs.

This Combined Report summarizes the discussion of the third focus group that represents both VOCA Administrators and Crime Victim Compensation Directors perspectives from participants in the focus group. It may not represent the thoughts of all VOCA and COMP administrators or personnel.

Methodology

The Center's team worked with Steve Derene, NAVAA Executive Director and Dan Eddy, NACVCB Director, to identify focus group participants whose states have previously experienced mass violence incidents (MVIs). Fourteen VOCA & COMP participants were invited and eleven attended. Some participants functioned in dual roles in their respective states, and therefore, participated in all three focus groups.

A focus group discussion guide was collaboratively developed by the Center, NAVAA and NACVCB that addressed the role of victim assistance and victim compensation programs in readiness, response and resilience; recommendations to improve collaboration or partnerships at the state and local levels; the types of useful resources that the Center can provide to VOCA and COMP agencies; and resources developed by these agencies that could be reviewed and shared by the Center.

General Themes

A recurring theme of this focus group was the need for resources on readiness, response and resilience that are *specific to state VOCA and COMP agencies*; and that are developed in a manner that emphasizes brevity and clarity. It was also suggested that the Center's resources and its website be organized by a timeline of "before, during and after" a MVI occurs, again addressing readiness, response and resilience. It should be easy to navigate and apparent to a user how to readily obtain the information they are seeking.

The group felt it would be helpful to have written guidelines and clarification about how VOCA and COMP agencies should request technical assistance from OVC, OVCTTAC, and/or the Center.

Focus group participants were very sensitive to the issue concerning the differences in the types of services and support that are provided to survivors of MVIs, versus those provided to survivors of other types of violence. Local and national outpourings of support, services and financial aid are significantly greater for MVI victims and survivors.

Strategies to Improve Cross-Agency Coordination

The group suggested recommendations that could be developed in advance of the occurrence of an MVI. A discussion about the use of the term "reunification center" for initial crisis response activities determined that this is detrimental for survivors whose loved ones are killed

and for whom “reunification” does not occur. The terms “Response Center” and “Crisis Response Center” were offered as alternatives.

When a MVI occurs, VOCA and COMP Administrators are often inundated with calls, text messages, and emails from their colleagues across the country who offer to assist and support them. It would be helpful if the Center could recommend a process that centralizes and documents these communications.

Enhanced publicity about the availability of victim compensation will increase victim/survivor and community awareness about this important resource in the aftermath of an MVI.

- The Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma, a National Project Partner, can help the Center develop a strategy.
- Resources for victims/survivors of the Route 91 Harvest Festival Attack in Las Vegas, available on the California Victim Compensation website, were cited as a good model for replication: <http://victims.ca.gov/victims/>.

Collaborative planning in advance of a MVI can enhance decision-making when a MVI occurs. It was recommended that the Center create a check list of the most important leaders and stakeholders at the Federal, national, state, Tribal and local levels with whom VOCA and COMP agencies should be familiar and engaged; and provide suggestions on how they can interact on planning, response and recovery.

It was recommended that advance work with OVC could determine whether or not there are mechanisms that can temporarily adjust victim compensation regulations in the state where the MVI occurred to allow more flexibility on the part of the compensation program to pay emergency expenses.

The importance of training was emphasized by the group as a whole, which recommended that VOCA and COMP leaders coordinate in advance to train *all Victim Assistance Professionals* (e.g. victim advocates, mental health, Comp and VOCA staff) on MVI readiness, response and resilience. Examples of existing training initiatives include:

- California is developing a three-day training program on crisis response for MVIs
- Florida provides the NOVA 40-hour training program
- Florida also provides regional training regarding MVIs to all Victim Assistance Professionals (VAPs) in the state
- The District of Columbia recently revamped its 2.5-day training MVI response training program that is a component of its State Victim Assistance Academy (SVAA). It is a skills-based training that focuses on the different roles that participants might serve in

the aftermath of a MVI and what they need to fulfill those roles. This training is offered to VAPs and other crisis responders and features speakers who focus on the importance of coordination (FBI, Medical Examiner, Office of Emergency Management, etc.).

All training and educational resources for VAPs and allied professionals should clearly define victim compensation, what it is, how it helps survivors, and its specific role in responding to victims of MVIs.

VOCA and COMP administrators must be prepared in advance to address vicarious trauma among VAPs and other first/second responders to MVIs. For example:

- Provide training and information to all VAPs through State Victim Assistance Academies and ongoing training programs.
- Develop information and tips sheets on “triggers” (cues) that can create vicarious trauma for survivors and VAPs, including when a new MVI occurs, and best practices for coping with stress and trauma.
- Develop information and tip sheets on staff wellness to promote resilience.

States should develop a roster of trauma-informed VAPs in advance of a MVI with all relevant contact information (cell phone numbers, email addresses, etc.).

VOCA and COMP Administrators should be aware of their states’ respective plans and structure of the initial Response Center, Family Assistance Center, and any resilience initiatives, including their leadership, chain-of-command, and the roles and responsibilities of VAPs (including COMP).

It is important to recognize that there is turnover in state leadership – including VOCA and COMP leadership and the Executive Branch, etc. – that will affect the quality of preparing and responding to MVIs. For this reason, documented plans are essential for effective and consistent implementation.

Practical tips are needed on how state VOCA and COMP programs can work together (many of which can be derived from these three focus groups’ suggestions/recommendations).

National-level Coordination

Clarification is needed about “who does what” at the national level, and if/how they coordinate planning, assistance and overall services. Agencies and national nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) involved in facilitating coordination often include:

- Office for Victims of Crime
- National Mass Violence and Victimization Resource Center
- OVC AEAP
- OVC TTAC
- FBI and other federal sources of funding (Social Security Income, Department of Veterans Affairs, etc.).
- National Compassion Fund (sponsored by the National Center for Victims of Crime)

Concerns were raised regarding particular models for determination of eligibility and amounts of awards to victims, family members and survivors, (e.g., Feinberg model) created in the aftermath of a MVI. Issues pertaining to speed of awards, immediate victims’ needs and long-term financial impact are all factors that must be considered. A list of factors that inform such decision-making that can be used by communities that want to manage their own fund would be helpful:

- National Compassion Fund: <https://nationalcompassionfund.org/>
- Ken Feinberg interview: <https://www.bizjournals.com/tampabay/blog/morning-edition/2016/06/5-questions-for-lawyer-kenneth-feinberg-consultant.html>

As one participant noted, “If we can’t get ourselves coordinated at the national level, and our own ducks in order, it is not presenting a clear solution for non-victim assistance agencies (in readiness, response, resilience).”

Other National Agencies and Organizations

The group stressed the importance of *national leadership* in preparing for and responding to MVIs. Such leadership could provide consistency and accuracy in resources specific to their constituents, which could prove to be helpful when leadership at the state and local levels changes. The group suggested that the Center should consider collaborating with:

- National Governors Association (already a National Partner Organization)
- District attorneys/prosecutors (National Association of Attorneys General (NAAG) is already a National Partner Organization); National District Attorneys Association; Associations of Prosecuting Attorneys

- National Association of Counties
- National Emergency Management agencies
- Departments of Homeland Security and Public Safety (at the Federal and state levels)
- National League of Cities
- National Sheriffs Association
- International Association of Chiefs of Police
- U.S. Attorneys and their victim/witness staff (USAs have already reached out to the Center)

Legislation and Policy

“People don’t heal on a grant cycle.”

The VOCA statute limits all VOCA grants to the year of the award plus three fiscal years, thus restricting the amount of time that an Antiterrorism Emergency Assistance program (AEAP) grant may be expended. As one participant noted, “people don’t heal on a grant cycle.” Federal legislation is needed to allow AEAP grants to be available for as long as it may be needed to respond to the long-term consequences of MVIs. It was suggested that the U.S. Congressional Victims’ Rights Caucus introduce legislation that would authorize AEAP grants to be available “without fiscal year limitation.”

OVC “Helping Victims of Mass Violence and Terrorism” Toolkit

“Mentor the Toolkit.”

As noted in the other two focus group reports, while VOCA and COMP administrators believe the resources in the Toolkit are helpful, the amount of information it contains is “overwhelming.” This focus group suggested that VOCA and COMP administrators who have used the Toolkit identify, document and share with their colleagues and with the Center the Toolkit resources that they found most helpful.

What the Center Can Provide to VOCA and COMP Agencies

There were many helpful suggestions about the types of resources they would like the Center to provide, for example:

- A comprehensive literature review of best practices in MVI readiness, response and resilience that includes brief summaries of each document, and general themes about best practices
- Make available information that can be used for survivor forums and websites on:
 - Victim/survivor privacy and confidentiality
 - Guidelines related to prosecution, and the challenges when victims and survivors speak out prior to a court case or criminal justice participation
 - Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and 508 compliance (a federal law mandating that all electronic and information technology developed, procured, maintained, or used by the federal government be accessible to people with disabilities).
- Clearer definition of MVIs (or a comparison and explanation of current, different definitions) by the:
 - U.S. Department of Justice overall, including OVC
 - FBI
 - U.S. Congress
- Clarification of language that is used in online fund campaigns (i.e., “Go Fund Me”) that may negatively impact victims’ compensation funds.
- Brief overview of AEAP (this is currently available in brochure form at <https://www.ovc.gov/AEAP/> ; perhaps a Tip Sheet that is specific to VOCA and COMP Administrators)
- Offer information about how to identify and make connections with national and state emergency management professionals
- Sample After-Action Reports (for MVIs in general, and also victim assistance-specific)

Recommended Resources Available through the Center

“Help us help each other.”

As noted in above in “General Themes,” focus group participants recommend that the Center’s resources (including the website) be organized in such a manner that the categories **Readiness, Response and Resilience** will be readily apparent and accessible.

Participants also recommended that the website include victim/survivor tips for self-assessment and help-seeking, including:

- How MVI victims and survivors can help themselves or obtain help from professionals?
- Online links to self-help resources

NOTE: A recommendation for opportunities for private forums for survivors and VAPs is not within the scope of the Center.

Recommendations for Sample Documents/Information

Sample Documents

- Post-MVI needs assessment instrument (with more details and guidance than are currently provided in the OVC Toolkit’s template)
- Shortened versions of victim compensation applications that are specific to an MVI
- Job descriptions for staff needed for immediate-, short- and long-term responses
- Sample press releases
- Scripts for agency leaders (for responding to news media inquiries)
- Planning documents for initial Response Centers, Family Assistance Centers, and Resiliency Centers, especially any that articulate the roles and responsibilities of VAPs

Information and Tip Sheets

- VOCA and COMP programs need to consider preparing tip sheets in advance of an MVI specifically focusing on these phases:
 - Before (readiness)
 - During (response)
 - After (resilience)
- Stressors and “triggers” (cues) that can create vicarious trauma for survivors and VAPs (including when a subsequent MVI occurs), and best practices for coping.
- Staff wellness to promote resilience
- How to plan and create survivor-centric memorials that pay tribute to the survivors and communities affected by an MVI, including physical and online memorials.
- How to plan and implement anniversary events that are survivor-initiated and/or survivor-centric, including suggestions for coping with stress, ongoing trauma and suicide ideation.
- Guidelines for agency public information officers about how to prepare and disseminate timely, accurate information following a MVI. Some existing resources identified by the group include:
 - **Tragedies & Journalists** by Joe Hight, Frank Smyth
<https://dartcenter.org/content/tragedies-journalists-6?section=all>
 - **Best Practices in Trauma Reporting** by Kevin Kawamot
https://dartcenter.org/sites/default/files/da_best_practices_0_1.pdf
 - **“Managing the Response to a Mobile Mass Shooting,”** published by the Police Foundation in 2017: https://www.policefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/PF_Managing-the-Response-to-a-Mobile-Mass-Shooting_5.10.17.pdf
 - **“After the Incident”** available online from FEMA includes guidelines for PIOs:
<https://emilms.fema.gov/IS360/SAFE0105summary.htm>

- The specific types of information the media need and request following a MVI.
- The role of a navigator following a MVI, including cases that cross multiple physical jurisdictions and justice systems.
- How to make appropriate referrals for survivors who reside in other communities, states and countries.
- Criminal justice system advocacy for VAPs to assist victims and survivors.
- How to enhance cultural competence in all preparation and response activities.
- How to make appropriate mental health referrals for MVI survivors.

Appendix A

Combined VOCA & COMP Focus Group Attendees

Charleston, SC

May 31, 2018

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Appendix C

Available Resources from Participants

Focus Group participants offered the following current or future resources.

STATE	RESOURCES
MA	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)• Job descriptions (i.e., navigators, rebuilding homes, etc.)• Sample press releases• Videos• Sample of a grant for a Resilience Center
CA	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• California Victim Compensation Website, information and resources specific for survivors of Las Vegas MVI• Scripts for Call Center staff• Working on building a Virtual Resilience Center to complement the on-site Resilience Center in Las Vegas – will include a private chat feature
DC	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Family Assistance Center plan• 2.5 day skills-based training agenda• Training curriculum for interpreters, “Breaking the Silence”
NY	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Public service announcements
NV/CA	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sample memoranda-of-agreements
SC	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Grant template for programs to apply for state VOCA funding in the immediate aftermath of a mass violence incident
ALL	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Personal testimonials of victims, survivors, first and second responders