

Victim Advocate

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Compassionate Interaction



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As a victim advocate, I am interested in effective justice system responses that meet the needs of survivors. While needs vary by individual, I can say that, in my experience, most victims want one or more of these five things: 1) to be treated with respect and dignity—as an individual at the center of the criminal event and with a vested interest in the justice system outcomes; 2) to be provided timely information about the person charged and the processes from arrest on; 3) to be given the opportunity to provide input to the decision makers even if they choose not to listen; 4) to see restoration of the harm that was caused; and 5) to know that what happened to them will not happen to others.¹ A justice system that follows the research evidence is more likely to achieve these goals.

While there are many intersections of research evidence and treatment of victims, I want to highlight two of them.

Compassionate Interaction. The way survivors are treated by justice system professionals impacts their own recovery and satisfaction with the system. When a

person experiences a traumatic event, they often have heightened senses around their emotional and physical safety. Their safety is enhanced when they are treated fairly, respectfully, and consistently; are truly listened to; and are given choices, so they experience some level of control. Sharing information that is relevant to victims—such as how the justice system uses actuarial risk/needs assessments—may be helpful to them. The use of motivational interviewing is another example of how research-informed practice can improve the experience of victims. Practitioners who understand the needs of those coping with trauma and who use a communication style that includes a spirit of collaboration, empathy, and self-efficacy are more likely to meet victim needs. Thankfully, practitioners across Pennsylvania are being trained in these highly effective practices.

Fewer Future Victims. Survivors are often interested in getting some assurance that what happened to them won't happen to someone else. While there are no guarantees, the justice system can put in place specific practices that increase the likelihood that the person who was charged will desist from crime. For example, the National Institute of Corrections pointed out in their 2017 document *A Framework for Evidence-Based Decision Making in State and Local Criminal Justice Systems* that if just half of justice system employees were to effectively apply evidence-based practices in just one case, it would result in over one million fewer victims. The question then becomes “Why wouldn't every local justice system in Pennsylvania adopt these practices?” As a victim advocate, this is my greatest wish: that survivors can realize their hope that others may not have to experience what they did.

¹ For more information on victim rights, see <https://www.justice.gov/usao/resources/crime-victims-rights-ombudsman/victims-rights-act>.