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Awareness of Rights and Services Available for Victims of Crime

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### **Abstract**

The Victim Witness Unit in collaboration with the District Attorney's Office strives to provide services and resources to survivors of crime. The agency serves survivors of all types of crimes in Monterey County. The problem addressed by this capstone is the financial burden survivors will come across during the criminal justice process. The project consisted of a long form video that will provide the community and intended audience with information about available services to survivors of crime. Survivors of crime are often not aware of the full scope of services that can be given to them as they go through this tough process. The agency can take a step further on addressing this problem by working outside in the community. For example, an idea of this would be tabling in certain areas that will target the majority of their clients. This will provide the population with another form of comfort and certainty different from what it would be by showing up to an office.

Keywords: *survivors, crime, victim, financial burden, services, resources*

## I. Agency Description

The Victim Witness Unit is located at the Monterey County District Attorney's building in Salinas, California. The District Attorney's Office as a whole has the mission to "promote justice, ensure that the rights of victims are upheld by treating them with dignity, respect and compassion, and aggressively and fairly prosecuting those who violate the law" (County of Monterey, 2019). The Victim Witness Unit has a similar mission, which goes deeper into the victims needs:

"...provide services to victims/witnesses of all types of crime; reduce the trauma and insensitive treatment that victims/witnesses may experience ...assure that victims as witnesses are informed of the progress of the case in which they are involved, empower victims to recover from the effects of crimes through crisis intervention and other support services, and provide assistance to victims of crime in applying for state compensation and in seeking restitution."

Monterey County has a higher crime rate than the national and state crime rate.

The unit is a non-profit organization that is fully run by multiple grants. Each employee at the unit gets paid by different grants depending on which population they work with. My mentor, Kristin Gebin, works with cases involving the elderly population so her grant is different from another advocate who works on cases for domestic violence victims.

In order to fully serve victims of crime, the Victim/Witness Unit has to collaborate with other agencies. These agencies include the Deputy District Attorneys (DDA) and the District Attorney Investigators (DAI). Together, all three agencies come together to not only help the

community as a whole but as well as help the victims and their families individually. They collaborate to see what is in the best interest of the victim. For example, a victim of domestic abuse is asked by the DDA and DAI what their desired outcomes are for the defendant(s) in a particular case. The majority of the time what victims say may play a huge part in the prosecution towards the defendant. Because of the full cooperation of the victim, they are offered the service of compensation from the California Victim Compensation Board. However, this is only for victims of violent crimes. Along with this service are many others. Court escort/support, crisis intervention, direct follow up and case status/disposition information are a few examples of services a Victim Advocate provides at this unit.

## **II. Communities Served by the Agency**

The Victims/ Witness unit serves Monterey County and their population is diverse. There are victims who are Spanish speaking only, some English speaking only but also some that speak both. Fortunately, every advocate, but two, speak English and Spanish fluently. The unit covers all types of victims, from elders to young to infants to deceased and all the advocates cover different cases. Some advocates do domestic violence, others do sexual assault, also gang violence and elder abuse. They also have advocates who work within the juvenile system. As mentioned before, the population is diverse which means we have victims who are in the mid/high class and we have victims in the low class. There are more elderly cases in the peninsula, most domestic violence cases the victims are women in salinas, gang violence cases/juveniles occur more in South County and in Salinas.

There are a variety of crime rates throughout Monterey County. According to the Salinas Police Department, the total of crimes in 2018 added to 5,316 and the Monterey Police Departments reports a total of 44.42 per 1,000 crimes in 2018. The state of California itself experienced about 444.1 crimes per 100,000 (Department of Justice, 2018). The majority of crimes committed in Salinas are property crimes (Crime Rating, 2016). However, at the Victim Witness Unit the majority of cases that are referred to the unit are victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. In 2018 alone, the Department of Justice reports 2,008 domestic violence-related calls for assistance were made in Monterey County.

Victims of crime face all types of issues, needs or problems. The majority of this population suffer financial burdens due to the crimes. Medical, vehicle, and income loss are what a victim usually suffers from. Victims sometimes face whether they want to cooperate with the criminal justice system or not. For instance, domestic violence victims are less likely to cooperate because these crimes are committed by a spouse or close relative. Victims of crimes need emotional support they either do not have or are too afraid to seek. Also, when victims are ordered to show up in court they do not have the funds or public transportation to attend. Therefore, the unit may provide the victims with meal and gas cards to help with expenses.

### III. Problem Description

According to the Department of Justice (2019), they award over \$2.3 Billion in grants to assist victims Nationwide. Financial burden can affect any person. Most people go through a financial crisis at least once in their lifetime. Victims of crimes, however, never seem to see the end of financial problems after they are involved in a crime incident. Too many victims of crime experience financial burden. Out of the \$2.3 billion, state victim compensation programs will receive over \$136 million to supplement the state funds that offset victims' financial burdens resulting from crime (Department of Justice, 2019). These states then distribute these funds to counties. There can be many contributing factors for someone to encounter a financial burden. Medical expenses, history of low income, loss of earnings and psychological costs are all causes of financial burdens.

Medical expenses are a huge burden most victims of crime face. Personal crime is estimated to cost \$105 billion annually in medical costs, lost earnings, and public program costs related to victim assistance (Wasserman & Ellis, 2010). Whether the crime they were in is vehicle related or physically related. Victims often do not have insurance that will cover their expenses or if they do it covers only part of it. Insurers pay annually \$265 per American adult (Wasserman & Ellis, 2010). A lot of this forces families who have already been through enough to pay these expenses out of pocket. So, not only do they have to worry about themselves but they have to worry about how they will make their future payments. This can make people fall more into debt.

The majority of victims of crimes in Monterey County come from low income families. A survey of 800 survivors across the country found that "...victims of crime are more likely to be

low-income, young and people of color; furthermore, people with the lowest levels of education, income and economic status are more likely to experience repeat victimization and serious violent crime” (Alliance for Safety and Justice, n.d.). Finances that accumulate from the crimes they are involved in can cause them to go into poverty. Some people may even become homeless which increases the rate of poverty and homelessness. It is a continuance cycle that is an ongoing issue in our society. Poverty is not something that is easy to come out of especially if financial issues keep arising.

Becoming a victim of a crime can make a person take days off from their job. This can be because of surgeries, appearing in court hearings and having to make time to meet up with investigators or attorneys. Whatever the reason is for missing out at work there are cases and possibilities where someone may lose their job. This in turn makes victims suffer financially and even mentally. This can cause them to fall behind on life and everything else they are going through. Figure 1 presents the problem model discussed in this section

**Figure 1: Problem Model**

| <b>Causes/Contributing Factors</b> | <b>Problem statement</b>                              | <b>Consequences</b> |
|------------------------------------|---|---------------------|
| High Medical Expenses              | Too many victims of crime experience financial burden | Mental Health       |
| Loss of property                   |   | Poverty             |
| Loss in earnings                   |   | Loss of job         |



**Project connection to social problem**

The video that will reach the community provides information on services the agency or unit offer as assistance to the victims. Most of the services provided are offered to assist victims with contributing factors mentioned above. In order to help with medical expenses as well as psychological expenses, the compensation application is available. However, that program is only for qualifying crimes and the majority of those crimes are violent crimes. If a victim of burglary loses expenses because of the incident they do not qualify for the victims of crime compensation application. Instead they have to ask for restitution as part of the prosecution towards the defendant.

This video will target an audience of families who are in the low income class. This is because the majority of people in Monterey County who are involved in crimes are from low income families. This video will be put out on local channels that everyone can have access too. This video will also be put onto social media platforms which can be easily accessed. Children, young adults and parents will all be available to watch this video and be informed of the services provided.

**IV. Capstone Project****Description and Justification**

Many people are not aware of the rights they have as a victim in a crime. The project consisted of making a short video or commercial to bring awareness to victims of their rights and services that are offered for them. The funding came from the agency

itself and we partnered up with KION, a local news station, to film, edit and upload onto different platforms. My role was to be in charge of producing the video. The project consisted of scripts being made for the District Attorney, the Program Manager and the agency. I also had to manage schedules and attempted to figure out who is going to be in the video. Meetings with KION took place to see what their expectations were and if they had any guidelines or rules to follow. In accordance with the agency, supervisor and the advocates employed there, we chose one or two victims to anonymously or voluntarily give a testimony on how the agency has helped them. There are comfort dogs in our unit who help and escort victims and they were implemented in the video as well. KION walked me through the whole spectrum of videotaping and we came up with ways to do shots and clips.

Oftentimes it is difficult for victims to locate the building and unit. This video made that easier by providing a visual representation to the location. Another way this brought awareness is by informing the audience with the types of support services and resources the agency helps with and provides. The agency expects to give victims comfort and confidence in being a victim. Being a victim can cause a lot of emotional distress such as guilt. Depression, fear, and wanting to withdraw or hide, stay isolated. (U.S. Department of Justice, 2019). Because of the emotional distress one may go through oftentimes it is difficult for them to seek help for themselves. With this video, confidence and knowledge was hoped to expand throughout the community.

The victims and the agency both benefited from this project. The victims benefit because they now have more information on the agency and possibly even more confidence to go into the office. As mentioned before, one of the services the agency provides is the CalVCP, which assists victims with any bills that occurred due to the incident. However, the application is only offered to certain crime types and also only if the victim is cooperating with the system. This video briefly informed the audience of this and it attracted the attention of those victims who are struggling financially due to some incident. In addition, the agency will benefit from this video by using this platform to create a better relationship with the victims. The victims who saw this video positively reacted to it and brought in more clients to the agency. They envisioned that the agency is caring because they took the time to bring this awareness to the community.

### **Project Implementation**

The method that was used for this project was through what is called a long form video. In order to excel in this project I learned everything about the media and the way it works. I have never worked on producing a video for different platforms. I learned the guidelines of each website that the video will be uploaded on. I did this by working with some videographers from KION. They briefly went over that with me as time passed. The implementation was divided into 4 components that are described in detail below. In addition, table 1 presents a detailed scope of work and timeline of implementation of this project.

Component 1: Organization

The participants in this video included the videographers, the advocates employed at the agency, victims, children, the comfort dogs the agency has, and the supervisor of the unit and building. My supervisor got me in touch with the videographers from KION via email so I was able to meet with them and do a thorough walk through of the building and potential shots. The advocates were given the choice of participating in the video and for the most part they were all a part of it as I hoped. The victims were chosen by the advocates and the supervisor, based on a list of names, a phone call was made to see which victims were up for it. The Program Manager ultimately chose who she thought would best fit the scenario. The children, who were videotaped playing with the dogs, were children from the employees there and we made sure to get consent from their parents as well as signatures from every participant on a form of liability. The community organizations that partnered with us was the local news station, KION. Other participants included district attorneys and the investigators.

The location for filming the video was at the agency itself in Salinas, California. All funding was provided from the agency and/or KION. The agency provided for any additional needed resources. Everything was planned before it was implemented. The budget they gave me was \$2,000 from the agency that was put towards the entire video and any necessities in the making of it. The time of this video was taken at the convenience of the participants involved. For advocates or staff members we blocked

out the entire unit schedule for a Thursday and Friday morning. For the victims, we set up times and meetings that worked for them as well as for the videographers.

Various challenges occurred throughout the entire making of this project. Challenges included: victims not cooperating, time between everyone's busy schedules, consents from the unit and background checks that will be needed in the event we need to shoot in our building. I also found it difficult to come up with scripts that both the agency and KION will agree on. I had to make sure I did not reveal too much information but also not reveal too little. In order to overcome these challenges, I kept myself positive, confident, and understood that everything might not work out the way I wanted it to. As long as I got the project done and accomplished it to my full potential.

### Component 2: Video scripts

In order to finish the filming of the video, scripts for both the supervisor of the agency as well as the district attorney for monterey county were created. The first step was to do research of the agency, find out about the background, look through the county's website, visit other county websites, and watch other videos and films of victim/witness agencies around the world. Printouts of the transcripts from each video and website were made to be able read them and highlight what was interesting to know about the agency and use the highlighted areas to get ideas about what should and shouldn't be in the scripts. Once both scripts were typed up, an email was sent to the supervisor, manager, and mentor at this agency. Printouts of the script were also left at their desks so they had a hard copy so they could proofread and add or delete anything.

Together they fixed a couple of errors and added and deleted some detail to make the scripts good for the video. The supervisor then emailed it to the district attorney so she could revise and approve of them.

### Component 3: Filming and editing

When the first day of filming took place, some last minute changes occurred leaving us only to film around 2 scenes. However, the second time around was more productive than expected. On that second day, interviews of the victim advocates were filmed which took up some time and also an interview of an investigator was done. The reception area as well as a few other scenes were taken on this day. The very following day an interview was done with a spanish speaking advocate as well as retakes or new takes of other scenes that were needed. There were only a couple of shots left to do before the shelter in place happened which made all students stop going to their agencies.

### **Implementation challenges**

During the implementation of this project there were many challenges I came across, as expected of course. Some challenges I had to overcome was the constant rearranging and reorganizing the schedules of everyone who was going to be a part of the video. It was frustrating having schedules set and some changes would come up on the day scheduled, therefore, making me have to go and figure out other possible dates for filming days. Although the first days and months of implementation were difficult, it started to feel like everything was finally falling into place. Everything was going as

planned until the COVID-19 chaos occurred and abruptly stopped any possible contact or basically any sort of continued implementation with the agency. It was most challenging for me to get over it and accept the fact that this video I worked so hard on completing was no longer going to be able to be finished.

| <b>Table 1. Scope of Work and implementation timeline</b>  |   |  |                           |
|--|---|--|---------------------------|
| <b>Title: Awareness of Rights and Services to Victims of Crime</b>   |   |  |                           |
| <b>Project description: Development of a long form video to aware victims of crimes of the resources available for them.</b> |   |  |                           |
| <b>Goal: Bring awareness to victims of Monterey County</b>   |   |  |                           |
| <b>Primary objective of the project: Increase knowledge of rights and services</b>   |   |  |                           |
| <b>Activities</b>  |   | <b>Deliverables</b>  | <b>Timeline/deadlines</b> |
| 1  | Discuss capstone project ideas with mentor  | Final capstone project idea approved                       | September 24, 2019        |
| 2  | Interview agency personnel about what information should be in the video          | Draft Scripts  | February 2020             |
| 3  | Prepare scripts for participants  | Final Script   | February 2020             |
| 4  | Organize participants and plan videotaping in coordination with KION videographer | Final meet up dates  | February 2020             |
| 5  | Filming and Editing   | Final draft of video                                       | February 2020             |
| 6  | Discovery   | Identify issues of data                                    | March 2020                |
| 7  | Complete reporting requirements   | Final agency and capstone reports                          | April 2020                |
| 8  | Prepare capstone presentation in selected format                                  | Present at Dress Rehearsal for grading (posters submitted) | May 2020                  |
| 9  | Final preparation for Capstone Festival   | Final presentation at Capstone Festival!!                  | May 15,, 2020             |

### V. Reflection of COVID-19 Pandemic's Impact on Agency and Population Served

COVID-19 and the requirement to shelter in place during the quarantine process forced my agency to close. Although they were closed only about 2 victim advocates were allowed to work remotely from inside of the office. For a few weeks there was nothing being done because they had to figure out the transition for the clients and themselves. Figuring out the process and their plan just like anyone else took about a week of preparation. They decided they would work from home and still work to their best abilities to inform their clients on the cases of the criminal justice system. However services did lessen. Services that included face to face interaction such as escorting victims to court hearings or when a victim is needed to testify.

COVID-19 changed everyone's lives very unexpectedly. For the clients at the Victim Witness Unit services were still provided for them. For example, they were still receiving calls for updates on their cases, they were being put through the process now of COVID-19 as well as the criminal justice system. The advocate and the client had to learn how to be patient with each other in regards to finding the appropriate resources and services that would best suit the situation. Most cases were being dropped because they did not want as many people in prisons and jails. This did not allow the advocate to provide comfort they initially would if cases were dismissed. The client here is who suffers the most. Depending on their case, it can go either good or bad. The clients were still however provided with assistance with the compensation application. As everyone else was doing, they offered assistance through zoom or video chat as well as constant emails and phone calls.



The problem of victims of crime going through financial burden only increases during COVID-19. A lot of people lost their jobs due to the virus and shelter in place. Many clients lost their jobs and therefore lost their wages and income. This on top of all other expenses makes it harder to get out of. During quarantine, domestic violence offenses rose as well as hospitalizations. These two incidents are another means of expenses a lot of clients had no ways of paying. This only put them further into debt and stress.

The agency has been able to work well with the COVID-19 situation. They have done exactly what has been recommended and like everyone else they are learning as they go. For future operations of the agency I think they would take more precautions of the clients and it has probably taught them more patience. They have learned the difference between what was considered a real necessity to what was now considered a real necessity. As they start reopening places the agency will continue for some time to enforce restrictions of certain clients allowed in the agency. For now they will continue to work on cases the court is only reviewing and moving forward with.

## **VI. Recommendations**

This project is meant to provide the agency with new knowledge on behalf of the victims of crime. It will change the way they assist clients in their agency because current resources that they are not using as much now might come up as new people come in. The project should continue as I was not able to finish the video. For the next person to take on this challenge, I recommend a lot of patience, gather knowledge on all resources provided by this agency, and learn how to communicate effectively. Do not be afraid to voice your opinion. Whether it has to

do with the making of the video or the agency. The agency takes in a lot of ideas and works with them. Also to get to really learn names, faces, and departments because all of these will be a help in the process. What could be done differently for the person who gets to continue this project is to focus on the learning process and not on the mistakes or criticism. Everyone in this office has a great understanding of life and exactly it is what they do. Become comfortable with asking questions, constant, emailing, and phone calls to get where you need to be.

Making the video will relate to victims who find themselves in a financial burden. The video will help with financial burdens by putting an ease to victims as well as informing of resources that the agency has to lower rising debts due to the incident they were involved in. Another idea that the agency can work into is to work more into the community. I had this idea of tabling at certain places and providing information to the community in all areas at different times of the day. There can be one day out of the week where an advocate or two can take half a day to find a place to table and be available for those in the community to ask questions or be provided with pamphlets or brochures on services available to them. This will show the community that there is an agency contributing to a great understanding on financial burden and other factors a victim of crime goes through.

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