

5-2022

## **From the Victims: A Needs Assessment and Training Program for Victim Advocates at the Monterey County District Attorney's Office**

Sophia Lopez

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/caps\\_thes\\_all](https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/caps_thes_all)

---

This Capstone Project (Open Access) is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ CSUMB. It has been accepted for inclusion in Capstone Projects and Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ CSUMB. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@csumb.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@csumb.edu).

From the Victims: A needs assessment and training program for Victim Advocates at the  
Monterey County District Attorney's Office

BY:

Sophia Lopez

Collaborative Health & Human Services

Department of Health Human Services and Public Policy

California State University of Monterey Bay

May 20, 2022

Sophia Lopez, Department of Health Human Services and Public Policy, California State University Monterey Bay. This research was supported by The Monterey County District Attorney's Office: Victims of Crime Unit. Correspondence concerning this report should be

addressed to Sophia Lopez, California State University Monterey Bay, 100 Campus Center,  
Seaside, CA, 93955. Contact: [soplopez@csumb.edu](mailto:soplopez@csumb.edu)

### **Abstract**

The lack of awareness of services and procedures of the criminal justice system causes victims of crime to not make reports to law enforcement. The Victims of Crime Unit in the District Attorney's office provides support and services to victims in hopes to help reduce the trauma and insensitive treatment they may endure in Monterey County. The purpose of this project was to inform the creation of a training geared to increase awareness of the needs of victims of crime to the employees in the Victims of Crime Unit. The project consisted of a series of interviews with victims and the subsequent development of training materials for the victim advocates based on participants' responses. The interviews revealed that improvements within the District Attorney's Office should be made. It is recommended that future training for victim advocates include more information be initially given to victims of who and what is being communicated to them.

## **I.**

### **Agency Description**

The Monterey County District Attorney's Office has been changing lives and protecting the community by upholding their commitment to promote justice, ensuring the rights of victims all while treating them with dignity and respect, and fairly prosecuting those who violate the law. All employees in the office work together and support one another to help bring justice to victims and the Monterey County community. The Advocates in the Victims of Crime Unit solely spend their work days supporting victims and providing them resources that will potentially help them emotionally, financially and physically. They do this by referring victims to programs such as The California Victim Compensation Program or organizations like the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). The general mission of the Victim/Witness Assistance Program is to provide services to victims/witnesses of all types of crime and reduce the trauma and insensitive treatment that victims/witnesses may experience in the wake of crime (Victim/Witness Unit).

## **II.**

### **Communities Served**

The District Attorney's Office Victims of Crime Unit serves anyone in Monterey County who has been affected by a crime. Although the office sees all different types of crimes, some of the more frequent ones are domestic violence, sexual violence, youth violence, child abuse and elder abuse. Some social inequities that are faced by the primary population are financial struggles. A lot of clients find it difficult to attend the court hearings because they cannot afford

to miss a day or even a few hours of work. Finding child care for their children can also become a struggle for some clients. To help with this and to allow clients to be able to use their right to attend court, the unit provides support and resources such as offering transportation if needed.

Monterey County has a very diverse population in every type of way. The Victims of Crime Unit sees clients of all ages, ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations etc. According to the DataShare of Monterey County in 2019, there is almost an equal percentage of women and men in the county. Even though the Victims of Crime Unit sees victims of all genders, women are the majority (Domestic violence - assets.speakcdn.com). In violent crimes, specifically intimate partner violence, the most common ages in women are between 18 and 24. A large majority of the population in Monterey County is Hispanic or Latino (59.4%) (Demographics dashboard. County of Monterey). This correlates with the different ethnicities of clients the Victims Unit serves.

### **III.**

### **Problem Description**

#### Macro Problem Statement:

*There is a lack of knowledge of and trust in the criminal justice system from the public, including victims.*

According to Domestic violence - assets.speakcdn.com, 1 in 4 women experience sexual or physical violence, or have become the victim of a stalking, intimate partner. In the same article, it is reported that 1 in 10 men experience violence from an intimate partner and need legal services. Whereas, only 1 in 5 women feel they need legal services. These statistics for both men and women are far too high. Anyone in an intimate relationship has the right to feel and be safe. If they are not, they deserve to have trust and confidence in the Criminal Justice System and

the employees of the District Attorney’s Office to do everything possible to protect them. As the years have gone by with new stories about ‘bad cops’, it can be assumed that the trust in law enforcement has gone down. This applies to both reporting crimes and calling the police when a crime is occurring. In the late 2000’s, the public was asked to use a scale to rate their trust in the police. Approximately 43% said their trust was in the middle and 13% rated their trust in police low (Jordan 2008). These numbers continue to decrease. In 2020, a study about public trust in police reported that the overall percentage of the public who do not trust the police dropped down to 48% (Ortiz, A). That is below the majority of people. If the public does not trust the police, or the criminal justice system, less crimes will be reported. People hear on the news about poor ways police officers handle calls, or hear from their friends the bad experiences they have had when reporting crimes. This can discourage them from reporting crimes they have become a victim to. If they do choose to report they still may not fully trust the attorneys, investigators and advocates etc. If there is no trust they may not feel safe enough to share all the details of what happened or share important aspects that those assigned to the case may be able to help with. There needs to be an increase of trust within the public, law enforcement and the criminal justice system so that people will be more inclined to report crimes, get justice and keep the community safer.

**Figure 1: Problem Model**

<p><b>CAUSES TO AGENCY PROBLEM</b></p>	<p><b>AGENCY-SPECIFIC “MICRO-LEVEL” PROBLEM ADDRESSED BY PROJECT</b></p>	<p><b>CONSEQUENCES TO AGENCY</b></p>
--	--	--

A needs assessment of the victims needs has not been performed due to lack of time or resources from the DA's office.	The DA victims unit needs to increase their understanding of the extent to which victims' needs are being met by its advocates.	Some victims may not want to communicate with the advocates and may not trust them thus leading to the victims not being transparent.
<b>CAUSES/RISK FACTORS TO BROADER HEALTH PROBLEM</b>	<b>BROADER "MACRO-LEVEL" HEALTH/ SOCIAL PROBLEM</b>	<b>CONSEQUENCES TO SOCIETY</b>
Victims hearing about negative experiences with officers, attorneys and advocates.	There is a lack of awareness of services and procedures of the Criminal Justice System	Victims not wanting to report crimes.

**IV. Capstone Project Description**

The purpose of this capstone project was to increase the knowledge of needs of the victims that victim advocates support. The goal was to increase the trust within victims. Interviews were conducted with six victims of crime to have a conversation about their experience with the criminal justice system and the people within it. To truly understand the needs, concerns, wants and fears of victims of crime a list of questions and talking points was compiled that was used for the interviews. These questions included if they reported or not and if they did report what was their opinion on the criminal justice system process. Others were what support did they get and from who, what did they need from the advocate that they did not receive, what services were they provided and which ones were they already aware of and how they were most negatively affected by this crime. This last question was mostly directed to aspects of their life like if they lost money, their job, housing, could not afford childcare, groceries etc. Some questions more directed about the criminal justice system included if they trust the system and the people within like law enforcement, district attorneys and the court/

judges, if they understand the criminal justice system process and are aware of the services available to them, and if they prefer getting information from pamphlets/brochures or from the victim advocates directly. They were also asked about their opinion on a Family Justice Center being built in the community and if they had found it difficult going to multiple different locations for services they were seeking as a result of the crime.

After collecting the data from the interviews, a presentation was made with an analysis and direct quotes from the interviews. This presentation was given to the victim advocates so they were aware of what victims may need, want, why they may not trust the criminal justice system, and how they felt about the criminal justice system process and those who supported them. From there, it was requested that the advocates provide their thoughts, opinions and feelings on the presentation via email. The responses from the advocates was collected and analyzed to determine how effective the needs assessment for victims was.

## **V. Project Implementation**

Since this capstone project included both a needs assessment and training program, it required many different steps in order to complete the implementation of it. The first step being recruitment. The most ideal way to recruit victims willing to participate would have been through contacting them directly from the agency's database. However, to respect confidentiality as well as be considerate of the trauma they have gone through, another way of recruitment was used. The style of recruitment chosen was through social media. A video was made explaining my role at the agency, the project, the search for people who have been victims who are willing to have a conversation about their experience with the criminal justice system, and the importance of

making participants feel comfortable and posted on instagram. Just from this initial video, five people responded that they would be willing to participate. In an attempt to recruit more participants, another post was made regarding the project. From the second post, two more people responded willing to participate. However, out of the seven respondents, only six ended up being interviewed. These interviews were conducted through zoom and were being recorded, with the participants permission. The request to record the interviews was made so it was possible to go back and listen to the recordings to properly analyze and organize the responses. With the video recordings, an analysis was done to organize the data into a training presentation that was given to the victim advocates at the district attorney's office. Responses from the advocates were requested to determine the successfulness of the project.

## **VI.**

### **Findings**

It is important to note that every individual who participated in the project had their own unique experience, thoughts and feelings with and about the criminal justice system. However, to certain questions they were asked, a lot of the answers were the same but of course with different explanations. It was found that every single participant did not trust the criminal justice system. Some for the reason that they have seen it fail so many other people or it has even failed them themselves. Others explained that from their own research done both inside and outside of school, they have come to the conclusion that the criminal justice system was not made to help people like "them". They explained more in depth that they believe the criminal justice system is set up to help the rich, white men and really nobody else. Two other questions most of the participants answered the same to were regarding how they were most negatively impacted and

the type of support they received and from who. It was found that all participants were most negatively impacted with emotional trauma as well as some experiencing a decline in their school work and grades. The majority explained they mostly received support from friends and about half received support from their family while the others' families either did not know or did not take the situation seriously. Most of the other questions asked received very unique responses from each participant.

## **VII. Assessment and Assessment Results**

There were three expected outcomes, a short term, intermediate term and long term, created that were to be used to determine the success of the project. Due to the lack of time remaining at the agency, only the short term outcome was able to be assessed. The short term goal was that the victim advocates will better understand the needs of victims. The intermediate is that more and better resources and support will be available to victims they serve and the long term goal is there will be an overall increase of reports being made to law enforcement. To assess the effectiveness and success of the short term goal, once the advocates received the training presentation it was requested that they respond with their opinions, thoughts and feelings on it via email. From their responses, it was found that the expected short term outcome was met. Some common responses received included statements that there were things in the presentation they did not even think of. They found the information useful and will try to incorporate it into their work with future clients. There was not enough time left at the agency to determine whether the project reached its expected intermediate and long term goals.

## **VIII. Recommendations**

Two major recommendations are made for the agency from the information gathered through this project. The first recommendation being transparency. Fortunately, the group dynamic the victim advocates have is great. All of the advocates help each other out with their cases when needed whether that means making phone calls for each other on their contact lists or escorting each other's clients to court and providing support to them. Although helping each other out is a great thing they do, building trust and rapport with the clients is also very important. When someone has just become a victim of a crime they may be more sensitive and less trusting with people. So, when they are receiving calls from different people every time, it can make them skeptical about trusting the person calling them. With that being said, the first recommendation being made is for the advocate assigned to the case to explain in the initial phone call to the victim that other advocates may be calling them if they are out of the office. Another suggestion is to continue making phone calls between the court hearings to check up on the victim. The criminal justice system process can be extremely long, and if a victim does not hear from their advocate for months they may feel forgotten about. It is important that the victims know the advocates are always there to provide support or refer outside resources to them. The second recommendation being made is regarding giving more detailed information. When making phone calls to the victims, the advocates typically update them on the status of their case meaning they will explain what stage they are in and what court hearing just happened and what will happen next. Typically, the advocates will also briefly explain what happens in said court hearings. However, from the information gathered through this project, it was found that even when the advocates explain what is going on, the victims still do not understand most of the time. This is due to legal terms being used that they do not know the meanings of as well

as simply forgetting what is happening in the next court date once it comes up because it may be months later. The specific recommendation being made to combat this issue is to provide some sort of document, whether that be a paper copy or digital, that has each court hearing and the explanations of them in simple terms. This document should be given to the victims to keep so they can always go back to it if needed. By providing this, victims will be less frustrated and more knowledgeable about the stage of court the case is in.

## XI. References

*Domestic violence - assets.speakcdn.com.* (n.d.). Retrieved December 20, 2021, from [https://assets.speakcdn.com/assets/2497/domestic\\_violence-2020080709350855.pdf?1596828650457](https://assets.speakcdn.com/assets/2497/domestic_violence-2020080709350855.pdf?1596828650457)

JORDAN. (2008). PERFECT VICTIMS, PERFECT POLICING? IMPROVING RAPE COMPLAINANTS' EXPERIENCES OF POLICE INVESTIGATIONS. *Public Administration* (London), 86(3), 699–719. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9299.2008.00749.x>

Monterey, C. of. (n.d.). *Demographics dashboard.* County of Monterey :: Indicators :: Demographics Dashboard. Retrieved December 20, 2021, from <http://www.datasharemontereycounty.org/indicators/index/dashboard?alias=demographics&localeId=264>

Ortiz, A. (2020, August 12). *Confidence in police is at record low, Gallup survey finds.* The New York Times. Retrieved December 20, 2021, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/12/us/gallup-poll-police.html>

*Victim/witness unit.* Victim/Witness Unit | Monterey County, CA. (n.d.). Retrieved December 20, 2021, from <https://www.co.monterey.ca.us/government/departments-a-h/district-attorney-old/victim-witness-unit>

