

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY – Victim Services Program Evaluation – April 30, 2020

Evaluation Purpose

The NWT Victims Services Program (VSP) is a community-based program, meaning community organizations, not public servants, provide local and regional services to victims of crime. Services are provided through eight sponsoring community organizations that deliver services to all 33 communities in the NWT.

The objective of the study was to conduct a complete assessment of the Victim Services Program (VSP) across the Northwest Territories. The evaluation assessed Program responsiveness (e.g. needs of clients, fit of services to the identified needs), achievement of outcomes (e.g. extent to which Program is achieving its goals), effectiveness of design and delivery (e.g. adequacy of the community model), and opportunities for future improvement of the Program.

Method of Study

The evaluation methodology included both primary and secondary sources of data. The primary sources of data were 81 key informant interviews with Victim Service providers, GNWT representatives, sponsoring organization representatives (e.g. executive directors), community stakeholders, and Court and Justice officials (e.g. Community Justice, RCMP, and Court officials). Secondary sources of data included program administrative data and expenditures, other reports and program files (e.g. VSP annual reports, contribution agreements), and an extensive literature review, including a review of best practices and a jurisdictional scan of delivery models in Canada and elsewhere (i.e. New Zealand, the United States, and Australia).

Major Findings

Responsiveness to Client Needs

There is a strong need for Victim Services given the high rates of reported and under-reported crime in the NWT. Police-reported family violence crimes are particularly high and disproportionately impact Indigenous women. The Program is responsive to the needs of victims and is generally reflective of type of victims and crimes reported by the police. Many clients who self-referred to the Program (an average of 20% to 30% over 4 years) and those who are recorded as ‘continuous cases’ were presumed to be the victims of unreported and under-reported crime. Indigenous women experiencing family violence remain the largest client group served by the Program.

The Program is responsive to the needs of victims it serves, particularly with respect to information needs, system navigation, referrals to other resources, safety concerns, and emotional support. However, several factors can make it difficult to reach all victims with services where and when needed. These include a lack of funding for travel (which limits providers’ ability to build trust and relationships in outlying communities), challenges in reaching victims when they are most vulnerable (e.g. in the immediate aftermath of an incident or after-hours), and low awareness of the VCEF in outreach communities.

Achievement of Outcomes

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The Program is perceived as effective in increasing understanding of the court process among victims participating in the justice system. However, these efforts have not necessarily translated in increased victims' participation in the system. Many factors other than availability of and access to information and supports for victims continue to contribute to high levels of unreported crimes and limit victims' participation in the justice system. They range from fear of the offender, shame and stigma, socio-economic factors and isolation, uncertainty and potential financial loss, mistrust in the system, lack of transportation and child-care, to the long court processes. In addition to these factors, participation in Restorative Justice (RJ) is further constrained by the types of incidents which are not suitable for RJ (e.g. seriousness of crime), capacity of the programs to engage victims, and reputation of the process in some communities.

Victim Service providers link clients to available services, particularly counselling, traditional wellness programs, the RCMP and legal services. In smaller communities, issues were raised regarding lack of much-needed services (e.g. shelters). In larger communities, the degree of fragmentation of services and high staff turnover pose a barrier to creating linkages and ensuring clients are served effectively. In some communities, interagency meetings are held regularly and have led to better collaboration among various services and resulted in new initiatives, though generally more formal collaboration is needed.

The Program contributes to victim safety by providing financial resources for emergencies, helping to create safety plans, and providing other needed support. Victim Service providers often go above and beyond to help victims fearful for their safety (e.g. opening their homes, providing transport). The Victims of Crime Emergency Fund has provided a total of nearly \$240,000 to over 330 victims (excluding victims of apartment fires in 2018/19) over five years to cover various expenses such as home repair, ID replacement, emergency food and clothing, and emergency phones and minutes. Some concerns were raised regarding the level of awareness and utilization of the fund among victims in outreach communities (as three communities accounted for two-thirds of funds expended).

Territorial and community level activities have increased the profile of the Program and public awareness of victimization. Most Victim Service providers are well known in their communities and participate in a wide range of awareness activities including community-wide events and collaborative events with other agencies. However, limited availability of resources at the community level contributes to somewhat inconsistent and sporadic public engagement activities and lack of focus on prevention. Some community stakeholders had a limited understanding of the Program and many noted a need for ongoing public engagement and increased efforts for a more collaborative approach to addressing concerns of those who are re-victimized or have complex needs.

Training provided by the GNWT has increased the ability of providers to meet the needs of victims. Sponsoring organizations differ in their capacity to support Victim Service providers. There is little formalized onboarding, in-house training, protocols or infrastructure established by sponsoring organizations to support consistency and sustainability of services. Very few Victim Service providers reported using the new self-care resources, mostly because it is difficult for them to take time off due to high demand for services and the responsibility they feel towards their clients.

Factors contributing to the effectiveness of the Program include capability and personality of individual Victim Service providers, strong relationships with the RCMP, a broadening of the

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scope of services to include victims of tragedy, collaboration with other community resources, and innovative public education approaches.

Design and Delivery

The community-based model is perceived to be appropriate for the NWT context. Some advantages of the model included its flexibility, the practice of community members helping their community, and the perceived trustworthiness of community-based organizations. However, there were also numerous issues raised related to community dynamics and politics that can affect consistency of services, confidentiality (particularly in small communities), dependence on RCMP referrals, delayed first point of contact with victim services, and limited resources for traveling to outreach communities. The community-based model allows for increased flexibility with respect to how services are provided; however, the model also resulted in a shift from some of the Program's original objectives and expectations (e.g. the Program was designed to be a front-line service and first point of contact for victims, although in most communities the approach to Victim Services resembles that of case management). The reporting and monitoring requirements established are insufficient to provide reliable information and support Program delivery.

Although the VCEF is administered in a timely manner, there is some confusion regarding the formally established guidelines, which has resulted in inconsistencies in how funding guidelines are applied. A decrease in funding distributed over four years, despite the increase in level of crime, suggests that the Program requirements may be applied too rigidly in some communities. Concerns were raised regarding eligibility requirements regarding what is considered a 'crime,' when the crime occurred and whether it was reported to the police.

The overall level of funding for the Program is low particularly when compared to the alternatives (e.g. no support or cost of other services delivered by government). Most of the funding provided to communities is used for staff wages and benefits and as such goes directly to Program delivery. The formal allocation of funding (as per Contribution Agreements) for training and travel is minimal and varies significantly across communities.

The costs of the services delivered to new clients are estimated to be, on average, about \$1,500 per new client and about \$200 per case. This varies widely across communities, reflecting differences in the number of clients served. The level of funding provided to communities for Victim Services and outreach activities limits the ability of the Program to contribute to preventative initiatives and adopt a more integrated case management approach to helping the most vulnerable clients (e.g. those in outreach communities; isolated, revictimized clients; and those with multiple barriers).

Recommendations

The following are major recommendations arising from the evaluation, reflecting the roles and responsibilities of the GNWT and sponsoring organizations.

The GNWT should consider the following:

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1. Introduce police-based Victim Services in communities where sponsoring organizations have demonstrated an inability to provide stable, ongoing service.
2. Restructure the VCEF to clarify its mandate and requirements and improve access.
3. Introduce additional requirements to be met by sponsoring organizations with respect to providing training and ensuring the well-being of Victim Service providers.
4. Create a more effective reporting and monitoring strategy.
5. Allocate additional resources for travel to outreach communities.

The sponsoring organizations should consider the following:

1. Create in-house onboarding processes and internal protocols.
2. Introduce referral protocols and information sharing agreements to improve integration of services.
3. Create a more strategic approach to public education and preventative measures.