

“The Changing Face of Victims’ Services”

*A paper for the
10th International Symposium on Victimology in Montreal*

Preface

In the following paper I shall describe a possible model of best practice for providing victim’s services and maximising the implementation of victim’s rights through setting realistic ideals, applying private sector practices, and building strong inter-agency and inter-personal relationships. To show that human services can balance business-like management practices and image very effectively with caring, information, advocacy and therapy services for clients.

The first part of the paper will briefly describe the nature of the Victim Support Service Incorporated and how it has grown from a small self-help group to one of the largest non-government victim support services in Australia. I shall also identify the victimological changes achieved by South Australia the first jurisdiction to bring in a victims’ charter in Australia.

The second and major part of the paper will explore the strategies that have been used to turn the organisation around after a crisis and rebuild it to a record funding level, staff compliment and client referrals. These strategies have been put into place within an environment of conservative government, economic rationalism and large government debt and therefore required us to change the way we do our work. We have had to put on a new face including some deep internal as well as some superficial cosmetic changes.

Finally if time permits I shall identify some of the mistakes and things we would do differently with the benefit of 20/20 hindsight.

Introduction

To give a little background about Victim Support Service at the outset is probably useful to enable an accurate picture of the organisation to be drawn and provide a context for the ideas I am about to put forward.

Victim Support Service is an independent, non-government organisation which has a grass roots community membership of interested “ordinary” people, crime victims, some companies, organisations and service providers. We started 25 years ago as a self-help group for the families and friends of homicide victims. It was a small voluntary body of (primarily) crime victims helping each other by sharing experiences and providing friendship or support to each other. It took about five or six years for enough funding to be wrung out of government to employ any staff – a social worker was engaged to provide professional counselling to clients. This model still continues today as we provide counselling through qualified professionals, self-help and therapeutic groups in which victims help each other under the guidance of a Social Worker, and Court support through carefully selected and trained volunteers. Our clients are victims of any crime from property victimisation through domestic violence, assault, sexual abuse to murder.

We have contact with around 2300 new referrals a year (and still increasing) and approximately 200 on-going clients receiving counselling and/or support at any one time. We have a staff of 15 with 9 of those being Social Workers. Our operating budget is around A\$550 000 a year – only \$890 000 of which we receive as an annual grant from government. Hence you will recognise our dependence upon government “generosity”. An extra 5 part-time staff provide services in the country.

A snapshot picture of our home territory will also probably be useful in establishing the context of this service.

Victim Support Service is based in Adelaide, South Australia, and provides a state-wide service to a population of 1.2 million. Our police crime statistics show around 250 000 incidents of victimisation a year – which is probably very low by comparison to many other jurisdictions. We also know that crime reporting is much lower than true levels of victimisation and that there is not just one victim per crime but five or ten times that number. We have a rising rate of most crimes and particularly in violent person to person crimes – although levels are still only just back up to the levels they were in 1993.

Our State has the dubious distinction, if that is the right word, of being the scene of some very well known serial murders including:

- The recent so called “Snowtown “ or “bodies in the bank” murders
- The “Family” murders of several young men in the late 1970’s
- The Truro murders of several teenage girls
- The disappearances of the Beaumont children and of two girls from the Adelaide oval.

I mention these horrible crimes to show that we have some unique characteristics in our part of the world that present certain challenges to our community and the services providing assistance to crime victims. Our numbers may not be high by comparison to other places but the needs and rights of our crime victims are no less than anywhere else.

South Australia has always been perceived as a leader in victimology in Australia and showed its heels to many other parts of the world in pursuing the rights of crime victims. We not only “allowed” women to vote first but we also were one of the first jurisdictions to enact a Declaration of Victims Rights. It was South Australia’s Declaration which was taken to the United Nations in the Mid-1980’s and then used as the basis for drafting the United Nations’ ‘Declaration of Rights of Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power’ - from which victims around the world have benefited.

The 80’s and 90’s saw many positive developments for victims in South Australia and the Victim Support Service was deeply involved in those changes. Some of them included the following:

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| 1969 | Criminal Injuries Compensation scheme introduced |
| 1970 | Women’s shelters and Sexual Assault Service commenced |
| 1976 | Legislation for rape reforms with greater acknowledgment of victims |

- 1979 Victims of Crime Service was established
- 1981 Report of the Committee of Inquiry on Victims of Crime tabled in Parliament which Ray Whitrod believed was the first in the Western World to probe the specific needs of victims of crime.
- 1984 Repeal of defendants right to make an unsworn statement
- 1985 Declaration of Victims Rights introduced by SA Government after being a strong advocate for the 1985 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Victims of Crime.
- 1987 Victims of Crime Branch established by SA Police
- 1989 Legislation for Victim Impact Statements and provision for offender restitution was enacted
- 1990 Copies of an Information booklet for Victims of Crime were distributed
- 1991 Police formed Domestic Violence Unit and 10 officers were appointed to investigate child abuse
- 1991 Office of Director of Public Prosecutions was created
- 1993 Vulnerable witness legislation was introduced to protect witnesses
- 1994 Family Conferences began as a Youth Court alternative for some young offenders
- 1995 Witness Assistance Service was established in Office of Director of Public Prosecutions
- 1995 Victims advocate (Victim Support Service) invited to sit on Prisoner Assessment Committee by Department for Correctional Services
- 1995 Criminal Injuries Compensation Act was amended to reduce emphasis on financial compensation
- 1996 Correctional Services Act ensured release of offender information to Registered Victims
- 1998 Legislation declared to protect counsellors notes on therapy with sexual assault victims
- 1998 Victim Impact Statements able to be read out in Court
- 1999 Attorney General formed Ministerial Advisory Committee on Victims of Crime
- 1999 Legislation passed to recognise "Home Invasion" and increase maximum penalties

However we also suffered a decline from having great influence and leadership to near collapse in the mid-90's. From late 1995 we brought about a revival of the service from the brink of disaster and possible de-funding – it is this story which I have been asked to tell at this symposium.

I shall do this by focusing on three questions:

- What was the crisis?
- What changes did we bring about?
- How did we do it?

What was the crisis?

After enjoying a close and productive relationship for many years with a socialist Labour government the service had funding for a specific project withdrawn by the one year old conservative Liberal Government. This was unacceptable to an organisation which had come to expect that Government had a commitment to crime victims and social justice policies generally. There was probably still a mentality in the community service sector that expected funding “handouts” to community

services as a matter of right – it had been an era of spending and support for service development. The whole sector was primarily of this view however the new Government had quite different expectations and while trying to reduce a massive public debt began to insist on measurable outcomes for the funds that were paid to community services (both government as well as non-government). It started to reduce funding to services which were perceived to not be delivering, or which had challenged the powers of the Parliamentary decision-makers. Our service was in one or both of these categories and did not help itself by taking the battle into the airwaves and print of the media. It had not learnt yet to be savvy (ie smart and strategic) within the changed political environment.

In addition the organisation suffered various other difficulties which included:

- Continued public debate and embarrassment of Government
- Conflict between Government and management
- Friction between senior staff
- Staff divisions from alignment to favoured individuals
- Factionalism on the Council
- Financial instability and possible insolvency
- Declining membership

An external consultant was brought in to conduct an organisation review to determine if the problems could be solved and if so, how.

What changes did we bring about?

I thought it would be useful to describe the organisation as it is today, only 8 years after the crisis, before then explaining how we actually went about effecting the change - which I shall do a little later in this paper.

We have:

- increased recurrent funding by 300% which is paid annually rather than only quarterly;
- sourced new grant funds;
- increased “permanent” staff;
- increased volunteer activities and numbers;
- increased membership by asking other agencies to join up to show their support;
- moved out of dingy victim-confirming accommodation to shopfront offices and designed a new logo to help support a new image.

Our growth in acceptability within the community and criminal justice arena is evidenced by the large number of committees to which we are invited, talks we are asked to give and approaches by the media. In the main we are recognised as positive, reasonable and objective rather than negative, uncompromising and complaining

The referral rate has been increasing for seven years and we now receive more referrals than ever before – necessitating the development of a more efficient and effective process for handling initial inquiries.

We have a range of professional looking publicity brochures and materials for clients which are standardised in format.

These accentuate a different image as a serious organisation that is credible, professional and here for the long term. We sought to ‘talk up’ these descriptors in true marketing mode to help create a self-fulfilling philosophy. Our small resource centre/library has proper cataloguing, purchasing and display systems which are an integrated part of our service range. These are included on the Internet on a comprehensive and attractive web-site which describes all our services.

We now have computerised office systems, client data-base and financial systems and a computer on all staff desks which enable us to contribute to research, provide sound financial reports to funding bodies and prepare statistics upon which to base our arguments about resources and victims needs.

These achievements have enabled the organisation to become a key stakeholder in the criminal justice system. We are so involved and interconnected to other agencies and government that we have created at least some degree of dependency upon us by others- which I believe empowers us better to fulfil our service delivery and advocacy role. I believe we have placed ourselves in such a position that we have bi-partisan support and are of such significance that our position is unlikely to be threatened by whims of the Government of the day or tenuous personality-based allegiances with bureaucrats. We have become partners and work together with stakeholders but without the pre-requisite to always be in agreement.

We have achieved this within a climate of a conservative government, massive state debt, economic rationalism, outsourcing, cost recovery by government and non-government alike, and privatisation or sale of Government assets. I believe that our political and economic climate is fairly typical of many so called modern or westernised societies. Hence many victims’ services are now or have already faced similar challenges. While our circumstances are not necessarily unique, I believe that the way we have tackled the problems may be a little different.

Further I believe that victims’ services and community services more generally will be forced to accept a different way of working if they are to survive the wave of economic rationalism which is sweeping the western world. Often linked to this is the draining of social capital and uncaring approaches by cash strapped governments which are pressuring small services to “amalgamate” with bigger ones to be more efficient, without being necessarily more effective, and reducing costs by increasing use of volunteers in sometimes questionable roles which have taken a minimum of 4 or 5 years of tertiary study and supervised professional practice to learn.

How did we do it?

In essence, key principles for “business” improvement were adapted from the private sector to bring about cultural change, improve financial and human resource management and develop a more business-like image. In parallel with this management approach, a clear philosophy about victim’s rights and how to achieve the best outcomes were developed and implemented in a strategic manner. This relied on building strong relationships and collaboration with government funding bodies and decision-makers as well as with offenders’ organisations and key criminal justice agencies.

I think this environment is one in which victims’ advocates have to decide that first

and foremost survival is the key objective – it is only if we can survive as part of the system that we shall either have a voice at all or be listened to. If we are de-funded or marginalised as “passionate”, “emotional”, ‘too precious’ or ‘too demanding and idealistic’ we don’t have to be heard. It is only if we both exist and have earned respect that we shall be listened to.

This climate is one requiring flexibility, reasonableness and compromise. These are characteristics we set about to demonstrate and focussed upon service delivery issues rather than challenging and confronting legislated victims rights more directly.

We have deliberately sought to reduce the polarisation between victim and offender upon which the media, amongst others, has sought to encourage and publicise. Our focus has been on issues to do with crime and restorative justice, which in itself focuses on outcomes for victims, offenders and the community – a much more positive agenda. We try to discuss issues not cases and talk about crime, its causes and effects rather than offenders and what they deserve. Why contribute to the development of community attitudes which reinforce aggression violence and polarity?

We have also taken a fairly hard line against the agitation by some sections of the community, and the media, for tougher penalties and/or mandatory minimum gaol terms. We see it as our duty to provide information to the community about the research which clearly demonstrates that punishment per se does little to change offending behaviour, let alone have any effect as a deterrent on the community at large. Too much crime is addiction related or spontaneous and unplanned and therefore a punishment paradigm is irrelevant to these two outcomes. We have tried to ensure political parties are informed rather than tackle them head on in the press. We can be more effective operating behind the scenes rather than seeking to publicly “embarrass” government into change- we don’t think this works because any Government is bigger and better at that game than we can ever be. Most victims are not retributive or vengeful – they primarily want the victimisation against them to stop, some appropriate punishment to be administered, and for the offender not to harm others. Too many people are under the misapprehension that the media-portrayed image of victims as rednecks seeking revenge is the correct one.

Thus one strategy has been to be clear about our philosophies and promulgate them articulately.

Underpinning this philosophical commitment has been our strategic planning process to arrive at a set of clear objectives, observable outcomes and key performance indicators to enable us to honestly and effectively monitor our progress.

We drafted the organisation's first three year strategic plan and used it as a management tool to help us stay on track and manage our workload.

I have already referred in this paper to being realistic in our goals, careful about our image and the marketing of that image, and doing battle behind closed doors rather than in the public eye. The approach was borrowed from the private sector as much as from any where else because we took account of image building techniques and marketing principles to present ourselves to Government, justice stakeholders and the media as a "business-like" organisation.

We set about showing them that we are efficient, effective, focussed and willing to earn respect rather than expect handouts and sympathy. Gradually they started to take us seriously.

We have sought practical changes and been pragmatic rather than confront policy or values. Policies and values are much harder to change than behaviour so we deliberately set about focussing on achievable outcomes and again borrowing from our knowledge of the business world, sought 'continuous improvement' or incremental change and gradually worked towards better outcomes for victims. Through this approach we united stakeholders towards common goals rather than highlighting differences and being divisive – incremental, pragmatic improvement not revolution was the plan. We also involved them in stakeholder consultation sessions to help inform our planning.

While this became our external approach we addressed internal organisational matters by identifying the issues and setting about tackling them in a planned manner – we followed our strategic plan, putting things in order of priority or achievability and chipped away at each one. As part of this planning we did as many successful enterprises do, actually planned the changes needed, identified possible barriers to change, involved staff, and minimised the possibility of surprises coming at us unexpectedly to push us off course. Underpinning the management of change was the concept of ensuring staff, and volunteers for that matter, were active participants and able to maintain (or in actual fact increase) their locus of control over the developments. We tried to keep moving forward with some urgency but without hurrying people. People generally do not like change and will resist it by trying to retain the status quo – we enabled them to control the controllable.

I come from a psychology background and have an inherent belief in people, they are the key to any organisation's success as well as being the most valuable and expensive resource. We have developed a culture which empowers people to contribute to their best – staff have autonomy to make decisions and have had to be encouraged and taught to do so. We all know what the plans and priorities are and the values which underpin and guide how we do things, so each person knows fairly intrinsically what decisions are likely to be supported or agreed to. While consultation is important to all of us, if time does not permit this to happen decisions can be made quickly. It is also important for staff to feel confident firstly about taking a decision but secondly to know that their actions will be supported by management rather than punished. With these principles operating in practice, an enterprise can be forthcoming which has a culture of learning (challenging its own practices and borrowing from others) and the confidence to take some risks in terms of what it does and how to do it. Having come through some difficult times the Victim Support Service now has rebuilt a positive self image and an outgoing or pro-active style.

Given that I have just claimed that we are a learning organisation and take calculated risks, I should admit that we did make some mistakes along the way – and will probably continue to do so.

Our mistakes and approach for the future

In essence the main thing we did was try to get closer to the business community than they wanted. We presumed that because we were borrowing some of the approaches used in business that the corporate social conscience would be willing to publicly support our goals. This was not to be. Crime and victims are neither sexy, focussed on children or to do with sport. The corporate sector does not want to be associated too closely with crime or victims – I guess its too negative. We tried to obtain sponsorship, corporate partners, business people on our management Council and a Patron from the business world. We went too far. In our experience which may be different from others (and I know that in New Zealand they have attracted corporate sponsors) business heads are in a different place – they don't understand our “bottom line” nor the subtleties of working in human services. Their values are different and therefore cannot be adopted – adaptation has however been more than possible, and in fact critical, to our survival.

We have tried to take on too much and therefore spread resources a little too thin – particularly at times of high referrals. We now manage this better and don't punish ourselves for having to put off deadlines or new projects because we did not have quite the time we thought we had, to give to a project.

We have many things left to achieve and, presumably, our work will never be finished - in our second three year plan we shall be focussing on:

- improving equity of access to information and services by marginalised crime victims in regional areas, children and adolescents, Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islanders, victims from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- restorative justice and extending victims participation in more meaningful criminal justice processes
- training for other service providers about victims needs and rights
- improving the accountability of criminal justice agencies for truly implementing the Declaration of Victims Rights
- reducing painful delays in court proceedings
- media treatment of crime and victims
- more funding for crime victims services

Conclusion

I believe we are in a much better position now to influence outcomes for victims than ever before because of the way we have changed the face of our organisation over the last few years. We now have a face with new vigour and youthfulness, one which can afford to buy cosmetics to keep up appearances, and to engage people to have greater face to face contact with crime victims. Our face is now better recognised by key players and we are invited to confer and contribute at most levels of the criminal justice system..

I would like to affirm the role that our knowledge of business practices has contributed to the way we have worked to rebuild our organisation.

I feel that many community services and helping professionals do not understand what can be usefully drawn from private enterprise which has had to learn how to manage staff, present financial information and manage money, think strategically and persevere or follow through on plans until they are achieved. Businesses have to plan and manage change or they will go under.

I believe that victims services can very usefully learn from this world and we need to overcome generally negative perceptions about money-making enterprises and the people running them– our motivations may be different but a profit motive is not by definition inherently bad. We can and in fact need to change the way we “do business” or we shall not survive and then where will our clients be?

Our strategies can be summarised into seven Fundamentals to Facing Change. They are:

1. Decide if you can be more effective by changing and look at the external environment to see if it too is changing .Do you need to do things differently?
2. Find some common ground which you can use to unite rather than divide and be a leader in this process. Seek continuous improvement and incremental change rather than idealistic revolution but also be clear about philosophies and promulgate them articulately.
3. Determine both short and long term (big picture)goals and actively plan how to implement them
4. Step out of your own shoes and look back at yourself from the outside – reassess your image and take a marketing approach to present yourself in appropriate ways to those you need to convince or with whom you need to build relationships
5. Show confidence, commitment and courage to make new links and form new partnerships
6. Actively manage change and internal processes to minimise resistance and surprises
7. Be flexible and reasonable

As a small service provider and advocacy body we have moved away from merely reacting and responding to immediate needs. By planning and thinking strategically we have looked at the big picture and allocated resources to work on longer term projects to, as they say in the corporations, “make a real difference”. Sometimes individual victims may suffer by having to wait for an extra few days for a direct service because counsellors are working on projects or conducting training. While this is unfortunate, we have to strike a balance. If we are ever going to advance the cause of victims and make a difference to how isolated crime victims feel in the community, how meaningfully they are allowed to participate in the criminal justice system, and what level of service and assistance they receive, we have to look at the big picture too.

I hope this paper provides some food for thought and issues some challenges to service providers and victim advocates.

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June 2000

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