

Report - VSE Members Online Discussion Challenges and Achievements during COVID19 Crisis for Victim Support Services 9th July 2020

Introduction

Victim Support Europe provided a unique opportunity to VSE members to share good practices and discuss challenges they faced during times of the COVID-19 pandemic in providing support and steps members have already undertaken in providing distance support to victims in Europe and worldwide.

The online discussion took place on 9 July 2020 from 10.30am to 12pm on Teams and gathered more than 30 participants. The online meeting was a combination of presentations from different VSE members and discussion on several topics. Participants were encouraged to use the chat to ask questions to speakers and to other participants and to share their experience.

This report aims at summarizing the discussions and presentations.

SESSION 1: Overview of challenges faced by victim support services

This session focused on findings from surveys conducted in the UK and with VSE members concerning the main problems and difficulties that victim support services faced in the time of the pandemic.

Presentation: David Kenyon, Head of Development, Supporting Justice (UK)

In the UK, Supporting Justice carried out an online survey of service providers. They have noted that COVID 19 had an impact on the delivery of services for victims in the UK. Services had to adapt significantly which quickly led to greater use of technology, innovation, creativity and new ways of working.

Key findings were:

- Over one hundred service organisations responded;
- 94% had to adapt their services during this crisis;
- 67% of services had not been able to maintain the range and level of support previously offered;
- 60% of services noted an increase in the number of victims concerned about personal safety;
- 60% are still assessing needs well.

Accessibility to victim support services was another challenge for victims. If victims cannot have an easy access to support services, their needs cannot be effectively assessed and met.

Victims have prioritised their needs caused by the crisis itself, rather than the crime. However, those needs do not go away over time. Effective assessment of needs is a key. If we don't know their needs, we can never get it right when it comes to support services.

BAME and young people may be disadvantaged by lack of face to face support. BAME communities might have less access to support services, due to e.g. language barriers. The fact that young people don't have access to education or have access to technology, means that they are not always in a position to safely express themselves because they're relying on remote support. There is more work to be done in order to better understand the situation.

Victim support services need to learn what has worked, what hasn't and how this can shape the future of our services. The assumption that support should be provided face to face only needs to be challenged. Many services are adapting and embracing modern technology but we can see there is more to be learned.

How can we strive to make our services more accessible? What tools and resources will we need in the future?

Presentation: Oleksandra Boychenko, VSE Researcher

VSE created an informative page and gathered data on crime, domestic violence, information for victim support professionals and distant support services which can help members with different information. This research is available to all members on our [website](#) and [intranet portal](#). As a response to COVID 19 VSE has conducted two different surveys:

- Survey among members on which information/resources are most useful for them: As a result we created a resource pack.

- Survey on specific challenges that our members face: The results from the second survey showed that our organisations had to adapt very quickly by using more technology, expand existing services and add new services (e.g. online platforms).

Biggest concern was: Determining the best tools to deliver the service.

General challenges were:

- Members worry about maintaining volunteers throughout and after the pandemic
- Maintaining services with a reduced budget.

VSE will continue to update the resource pack, organise webinars/discussions and possible direct trainings in the future.

SESSION 2. How VSE members have dealt with lockdowns and managed to resolve challenges?

This session was focused on retaining volunteers, witness services training development, 116 006 help lines as well as on organizational adaptation in providing a variety of services remotely, supporting first responders and medical teams.

Presentation: Jolena Flett, Head of Services Foyle, Victim Support Northern Ireland

Victim Support Northern Ireland made a complete switch from being office-based to completely remote working. Over the past year they developed distant support services. This urgency was triggered from people who were not attending their appointments. They developed telephone support and carried out research on best online chat. Before the crisis they had 117 volunteers face-to-face and 25 volunteers on telephone support. The face to face volunteers felt that they couldn't give the support that they could give face-to-face. The challenge was that some of the volunteers were not used to this technology and they had to adapt to new situation. At this moment VSE NI have 45 volunteers available for telephone support. There is an ongoing recruitment for telephone-based volunteers. Through Teams/Zoom they could develop their core learning so the geography was not concern.

Presentation: Ivana Andrijašević - Coordinator of National Call Center for Victims of Crime, Victim and Witness Support Service Croatia

At the end of February, Croatia had the first recorded case of Corona. Another impact on the functioning of the support services was the Earthquake in Zagreb at the end of March. The problems that they faced were:

Staff shortage

- (By the middle of March, they had to suspend all the volunteer activities. From having 33 volunteers and 3 staff they went only to 3 people providing support.)
- change in work environment - blending personal and professional time and space
- Increased number of calls
- Changes in working hours

Volunteer recruitment disruption

- Volunteer recruitment continued in June but with half of the original number - 10 volunteers instead 20 - due to COVID and Zagreb earthquake.

Budget cuts

- European social fund – Cuts in financial sums given to organisations for project activities implementations
- Further budget cuts for Ngo`s were announced

Despite all the problems our main goal is to ensure continuous availability of support and continuous work of National call Centre for victims of crime.

Presentation: Dr. Sigal Haimov, Director of Professional Programs and Models Development & Idit Michael, Head of Programming, NATAL Global

In Israel the Helpline was one of the most wanted units. A special helpline for Covid-19 calls was opened which operated alongside with the helpline for victims of terrorism and crime. Additional helpline staff was recruited and professional therapists were used to answer the phones. There was an increased number of calls from victims that were searching for help. Volunteers provided the assistance needed. As a support to the staff's wellbeing, webinars were organised with special trainings.

Clinic:

- The face to face meetings had to be replaced with telephone, Skype or Zoom
- Increased session frequency/ suspension treatment/reduced fees
- Support helpline calls and stuff

Community outreach:

- Supporting communities coping with COVID 19
- Organising special webinars for COVID 19
- Developing psycho- educational materials for public

Academy:

- Organised webinars and podcasts to support students
- To suspend/cancel courses and move to e-learning and provide refunds for people who couldn't get credits.
- Organised Online diploma ceremony.

PR & advocacy:

- Put emphasis on advocacy
- The helpline was promoted on TV and social media.
- Special website providing information and tools for the public.

Resource development:

- Most organisations needed to deal with donations and shortage of money.
- Recruiting donations for covid-19 activities.
- Raising money for new resources and donations for technological upgrades etc.

At the beginning of the pandemic they had to analyse the situation and adapt to the new needs. Usually they train first responders for two weeks. The first week concerns the course itself, during the second week it is about training the trainers. From onsite training they went to online. From outdoor event to Zooming. A two weeks training was replaced by an hour of online training. They created self-care tools for the new volunteers and trainers.

SESSION 3. Looking to the future, opening up and future events

VSE members were able to share their achievements and exchange thoughts about potential future steps that could be undertaken in case of a second wave of the pandemic.

Presentation: João Lázaro, President APAV

In Portugal half of the situations before the crisis were dealt by telephone, and half face-to-face. Distance support wasn't really new. During the lockdown shelters were closed and a strict quarantine was kept in the shelters. Additionally, a specific area was created on the intranet for covid-19 containing a contingency plan. Around the end of April/beginning of May an action plan was launched for the new normality. This did not only cover delivery, but also on how to deliver and how to transmit confidence in our staff and mainly our volunteers. The staff have been working from home and supporting victims from home. This was a crucial part of building this plan.

They had a special request from the government to open up temporary shelters for victims of domestic violence but we had to be very creative to get all the protective equipment. They asked staff/volunteers to measure their temperature before leaving their home to reach a victim support office. The manager of each office had to create a WhatsApp group for volunteers to do a follow-up if someone didn't feel good or fell sick. E.g. in the shelter there was a specific protocol of measures → dirty and clean area policy.

In the office the rooms were rearranged to meet the criteria and some staff are still working from home. They are following up the situation on weekly bases, not only with volunteers but also staff.

The national network of shelters mainly belongs to NGOs and city halls. They were closed and went through strict quarantine procedures. Nationally, the government opened 2 centres. 1 of them is covered by APAV. They have measures also for the victims that are submitted to the shelters each of them has to be tested first.

4. Other important remarks from the members in the chat

Have you see any difficulties regarding tech/ internet for rural communities? Is it in some countries this is particularly problematic?

Pauline OKROGLIC -France Victimes

For us it was mainly an issue of having the proper equipment in the first place. A lot of our workers had to use their own laptops, personal mobile phone etc

Ann Marie Adair –Victim Support Scotland

Victim Support Scotland very quickly provided mobile phones and laptops to our volunteers and staff so we could provide support and we have a web chat service available with extended opening hours to make ourselves more accessible

OLIVIER LAUWERS – Terrorism Division - Commission for financial aid for victims BE

In Belgium we've secured virtual hearings so victims of terrorism can attend the hearings of our Commission before we made a decision on their compensation / financial aid. But this has already been tested a few months before the Covid-19 crisis by our Unit for victims living in Australia who wanted to attend the hearings.

Kristiina Luht- Ministry of Social affairs Estonia

In Estonia, the victim support workers already had their work laptops and mobile phones, so this was not a problem. And I agree that young people often prefer online consultations, chats, so Estonian victim support crisis hotline provides chat counselling service as well.

Mike Findlay-Victim support Scotland

At Victim Support Scotland we have seen a big rise in our service users feeling suicidal; with BAME and young people, we feel that technology is a positive way to reach out to these groups.

Tobias Koertner -Weisser Ring Austria

In Austria, most of our staff already had work mobile phones and laptops. However, in some cases, staff had to fall back on their private laptops to be able to join video meetings...

We also referred clients to the emergency hotline. clients calling the office were informed by a taped message to call the emergency hotline. However, during the lockdown-phase in Austria, also activity of clients'/victims sort of decreased.

Volunteers working for WR Austria were not really active during that time.

Bianca Biwer –Weisser Ring Germany

In Germany we sent everybody to "home office". Therefore, we provided a special online training or the volunteers. But of course not everyone feels comfortable with it. Our helpline got a big increase in support "action"

Krisztina Bardóczy -Ministry of Justice Hungary

In Hungary we have a 24/7 Help Line for victims maintained by the Ministry of Justice, and the staff is therefore specialised in hearing victims and to assess their individual needs. Victims preferred help by phone even from our psychologists at our victim support centers

Was the court hearing problem in the jurisdictions?

Kevin Tso Victim -Support New Zealand

Victim Support NZ secured virtual participation in court hearings during lockdown as the Justice System had overlooked the victims during this period.

Ann Marie Adair -Victim Support Scotland

Summary and Solemn trials had completely stopped during lockdown in Scotland so there were no victims being asked to provide evidence. We are now seeing trials going ahead from next week and our volunteers are very happy to now support them as we have around 50 volunteers in Glasgow and many more around the country

While people were waiting for trials to go ahead our volunteers supported them over the telephone to give emotional support and assess safety to ensure the person was fully supported during lockdown

Tobias Koertner –Weisser Ring Austria

In Austria, no trials took place during lockdown in March/April (except for urgent cases with high sentences).

As of now, trials are again done, everyone has to wear a mask. victim supporters can accompany victims, even though "unnecessary" audience in court rooms is not appreciated at the moment. Apparently remote justice is offered in certain cases, but it is not very common in Austria.

Jolena Flett-Victim Support Northern Ireland

Sometimes the challenge was within the courts. They are using different programs and this is quite challenging when supporting victims. We were confronted with different use of technology with different courts. As we are starting compensation meetings, the testing phase was a complete disaster. At this moment the hearings will be virtual but whether the courts will remain virtual it's a big question concerning the privacy issues.

Nikica Hamer Vidmar-Ministry of Justice Croatia

Telephone support has shown to be very useful. Victims cannot come to get information. For us it has been a very good solution, maybe because people are still used to phone communication. Colleagues use videoconferencing much more, especially when talking with the offender. I hope that this situation encourages judges to use video calls more often.

Did you had working from home guidelines to e.g. ensure privacy?

Did you find that victims had concerns about speaking in private (e.g. in domestic violence cases?)

Bianca Biwer –Weisser Ring Germany

WRG had guidelines and offered one specific tool for videoconferences. Most victims are fine with it but not every one

Mike Findlay-Victim Support Scotland

In Scotland we have produced a number of guidelines for home working (including home set up). We have also been considering vicarious trauma and the fact that people are taking some serious / work calls into their home life. We have put in place a health & wellbeing programme to support colleagues with this

Tobias Koertner -Weisser Ring Austria

We did not have proper guidelines, as everything had to happen rather quickly. We are actually now working on providing staff with proper home office regulations and settings.

OLIVIER LAUWERS- Terrorism Division - Commission for financial aid for victims BE

NO proper guidelines at all in Belgium.

Ann Marie Adair-Victim Support Scotland

Victim Support Scotland developed new processes and guidelines for staff and volunteers within 2 weeks of going into lockdown because we had to adapt our whole way of providing support. We provided a call handling guide for all volunteers and a guide to using Teams as a priority and other guidelines have followed.

Victim Support Scotland have done risk assessments of all our offices in our courts and community buildings so they are safe and clearly marked to abide by the guidelines of the 2 metre social distance for staff and volunteers and service users.

We also developed guidelines for all staff and volunteers for their individual areas so they are aware of the process in each building

Kristiina Luht-Ministry of Social affairs Estonia

Estonian Victim Support and also the Ministry of Social Affairs developed several guidelines on how to deal with victims, cases etc.

Pauline OKROGLIC –France Victimes

In France everything was put on hold during lockdown and now it has resumed to its regular activity.

Kristiina Luht- Ministry of social affairs Estonia

Since the calls about domestic violence dropped seriously, we believe that victims did not dare to make those phone calls

Tobias Koertner-Weisser Ring Austria

The number of the domestic violence victims in Austria went down.

Bianca Biwer –Weisser Ring Germany

Only on our hotline and online support we noticed an increase, decrease of domestic violence in our local branches

Sofia Barlind -Victim Support Sweden

We have conflicting reports as well. Women's shelters reported significantly less interest in their services. But our helpline, which is for general services, had an increase of about 15% from March to April. We don't have reports from the Police yet as to actual reported crimes, but we're keeping an eye on it.

Kevin Tso-Victim Support NZ

In NZ domestic violence maintain pre COVID-19 levels during lockdown and beyond. A strategy was when possible for the victim to remain in the house and for the offender to be removed. Often it is the other way around. We also had very secure, private means of the victim to report incidents.

Difficulties for the helpline workers

Pauline OKROGLIC –France Victimes

For helpliners- both private and professional spaces were blended together and it made it difficult for them to have the distance they usually have when taking on phone calls and returning to their private life. It was harder for the helpliners than our more "administrative" services. They felt that victims were invading their personal space and had to adapt to keep providing a good quality of service.

Tobias Koertner -Weisser Ring Austria

This was rather an issue with internal video conferences, yet it sorts of lightened up the atmosphere. However, it was quite important to sort of find a room and make it clear to family members that they should not intrude during working hours.

Budget Cuts –Social Fund cuts? More budget provided?

Pauline OKROGLIC- France Victimes

FV don't have a clear idea of the budgetary impact for now, but we will for sure have budget cuts, as the activity decreased during the lockdown.

We've had no financial help from the French government during the lockdown. We received some financial support afterwards from the Ministry of Justice to buy protective equipment for our associations (masks, gloves, and so on) when they would go back to work face to face, but they did not provide protective equipment for our staff working within tribunals immediately when they reopened (we had to place the order for the associations and then get reimbursed by the Ministry)

Sofia Barlind -Victim Support Sweden

No cuts yet (quite the opposite) but we're worried about the economic turndown, how will that influence tax revenue and thus funding to NGOs on a regional and municipal level. That's longer term. Next year, the year after perhaps.

We would really like to have an exchange on this subject (funding) in particular with other members. Perhaps we can organise a strategy both on national and EU levels.

Additionally, our government set aside 10 million euros for victims of domestic violence, LGBTQIA+ victims and children in those environments, so all of those NGOs working with this in Sweden were able to get additional funding. And we got a fair chunk of that :) which is now going toward ad campaigns and extended opening hours on our helpline and starting a chat service.

Kristiina Luht- Ministry of Social affairs Estonia

Estonian government also provided more funding, for supporting existing services, providing new ones, and for training specialist and providing supervision and counselling for them

Ann Marie Adair-Victim Support Scotland

Victim Support Scotland has provided much more financial assistance since lockdown as Scottish Government provided additional funding of £70,000 to our victims' fund meaning we could support our victims financially where they had any urgent need relating to the crime.

Have you continued to deliver training internally or externally - did you have similar problems and solutions?

Has anyone developed new web based training platforms to adapt?

Kristiina Luht- Ministry of Social affairs Estonia

Our victim support crisis hotline is accessible 24/7 and workers work from home anyway. Victim support workers (located in police stations) worked now from home as well, normally they meet people every day. Government rules did not affect the service negatively, and we got more money to hire more people, do trainings etc

Krisztina Bardóczy-Ministry of justice –Hungary

All the offices involved in state victim assistance (capital and county government offices as well as victim support centres provided opening hours to everyone who needed help, so the face to face help was also available

Patrick McNicholas -Victim Assistance Ireland

Victim Assistance office remained open during Covid-19 where we continued to hold meetings with victims. All out staff are trained volunteers.

Did any service provider increase their services for those bereaved by COVID-19?

Kevin Tso-Victim Support NZ

In New Zealand there was a high level of preparedness for deaths from COVID-19 which was a joined up approach with Ministries and other agencies. The aim was to support the bereaved. Thankfully

this did not eventuate in NZ. Mass death preparedness is being built into our response plans and would like to know other org's experiences.

Kristiina Luht-Ministry of Social affairs Estonia

Yes, in Estonia we started providing psychosocial crisis support. Especially for front line workers - medical personnel, police, etc. Provided psychological support, guiding on how to deal with this reality, also providing support for people in hospitals and their relatives. Latter was very important since hospitals and houses for elderly were closed down and they could not meet anybody outside, friends, relatives etc.

Increasing number of cases of Child abuse?

João Lázaro APAV-VSE president

In Portugal cybercrime and on line child sexual abuse have increased a lot.

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