



The National Organization For Victim Assistance®

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## **Working With Victims of Crimes with Disabilities**

### ***Crime Victims With Disabilities OVC Bulletin***

#### **A Message from the Director**

During the past two decades, the victim assistance field has made tremendous progress in securing fundamental justice and comprehensive services for all crime victims. However, many crime victims remain un-identified and unserved. To ensure these "invisible" victims are reached, the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) provided funding to the National Organization for Victim Assistance (NOVA) for the project Working with Crime Victims with Disabilities. As part of this project, NOVA coordinated a symposium that brought together experts in the disability advocacy, victim assistance, and research fields to address the issues of justice and access to services for crime victims with disabilities. This symposium was one of the first national scope initiatives that focused exclusively on individuals with disabilities within the criminal justice system, not as offenders, but as victims.

The findings of the symposium communicated in this OVC Bulletin illustrate that many crime victims with disabilities have never participated in the criminal justice process, even those who have been repeatedly and brutally victimized. The highlighted recommendations will assist advocates in their efforts to ensure that crime victims with disabilities have full access to the criminal justice system and receive their entitled services. Lastly, a few of the existing programs that are working actively to serve crime victims with disabilities are described.

We know that the issues involved in assisting victims with disabilities present tremendous challenges. But we have full confidence that the victim assistance and disability advocacy communities will embrace these challenges like they have so many others. Working with Crime Victims with Disabilities represents a small but significant step toward ensuring justice and access to services for all crime victims.

#### **Working with Victims with Disabilities**

**by Cheryl Guidry Tyiska, NOVA's Former of Victim Services  
National Organization for Victim Assistance**

#### **Introduction**

This Bulletin is a product of the Symposium on Working with Crime Victims with Disabilities, funded by the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) and coordinated by the National Organization for Victim Assistance (NOVA), on January 23-24, 1998, in Arlington, Virginia. The Symposium brought together experts from the

disability advocacy and victim assistance and research fields, and they raised as many questions as they answered, thus opening the way for the victim assistance field to look more closely at a large and under-served crime victim population. As a result of their discussions, they developed recommendations for OVC and the victim assistance field on improving the response in serving crime victims with disabilities, which are included in this Bulletin.

Historically, all victims of crime have been denied full participation in the criminal justice process. Crime victims with disabilities and their families are even less likely to reap the benefits of the criminal justice system. Disability advocates report that crimes against people with disabilities are often not reported to police. Of those that lead to an investigation and an arrest, very few are prosecuted. When going through the criminal justice process, few victims with disabilities come into contact with a crime victim advocate. Often when victim services are provided, they may be inappropriate due to inadequate training of victim service providers.

As with most types of crime and crime victims, underreporting of crimes perpetrated against people with disabilities is a major problem. Currently there is no authoritative research that details how many individuals with a disability become crime victims or how many people become disabled by criminal attacks. Nor has the victim assistance field adequately identified the best practices for serving victims with unique needs or how to train criminal justice system personnel - including victim specialists - to make services truly accessible to all crime victims.

Limited information exists regarding the criminal victimization of people with disabilities, but the little that is available is horrifying in nature and scope. Joan Petersilia, Researcher and Professor of Criminology at the University of California, Irvine, stated that persons with developmental disabilities have a 4 to 10 times higher risk of becoming crime victims than persons without a disability, in her Report to the California Senate Public Safety Committee hearings on "Persons with Developmental Disabilities in the Criminal Justice System." In addition, she says, "Children with any kind of disability are more than twice as likely as non-disabled children to be physically abused and almost twice as likely to be sexually abused." Others in the crime victims field recount anecdotal experiences from their work that illustrate that crimes against people with disabilities are often extremely violent and calculatedly intended to injure, control, and humiliate the victim.

*"Children with any kind of disability are more than twice as likely as non-disabled children to be physically abused and almost twice as likely to be sexually abused."*

Reginald Robinson, former Acting Director of the Office for Victims of Crime, asked the Symposium participants "How can we better identify and serve all crime victims who need advocacy and services? Are we rising to the challenge of being inclusive as we define the populations that deserve our attention and

support?" This Bulletin highlights the main discussion points and recommendations developed by the Symposium participants and seeks to encourage victim assistance program staff to take the necessary steps to better serve crime victims with disabilities in their communities.

### **Crime Victims With Disabilities OVC Bulletin Other Sections**

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Recommendations for National, State, and Local Disability Rights Specialists

Recommendations for Other Departments of Justice Agencies

Implications

For Further Information

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