

Victims Services Branch Overview



VICTIMS DESERVE TO BE HEARD

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Victims Services Branch

The Victims Services Branch oversees the administration of the *Victims of Crime Act*. This Act came into force in 1997, and replaced the *Criminal Injuries Compensation* and *Victims Programs Assistance Acts*, consolidating assistance and other services to victims under one Act. It established the authority to collect surcharges on provincial statute offences, defined principles respecting the treatment of victims, and introduced financial benefits for victims.

Under the Act, federal and provincial fine surcharge revenues are deposited into the Victims of Crime Fund. All programs and services delivered by Victims Services Branch are fully supported by revenue from the Victims of Crime Fund, and not from taxpayer dollars.

The *Victims of Crime Act* supports two primary programs: the Grants Program and the Financial Benefits Program. The Grants Program provides funding to eligible organizations that deliver programs and services to assist victims of crime, and the Financial Benefits Program provides one-time payments to eligible victims who have suffered physical and/or emotional injury as a result of violent crime in Alberta. In addition, the Branch manages Alberta's Victim Impact Statement Program and Requesting Restitution Program, promotes the principles of the Act, develops policies pertaining to victims, delivers training and awareness programs, and promotes the expansion of victim assistance programs and initiatives throughout the province.

Major Activities

There are four main activities in the Victims Services Branch:

- 1) Delivering the Financial Benefits Program;
- 2) Delivering the Grants Program;
- 3) Providing support to victim assistance programs, and;
- 4) Administration.

Typical activities in the Victims Services Branch include:

- Providing information and support to stakeholders throughout the criminal justice system regarding victims' issues.
- Ensuring that victims are treated according to the principles of the Act.
- Creating and delivering awareness programs and materials
- Creating and delivering training programs and materials
- Expanding and enhancing services for specialized groups of victims.
- Providing financial benefits to eligible victims
- Providing grants to eligible victim assistance programs and initiatives
- Developing policies and guidelines pertaining to the delivery of victim services

Employees

There are currently 33 employees working for the Victims Services Branch who are supported by an Executive Director, Administrative Assistant, and Branch Research Officer. The Branch is comprised of two key operational areas:

- 1) The Victims of Crime Financial Benefits Program has 17 staff members.
- 2) Victims Programs has 13 staff members. This area administers grants to victims programs across the province, in addition to providing program support.

Financial Benefits Program

In Alberta, victims who have suffered physical or emotional injury as a direct result of violent crime can apply for financial benefits. Those injured may be eligible for a one-time financial benefit based on the severity of injuries sustained. Payment is determined by the severity of the injury rather than on losses or costs incurred, and is made regardless of the victim's financial position or sources of income. The Program's intent is to recognize or acknowledge victimization rather than attempt compensation for loss.

Individual victims of crime received a total of \$9.7 million dollars in Financial Benefits funding during the 2007–2008 fiscal year for physical or emotional injuries sustained as a result of violent crime.

Victims of Crime Fund Grants

Groups and organizations that provide services that directly benefit victims of crime are eligible to apply for a Victims of Crime Fund grant. A committee with representation from government, police and the community evaluates applications for funding in June and December each year.

Since proclamation of the Victims Programs Assistance Act in 1991, and the Victims of Crime Act in 1997, victim assistance programs have expanded throughout the province. With the support of local communities, police services and Alberta Solicitor General and Public Security, a network of 73 police-based victim service programs operating in 117 victim service units has been established to provide services such as information, assistance, and courtroom support to victims during the criminal justice process.

As well as grants for police-based programs, funding has also been approved for community-based programs and specialized initiatives.

In 2007–2008, \$5.4 million dollars in grant funding was provided to 100 victim assistance programs and initiatives. This amount reflects an increase of 22% over the previous year's funding. Of this amount, 65% of the funds were provided to police-based programs and 35% was provided to community initiatives.

Victim Assistance Programs

The Victims Services Branch works in partnership with victim assistance programs to assist victims of crime in Alberta. Victim assistance programs are mostly run through the efforts of

volunteer advocates and board members. During the 2007–2008 fiscal year, over 2,000 volunteers contributed more than 201,000 volunteer hours to victim assistance programs in Alberta.

Victim assistance programs are located in communities throughout Alberta. Services provided to victims may include intervention and support, information about their case and criminal justice proceedings, information about medical, legal and social services that can help referrals to other community agencies, and court room orientation and accompaniment. These programs also provide victims of crime with information about completing victim impact statements, and assistance with requesting restitution, and applying for financial benefits.

During the 2007–2008 fiscal year, victim assistance programs reported handling 44,736 new cases. Over half of these cases involved assisting victims of violent Criminal Code offences. Overall, assistance was offered to approximately 61,000 people in that same period.

Victim assistance programs that receive funding from Alberta Solicitor General and Public Security are required to report quarterly performance statistics to the Victims Services Branch.

There are two kinds of victim assistance programs in Alberta – police-based victim service units and community-based programs. All Albertans now have access to a police-based victim service unit, and Victims Services Branch staff is working to continue to enhance service to victims.

Police Based Victim Service Units in Alberta

Police-based victim service units are most often co-located with the local police agency. As of March 31, 2008, Alberta's network of police-based victim service units consisted of 73 programs operating 117 victim service units.

Community Based Victim Assistance Programs

Community-based victim assistance programs and initiatives that received funding during 2007–2008 are:

- Alberta Police-Based Victim Services Association
- Alliance to End Violence Society of Calgary
- ASSIST Community Services
- Calgary Communities Against Sexual Abuse Society (CCASA)
- Calgary Legal Guidance Association
- Canadian Society for the Investigation of Child Abuse
- Catholic Social Services
- Central Alberta Women's Emergency Shelter Society
- Changing Together – A Centre for Immigrant Women Association
- Family Law Office
- HomeFront Society for the Prevention of Domestic Violence
- Lesser Slave Lake Indian Regional Council Victim Service
- Multicultural Handicrafts Training and Friendship Society of Edmonton

- Lloydminster Sexual Assault and Information Centre
- Northern Regional Victim Services Conference
- Providing Assistance, Counseling and Education (P.A.C.E.)
- Project KARE
- Saffron: Strathcona Sexual Assault Centre
- Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton (S.A.C.E.)
- Siksika Crisis Response Team
- Southern Alberta Regional Conference Committee
- Victims of Homicide of Edmonton Support Society
- Zebra Child Protection Centre

Community-based victim assistance programs that received multi-year grants in either: 2004-2005, 2005-2006, or 2006-2007 include:

- Community Initiatives Against Family Violence
- Crisis Centre
- Edmonton John Howard Society
- Lloydminster Sexual Assault & Information Centre
- Tsuu T'ina Nation Stoney Corrections Society

Training Programs

The Victims Services Branch provides education and training to individuals who provide assistance to victims of crime in Alberta.

Training and Information

The focus of training and information is to provide victim services training to staff and volunteers who work directly with victims of crime. This includes victim assistance program coordinators, volunteer victim advocates, police/RCMP, Crown prosecutors and probation officers.

A second training officer position was added to the Victims Services Branch's organizational structure in the fall of 2008.

Victim Assistance Coordinators' Training

The Victim Assistance Coordinators' Training provides information about the criminal justice system, federal and provincial legislation concerning victims of crime, and best practice information on related programs assisting victims in Alberta.

Both basic and advanced week-long training programs are offered in the spring and fall (respectively). Participants include victim assistance program coordinators, police members, Alberta Justice employees, Alberta Solicitor General and Public Security employees and Aboriginal representatives.

An aboriginal training program has also been developed. The first training session was offered in May 2008.

Victim Advocate Training Manual and Certification

This training manual is distributed to victim assistance programs throughout Alberta. It establishes a standard for victim advocate training and creates an opportunity for advocates to become certified. As of September 30, 2008, 1024 people have become certified victim advocates.

In 2009, the Manual will be expanded to include four new modules that focus on human trafficking, E-crimes, on-line child exploitation, and sexual minorities / gender variance.

Public Awareness Initiatives

The Victims Services Branch produces a number of brochures on issues related to victims in Alberta. This includes the Victim of Crime Handbook which is translated into eleven different languages. The Branch also maintains a public web site which contains information to assist victims and victim service providers (www.victims.alberta.ca).

The Victims Services Branch has also run a province-wide Awareness Campaign for three years (2005-2006 to 2007-2008) using radio announcements, transit advertisements and posters to promote information about programs and services that are available to victims of crime. In Phase IV of the campaign the Branch will begin targeting specific demographic groups to continue building awareness, and get information out to the harder to reach groups.

Victim Impact Statement Program

Victims are afforded an opportunity to describe, in writing, to the Court, how they have been affected by the crime, in the form of a Victim Impact Statement. Victims also have the opportunity to read their statements aloud in court. Victim Impact Statements are opened after a finding of guilt but prior to sentencing, and shall be considered by the judge.

The Victims Services Branch has developed guidelines and procedures related to Victim Impact Statements, which are implemented by victim assistance programs, Alberta Justice, Correctional Services and police.

Request for Restitution Program

Victims who have suffered a financial loss as a result of crime can request restitution from the offender. These requests are forwarded to the Crown for further action; the victim also has the option of asking the Court to order restitution on its own motion.

Restitution may be ordered for damage, destruction and loss of property, bodily and psychological harm, expenses incurred in moving out of the offender's home, or for losses incurred by unknowingly purchasing or lending money on stolen property.

The Victims Services Branch works with police, Alberta Justice and victim assistance programs to promote awareness of this program.

Major Stakeholders

The Victims Services Branch deals with many agencies and organizations throughout the justice process, as well as with individual victims of crime. Major stakeholders include:

- Victims
- Alberta Police-Based Victim Services Association and its member organizations
- Alberta Justice
- Police/ RCMP
- Community-based victim assistance programs
- Health care service providers
- Alberta Child & Youth Services
- Alberta Association of Sexual Assault Centres

Major Issues

One of the challenges facing Victims Services Branch is the inherent difficulty in gaining consensus from multiple stakeholder groups (i.e.: victims, police/RCMP, Alberta Justice, the Alberta Police-Based Victim Services Association).

Privacy legislation also creates challenges to providing a consistent level of services to victims. Municipal police operate under different privacy legislation than the RCMP (FOIPP and the federal Privacy Act, respectively), resulting in victim service providers from different jurisdictions not having the same ability to access information.

In addition, the average Albertan does not think about or feel a need to know about victim services until they become a victim. However, since everybody is a potential a victim of crime, an important challenge for Victims Services Branch is to build awareness within the general population about the services that are available to assist victims.

Finally, victim assistance programs rely heavily on services provided by trained volunteer victim advocates. Programs have indicated that it is increasingly difficult to recruit and retain volunteers.

Victims of Crime Consultation

In August of 2001, Alberta's Solicitor General launched a committee to help create a more meaningful role for victims of crime in the justice system. The committee was charged with developing a ten- year vision for expansion and enhancement of victims' programs and services in Alberta.

The committee met with victims, victim advocacy groups, police agencies, and other service organizations throughout the province in 2002, and a final report of their findings was presented to the Ministry in September 2002. The Report can be downloaded from www.solgps.alberta.ca/Pages/publications.aspx

The Report of the Alberta Victims of Crime Consultation outlined six key statements as the basis of the ten-year vision for victims' programs and services:

- Victims of crime in Alberta have timely access to information, effective services and supports.
- Alberta has a justice system that recognizes and treats victims with respect.
- Stable and ongoing funding for essential services for victims of crime is a priority shared by government and community.
- Individuals working with victims have the knowledge and skills to respond to the needs of those they serve.
- Victims of crime with unique needs, including Aboriginal people, have access to services.
- Alberta supports restorative justice programs in which victims feel safe and empowered, offenders are held accountable, and communities are involved.

As of December 31, 2008, the Victims Services Branch has successfully implemented 28 of the 37 approved recommendations.

Major Initiatives and Projects

Victims of Crime Protocol

The concept of a Victims of Crime Protocol arose from a joint Alberta Justice and Alberta Solicitor General and Public Security review of policy and legislation related to victims in Alberta. It was recommended that a series of consultations with police agencies, criminal justice officials and other stakeholders take place to more fully define what victims of crime can expect from the criminal justice system.

As a result of these consultations, a Victims of Crime Protocol was implemented in the 2007-2008 fiscal year, and Protocol training was provided to 897 criminal justice stakeholders in twelve communities across the province. The Protocol provides a detailed account of what victims can expect from various segments of the criminal justice system.

A three-year evaluation of the Protocol began in the fall of 2008 to determine how effective the protocol is in meeting the needs of victims of crime, as well as how well it is being incorporated into the day to day practice of our partners in the criminal justice system.

RCMP – Victims Services Branch Strategic Plan

Victims Services Branch collaborated with RCMP “K” Division to develop a strategic plan for victim services; a memorandum of understanding between RCMP “K” Division and Solicitor General and Public Security (SOLGPS), and; Local Memorandums of Understanding between victim service units and SOLGPS. These documents define roles and responsibilities of RCMP “K” Division, SOLGPS, and victim service units in delivering services to victims of crime. The goal of these documents is to increase referrals and ensure and victims consistently receive access to information and services they are entitled to. All three documents were finalized and signed in 2007-2008.

Services in Specialized Communities

Two of the positions in the Branch focus on expanding and enhancing services for specialized populations. These positions include: Program Liaison for Aboriginal and Isolated Communities and Coordinator of Community and Specialized Programs. These positions focus on capacity building and expanding services in specialized communities.

Since these positions have been implemented, victim services outreach has been enhanced in a number of Aboriginal communities including: Saddle Lake, Goldfish Lake, Fishing Lake, Frog Lake, Cold Lake First Nation and Heart Lake First Nation. Victim services units have also been established in Red Earth Creek, Hobbema and Siksika.

In regards to community and specialized programs, initiatives are being developed and implemented that enhance services for human trafficking victims, immigrant victims, sexual minorities / gender variance victims, and victims of family violence.

Enhanced Performance Measurement Frameworks

The Program Evaluation Coordinator helps ensure that programs receiving Victims of Crime Fund grants meet province-wide guidelines for service delivery. An Enhanced Performance Measurement Framework for police-based victim service units was developed, and training was provided to police-based programs in July – September 2007. An Enhanced Performance Measurement Framework for community-based victim assistance programs will be developed and implemented in 2009-2010.

Planned Initiative and Projects

Victim Court Attendance Program

The Victims Services Branch has submitted a Minister's Report for approval for a new program that would pay travel expenses incurred by victims (or surviving family members of deceased victims) to attend specified court proceedings. A decision on the report is expected in the spring of 2009.

Counseling Services for Victims of Crime

The Victims Services Branch has also submitted a Minister's Report for approval for a new counseling program that would cover the costs for a specified number of counseling sessions for victims of crime (in addition to young children who are witnesses of serious and violent crime). The decision on this report has been put on hold.

Both of these programs are reflected in SOLGPS 2008-2011 Business Plan Strategy 6.4, which reads: "In consultation with key stakeholders, develop new programs for victims of crime, such as the provision for counseling services and financial assistance for attending specified court proceedings."