

COLORADO'S CVC RESPONSE TO THE COLUMBINE TRAGEDY

On April 20, 1999, Colorado experienced one of the worst incidents of school violence our country has ever seen. Colorado's program is one of only two decentralized programs in the country, and with over 2000 potential victims, there was a very real possibility that the 1st Judicial District's compensation program would exhaust all of its resources, and those of the other programs in the state, responding to the Columbine tragedy. Fortunately, within days of the crime, the Office for Victims of Crime approved \$750,000 in emergency VOCA funds to be used to help assist victims of the Columbine tragedy, and an additional \$250,000 was subsequently approved.

The CVC program received a total of 761 applications for primary victims only (37% of the primary victims that were eligible), and disbursed a total of \$804,907.06 during the grant period. A breakdown of the expenses follows:

<u>Compensable Loss</u>	<u>Amt. Paid</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Medical/Dental Expenses	\$ 56,086.59*	7%
Mental Health Expenses	\$551,016.48	68%
Economic Support/Lost Wages	\$157,491.09	20%
Funeral/Burial Expenses	\$ 34,950.00	4%
Other Expenses	\$ 5,425.90	1%

The proportionately small disbursement for medical expenses can be attributed partially to the fact that most of the injured victims had health insurance, and also because only a small percentage of victims were actually physically injured. Conversely, the majority of victims, as well as their family members, applied, and were approved for, mental health compensation.

Including temporary emergency hires, the program employed one full-time and four on-call staff members, as well as the administrator, during the Columbine response. A total of \$19,865 of the \$37,500 federal administrative dollars awarded was disbursed for administrative costs.

Following is information regarding Crime Victim Compensation's response to the Columbine tragedy:

While the crime was taking place

- Immediately upon hearing the news reports about Columbine, staff from the DA's office (Victim Witness Director, Crime Victim Compensation Administrator and Victim Witness Specialists), COVA (Colorado Organization for Victim Assistance), the sheriff's department and advocates from other police and victim services agencies mobilized. COVA assisted in providing coordination to the effort. However, at the time this tragedy occurred, no community crisis response team was in place. Since the tragedy, a team has been established. Fortunately, at that time all of the victim service providers in the First Judicial District had been meeting on a monthly basis for many years, were familiar with each other, and with each program and its role. All of the providers were also familiar with COVA.
- It was decided that, because responders specifically trained in trauma response had been dispatched to the scene, it would be appropriate for CVC staff to remain at the DA's office where the program is housed, and coordinate their efforts from there.
- A list of mental health providers was run using CVC software; CVC staff called the most trusted providers in the area to ask them to respond to the scene immediately. Most of those contacted were already there or on their way. However, as the follow-up report by the governor's office indicated, too many responded. This is an excellent example of how a structured response would have eliminated some of the confusion and trauma.
- The CVC board made policy decisions as the crime was taking place; the board allowed the administrator to make suggestions in the interest of getting services to the victims right away.

The decision was immediately made that these victims should be treated as similarly as possible to victims of "regular" crimes, with the realization that the program had helped other victims in the past and would need to continue to help other victims in the future.

- The decision was also made to include every student, faculty and staff member of Columbine, regardless of whether they were at the school that day or not, recognizing that the trauma would impact all of them.
- Colorado's broad statute allowed the board the latitude to make policy decisions specific to this case (for instance, another state that experienced a mass tragedy had to have a special legislative session to change their statute to allow benefits for secondary victims - after intense criticism from the public). Programs should look at their statutes with the perspective of a mass tragedy response so legislative changes don't have to be addressed in the middle of a crisis.
- The CVC administrator was bombarded with phone calls from providers and citizens offering help. Constant communication with those on the scene helped define what was actually needed. Eventually, a separate fund was established to provide a vehicle through which donations could be made to assist victims with needs not met through CVC (The Healing Fund).

Immediately following the tragedy

- Information regarding policies specific to Columbine were distributed to all victim advocates in the district, and continued to be distributed on a regular basis. (SAMPLE MEMO ATTACHED)
- OVC made a promise of funding within three days of the tragedy. An initial grant of \$750,000 was approved.
- Office supplies and furniture were ordered to allow segregation of the Columbine claims.
- Temporary help was employed, and additional shifts were approved to support the response.
- Streamlined CVC applications were mailed out within two days to every eligible victim. A letter from the district attorney, as well as a memo outlining the services available, were included. (SAMPLE ATTACHED) This was expedited by obtaining the school's mailing list, which was printed out on labels by the school district. We received three copies of the labels for future use. Applications were printed in a specific color so they could be easily identified. Streamlining consisted of printing the crime information on the application, providing check-off boxes which indicated the level of victimization, and eliminating the items that did not apply to the incident (ie. residential property). It is advisable to streamline apps, but not too much, so victims don't have to be recontacted to get additional information. It was discovered later that, despite best intentions, the applications were sent out too soon. It was found that victims were so traumatized that they didn't remember getting the application, or couldn't process the information. California did a study at that time that indicated that, for maximum effect, it's advisable to wait approximately ten days after the event to send information to crime victims.
- Crime codes were set up in the CVC software program to identify Columbine claims.
- A press release from the DA's office was distributed regarding the availability of compensation to the victims. (SAMPLE ATTACHED)
- It was decided to "fast track" all of the Columbine applications, while attempting to keep the normal workflow within customary timeframes. The color-coded applications helped in quickly identifying the Columbine claims. The board gave the staff authorization to administratively approve claims based on the level of victimization. Also, form letters specific to Columbine awards were built into the CVC software, allowing correspondence to be generated with the push of a button. Columbine claims were processed within three weeks. With few exceptions, normal timeframes (45 - 60 days) were maintained for all other claims coming in at the same time.
- The administrator attended an informational meeting for the family members of the deceased and injured victims to inform them of the board's policy decisions. Information was also provided by the Sheriff's Department, the DA's office, state government agencies and COVA.

- A dedicated phone line with an “enlarged” voice mailbox was installed. The volume of phone calls was massive, and the level of trauma contributed to the length of the calls. This was undoubtedly the largest demand on the staff.
- A separate account and ledger was maintained for the Columbine VOCA grant.
- COVA and CVC collaborated in getting money to victims with immediate needs. COVA “fronted” money to victims through the Healing Fund (a fund for Columbine victims and their families, as well as the Columbine community, comprised of donations from citizens, businesses and other organizations), and a system was devised to make repayment to the Healing Fund for expenses covered under board policy. This allowed the CVC program to focus on answering calls and processing the large number of claims coming in. The CVC program and the Healing Fund stayed in close contact, and compared claims to avoid duplication of payment.
- Efforts were closely coordinated with the law enforcement-based victim advocates assigned to each family of a deceased or physically injured victim. There was constant contact with the advocates, and they were allowed to make suggestions about policies, which were fine-tuned for maximum impact.
- Follow-up phone calls were made directly to every victim by paid and volunteer advocates at least once, informing them of the availability of compensation and other forms of assistance, and providing referrals when requested.
- A relationship was established with Columbine Connections, a community-based organization funded through VOCA Assistance which provided mental health services and other programs to the Columbine Community. (SAMPLE NEWSLETTER ATTACHED)
- A relationship was also established with the school district.

Ongoing

- Close contact was maintained with the law enforcement-based advocates, as well as special advocates assigned to help the severely injured with life plans.
- CVC board members decided to extend the application period due to the age group of the victims involved and the exacerbating events which occurred following Columbine (suicides, copycat shooting, back to school time, the anniversary of the event, etc.). These triggering events caused an influx of phone calls and applications.
- A second mailing of applications was done three months after the first mailing, and immediately preceding the beginning of the school year. Included in the second mailing was a letter which listed symptoms of PTSD. (SAMPLES OF LETTERS ATTACHED)
- Resistance was encountered from agencies/businesses that were anticipating lawsuits, so it was sometimes difficult to get information needed to effectively assist some victims.
- Upon being advised that the program would only be awarded a portion of the additional funding requested, the board decided to terminate mental health coverage for Columbine victims based on the end of the grant period. This decision was made due to the program’s inability to absorb the costs of providing ongoing assistance to the huge volume of Columbine victims for which mental health services were being provided. Letters were sent out five months before this termination date to inform all victims that had previously been approved for mental health compensation that funding would cease at that time.
- The CVC computer software allowed the use of special crime codes that quickly identified Columbine claims. The software easily compiled statistics and reports which assisted with federal reporting, justification for additional funding, and auditing needs. Reliable software and hardware is imperative.
- A federal audit of all VOCA grants for Columbine was performed by the Justice Department in 2003. The importance of requiring documentation validating payments, and the need for good accounting and computer systems was made clear from the process.
- The board made permanent changes to some of their regular policies as a result of the Columbine tragedy.

- The program has been positively affected by the tragedy in terms of visibility. Claims and disbursements have steadily increased since the Columbine tragedy, and more victims are applying for, and following through with, mental health treatment. As a result, mental health encumbrances for the 1st Judicial District alone now exceed \$500,000, and disbursements have exceeded \$1.2M each year since the tragedy.
- The program continues to receive calls from Columbine victims or their family members with triggering events, such as the 9/11 tragedy.

Advice to CVC staff and administrators:

- Try to avoid making decisions based on emotional responses. Eventually you will be asked to justify your decisions based on funding guidelines.
- Don't feel that you have to immerse yourself in the tragedy- know that it's okay if you don't read every article or watch every news story about the event. You will be in much better shape to assist victims if you attempt to stay healthy yourself.
- The media is often intrusive, disruptive and inaccurate. If at all possible, ask your PIO to field all media requests. However, be prepared to talk to the media yourself, as the PIO may be too busy to do so. It is important to reiterate your information several times to a reporter- and even then the information may not be accurate.
- There is a real sense of entitlement from victims in cases where high level government officials are making promises and the media attention is so intense. Remind your staff- and yourself- that you are doing your best, within the constraints of your policies and statute.
- Establish relationships with victim service providers, and get involved with community crisis response teams.
- Contact other programs who have responded to a mass tragedy for help or to debrief.
- It's important to recognize that there will be long-term effects from responding to mass tragedy. Monitor your staff to meet their emotional needs, and provide opportunities to debrief or attend counseling, if needed. And don't ignore your own needs!

In addition to the sample documents referenced, a copy of the report to the Governor's Commission on Columbine is attached. The report includes valuable information regarding the overall response to the Columbine tragedy by the various victim service agencies involved, and includes the identified strengths and weaknesses of those agencies, as well as advice for planning a community response to crisis.