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VictimConnect Research Capacity Building

Toolkit Resource 6

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This brief is the sixth of seven toolkit resources supporting the Urban Institute’s formative evaluation of the VictimConnect Resource Center. The evaluation was conducted in 2019 and 2020 with funding from the National Institute of Justice (box 1).¹ In this brief, we summarize activities that the National Center for Victims of Crime (NCVC) has engaged in with Urban’s assistance to build research capacity in preparation for a comprehensive implementation evaluation and rigorous outcome evaluation of VictimConnect.

Introduction to Research Capacity Building

“Research capacity building” encompasses all the activities that support a program or service’s ability to undergo research and evaluation. When a program is being developed, for example, the focus is often on securing resources, finding the right staff, and building the infrastructure to begin serving clients. It is arguably equally important to consider how that program can be assessed at some point—or ideally, on an ongoing basis—by the organizations operating and funding it.

Integrating mechanisms for conducting research and evaluation is critical to ensuring that a program remains faithful to its intended model and achieves what it hopes to in serving clients. Only

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BOX 1

Overview of the VictimConnect Evaluation Toolkit

The VictimConnect Resource Center is a nationwide helpline that provides information, emotional support, and referrals to victims of crime and their loved ones through four technological modalities: softphone (phone calls via a secure, anonymous internet-based connection), online chat, text messaging, and the center website. In 2019, with funding from the National Institute of Justice, Urban launched a multiphase evaluation of the center, collaborating with research liaisons at the National Center for Victims of Crime. During the first phase, the evaluation team conducted a formative evaluation of VictimConnect through which it assessed the program's evaluability, used those findings to strengthen the program's research capacity, and developed a comprehensive plan for a future implementation and outcome evaluation. Findings from the first phase are summarized in *Formative Evaluation of VictimConnect: Preparing for Rigorous Evaluation of a National Resource Center* (Yahner et al. 2020) and are supplemented by the VictimConnect Evaluation Toolkit resources, which are briefs covering the following: (1) foundational theory and literature, (2) refining the logic model, (3) an evaluability assessment, (4) the implementation evaluation plan, (5) the outcome evaluation plan, (6) research capacity building, and (7) evaluation instruments. If funded, we anticipate that the next phases will begin in 2022 and will entail a comprehensive implementation evaluation and rigorous outcome evaluation of VictimConnect.

by doing this can program providers learn enough (after a program is underway) about what may need to be changed, maintained, or expanded to achieve a program's implementation fidelity and outcome success.

Research capacity building may include formalizing protocols for program training and implementation; identifying opportunities to collect meaningful data from program staff, clients, and stakeholders; developing tools and instruments to support such data collection; and integrating procedures for securely analyzing program-fidelity and outcome-evaluation data. These activities can be challenging to focus on during program development in addition to other infrastructure building. This is particularly true when the need for a program has been clearly recognized by the field, as was the case with the VictimConnect Resource Center, which fills a gap in national helpline services by anonymously serving victims of *all* crime types.¹

Despite this challenge, NCVC (VictimConnect's provider) has long recognized the value of research to the victim services field; it was one of the core partners, along with the Urban Institute and the Justice Research and Statistics Association, to develop the national [Center for Victim Research](#). As a result, NCVC had already integrated some research capacity into VictimConnect's development. Other research capacity building activities—the focus of this brief—were developed during Urban's formative evaluation of VictimConnect.

Urban's research team worked collaboratively with research liaisons at NCVC to identify, support, and guide additional activities that would prepare VictimConnect for a future comprehensive implementation evaluation and a rigorous outcome evaluation. Strong partnerships between a service provider and a research team to share programmatic and research expertise can better prepare a

program to undergo rigorous evaluation.² In the next sections, we describe the research capacity building that emerged during the past two years of this research-and-practice partnership.

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Research Capacity Building at VictimConnect

Since NCVC developed VictimConnect in 2015, program staff have been attentive to the importance of collecting and analyzing data to assess the program's performance. Several mechanisms were put into place so that VictimConnect supervisors could routinely measure the program's reach across the victim services field, understand what types of clients were being served and the resources most frequently requested, and assess how well the technological platform underlying VictimConnect was able to meet visitor requests by anonymous softphone, online chat, text messaging, and web-based searches.³

These existing sources of VictimConnect data include session statistics (e.g., number and timing of calls, chats, texts), a visitor feedback survey (which visitors can complete after sessions end), visitor demographic information recorded by VictimConnect staff, and website traffic data collected using Google Analytics. Background on these data sources and further descriptions are available in the *VictimConnect Operations Summary* (NCVC 2020) and in Urban's *fourth* toolkit resource (Dusenbery, Yahner, and Bastomski 2020). Because these data were collected before the present study, they are not discussed further in this brief.

Since the 2019 launch of Urban's formative evaluation of VictimConnect, NCVC has engaged in additional research capacity building activities to prepare VictimConnect for a future comprehensive implementation evaluation and a rigorous outcome evaluation. The dozen such activities described below align with the following goals:

- to strengthen the operational model of VictimConnect
- to refine and expand VictimConnect data collection activities
- to foster the sustainability of research and evaluation in support of ongoing and future analyses of VictimConnect data

Strengthening the Operational Model

To clarify and strengthen the operational model of VictimConnect, NCVV engaged in five research capacity building activities. These included conversations about its underlying theoretical framework, refinement of its logic model, documentation of its operations, revisions to staff training protocols, and development of quality-control rubrics.

- 1. Embracing a theoretical framework.** As described in the [first](#) toolkit resource, NCVV intentionally designed VictimConnect's services following best practices for trauma-informed, victim-centered, and strengths-based approaches. Through conversations with Urban's research team about this theoretical framework, however, NCVV and Urban recognized the ways in which VictimConnect's multistage response to victims *also* align well with principles of crisis intervention theory, even though that theory was not an explicit part of the program's development. The National Center for Victims of Crime reviewed the key concepts and multistep approach outlined by crisis intervention theorists and agreed that they mirror VictimConnect's intentional, multistage response. These key concepts include safety assessment, collaborative rapport-building, problem identification, supportive and empathetic response, action planning, and follow-up guidance (James and Gilliland 2017; Roberts and Ottens 2005). Moreover, NCVV embraced the crisis intervention theoretical framework and intends to incorporate it into training for Victim Assistance Specialists (VASs) moving forward, alongside existing coverage of trauma-informed, victim-centered, and strengths-based approaches. In addition, during the course of these theory-focused conversations, NCVV determined it would incorporate training on the "five stages of change" model that describes the phases through which people proceed when undergoing positive change (Norcross, Krebs, and Prochaska 2011). Training on this model will help VASs better understand how to meet visitors where they are in a strengths-based manner.
- 2. Refining a logic model.** As described in the [second](#) toolkit resource, NCVV previously developed a basic logic model underlying VictimConnect's development, but during this formative evaluation, it worked collaboratively with Urban's research team to refine its structure and key elements (Dusenbery 2020). The final logic model incorporated a goal statement and clearly outlined objectives, inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, assumptions, and external factors, each organized according to the key focus areas of VictimConnect: visitors (crime victims and supporters), technology, staff and volunteers, outreach and collaboration, and evaluation and improvement. The focus area on evaluation was one of the most significant additions to VictimConnect's logic model and commits to developing evaluability and research capacity. After these elements of the logic model were refined, Urban's research team was better able to outline measures of implementation fidelity and outcome success, as described in the [fourth](#) and [fifth](#) toolkits.
- 3. Documenting program operations.** Early in this formative evaluation phase, Urban's research team noted that although NCVV had a number of research-supportive elements in place for VictimConnect (e.g., integrated data collection, published performance reports), there was no

comprehensive summary of its programmatic operations. In conversations with NCVC's key research liaison, it became clear that such a publication would help outline for Urban's team (and the field at large) all of the components involved in developing and operating the resource center. Accordingly, NCVC staff drafted its first summary of the program's operations, which Urban's team reviewed and provided feedback on, and which NCVC subsequently published (NCVC 2020). The summary describes the development and launch of VictimConnect, its grounding principles, core aspects of VAS training, the program's multistage response to visitors, its data collection, and the outreach and collaboration it aims to do with the larger community of victim hotlines, helplines, and resource centers.

4. **Revising training protocols.** Throughout the course of this formative evaluation, the NCVC staff continued to revamp and formalize its training protocols for VASs. These revisions included developing an integrated series of in-person and virtual training modules,⁴ covering topics such as the multistage victim-centered response; victimization needs by crime type (e.g., financial crimes, human trafficking, sexual assault, intimate partner violence, elder abuse, stalking) and for special victim populations (e.g., historically underserved victims, youth, older adults, military, and incarcerated victims); safety planning; financial solutions; technology systems (including the VictimConnect platform); recording of demographic characteristics; issues surrounding crime reporting and mandatory reporting; and self-care and resiliency activities to address vicarious trauma. These modules reflect the comprehensive training program that new VASs undergo, which is delivered in 80 hours across a two-week period and incorporates role-playing and shadowing and mentorship opportunities after the formal training is completed. Notably, training incorporates skills development aimed at ensuring that staff, for example, use active listening and empathetic response. The director of victim services at NCVC is also developing an agenda for integrating advanced trainings on specific victimization-related topics into staff's professional development. Formalized training protocols will assist Urban's researchers in the planned implementation evaluation of VictimConnect by clarifying very specifically what topics need to be assessed to measure fidelity to the program model.
5. **Developing quality-control rubrics.** The National Center for Victims of Crime developed a clear set of quality-control rubrics to be used by VictimConnect supervisors when overseeing staff interactions with visitors during phone and chat conversations. Supervisor oversight occurs frequently during the three weeks after new staff are trained and randomly thereafter, including random spot checks of advanced staff. These rubrics outline specific components of the multistage VictimConnect response, which, as described in NCVC (2020), includes safety assessment and introductory topics; active listening and connecting; problem identification, client empowerment, and safety planning; and information referrals and warm transfers (if requested). Supervisors use the quality-control rubrics to score and comment on staff fidelity to these interaction components, recording of demographic data (if voluntarily mentioned during the interaction), and their adaptability within a victim-centered, trauma-informed, and strengths-based approach. Moreover, NCVC drafted instructions to accompany these rubrics,

which are being finalized after undergoing testing to ensure they are as objective as possible and usable by staff at any level (NCVC envisions that even new staff will apply the rubrics when shadowing more experienced staff). These rubrics and instructions provide a template for Urban's own planned observation protocols for assessing VictimConnect phone, chat, and text interactions during the implementation evaluation.

Refining and Expanding Data Collection

During Urban's formative evaluation of VictimConnect, NCVC embraced four research capacity building activities that will refine and expand the collection of information about VictimConnect's implementation and outcomes. These activities include technological changes to support anonymous phone observations and recruitment of study participants and visitors for the comparison group, capturing information about the most frequently referred providers, refining the type of demographic information recorded by staff, and analyzing existing VictimConnect data with a mind toward understanding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on overall operations and service requests.

6. **Expanding technology to support data collection.** During Urban's formative evaluation of VictimConnect, the program's technological platform was expanded in two ways that increase the research capacity of NCVC in support of future evaluations. First, the platform was upgraded to allow staff working remotely to be supervised to ensure quality control, which was previously only possible if a VAS and observer were in the same room. Now, a VictimConnect supervisor can join a conversation virtually to conduct oversight to ensure staff are operating in accordance with the multistage, victim-centered response they are trained to deliver. This technology will also allow Urban evaluators who have signed NCVC's confidentiality agreement to observe a random sample of VictimConnect interactions in real time to track implementation fidelity. Second, through conversations with VictimConnect supervisors and staff, Urban gained clear understanding of how recruitment for the planned evaluations could occur using VictimConnect's existing communications channels. Study recruitment opportunities will at minimum become available to phone and chat visitors as the last option on the existing visitor feedback survey and to website visitors, some of whom will connect with a VAS and some of whom will not, by placing a "button" with information about the study on the main VictimConnect website. This latter change will permit Urban to identify voluntary study participants who comprise the treatment group of interest (i.e., those who connect with a VAS) and those who comprise a quasi-experimental control group (i.e., those who do not). Urban and NCVC also discussed the possibility of having VASs offer visitors information about the study at the end of each interaction (if the visitor is not in distress); this possibility will be further explored in the pilot study of the planned evaluations of VictimConnect.
7. **Identifying frequently referred providers.** Along with NCVC's revamped technological platform came the opportunity for VictimConnect staff to record information about the most frequently referred service providers. Victim Assistance Specialists receive a diverse array of requests from visitors and work to meet those requests by searching an internal database of

victim services in each state and victimization-specific national organizations. Before the technological innovations, it was not easy for staff to record which services and resources were offered to visitors during an interaction. During the formative evaluation of VictimConnect, Urban's research team and NCVC's research liaison discussed the value of consistently recording referral information so as to enable identification of the most frequently referred providers. Urban's research team envisioned a future partnership with a subset of these providers to incorporate the voices of warm-transferred visitors into the planned outcome evaluation. This group of visitors is currently missing even from the visitor feedback survey because the priority is on seamlessly connecting them with a provider to meet their needs. Identifying and partnering with these providers will also help Urban conduct interviews about the warm-handoff process and other aspects of VictimConnect as part of the implementation evaluation. Developing a comprehensive mechanism for recording referral information is now possible and is actively being planned by VictimConnect supervisors, but the endeavor is complex and will require thoughtful integration over the next year into the newly revised platform.

8. **Refining collection of demographics.** The National Center for Victims of Crime collects VictimConnect visitors' demographic characteristics and experiences if voluntarily disclosed during interactions. These items make up a long list and include visitors' gender, age, state, victimization type, and resources requested. During the formative evaluation, NCVC supervisors refined the list of demographics that staff were to record to improve its clarity, add new items, remove redundancies, and make it consistent with the demographics recorded by the DC Victim Hotline (a program also operated by NCVC). To help ensure that staff achieve common understanding of how and when to record each term, NCVC also created an internal document defining the data-collection fields and outlining the protocol for logging the demographic information. This refined and standardized collection of demographic information will strengthen the quality of data analyzed by Urban in its planned evaluations of VictimConnect.
9. **Assessing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.** In response to the historic upheaval caused by the pandemic, service providers nationwide were forced to halt and/or deprioritize in-person interactions with clients in lieu of telephone or virtual service provision. Given that the VictimConnect Resource Center already operated on a secure, technological platform that enabled connections by softphone, online chat, texting, and web-based searches, the program was technically well suited to accommodate these changes. However, the pandemic's impact on crime victimization experiences and barriers to service delivery, particularly for the most vulnerable populations, were wide ranging.⁵ Furthermore, since the pandemic began in March 2020, the VictimConnect Resource Center has seen a nearly 180-percent increase in incoming requests. Given these realities, during the latter part of VictimConnect's formative evaluation, NCVC realized the value of conducting its own assessment of the impact of the pandemic on victimization experiences and service responses using data from session statistics, demographic characteristics of callers, and visitor feedback survey it had been routinely

collecting. These research capacity building activities strengthen Urban and NCVC's understanding of how the pandemic has impacted (and how it may continue to impact) VictimConnect service referrals and operations.

Focusing on the Sustainability of the Evaluation

Several of NCVC's research capacity building activities focused on sustaining its ability to conduct ongoing assessments of VictimConnect and Urban's ability to conduct a rigorous, independent evaluation. This research capacity building included creating a new research and evaluation department within NCVC, discussing potential quasi-experimental comparisons of performance by paid and volunteer VASs, and analyzing previously untapped data on VictimConnect's performance.

10. **Hiring a research and evaluation director.** One of the most impactful research capacity building activities to emerge from Urban's formative evaluation of VictimConnect was NCVC's determination that it should formally launch an internal research and evaluation department. To this end, NCVC has been actively drafting position requirements and acquiring necessary internal approvals to hire a research and evaluation director. This position will become the primary research liaison to Urban in its planned implementation and outcome evaluations of VictimConnect and will also routinely manage data collection, analyses, and reporting of VictimConnect data. In this way, the comprehensive and rigorous evaluation activities planned for 2022 could become sustainable (in some capacity) by NCVC even after its formal partnership with Urban on this effort ends.
11. **Exploring rigorous research designs.** Throughout this formative evaluation, Urban, NCVC, and the project's advisory board discussed different research designs with the intent of increasing the evaluation's rigor, particularly with regard to assessing the impact of VictimConnect on access to and delivery of services to crime victims. Fortunately, the way in which incoming VictimConnect calls, chats, and texts are received by staff is already naturally random. Among those on staff at any given day and time, interactions are picked up by whichever staff is available on a first come, first served basis. In this way, any data collected regarding implementation fidelity or immediate interaction outcomes (e.g., through observations or results of visitor feedback surveys) can be relatively equally parceled among staff online at that time. This natural experimental design will enable Urban's research team to conduct quasi-experimental comparisons of staff performance, which is particularly useful when considering differences between paid professional VASs and the unpaid (though highly trained) volunteers that NCVC envisions engaging in 2021.⁶ Such comparisons can elucidate whether the quality of service delivery is impacted by the type of staff visitors interact with (i.e., paid or volunteer), which may inform the efficiency and capacity of service providers. Furthermore, NCVC has indicated that it would be willing (and that it would be technologically possible) to randomly assign incoming interactions to specific VASs. Urban's evaluation would only incorporate this randomization if the decision to compare staff expertise by type of victimization experience reemerged as a priority for the evaluation of VictimConnect (it is currently not of focus).

Moreover, NCVC supported exploration of rigorous research designs by having its research liaison review previous hotline evaluations to identify common evaluation methodologies and measures most relevant to VictimConnect’s purposes, which Urban’s team synthesized and incorporated as needed.

- 12. Expanding analyses of performance measures.** In March 2020, NCVC hired a new director of victim services who quickly began exploring the aforementioned session statistics and demographics data collected by VictimConnect staff. She examined these data in an effort to understand and improve the program’s operations and to establish a routine structure in which such analyses could be internally conducted and reported. The result of these explorations culminated in an internal performance measures report assessing statistics for VictimConnect interactions from January to June 2020; the report will be repeated at least semiannually as a sustainable research practice. One of the key items to emerge from this analysis, from Urban’s perspective, was clarification on the percentage of warm-transferred calls, which constituted just over a third of all phone calls during that time, rather than the large majority that VictimConnect had anecdotally reported to Urban in its evaluability assessment interviews (Yahner et al. 2020). From an evaluation standpoint, this provided increased hope that planned study recruitment efforts targeting the existing visitor feedback survey and website would not miss as many potential participants as previously thought, because many of them would still be on the call at the conclusion of the interaction. However, Urban’s team continues to plan to partner with the most frequently referred providers to attempt recruitment of warm-transferred visitors.

Conclusion

This brief highlights the importance of research capacity building as an integral part of program development, given its impact on providers’, funders’, and researchers’ ability to understand which components of a program are working well and which may need to be improved. The National Center for Victims of Crime has long been attentive to these issues and had engaged in several research capacity building activities before Urban’s formative evaluation of VictimConnect.

During the 2019–2020 formative evaluation, Urban and NCVC’s research liaisons worked collaboratively to identify and pursue a dozen additional activities that have strengthened the program’s overall model and supported the sustainability of research and evaluation. The research capacity building described in this brief, in addition to that previously integrated into VictimConnect’s operations, have prepared VictimConnect for ongoing performance monitoring by NCVC and a future, comprehensive implementation evaluation and rigorous outcome evaluation to be conducted by Urban. Importantly, building research and evaluation capacity into the structure of VictimConnect has been done without altering its core technological victim services functions—namely, to provide an empathetic response, confidential and high-quality referral information, and where possible a warm handoff to a victim services provider. In these ways, an intentional focus on research has helped and will continue to help the program better meet the needs of crime victims and their supporters nationwide.

Notes

- ¹ See White, Dusenbery, and Bastomski (2020) for a discussion of VictimConnect’s founding.
- ² “Working Together,” Center for Victim Research, accessed December 30, 2020, <https://victimresearch.org/tools-training/working-together/>.
- ³ “Visitors” to the VictimConnect Resource Center are primarily crime victims but also include those who support victims, such as family, friends, and service providers.
- ⁴ In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, NCVF is further revising training to occur completely virtually. Several of the modules used so far have come from the Office for Victims of Crime’s Training and Technical Assistance Center’s victim assistance training online modules.
- ⁵ See, e.g., Han and Mosqueda (2020), and Lawson, Piel, and Simon (2020); see also Storm Ervin and Sara Bastomski, “We Need to Do More to Support Victims of Domestic Violence during the Pandemic,” *Urban Wire* (blog), Urban Institute, April 21, 2020, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/we-need-do-more-support-victims-domestic-violence-during-pandemic>.
- ⁶ Volunteers will begin focusing on chats, which are more easily monitored by a trained Victim Assistance Specialist; however, those who demonstrate competency and compassion will be advanced to phone interactions, under the supervision of paid trained staff until the volunteer appears fully capable of independent interactions.

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