

# OVS Outreach

## Fall 2020

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### From the Director's Desk



Incredibly, this is our sixth month of living with the COVID-19 crisis, but thanks to smart leadership in New York, we are finding our footing in the “new normal.” These times have been incredibly challenging, and we continue to be inspired by the resilience

and resourcefulness of each of you who have risen to the occasion and ensured that survivors of crime have the support and resources they need.

We have begun to adapt to the necessary changes required by a pandemic, an evolution even more critical given the particularly disturbing increase in gun violence across the state and country. Shootings and firearm-related deaths, which had been at their lowest levels in decades in many places, including many of New York State's urban centers, have erupted. Communities of color – hardest hit by the COVID-19 crisis, economic struggles and social unrest following the death of George Floyd – also have been disproportionately affected by this increased violence.

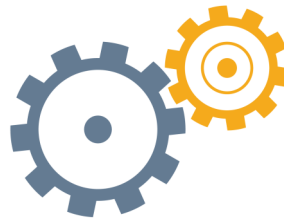
New York has been at the forefront of innovation in addressing gun violence. We know that it is both a criminal justice and a public health issue. Gun violence devastates families and communities. It is not enough to provide resources to those already affected by violence. We must also find community-based solutions for long-term change. OVS proudly supports multiple community-based organizations with a mission to stop the spread of gun violence, as well as to support victims and survivors. We also partner with the state Division of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS), providing additional funding for its SNUG Street Outreach program, which aims to identify and implement evidence-based solutions for reducing or ending gun violence and heal individuals and communities.

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### OVS Launches VAP Connect

OVS recently launched [VAP Connect](#), an online community for victim assistance programs (VAPs) funded by the agency.

VAP Connect is designed to provide a platform for victim assistance professionals to share information, build networks and obtain more tools to help innocent victims of crime in New York State. OVS also will use VAP Connect to provide important updates and announcements for VAPs and their staff.



Learn more by watching our [Launch Q&A webinar](#) and accessing the official [VAP Connect Tip Sheet](#), both of which can help you get started.

VAP Connect is a forum by and for victim assistance professionals; it will grow and change as you and your peers engage with it. More than 100

VAPs have joined the conversation so far, so please, join, engage and start connecting today! ■

**Click here to access VAP Connect today!**



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Victim Services**

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## From the Director's Desk

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This issue of OVS Outreach highlights that initiative and others working to make our communities safer by reducing gun violence and increasing capacity for victim services. If these programs are in your community, I encourage you to learn more about them and explore ways in which you can collaborate and support each other's work.

Stay safe and healthy. And, as always, thank you for your commitment to serving all victims of crime across New York State.

Sincerely,

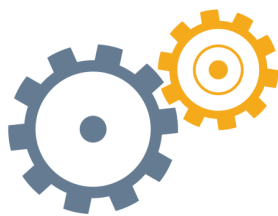


Elizabeth Cronin, Esq.

## OVS Speakers Bureau: Call for Presenters

OVS is currently seeking volunteers for its [2021 Speakers Bureau](#)!

The OVS Speakers Bureau is a bi-monthly information-sharing seminar for OVS staff and allied professionals on a variety of topics, including:



- Victim assistance program overviews and provider testimonials;
- Innovation in victim services;
- Victim services best practices;
- Reaching underserved victims;
- Self-care;
- And more.

These seminars will seek to educate attendees on the tremendous impact victim services have on the lives of victims and survivors from across New York State.

We are excited to announce our schedule for the upcoming 2021 Speakers Bureau:

- |              |                |
|--------------|----------------|
| • January 26 | • July 20      |
| • March 16   | • September 14 |
| • May 18     | • November 9   |

All sessions run from 1:30 p.m. – 3 p.m., inclusive of Q&A, and will be hosted virtually.

If you are interested in presenting, speaking or know others who would like to be considered for the seminar series, please email [training@ovs.ny.gov](mailto:training@ovs.ny.gov) for more information.

We look forward to receiving your proposals! ■

## Five Questions For...Lisa Good

Lisa Good, Founder/Director of [Urban Grief](http://urbangrief.org/) in Albany, NY, recently participated in OVS' "Five Questions For..." series, which highlights programs and services funded by the agency. The following conversation has been edited for length and/or clarity.

### 1. Who does your program help?

Urban Grief works to help underserved victims in black and brown communities within the Capital Region.

We focus on reaching homicide victims' family and people directly and indirectly impacted by shootings and community violence, as well as connecting with individuals who have been victims of other crimes but face barriers to receiving assistance.



### 2. How do you reach them?

When you're talking about an underserved population, that's the biggest challenge. We use every contact that we have available to identify and connect with people. We rely on social media, the social connections of our team members, and introductions from other community members. For example, if someone shares information on social media about a homicide or a shooting/stabbing, I may reach out to them to let them know what we can offer and see if they will connect us with the family. It's definitely a lot of cold calls. Often, we are not able to get directly to the injured person, but I believe that there are concentric circles of harm with violence, so even if we reach someone on the "outer" circle, we can help.

### 3. How does your program make a difference for victims and families, and the community?

Being present. Acknowledging the harm. Connecting them to resources, including OVS. Advocating for them, whether it's with the police department, at the hospitals, or even within families. We also are thinking out of the box and trying to respond to real needs exacerbated by COVID-19, such as meeting with people outside. For example, during the initial surge of COVID-19, programs focused on the learning needs of children, but no one considered the disruption of learning opportunities for adults participating in High School Equivalency Programs, and we worked with Trinity Alliance's IT director to supply a PC and customized self-care package to the caregiver of an injured survivor.

### 4. What inspires your work?

My faith and the people I serve. I draw strength from their courage and resilience. I see their need, and that inspires me to continue being innovative in addressing and responding to the victimization and harm caused by violence.

### 5. What are you most proud of?

Through Urban Grief's long-time relationship with Trinity Alliance of the Capital Region, we obtained funding from the National Association of VOCA Assistance Administrators (NAVAA) to host awareness-raising activities and distribute information about crime victims' rights, services and needs within poor and marginalized communities disproportionately impacted by gun, sexual and domestic violence and child abuse.

Many events during National Crime Victims' Rights Week (NCVRW) are often hosted by law enforcement, District Attorneys' offices, etc.; there wasn't a lot of participation by black and brown communities. I am very proud of the efforts we made to build neighborhood-based awareness by highlighting the unique needs of underserved communities.

To further the objective of reaching and serving more victims, I am now working with Trinity Alliance of the Capital Region under a newly funded OVS grant. The new program has retained the Urban Grief name to ensure historical recognition by and acceptance in the target community.

Visit <http://urbangrief.org/> to learn more. ■

## SNUG Street Outreach Works to Stop Gun Violence

While the country grapples with the consequences of COVID-19 and the murder of George Floyd, another significant public health crisis should be ringing alarms. Gun violence has increased across the country, and New York State is no exception. There has been a 95 percent increase in the number of shooting victims in New York City through late August compared to last year and in the urban centers outside of the five boroughs, shooting incidents increased 80 percent in the first eight months of the year compared to the same time frame in 2019.

As with any large-scale movement or public health crisis, we need to address gun violence by mobilizing communities, changing behaviors and shifting cultural norms. New York State's SNUG Street Outreach programs have been using these strategies in communities affected by gun violence since 2009. Their work, and the efforts of law enforcement agencies that participate in the state-funded Gun Involved Violence Elimination (GIVE) initiative, have made a difference. Last year, there were 679 shooting incidents with injury in the state's urban centers outside of New York City, the fewest since the state began collecting this data in 2006.

Now, more than ever, it is important to recognize, promote and learn from street outreach work, which treats gun violence like a disease and uses a public health model to identify it, address it and stop the spread. SNUG programs serve neighborhoods in Albany, the Bronx, Buffalo, Hempstead, Mt. Vernon, Newburgh, Poughkeepsie, Rochester, Syracuse, Troy, Wyandanch and Yonkers.

Twelve SNUG sites across the state deploy teams of outreach workers from the communities they serve to mediate conflicts and mentor youth. SNUG outreach workers are essential to addressing gun violence. With their unique ability to connect with those at the highest risk for involvement in gun violence and their knowledge of street activity, outreach workers are first-line responders who intervene to diffuse situations that may escalate to gun violence.

As of this year, thanks to an innovative collaboration between the state Division of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) and OVS, SNUG now provides mental health and case management services to help address the impacts of trauma felt by victims, their families and outreach workers themselves.

SNUG social workers and case managers receive intensive, trauma-informed training, lead support groups and work closely with homicide and shooting victims and their families. They also provide concrete services, such as safety planning and employment services, and help victims seek assistance from OVS if they are eligible. In addition, hospital-based SNUG social workers are currently being hired to provide specialized services for victims and connect them to SNUG programs post-discharge. Social workers and case managers also seek to connect with other victim assistance programs to help strengthen the network of services available for victims of crime and their families.

Like COVID-19, the rise in gun violence has disproportionately affected communities of color in New York State. At the same time, the death of George Floyd has moved discussions about racial equity and social justice front and center. If you have been prompted to act by these events, there are many ways that you can get involved with the SNUG site in your community. Please reach out to me at [erika.mendelsohn@dcjs.ny.gov](mailto:erika.mendelsohn@dcjs.ny.gov) for more information about the SNUG program in your community. ■

**SNUG**  
**OUTREACH**  
New York State

*Submitted by Erika Mendelsohn, LCSW  
SNUG Social Work Program Director*

## SNUG Social Work Initiative in Action

Two young men were brought to a local hospital after being shot as they left a funeral. The young men's family members gathered in the emergency room and when tensions began to run high between the two groups, the hospital called a "code orange." At the same time, a SNUG social worker and case manager were called to the hospital to respond to the situation, as were multiple police officers.

When the social worker and case manager arrived, they were able to de-escalate the conflicts and talk with the victims' mothers, offering understanding and validating their emotions. Although posted throughout the emergency room, police officers stood back and allowed the SNUG team to intervene.

One mother was angry because the hospital staff would not give her an update on her son; she felt like they were not taking his injuries seriously. To assist, the SNUG social worker spoke with the emergency room social worker about the young man's condition and relayed that information to his mother, who was relieved and calmed down.

The other mother was fearful that her son would die in surgery. The SNUG social worker and case manager stayed in contact with emergency room staff and when the mother's worst fear was realized, emergency room staff requested the SNUG social worker and case manager be there when they spoke with the young man's mother. SNUG staff stayed with the mother to comfort her and help her grieve and when the mother asked, they agreed to accompany her to see her son. The social worker also spoke with the young man's sister, who expressed a desire for violent retaliation. The social worker talked her through those emotions, counseled her about why seeking revenge wasn't the answer and relayed those concerns to SNUG outreach workers, who addressed the situation to prevent retaliatory violence.

Both the emergency room staff and police officers expressed gratitude to the SNUG team for their intervention and mediation, which successfully resolved the conflict among the families without police intervention or arrests. ■

*The SNUG Social Work Team submitted the above overview of how team members responded to an incident that occurred in August 2020.*

## New Laws to Support Survivors of Sexual Assault

Recent legislative changes have resulted in expanded access to services and treatment for victims and survivors of sexual assault:

**HIV Post-Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP)** – Hospitals providing treatment to victims and survivors of sexual assault are required to provide a seven-day starter pack of HIV PEP to those who are 18 or older and the full, 28-day supply of medication to those who are younger than 18. Previously, hospitals were only required to provide the seven-day starter pack of HIV PEP. This change improves minors' access to the full regimen of HIV PEP without involving a parent or guardian to receive the remaining 21-day supply.

**OVS Forensic Rape Examination (FRE) Direct Reimbursement Program** – The following changes apply to FRE claims filed by medical providers on or after June 15, 2020, for treating victims and survivors of sexual assault. Providers will be reimbursed by OVS at the Medicaid rate, not to exceed the following:

- \$800 for an exam that does not include use of a sexual offense evidence collection kit (kit);
- \$1,200 for an exam that includes the use of a kit;
- \$1,500 for an exam of an individual who is 18 or older, with or without the use of a kit, and with the HIV PEP seven-day starter pack; and
- \$2,500 for an exam of an individual younger than 18, with or without the use of a kit, and with the full regimen of HIV PEP.

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As a reminder, state law requires that providers must give the FRE Direct Reimbursement Program claim form to every sexual assault survivor and discuss the billing options available to them through the program.

**When an individual chooses to use the FRE program, the hospital or licensed health care provider must seek reimbursement from OVS and accept this reimbursement as payment in full. No victim or survivor who chooses this option should ever receive a bill for HIV PEP or the sexual assault exam.**

Services not covered by the FRE program may be billed directly to the patient or their health insurance. In addition, a victim or survivor must be informed that they may file a compensation application with OVS. If the agency determines eligibility, the individual will be reimbursed for any non-covered expenses related to the crime, including but not limited to medical care and mental health counseling, moving, and loss of earnings.

OVS continues its work to finalize the necessary updates to its FRE claims processing system. The agency was unable to start this process until the above legislative changes, which were included in the 2020-21 state budget, took effect. All claims submitted prior to June 15, 2020, have been processed, while those submitted after that date remain pending until the updated system goes live. The agency aims to begin processing pending and new claims later this month.

Please refer to the OVS web site's [FRE page](#) for information related to these new provisions, including links to the updated [FRE claim form](#), [supplemental information document](#) and a list of updated FAQs. Also available on the OVS website is a training that provides an overview of the FRE Direct Reimbursement Program that covers relevant laws and regulations, how to complete and file the FRE claim form, common billing/reimbursement issues and other FAQs. ■

## OVS Provides Additional Support for Funded Programs

The COVID-19 global pandemic has presented many new challenges for victim assistance professionals. In the aftermath of New York on PAUSE, OVS has focused on finding ways to provide additional support and flexibility to its funded programs. Working in partnership with the federal Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) and the state Division of the Budget, OVS has provided flexibility and additional funding to VAPs to ease burdens resulting from the pandemic:

- **OVC-approved Match Waiver Policy**

This new policy grants OVS the ability to waive match requirements for all OVS contracts that are currently being paid with VOCA funds from OVS' 2017 and 2018 federal VOCA awards. The change gives programs some expanded options when spending their awards on VOCA-allowable expenses.

- **Additional VOCA Funding for 2019-2022 Grant Recipients**

All recipients of grant funding from the OVS 2019-2022 Request for Applications (RFA) will receive additional, pro-rated VOCA funding for the second year of their contracts. Additional information about this funding will be included in Year Two Award letters, which will be mailed soon to funded programs.

More information is available on the [OVS Victim Assistance Program webpage](#). ■

## Adapting to Working Remotely: OVS Rises to the Challenge to Help Victims of Crime

The transition to working remotely occurred quickly for OVS and other state agencies, but each passing month has provided an opportunity for the agency's staff to improve its operations. Staff accomplished this by cooperating with OVS' expansive network of tireless and committed advocates, work that has continued as the volume of claims filed has steadily increased.

This spring, the Compensation Unit received less than half the number of claims than it did during the same time frame in 2019 (April saw 339 claims, versus 937 in 2019). In the past two months, however, the unit has seen a slow but steady increase in claims, in particular, homicide claims. So far this year, 10.5 percent of the claims received by OVS are connected to homicides; that is nearly double the percentage of homicide claims for all of last year (5.5 percent).

The vast majority of claims received by OVS – about 80 percent – are submitted through victim assistance programs, which clearly illustrates the important role that advocates play in helping victims and their families apply for financial assistance. Compensation Unit staff look forward to continuing to work effectively and efficiently with VAPs, whether remotely or when it is safe for them to return to the office.

More information is available on the [OVS Victim Compensation webpage](#). ■

## Advocate Accompaniment in Virtual Court Proceedings

An issue was recently raised as to whether advocates for victims could participate in virtual court proceedings that they would have attended with the victim in person prior to COVID-19, and how to do this.

We have verified with the Office of Court Administration that advocates may participate remotely. According to Counsel's Office, the judge's secretary, clerk or other court staff who provide the Skype for Business or Microsoft Teams link and telephone information to the litigants can also provide this information to a victim advocate.

If an advocate does not know who to call for this information, they should consult the website and main phone number for the individual court or, if that fails, [nycourts.gov](https://nycourts.gov). The court system's COVID-19 hotline, 833-503-0447, will have information on how to contact the court.

Advocates assisting litigants in the remote order of protection program under Family Court Act 153-c(b) are automatically included. Under Family Court Act 838, a petitioner for an order of protection may have a "friend, relative, counselor or social worker" present – not to participate (unless they are a witness) but simply to listen as a supportive person. ■