

Seeking Solutions:

Challenges for Providing Victim Services in Rural Communities: Ensuring Sustainable and Effective Services

June 25 – 26, 2024 • Skaneateles, NY

The New York State Office of Victim Services (OVS) 2024 Seeking Solutions Summit, *Challenges for Providing Victim Services in Rural Communities: Ensuring Sustainable and Effective Services*, took place June 25-26, 2024, at [The Lodge Skaneateles](#) in Skaneateles Falls, New York. The Summit was a statewide professional development event where OVS-funded advocates and allied professionals gathered to learn from experts and each other about strategies for addressing the unique challenges of serving crime victims and survivors in rural communities. OVS offers special thanks to the planning committee members (see Appendix) who so generously offered their time over a number of months to make this sold-out event a success.

In a post-event survey, 76% of those responding rated the Summit as “excellent,” with another 19% rating it as “very good.” The remaining respondents rated the Summit as “good,” with none ranking it as “fair” or “poor.” All survey respondents indicated they intended to use the information gained from the event in their profession, and all said they would recommend future OVS conferences to colleagues. More details from the post-event survey appear below.

Summit Overview

Opening remarks were delivered by OVS’ new Director, Bea Hanson, who warmly welcomed attendees and thanked them for their dedication in supporting crime victims and survivors. Director Hanson reiterated that the focus of the Summit was on doing this work in rural communities and leveraging the unique strengths of rural communities to address the barriers presented.

Director Hanson then introduced the first plenary speaker, Andrew Campbell, Founder and CEO of Campbell Research and Consulting. Mr. Campbell is an expert on family violence and the associated risks of harm for adults, children, and pets. He is a sought-after speaker nationally and internationally on these topics and is the author of *Violence in Rural Communities and The Interconnectedness of Pet Abuse, Child Abuse and Partner Abuse*. Mr. Campbell’s Summit presentation was in two parts: *Family Violence in Rural Communities* and *The Interconnectedness of Pet Abuse, Child Abuse and Partner Abuse*. Attendees were fully engaged during the presentations as evidenced by the many questions and active discussion throughout. Mr. Campbell’s full biography and slides used at the Summit are available on the Summit website ([vapconnect.com](#)). Following the afternoon plenary presentations, there was informal networking during a social hour.

“All of the OVS staff did a fantastic job of making everyone feel welcome... The information all could directly be used in my particularly program – I took so much away from it.”

The second day of the Summit started with a powerful presentation by plenary speaker Joseph G. Fazzary, Esq., who has served as the District Attorney in Schuyler County, New York, since 1998. DA Fazzary has advocated for crime victims his entire career and used his own experience as a survivor of child abuse as a catalyst for this work. He is a highly regarded speaker on topics

including violence in relationships, sexting, bullying, drug use and child sexual abuse, and is the founder of the newly opened Justice Center in Schuyler County. Attendees paid rapt attention to Mr. Fazzary's presentation which was interwoven with his personal story, and ended with a spontaneous standing ovation from attendees.

"It is nice to know other agencies face the same problems and none of us are alone."

The remainder of the day included a series of three breakout groups, starting with small groups assigned by job roles. This breakout provided the opportunity for networking and shared learning with colleagues from rural areas across the state with similar job responsibilities. After lunch, participants rotated among 30-minute "round robin" presentations provided by

Summit attendees on the following topics: domestic violence/stalking; working with youth; technology innovations including Telesafe; and mobile Child Advocacy Centers (CACs). A mobile child advocacy center from the McMahon Ryan Child Advocacy Center in Syracuse was onsite and available for tours. Another special treat was the presence of therapy dog Juno who attended sessions and mingled among Summit participants to demonstrate her talents.

The last session of the Summit was small group discussions on the topics of serving victims/survivors of domestic violence; working with children and youth who have experienced trauma; building collaborations for effective service delivery; and working with male survivors of abuse. Key successes, challenges and resources shared in each of these groups are described below. A "quiet room" was provided throughout the conference as a safe space to relax and regroup.

The Summit concluded with closing remarks by Director Hanson who expressed her appreciation to attendees, on behalf of the OVS team, for their contributions to the Summit and her enthusiasm that some of the learnings from the Summit will be the catalyst for additional and more effective services to crime victims in rural communities.

Themes and Observations from the Summit

A number of themes were heard and observed at the Summit, including the following:

- **Active engagement of Summit participants:** Many attendees expressed appreciation that the Summit focused specifically on rural communities, brought in expert speakers with lived experience as crime victims/survivors, and built in time for shared learning with colleagues. They also expressed appreciation for the opportunity to meet OVS Director Hanson and talk directly with OVS

staff about their work and the uniqueness of serving crime victims in rural communities in a setting focused solely for that purpose. It was encouraging to hear many attendees identify ideas from the Summit that they will work to incorporate into the ways they deliver services to victims. For example, one participant said they are going to find a way to get a therapy dog to have in court to support victims. Attendees repeatedly emphasized the importance of victim advocates across the work they do, and the supportive, calming influence advocates provide.

"I loved the focus of rural – I have never been to a summit where I felt like we all understood our issues in our geographic areas."

"Very important topic and not always thought about."

- **Importance of pets/animals:** Plenary Speaker Andrew Campbell described how a connection to a pet or farm animal can prevent a victim from leaving an abusive situation, particularly if the perpetrator has harmed or threatened to harm the animal. Animal abuse can also be a precursor to

abuse of someone else in the home. Neighbors, Campbell said, are more likely to report animal cruelty, which can assist response agencies in identifying situations that require intervention. Observing the behavior of pets or other animals in the home can also provide insight into the type of environment that exists.

The issue resonated with attendees, who noted there may be additional opportunities in their communities to assist shelters in finding ways to allow victims to bring pets with them, or locate alternative placements for animals the victim does not want to leave behind. Currently, Campbell said, only 12% of domestic violence shelters allow pets. Examples include BestyBnB in Kansas (<https://www.mybestybnb.com>) and the Urban Resource Institute in New York City ([PALS Updated - URINYC](#)).

- **Building and sustaining collaborations:** The importance of partnerships across provider agencies and community organizations was raised multiple times, with examples of what can be accomplished through collaboration that no one agency would be able to do by itself. Examples included the Family Violence Prevention Center in Broome County and the newly opened Justice Center in Schuyler County, among others. The necessity of good leadership to initiate and sustain collaborations was stressed, as well as the need to embed the collaboration to continue beyond a change in leadership. One suggestion was to develop a Memorandum of Understanding between partner agencies.
- **Trauma training and trauma-informed best practices:** Attendees emphasized the importance of the training they have been provided about the impact of trauma and trauma-informed services. They expressed a need for more of this training on an ongoing basis – it’s not a “one and done” – and coaching to ensure that what is learned in the training is incorporated throughout their service delivery model. Participants also said that such training has a diagnostic element to look at root causes of behavior.

Addressing Persistent Challenges

A number of long-standing challenges were raised during the Summit and attendees were asked to share any strategies they have used to try to address them. These included:

- **Interconnectedness of small-town life:** A common theme raised was that the same interconnectedness that is source of support and friendship in rural communities, can present a barrier for crime victims when everyone involved in an incident may be known to multiple local families and organizations. This can create a disincentive to reporting and challenges in investigations and the legal system. This interconnectedness also means that news or rumors travel fast; once a charge has been filed or a first responder called, it may be known throughout the community. This is compounded by families listening to police scanners, and sharing what they hear with others.

“The dispatcher who took the victim’s report was the abusive partner’s relative.”

It can also feel for the victim that the community is no longer a safe space. The likelihood they will run into their perpetrator is high; higher still is the likelihood that people will know some version of the victim’s story. This can mean victims and their family member feel isolated, whether or not they have told their story.

- **Communication challenges:** Spotty cellphone coverage and internet access can impede a victim’s ability to get help, especially in an emergency situation. Attendees were encouraged to consider who does regularly see families in their home, such as delivery personnel and mail carriers, and to think creatively about ways to give victims the opportunity to safely self-identify. This may include posting notices about help for intimate partner violence in

“The one time the victim was away from her abuser was to walk down the long driveway to get the mail.”

places such as libraries or grocery stores that a victim may go to alone without the perpetrator.

It was suggested that localities appeal to cellphone service providers to waive change fees, so that a victim can change plans without penalty to distance from the abuser. In some cases, the ability to use technology to communicate only helps the perpetrator. For example, abusers may use Apple AirTags or comparable devices to keep track of the location of the victim and their belongings.

- **Challenges within the courts and legal system:** The requirement of a unanimous jury verdict can be challenging if all jurors don't have sufficient understanding of the dynamics of intimate partner violence, elder abuse, or child abuse. This can be especially confounding in child sexual abuse cases, when the child is the only witness and there is no corroborating evidence. Child witnesses can pose particular challenges if asked the standard questions adults are asked. For example, a child may be able to describe the setting where the abuse occurred but not the dates, times, etc.

Related to the interconnectedness of communities, judges are more likely in rural areas to have some familiarity with a victim, perpetrator, their families or other parties in a case. The decision to assess that involvement and potentially recuse themselves from a case is the judge's alone. If the judge does recuse, and a new venue is necessitated, this creates additional time and travel burdens for everyone involved, as well as added costs. Local magistrates are not required to have law degrees, and town judges without legal backgrounds are more common in rural areas than in cities or suburban areas. This can complicate arraignment and prosecution.

- **Lack of transportation:** The lack of public transportation was repeatedly cited as a barrier to providing services. Unlike many urban areas, someone experiencing intimate partner violence cannot walk to the corner bus stop to escape. Buses may not travel between counties, and some drivers will deny a rider with too many bags, or require they leave behind a very large bag with their personal items. And even if a taxi or Uber-style service is available, it could involve a driver known to the abuser.
- **Distance between homes:** The sheer amount of space between residences was cited as a deterrent to identifying incidents of abuse. Unlike in urban environments, what is happening inside a home is less likely to be heard by neighbors. Distance can be a factor in both the time it takes for a first responder to arrive on the scene, and the amount of notice they might provide to the abuser by traveling down a remote road or long driveway. The large area covered by each agency also necessitates higher staff time and costs for travel.
- **Domestic violence shelter services:** Every community should, but does not, have a shelter or readily available services to support victims. In order to maximize the effectiveness of services provided, attendees suggested it would be helpful to have a repository of shelter best practices and model policies, procedures, mandates and other requirements.
- **Fiscal challenges:** Funding of services and training is always a challenge. In small communities, programs may struggle with budgetary issues, staffing, and resource development – organizational issues that are more easily managed by large urban or multi-county programs with larger budgets. Some services may have long waiting lists as well. Local agencies struggle with staff recruitment and retention for a number of reasons, including low pay. What funds are available need to be more flexible to meet local needs. Greater funding would allow agencies to recruit and retain staff, and support cost of living increases as well as offer a broader range of trauma-informed services for victims.
- **Culture of privacy around family matters:** Summit attendees identified that there can be a culture in some rural areas that is more “old school,” where residents may be less likely to get involved in identifying and reporting family violence, considering these to be private, family matters. In these instances, the abuse is less often reported, leaving the victims without outside intervention or protection. In some cases, the family violence may be known to friends or neighbors, but they do not view it as an issue appropriate for outside intervention.

Feedback from Breakout Groups

What follows are additional key themes that emerged from the four small group discussions specific to certain topics, including challenges raised, achievements and resources.

1. Working with Male Survivors

This group discussion focused on the unique needs of male survivors, and identified the following key issues:

Challenges:

- **Taboos** – Sex in general may be a taboo subject, decreasing the likelihood that victims come forward. Males may feel additional reluctance due to cultural pressures around masculinity and feelings of shame or confusion about their own physical reactions during sexual abuse.
- **Gender identity of the abuser** – If the abuser was of the same gender as the victim, that may create concerns for the victim around their sexual orientation. If the abuser of a male child/teen is a woman, the male may experience congratulations instead of support, with the situation dismissed by those the victim tells as a rite of passage.
- Perpetrator admissions are rare in cases of abuse of boys or young men.
- Males are often seen for the symptoms they present, such as behavior issues, anger, or drug addiction, without attention to the underlying trauma. Service providers need to do a better job of asking about and screening for prior abuse.

Successes:

- **Education** – Communities have successfully conducted education about the abuse of boys/young men after a local incident of abuse was revealed; ideally, this would occur prior as a prevention measure. Training needs to occur not just for the professionals involved in responding, but for the entire community so they are aware and receptive if a victim comes forward. Schools need to continue to expand the training and resources they provide.
- Child Advocacy Centers provide a safe space across systems for treatment and support.
- Peer support is important for male survivors to be able to share their experiences with other male survivors.
- **Growing awareness** – As more male survivors come forward, it helps others to do so as well. A suggestion was made that when a male does come forward, he should be asked what helped him disclose the abuse, so that those paths can be reinforced.

“DA Fazzary handled a hard topic with grace and compassion; amazing. It was so motivating to see what he has accomplished in his community.”

Change “safe space” to “brave space”

- **Changing the concept from “safe space” to “brave space.”** If males are getting the message they have to be tough, they won’t ask for a safe space. A “brave space” gives them more alignment with societal messages they may have received, and also accurately reflects the challenges in ensuring safety.

Resources:

- *The Mask You Live In* is a 2015 documentary following boys and young men as they struggle to stay true to themselves while negotiating culturally narrow definitions of masculinity. <https://thereproject.org/films/the-mask-you-live-in/>

2. Working with Children and Youth

The group discussed that effective responses to child abuse are dependent on cross-systems collaboration and shared goals. A suggestion was made to develop memos of understanding (MOUs) across systems to enhance information sharing and establish shared protocols and procedures. Consistent training across systems on trauma-informed care also would be helpful.

The group also discussed how pets and other animals relate to child and youth victims of crime. The group acknowledged the challenges of keeping children connected to their pets, particularly if the child is placed in kinship or foster care, but suggested everyone involved in cases involving children and youth should be asking about pets in the home as well as attachment to any farm animals.

Challenges:

- **Lack of reporting** – Community members may not be aware of what is happening to a child or youth inside the home. In some cases, it may be that the reality of child abuse is unfathomable; even if someone suspects, they may second guess what they see. In other instances, it may be privacy-related, i.e., one doesn't tell others how to parent.
- Symptoms of child abuse can be less apparent to others. Research has indicated that neighbors are more likely to report animal abuse than child abuse, as it is more visible to community members. Sometimes the child's behavior becomes a focus of intervention, without looking at underlying abuse. A compliant and quiet child can be seen as doing fine, while that affect could indicate desensitization resulting from abuse.
- All responders need to understand the challenges in reporting, and to be aware that often there may well be many other incidents that have occurred prior to a report being made.
- **Challenges of child witnesses** – Interviewers need to be well trained in asking questions of youth to elicit the most thorough responses. Open-ended questions about what the child remembers, rather than questions about the dates and times the abuse occurred, for example, are more likely to elicit relevant information. Child Advocacy Center interviewers are trained to ask questions in this way.

Successes:

- **Education** – Providing education about trauma and trauma reactions prior to adulthood can help children and youth come forward about abuse, and help other community members report or respond with support for their victim.

Resources:

- **Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA)** – CASA volunteers are community volunteers who stand up for children who have been abused and neglected. They are recruited, trained and supervised by professional staff and appointed to cases of suspected abuse/neglect by family court judges. For more information, go to casanys.org.

3. Building Collaborations

This group focused its discussion on the importance of multi-agency/multi-systems collaboration to achieve the most effective service delivery system for victims.

Challenges:

- **Systemic barriers** – Each system represented in a collaboration may not understand the policies and procedures of other stakeholders, which can inhibit problem resolution. Understanding the barriers, the ‘why’ of what another entity is unwilling or unable to do, can assist the process of working together.
- **Resource issues** – A community may lack or be unaware of resources that would support and grow collaboration.
- **Different stakeholder personalities** – The individuals at the table can greatly impact whether systems can work together. Those attending stakeholder meetings may be personally resistant to change or may come to the table and not participate. Individuals may be defensive about their own system or bring implicit or explicit biases and assumptions.

“Sometimes ‘no’ isn’t because of resistance. It’s because of systemic roadblocks or requirements.”

Successes:

- **Grounding in mission** – An effective collaboration strategy is to continually reaffirm the group’s mission. This helps to re-center the group when challenges present, and assists in keeping expectations stable and boundaries clear.
- **The Family Violence Prevention Council** started from child advocacy but branched out to provide support to many populations by identifying good partners in the community, especially in collaboration with non-victim-related entities to identify and engage with people in need. The Council provides a forum to address the incidence and effects of family violence, and works to prevent violence, maltreatment, and neglect in all its forms. (<https://www.gobroomecounty.com/fvpc>)
- **Colocation of staff** has shown to have a positive impact on assisting systems representatives in getting to know and understand other professionals and their procedures and policies.

4. Domestic Violence in Rural Communities

Challenges:

- **Housing and shelters** – The limited availability of shelters and hotels/motels in rural areas impact the ability of victims to leave an abusive situation. It is likely the offender knows someone involved in the local hotel/motel, if one is available. To travel to a shelter or motel further away may necessitate public transportation, which also is limited.

Other emergency housing can be scarce as well. Even with the promise of first and last month’s rent, some landlords will not rent to individuals involved in domestic violence situations.

The same holds true of other supports, such as emergency rooms or other health-related services. A limited number of rural areas have the benefit of a local Family Justice Center, or “one-stop shop” to address all of the victim’s needs in one place, so clients are forced to travel to multiple entities and sites.

- **Discretion** – In a small community, private information and rumors spread easily.
- **Legal challenges** – Legal aid, particularly for divorces, is scarce. Lawyers and judicial officers may not be trauma-informed, and may not have received training specific to domestic violence. They may also have a more traditional, conservative way of thinking about family structure and women’s rights.

Successes:

- System-based advocates from the DA’s office mentioned that being able to speak “legal language” and explain the process to victims has led to confidence and trust with clients.
- The DA’s office created a “soft interview room” for advocates and clients. Providing that space for everyone has been impactful for all parties.
- Having a contracted therapist who can provide services in person or virtually has proven to be essential.
- A Domestic Abuse Response Team (DART) program was established. Partners in the field as well as survivors have been brought in to share their stories.
- Service providers routinely meeting with law enforcement can enhance awareness among local police departments as well as referrals for services.
- The Address Confidentiality Program (ACP) is designed to offer victims of domestic violence a way to prevent their abuser from locating them through public records. It can form a key piece of an overall safety plan. (<https://dos.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2018/09/address-confidentiality-program-frequently-asked-questions-participant.pdf>)

Conclusion

“Great to see so many caring advocates in one place.”

As noted above, attendee feedback after the event was overwhelmingly positive. Pre-event processes were highly rated, with pre-event correspondence rated as either 5 or 4 on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being excellent (a total of 95%). The registration process, summit check-in and arrival processes were rated 5 or 4 by all respondents to the post-event survey. The two plenaries by Andrew Campbell were rated as excellent or very good by 92% and 95% respectively. Joseph Fazzary’s plenary was rated as excellent or very good by 97% of survey respondents.

All of the round robin sessions and facilitated discussions were rated as either 5 or 4 by a majority of respondents attending each session. The venue was highly rated among attendees, although some survey respondents experienced challenges finding hotels at the state rate nearby. A total of 98% of respondents said that participation and interaction at the summit was encouraged, and 87% of respondents strongly agreed that speakers and presenters were knowledgeable about the topics and well prepared. As one attendee said, “Down to every last detail, it was incredible.”

2024 OVS Seeking Solutions Summit Planning Committee

Blake Kush

Training and Outreach Unit Chief
New York State Office of Victim Services

Rachel Gentile

Program Outreach Specialist 2
New York State Office of Victim Services

Kristin Beylo

Coordinator
Family Violence Prevention Council

Joseph Fazzary

District Attorney
Schuyler County

Nancy Harris

Medical Manager for CACs, Cofounder & Medical Manager
St. Peter's Health Partners, NYS Telesafe Program

Sarah Maida

Attorney in Charge
Legal Services of the Hudson Valley

Lori Oliver

Contract Management Specialist I
New York State Office of Victim Services

Brianna Reeves

Community Educator and Experience Design Lead
BHSN STOP Domestic and Sexual Violence

Ivy Schoff

Victim Witness Coordinator
Northern NY US Attorney's Office

Angela Smith

Domestic Violence Program Director
Catholic Charities of Delaware, Otsego,
and Schoharie Counties

Jackie Ward

Program Director
Catholic Charities of Herkimer,
Domestic Violence Program