

Victims Allies Project (VAP)
2009 ANNUAL REPORT

Mission:

To provide our clients—the family and friends of homicide victims—with the assistance and tools needed to successfully navigate the Orleans Parish criminal justice system.

Considerations:

VAP was founded through a partnership among 3 organizations – Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans, VOTE, and Silence is Violence. An Advisory Committee comprised of members from each of these organizations collaborated on starting strategies for VAP and hired initial staff. On March 14, 2009, an Introductory Meeting and Workshop was held at Xavier University for partners and volunteers of the Victim Allies Project.

YEAR 1 ACTIVITIES:

Crime Victims Guidebook: In June 2009, the Victim Allies Project published the *Crime Victims Guidebook* by Rose Preston. This free publication walks victim-survivors of homicide through many of the emotional, psychological, and judicial challenges and hurdles that follow the violent loss of a loved one. During 2009, 2,600 copies of the book were distributed in Orleans Parish and throughout the United States. The majority of books have been distributed to:

New Orleans Police Department
Office of the Orleans Parish District Attorney
Orleans Parish Criminal Sheriff
United States Department of Justice
New Orleans EMS
New Orleans Fire Department
Churches and Ministry Groups
Victim Support Groups
Funeral Homes
and by individual request.

Volunteer Recruitment and Trainings: Members of the VAP Advisory Committee worked hard in the initial months of the project to recruit and train volunteer partners for our clients. Half-day trainings covering sensitivity issues as well as a criminal justice overview were held in June, July, and November of 2009. To date, VAP has 14 trained volunteers available to work with our clients. In addition, VAP hosts regular informal gatherings for volunteers to share their experiences and advice, and to receive emotional support from the group.

Clients: To date, VAP has served 14 active clients intensively and has served dozens of additional victim-survivors of homicide through community outreach.

Client service ranges from one-time consultations regarding the criminal justice process and information sessions on the resources of VAP, to intensive one-on-one partnerships with VAP volunteers. Clients matched with a designated VAP volunteer can anticipate assistance in the following areas:

Filings and appeals for crime victim reparations

Homicide detective meetings and correspondence

Assistant District Attorney meetings and correspondence

Courtroom appearances

Victim advocacy

General understanding of criminal justice terminology and processes

Operations: VAP currently employs two part-time staff members, a Program Manager (Denise Obst) and a Client Liaison (Troylyncia LeBrane). The program operates out of the SilencelsViolence office at 520 Port Street. Volunteers and clients are able to use office for private meetings and to touch base with staff. Intake and all files are held securely at this location.

Initial funding for VAP came through a federal HOPE II grant for crime victim support. Currently, SilencelsViolence general operating funds are providing for the continuation of VAP while we seek additional dedicated funding.

An **Advisory Committee** meets regularly to assess and support the staff as they pursue VAP's mission. Specific Committee responsibilities include: financial/facilities, staff support, volunteer and client recruitment, and community outreach.

The Advisory Committee for 2010 includes:

Ken Foster (SilencelsViolence)

Norris Henderson (V.O.T.E.)

Zully Jimenez (Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans)

Baty Landis (SilencelsViolence)

Rose Preston (author, *Crime Victims Guidebook*)

Linda Roussel (Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans)

Nakita Shavers (Dinerral Shavers Educational Fund; SilencelsViolence)

VAP Findings as of March 2010: VAP has been fortunate to begin operations with very productive partnerships across the criminal justice system. We have been especially pleased to participate in monthly Multi-Agency Meetings including representatives from the DA, the NOPD, the Criminal Sheriff, the Department of Justice, and the Police and Justice Foundation. We continue to pursue more streamlined communications with each of these agencies, and to find ways in which we can support both our clients and the criminal justice system overall as effectively as possible. Findings with respect to specific agencies are outlined below.

NOPD: First-year collaboration with the New Orleans Police Department has been very productive. In particular, communication with the Victim-Witness Assistance Unit (Detectives Jolivett and Smith) has been very efficient and helpful. Client concerns and questions regarding case progress has received attention each time we have requested it. Captains Gremillion and Harbin in the Homicide Unit have met with us upon request and have been responsive about individual cases. Detective Matthews (Homicide) orchestrated the second-annual Gone But Not Forgotten event, memorializing victims of homicide around the holidays, which meant a lot to our clients.

Challenges involving the NOPD have included persistent client and volunteer concerns that cases are not thoroughly investigated, and that victim families are not provided with clear and timely information, such as item numbers. We hope that VAP's support for more active engagement of victim-survivors in the criminal justice process will also bring useful information into the investigative process and ultimately aid NOPD homicide investigations.

As of March 2010, VAP has supported ten clients with their NOPD-related needs.

DA: The New Orleans District Attorney's office has provided VAP with expertise and client resources. From the beginning of the process, the Social Services staff of the DA's office has been exceedingly receptive to our inquiries. Chief Investigator, Howard Robertson, met with us and offered his support. Andree Mattix, Director of Social Services, has been invaluable to our clients and us by providing referrals, resources, and other forms of assistance. The Victim Witness division has worked with our clients and volunteers in trial matters.

Challenges involving the DA's office have included the inability of clients and volunteers to receive timely and accurate trial dates as well as a feeling of a disconnect between the Assistant District Attorneys and the victim-survivors. As of early 2010, we do see an increase in responsiveness from the DA's office to the victim families who are our clients, as a key element in creating confidence in the New Orleans' criminal justice system.

As of March 2010, VAP has supported four clients with DA-related needs.

U.S. Attorney: The U.S. Attorney's Victim Advocate department has been instrumental in providing our organization with advice on client cases, as well as advocating for the inclusion of the Victim Allies Project as an essential component of the Orleans Parish criminal justice process.

Orleans Parish Criminal Sheriff: The Sheriff's office is a critical partner for VAP, as many of our clients are unable to meet their most immediate material needs as a result of the loss of their loved one, which in turn makes it very challenging for them to engage in the criminal justice process. As such, recently VAP met with Sheriff Gusman to discuss clients' experiences with the Louisiana Crime Victim's Reparation Fund. Upon conclusion of the meeting, Sheriff Gusman proposed setting up trainings to inform stakeholders and community agencies of the procedures and qualifications for the reparation funds. VAP feels that such a move will help eliminate confusion and frustration for victims' families.

As of March 2010, VAP has supported four clients with their pursuit of reparations.

Future Considerations: In the immediate future, VAP will seek to increase our partnered clients to 20 by the end of 2010. We will accept nominations for new Advisory Committee members by December 15, 2010. During the coming months, we will hold at least three volunteer training sessions, as well as volunteer support socials.

VAP will also continue advocating for the rights of victims to receive information and support within the criminal justice system, and for the inclusion of community-based support structures within core criminal justice strategies. By the time of our 2010-2011 report, we will compile specific numerical data regarding individual client experiences with each of the criminal justice agencies named above.

We look forward to a continued open and constructive relationship with all VAP partners, and to serving our clients with ever-greater efficiency for the sake of their own lives as well as the integrity of the criminal justice process as a whole.

www.victimallies.org