

Appendix 5

Victim counseling center PF Germany

Introduction

For many members of the Building Bridges programme, it was a challenge to find enough victims of criminal activity who would willingly engage with offenders. In Germany, we established a “victim-counseling” center to solve this problem. According to the criminal code, victims are people. As such, people of every gender, age, religion, socioeconomic status or nationality can use this counseling center. Through this center, victims had the chance to meet qualified counselors, including staff involved in “Building Bridges,” and they were counseled through their personal trauma. The center has become the first step in bringing victims and offenders together, as it provides initial support to the victim, a necessary task if victims and offenders are going to come together for reconciliation. We have found victims are more likely to engage in the “Building Bridges” programme after being counseled by the staff. Many good examples and outcomes have resulted from this engagement. The following text provides a short explanation of the center.

Starting situation

In contrast to offenders, victims of criminal activity are often neglected by larger societal services and governments. Victims suffer emotionally from the consequences of an offenders actions, and that trauma can last many years after an offender is sentenced. Victim’s emotions often range from anger, to powerlessness, fear, compulsion and other anxiety-ridden feelings, frequently resulting in nightmares or sleeplessness. Center staff support the victims and their families to deal with the situation, and show how they can react in an appropriate way. In a second step, strategies are evolved as to how the victims can find their way back into a normal life. For it to be most effective, the victim counseling center should be a free, un-bureaucratic and fast, where the clients do not have to wait longer than a week to receive support.

Target group

The term „victim“ refers to people, who are defined as injured, damaged or as being a witness by criminal law. Most often victims of a violent crime seek for counselling, followed by victims of crimes against personal freedom, robbery, crimes against bodily autonomy, murder and manslaughter.

Reach

According to the criminal code, victims are people. As such, people of every gender, age, religion, socioeconomic status or nationality can use this counseling center. Requirements to engage with the center are quite simple. Attendees can either be a victim of a criminal act, a family member of the victim of a criminal act or belong to the social environment of the victim.

The kind of the crime, point of time and if the victim has filed a formal suit against the offender is not a pre-requisite for being able to receive services.

Public relations activities are important to implement to reach the public. Information brochures can be displayed in surrounding city halls, medical offices, social institutions and at the police office. Furthermore, cooperation with victim counselling centers and other counselling centers serves as multiplier to spread information. Citizens gain knowledge through prevention work in schools and information events in various institutions. Interviews



or reports should be published in newspapers, magazines and TV, where possible. Finally, a web presence and buzz marketing are important factors.

Center Objectives

The main objective is to provide a holistic support of persons having been a victim of a criminal act. This objective is composed in different sub-goals:

- Support the clients in their difficult situations and assist them in processing experiences. The services directly address affected persons, as well as their relatives and their social environment. The victim counselling's aim is to demonstrate possible ways for affected persons to deal with their experience. At the same time strategies concerning further actions are developed along with the clients. Thereby the persons shall be guided back to normal life.
- It's important that clients' requirements and wishes have the priority. The services include the treatment of their fears, concerns and trauma. Additionally, there is advice and support concerning their legal rights, as well as financial and practical issues.
- Confidentiality, voluntariness and orientation along the clients' requirements are a top priority. Assistance can be provided anonymously by request. Affected persons do not have to file an application; there are no financial costs and no long wait to facilitate access to the service.
- Special attention is drawn to the handling of extreme trauma. Persons having been a victim of a criminal act and making use of victim counselling are often affected by some of the most heinous crimes. It is for this reason that it is very important to deal with the effects and manifestations in a systematic and holistic way.
- The emphasis here is on the promotion of resilience. This means the promotion of being able to deal with their trauma successfully and "bouncing back". The aim is that clients accept the traumatic experience as in the past, but they have brought it under control. They will be given tools and ways to transform their experiences to lead a normal life. Different exercises help to strengthen the individual's mental resistance to cope with anxiety, depression and other common symptoms.

Human resources

The employees of the center are suitable educational specialists (qualified pedagogues, social workers, social pedagogues and educators with additional qualification). Professional qualification includes a basic education, knowledge in victim protection and legal procedures in criminal proceedings, as well as knowledge in dealing with traumatized persons. Furthermore, the employees will be supported by volunteers and interns in certain sections, e.g. accompanied visits to authorities or administrative tasks.

Material and space resources

The victim counselling will be located close to public transport and can easily be reached by car at the same time. The premises feature bright and friendly rooms where counselling can take place undisturbed in a trusting atmosphere.

Timeframe

Victim counselling's duration can range from a short conversation to a regular support for months or years. As soon as a victim asks for counselling there will be a first meeting, taking approximately one hour, within the same or following week. Afterwards it is up to the clients' needs and wishes if there will be further regular meetings.



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Methods

Victim counselling offers individual interviews or group discussions. There is counselling and support suitable for children and teenagers, as well. The focus is on the clients and their strengths and resources, as well as their environment, especially the family environment. Victim counselling makes use of systematic methods, such as the clients' genograms, family constellation, etc. Moreover there are interaction exercises or methods as biography work. All information is confidential. It is desired that clients register in order to participate in the counselling.

Description of the measure

The center offers affected persons and their relatives psychosocial accompaniment to prevent and alleviate psychosocial and posttraumatic stress. Victim counselling includes the following services:

- We listen to them.
- We support them in coming to emotional rest after the crime.
- We accompany them after the crime, before and during the proceedings, as well as in dealing with the crime's consequences, which can have happened a long time ago.
- We offer them counselling and pastoral care.
- We inform, advise and support them regarding legal affairs and different offers of assistance.
- We advise them concerning financial and practical questions related to the crime.
- We inform them about criminal and legal proceedings.
- We facilitate contacts with other experts, as doctors, psychologists, therapists or lawyers.

All in all, the victim counselling remains focused on its slogan and underlying mission: "Assistance.Counselling.Accompaniment".



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