

Building Partnership Toolkit: Whitepaper

Cultivating collaboration within children and youth victim services

"No single discipline can effectively meet the needs of a victim of child abuse." These words serve as a preamble to the model that provides a multidisciplinary response to child victims across the United States. A natural extension of this approach invites leaders at all levels to work collaboratively with their counterparts to ensure a more comprehensive and effective delivery of services. This paper encourages a closer partnership between State Chapters of Children's Advocacy Centers (CACs) and State Victim of Crime Act (VOCA) Administrators. Beyond encouragement we offer a model for building and sustaining such collaborative partnerships between state level stakeholders of child and youth victim services.

Child victimization continues to be pervasive problems in the United States that can negatively affect children and youth, their families, and communities. The need for effective and accessible services for child victims of crime is clear.

Over 1000 Children's Advocacy Centers (CACs) across the country currently respond to this need with high quality services for child. CACs serve to facilitate a child focused, multidisciplinary response to allegations of victimization, marshalling the resources of law

enforcement, child protective services, medical professionals, prosecutors, victim advocates, mental health providers and forensic interviewers. State Chapters for Children's Advocacy Centers, tasked with providing training and technical assistance, legislative advocacy, networking opportunities and assistance with the development of new CACs, exist in all 50 states.

The Victims of Crime Act of 1984 established a fund to support the delivery of victim services throughout the country. In 2019 \$3.35 billion was distributed to states to be administered by a VOCA Administrator. These administrators work to ensure that programs and organizations throughout their state receive the funding needed to meet the needs of victims of crime.

CAC Chapters and State VOCA Administrators come in all shapes and sizes. Whether a Chapter is a nonprofit or a government-based organization, no two are alike. The same holds true for VOCA Administrators with each state identifying its own state administering agency to distribute funds and monitor grants and programming. Every state also has its own system for providing services to children and youth victims, involving child welfare and criminal justice agencies.

With no widely prescribed or accepted model for what a systems level partnership between these entities should look like, we find levels of collaboration varying greatly from state to state. These partnerships range from intentional and comprehensive to almost nonexistent. In some states we see cases of failed partnerships, resulting in strained and broken relationships. Encouragingly there are multiple examples demonstrating that a close and meaningful

collaboration between these systems level stakeholders results in improved access and quality of victim services for children and youth.

Making a Case for Partnership

Several arguments for a closer relationship between VOCA Administrators and CAC Chapters are immediately apparent:

More Agile Systems

With recent fluctuations in funding, VOCA Administrators and CAC Chapters have had to adapt, on a relatively quick basis, to changes within the system that supports services for victims of crime.

Whether it's figuring out how to connect more resources to services or how to decrease funding without significantly impacting service delivery, collaborative partnerships create more nimble systems able to quickly adapt to change.

Connecting Resources to Need

There is perhaps nothing more frustrating than an RFP that no one applies for. The space between funding and direct services is often substantial, making it challenging to know how to effectively steer resources. As membership organizations, CAC Chapters rely on strong relationships with the CACs in their states. They have their finger on the pulse of the work being done on the ground. Access to such perspective offers the ability to intentionally craft funding initiatives, ensuring that resources find their way to need.

System Efficiency

Close relationships, built on shared understanding and mutual respect, make things work easier. Whether on a multidisciplinary team or a state level collaborative, efficiency within complex systems demands partnership. Finding the answer to your question with one phone call instead of five is no small thing. Neither is having Chapter staff provide regular technical assistance on VOCA grant reporting during CAC Chapter membership meetings. With good partnership we find endless opportunities to do the work in a more efficient manner.

Innovation and Creativity

Interdisciplinary teaming to solve complex problems is by no means a new concept. Bringing together a diversity of perspective and experience can yield innovative and creative solutions.

Collaborative partnerships between CAC Chapters, VOCA Administrators and other stakeholders, present an opportunity to inject new ideas and approaches into the system, resulting in improved services for children and youth victims of crime.

How to Begin

Cultivating a strong and lasting collaborative partnership is no small task, but it's not exactly rocket science. While it can be as simple as expressing a hope for a closer relationship, it really should be an intentional process with identified goals and a shared vision.

Attention to three areas of focus will help guide CAC Chapters and VOCA Administrators on a path toward enhanced collaboration and partnership, ultimately improving services for crime victims.

Assessing Need

Any good process of building partnership should begin with an assessment of need. This doesn't have to be a painstaking endeavor, but should ask a few key questions:

- What does partnership and collaboration currently look like between the State CAC Chapter and the VOCA Administering Agency?
- Are we in regular communication with each other?
- Do we participate in any collaborative projects or facilitate shared programs?
- How likely are we to reach out to each other for assistance or with questions?
- How might a collaborative partnership translate to improved services for children and youth victims of crime?
- What challenges or obstacles that would present potential barriers to a collaborative partnership?

Answers to these questions will offer a sense of whether a more intentional partnership building processes is necessary and how it might need to be structured to achieve the desired result.

Considering these questions can also offer CAC Chapters and VOCA Administrators an opportunity to reflect on what might be possible if their answers were different.

Intentional Relationship Building

Collaborative partnerships depend on trust and safety, which in turn depend on strong relationships. An early and necessary step in any

partnership building process is relationship building. Creating opportunities for partners to come together and get to know one another is an easy yet frequently overlooked part of the process. Intentional relationship building presents opportunities for individuals to get to know one another as people, beyond simply roles and titles. Making time and space for building relationships establishes the foundation on which partnership can then be built.

Create A Shared Understanding

If asked to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, you could likely do so without thinking about it. Ask a team of ten people to make a sandwich together and the process will look a lot different. That's because we all approach the world with our own unique understanding, shaped by our individual ideas, perspectives, and experiences.

An early and critical step in teaming is to craft a shared understanding of the work we all do and why we do it. Collaboration must begin with sharing about our roles, responsibilities, challenges, opportunities, hopes, and ideas. This allows us to create a new, shared perception of our partners and how a collaborative partnership might translate into meaningful effect. This basic step helps to reveal and clarify any assumptions or confusion that exists, even within teams that already have strong relationships.

Facilitating and Sustaining Collaboration

While these three areas of focus offer a glimpse into what a collaborative partnership may offer and how to begin the process, it

may require a deeper investment of time and intention. Once it is clear that both the CAC Chapter and VOCA Administrator are interested in stronger collaboration consider engaging a facilitator to guide the process. Facilitators help by creating structures that cultivate and sustain collaborative partnerships. All four Regional Children's Advocacy Centers are well suited to help facilitate such processes, as are countless other training and technical assistance providers.

Sustaining collaboration can be relatively easy once a foundation for partnership is established. In many cases just working collaboratively is all that is needed to keep things running smoothly. The addition of ongoing points of connection, attention to the areas of focus listed above and regular strategic vision setting is often more than enough to ensure a stable long-term partnership. That said, with turnover in leadership and staff there may be a need to re-engage in a more committed process from time to time.

Looking Forward

CAC Chapters and VOCA Administrators, along with other important stakeholders, have an opportunity to enhance access and quality of victim services for children and youth in their states. This can often be achieved with little to no investment of resource beyond the time it takes to sit down together and maybe the cost of a few lunches. Certainly, there will be obstacles to navigate and perhaps some challenging conversations to be had, but when done in the interest of better serving our most vulnerable, it is well worth it.

As more and more VOCA Administrators and CAC Chapters come together to form collaborative partnerships we look forward to continued improvements in the field's ability to meet the full needs of all children and youth victims of crime.

A companion resource titled "Building Partnership Toolkit" offers step by step support for those engaged in building collaboration between CAC Chapters and VOCA Administrators. This resource can be found at the National Resource Center for Reaching Victims website.

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