

## **Victim Impact Panels**

Victim impact panels provide a forum for crime victims to tell a group of offenders about the impact of the crime on their lives and on the lives of their families, friends, and neighbors. Panels typically involve three or four victim speakers, each of whom spends about 15 minutes telling their story in a non-judgmental, non-blaming manner. The offenders of the victim presenters are not present. While some time is usually dedicated to questions and answers, the purpose of the panel is for the victims to speak, rather than for the victims and offenders to engage in a dialogue.

Victim impact panels were first initiated in 1982 by Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD). In light of the devastating consequences of drunk driving on its victims and on society (causing over 17,000 deaths and more than one million injuries in 1995 alone), MADD felt that it was critical to change the generally accepted attitude that these incidents were "accidents" rather than crimes. They believed that a key component of changing attitudes was to confront drunk drivers with first-hand testimony from the victims of drunk driving crashes.

As a result of positive feedback from both victims and offenders who have participated in drunk driving panels, this strategy has been used with other crimes such as property crimes, physical assault, domestic violence, child abuse, elder abuse, and homicide (the survivors serve as panelists). Attendance by offenders at a panel is often court-ordered in juvenile and criminal cases, either at diversion or accompanying a probation sentence. Panels have also been used in prison and jail settings, with parolees, and in treatment programs, defensive driving schools, and youth education programs. Additionally, victim impact panels are often presented at training forums for juvenile and criminal justice professionals to help them better understand the scope and trauma of victimization.

### **Goals**

The goals of victim impact panels are to:

- Help offenders understand the impact of their crimes on victims and communities.
- Provide victims with a structured, positive outlet to share their personal experiences and to educate offenders, justice professionals, and others about the physical, emotional, and financial consequences of crime.
- Build a partnership among victim service providers and justice agencies that can raise the individual and community awareness of the short- and long-term impacts of crime.

### **Implementation**

Many criminal and juvenile justice agencies have institutionalized victim impact panels as a sentencing option. Victim service organizations either implement the program for the court, or work in collaboration with justice personnel to conduct panels. Whatever the structure, victim service agencies are usually best prepared to perform the critically important role of screening victims to ensure they are sufficiently healed from their victimization experience not to be retraumatized by participating in the panel. Other implementation tasks are to prepare the victims for participation, moderate the panels, gather participant feedback information, and provide records of participants and program activities to the sentencing authority.

### **Lessons Learned**

A research study of victims speaking on victim impact panels to convicted drunk drivers found that 82 percent of victims who told their stories to offenders said that speaking aided them in their

recovery (Mercer, 1995). Ten percent felt they were neither harmed nor helped by the experience, and eight percent said they felt the experience had been harmful to them.

Most offenders who complete evaluations after listening to a victim impact panel indicate that their experiences were positive and educational, and contributed to a change in their attitudes and perceptions about their crimes.

### **For More Information**

A comprehensive guidebook and educational videotape on how to implement victim impact panels is available from the National Office of Mothers Against Drunk Driving (1-800-438-6233). Additionally, the Office for Victims of Crime sponsors a regional training-for-trainers series conducted by MADD and the California Youth Authority on how to implement victim impact panels and awareness classes. For more information, please contact Regina Sobieski, MADD, 1-800-438-6233, ext. 261.

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