

## Executive Summary

### Partnering to Access Legal Services (PALS): A Needs Assessment for the Denver Wrap Around Legal Services for Victims of Crime Project<sup>1</sup>

Anne P. DePrince, Ph.D., Tejas Srinivas, Michelle Seulki Lee (University of Denver)  
June 30, 2014

A three-phase Needs Assessment was conducted in the Denver Metro area (2013-2014) to identify the gaps and strengths in legal service needs that arise out of victimization (e.g., domestic violence and sexual assault; child abuse and neglect; elder abuse; human trafficking). Phase 1 involved interviews with 25 representatives from organizations that provide legal services for crime victims or work on crime-victim and related issues in some capacity (e.g., through research, education, or policy). Phase 2 involved 15 focus groups with 88 diverse individuals (including Spanish speakers) exposed to crime or who knew someone well (such as a loved one) exposed to crime. To assure focus groups reflected legal needs across the lifespan, three groups comprised of volunteers who worked closely with child or older adult crime victims. Based on analysis of transcripts from Phases 1 and 2, we developed a survey instrument to assess perceptions of legal needs and barriers to getting legal needs met following crime. In Phase 3, 114 diverse individuals exposed to crime or who knew someone well (such as a loved one) exposed to crime, and 122 professionals working with crime victims, completed the survey.

Drawing on diverse samples of participants across the three phases of study, the findings reveal that crime victims have interconnected and complex legal needs that span civil and criminal systems as well as face a host of barriers to getting their legal needs met. Data from this multi-method assessment converge on four primary problems that reflect inadequate 1) information/knowledge about legal issues; 2) resources and funding; 3) trauma-informed, victim-sensitive, and victim-centered approaches; and 4) system coordination.

**Lack on Information/Knowledge.** In focus groups, crime victims reported great difficulty accessing information about legal issues as well as problems with inconsistency and/or inaccuracy in information received from service providers. Focus group participants highlighted the urgent need for accessible information about legal terms and procedures. They described difficulty asking for help and seeking services when they did not understand the legal terms and systems in play. Focus group participants emphasized the importance of web-based resources (website, videos available on the Internet) that could be open to victims (regardless of whether they were enrolled in services at a particular agency) and that used accessible language. The sentiments from focus groups about lack of information were clearly supported in the survey data, which revealed that both crime victims and professionals perceived information barriers as serious problems. The survey data revealed particular concerns about the timing of information (e.g., that information given in the aftermath of the crime might be lost/forgotten when needed later), lack of awareness about services, lack of knowledge about crime victim rights, and insufficient legal clinics/workshops/educational opportunities.

**Resources and Funding.** In both interviews and focus groups, participants – professionals and victims – described the stresses and pressures of accessing and providing legal services in environments of limited

---

<sup>1</sup> This project was supported by Grant 2012-VF-GX-K018 awarded to Rocky Mountain Victim Law Center by the Office for Victims of Crime, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this report are those of the contributors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

resources. There was widespread recognition among participants that low-income legal service providers do not have adequate staffing given the volume of need in the Denver area, and that individual victims do not have the personal resources to seek out private attorneys. Beyond a general recognition of the need for more legal professionals, focus group participants talked about limited resources across service agencies (legal and otherwise) that make it difficult for providers to take adequate time with individuals and for professionals to get the relevant training they need to help victims effectively interface with legal systems. Focus group participants recognized the importance of training resources for service providers and the value in having adequate staffing and support. Focus groups also illustrated the interaction of larger resource and economic issues with legal service needs. All of these findings were supported in the survey data, in which participants noted significant barriers to getting legal needs met, such as inadequate legal resources (e.g., insufficient availability of guardians ad litem and low-cost attorneys), long waitlists, impediments to accessing services (either physically getting to service locations or lack of technology), and difficulty getting basic needs met.

**Trauma-Informed, Victim-Sensitive, and Victim-Centered Approaches.** Data from the interviews and focus groups made clear the critical importance of legal services that are trauma-informed, victim-sensitive, and victim-centered. Focus group participants talked about barriers to engaging with the legal system when providers did not understand the impact of trauma and related mental health issues on victims. For example, victims may ask for information multiple times or in multiple formats because cognitive consequences of trauma make the acquisition and retention of information difficult in the aftermath of a crime. Across all three phases of the assessment, both professionals and victims noted that legal professionals often do not appear to know enough about trauma and its consequences, including specific crimes such as domestic violence. Adding to this lack of knowledge, the data revealed the need for victim-centered approaches that take into account the social and psychological consequences of crime. For example, lack of social support, discrimination, and shame may interfere with victims' ability to seek out and effectively use legal services.

**Legal and Non-Legal System Coordination.** In interviews and focus groups, both professionals and crime victims recognized that legal needs intersect and overlap with many other human and social service needs following crime (e.g., mental health, housing, transportation, financial). Not surprisingly, then, data from all three phases of the assessment pointed to the difficulty victims (and professionals seeking to help victims) have navigating the complex, inter-related legal, human, and social service systems. Across all phases of study, data pointed to the need for continued improvement of coordination across legal and non-legal systems to help victims get their legal needs met. Within the criminal and civil legal systems specifically, several barriers related to system-wide coordination emerged. For example, both focus group and survey data revealed substantial concerns from victims about their overall safety when engaging with the legal system (e.g., during prosecution of an offender, during civil protection order proceedings, or when seeking enforcement of protection orders) as well as concerns about their loved ones (e.g., fears that they would lose their children or loved ones would have their legal status in the United States challenged). Findings also revealed significant concerns with the length of time and complexity of cases in the legal systems. While a Wrap Around Legal Services for Victims of Crime (Wrap Around) project cannot change the pace at which courts work, victims may benefit from practical and realistic information about the length and complexity of proceedings, and cross-trainings may help advocates better inform victims. Also across all phases of data collection, both victims and professionals reported significant concerns related to lack of communication among members of the judiciary (e.g., judges/magistrates not being aware of cases, lack of communication across judicial districts for cases that involve the same victims/offenders).