

Bringing Victims and Victim Service Providers into Reentry Planning in New Jersey

A Report by
The National Center for Victims of Crime

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	ii
About the National Center for Victims of Crime	ii
Introduction	1
Purpose	3
Focus Groups	3
Layout of This Report	4
Section 1. Critical Messages from Providers and Victims.....	5
Enthusiasm for Collaboration and the Need for Leadership.....	5
Victim Needs	7
Offender Rehabilitation and Supervision	12
Roles for Victim Service Providers.....	14
Education for Parole Officers and Victim Service Providers	16
Section 2. Lessons Learned.....	20
Section 3. Recommendations	23
Section 5. Conclusion.....	25
Appendices	
I. Reentry Initiatives with a Victim Perspective	
II. Focus Group Questions	
III. Provider Participant List	
IV. New or Pending Resources for Victims in New Jersey	

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About the National Center for Victims of Crime

The National Center for Victims of Crime is the nation's leading advocacy and resource organization for victims of crime. Since its inception in 1985, the National Center has helped victims of crime understand the impact of victimization, and has worked with crime victim advocates, criminal justice officials, and policy makers throughout the United States to secure legal rights and protections for those harmed by crime. The National Center has a particular interest in the needs of victims at the time offenders are released from incarceration and actively fosters opportunities for victims and victim service providers to enhance the effectiveness of reentry policies.

Introduction

In recent years, the number of prisoners returning to the community each year, and the multiplicity and complexity of their needs, has given rise to numerous concerns in New Jersey as in other states. With many former inmates facing problems stemming from substance abuse, poor physical and mental health, limited education, lack of job skills and employment opportunities, and lack of affordable housing, the challenges of reintegration often seem overwhelming.

In response to a perceived offender reentry crisis, researchers and policy makers pointed to the need for fresh approaches. Important themes began to emerge: the need for early intervention (comprehensive assessments and rehabilitative programs from the time offenders begin their sentences); the need for continuity between in-prison and post-release programs so that the benefits of pre-release education and treatment services are not lost when prisoners return to the community; and, the importance of collaboration among community agencies. No single agency can address the many complex needs of returning offenders. To develop and implement effective reentry programs demands partnership efforts and joint problem-solving involving a wide range of public and private agencies.

In the past, there have been significant barriers to the involvement of victims and/or victim advocates in the development and implementation of offender reentry initiatives. On the one hand, there were concerns that victim interests would trump those of offenders and undermine efforts to help them successfully reintegrate into the community; on the other, there was a general lack of awareness of the roles that victim service providers could play, as well as resistance on the part of some victim advocates to the idea of any involvement with offenders. In recent years, attitudes on both sides started to shift in response to increasing awareness of the importance of informal as well as formal social controls to reduce recidivism rates.¹ Thus, in some jurisdictions (partly as a reaction to past failures) victim service providers have been invited to join multi-disciplinary collaborations designed to produce more effective reentry policies.

Victim rights vary from state to state but normally include the right to be notified about and attend particular stages or proceedings in the criminal justice process.² For example,

¹ James M. Byrne, Faye S. Taxman, and Douglas Young, "Emerging Roles and Responsibilities in the Reentry Partnership Initiative: New Ways of Doing Business," (Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice, 2002).

² Other victim rights include the right to notification of other legal remedies; the right to protection from intimidation and harassment; the right to notice of the release or escape of the offender; the right to privacy, including confidentiality of records; the right to speedy trial provisions; the right to confer or discuss the case with the prosecutor; the right to prompt return of the victim's personal property seized as evidence from the offender, and the and the right to victim compensation and restitution.

victims can normally make a victim impact statement prior to sentencing and sometimes have the right to be consulted before plea bargains are settled. In addition, they are usually entitled to be heard when an offender is being considered for parole – by appearing in person at the hearing or submitting a statement in writing. In theory, this should enable victims to bring attention to concerns about the offender’s release - for example, in relation to safety or payment of restitution. In practice, the system does not work perfectly for a variety of reasons: for example, victims are not always notified - or notified in a timely way – and miss the crucial hearing; and even if they manage to participate, the process does not necessarily allay their fears.

As New Jersey rises to its own reentry challenges, new opportunities for collaboration are likely to emerge. The basic premise of this report is that victim service providers, like many other community-based agencies, should be seen as potential partners who can help inform the development and improve the effectiveness of reentry policies. On the one hand, victims of crime have specific needs relating to the release of their offenders, and the success (or failure) of reentry policies has direct implications for them and those who serve them. On the other, incorporating a victim perspective when thinking about reentry can strengthen policies that seek to reduce recidivism and increase public safety.

For reentry policies to proceed as if the interests of victims and offenders are unrelated ignores a basic reality. As one recent report explained: “For most categories of crime, particularly the types of crime that lead to incarceration, offenders and their victims live (and/or) work in the same neighborhood. In a significant number of cases, they both live on the same street or housing complex; and for certain crime categories (sex offenses, domestic violence) they actually reside in the same home.”³ The mere proximity of many victims and their returning offenders highlights the importance of considering the needs of victims and offenders together and involving victim services providers as reentry initiatives are developed and implemented.

The needs of individual victims relating to the release of their offenders from incarceration vary according to a variety of factors such as the nature of the crime and the relationship between victim and offender. While safety is often a critical issue for victims of domestic violence and sexual assault, the primary need for some homicide survivors is for emotional support or reassurance that the offender has been rehabilitated. In contrast, where those returning from incarceration are non-violent drug offenders and the primary victim is the offender’s family, the main concern may be keeping the offender in treatment or away from neighborhood drug dealers. But, in all cases, individual victims and individual families are also members of a community and they have an interest in the

³ Byrne, Taxman, and Young, “Emerging Roles and Responsibilities in the Reentry Partnership Initiative: New Ways of Doing Business.”

successful reentry of the offender from a broad as well as a narrow perspective. This is recognized in the newer “problem-solving” approaches to reentry such as the Reentry Partnership Initiatives.⁴ These are involving victims and victim advocates among a range of non-traditional partners on the basis that their participation will enhance rather than undermine the effectiveness reentry policies.

It is hoped that state and local public and private agencies working with offenders and with victims will find this report a helpful starting point for thinking about ways in which the victim perspective can strengthen efforts to reduce recidivism, increase public safety, and assist the successful reintegration of offenders.

Purpose

In January 2005, with support from the Fund for New Jersey, the New Jersey State Parole Board, and the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice (NJISJ), the National Center for Victims of Crime (“National Center”), set out to explore ways in which victim service providers in New Jersey might increase their involvement in the planning and implementation of reentry initiatives designed to successfully reintegrate returning prisoners, reduce recidivism, and increase public safety. To this end, the National Center convened a series of focus groups with victim service providers and victims. These discussions had several related purposes:

- To hear from providers and victims about victim priorities regarding the return of offenders from incarceration;
- To raise awareness about the potential of victim service providers to contribute to the effectiveness of reentry policies and get a sense of their prior involvement in reentry programs in New Jersey; and
- To draw on the creativity of participants with differing perspectives and experience and brainstorm about specific opportunities for increased involvement of victim service providers in reentry initiatives in New Jersey.

Focus Groups

The National Center started by contacting a wide variety of public and private agencies to see if they would participate in the project. The aim was to identify victim service providers who would be willing to take part in focus group discussions in Newark, Camden, or Trenton and/or help recruit participants for parallel focus groups with victims. In March 2005, the National Center convened three focus groups with service providers. The first took place in Newark on March 8th; the second, in Trenton, on March

⁴ See, for example, Byrne, Taxman, and Young, “Emerging Roles and Responsibilities in the Reentry Partnership Initiative: New Ways of Doing Business.”

15th; and the third, in Camden, on March 16th. The National Center also convened a small focus group with victims in Camden and interviewed one additional victim in Newark.

The National Center recruited participants for the provider focus groups in different ways. To compile an initial list of potential participants, it began by reviewing organizations in its own (national) database of victim service providers. In addition, it accepted suggestions from the NJISJ and the New Jersey State Parole Board. A key aspect of the outreach efforts was the “snow-balling” process whereby a conversation with one person led to others who might participate in the project. Over a period of several weeks, the National Center made contact with more than 50 service providers.

The overwhelming majority of those contacted were sympathetic to the aims of the project. Some went far beyond the call of duty in their efforts to connect the National Center to other potential participants. Among 30 participants who ultimately participated in the provider focus groups were victim witness coordinators from the county prosecutors’ offices; representatives from state agencies such as the Department of Corrections, the Juvenile Justice Commission, and the Division of Women; representatives from the New Jersey Coalition for Battered Women; and the executive directors and/or other senior staff members from a range of private nonprofit agencies serving homicide survivors, victims of domestic violence and/or sexual assault, and child victims of sexual abuse. In addition, several service providers who were unable to attend the focus groups contributed via e-mail and telephone. (See Appendix II for a list of the provider participants.)

Layout of this Report

This report is informed by the focus group discussions in New Jersey and innovative victim-centered reentry programs around the country. The report is divided into four sections. Section 1 summarizes critical messages from the focus group discussions. Selected quotations from the participants are presented in italics throughout this section. Section 2 provides a synthesis of the messages from the focus groups in terms of “lessons learned.” Section 3 contains a set of recommendations in the form of actionable “next steps.” A brief conclusion is presented in Section 4. Appendix I has summaries of victim-focused reentry initiatives in New Jersey and elsewhere. Appendix II contains a list of the participants who attended the provider focus groups. Appendix III contains the questionnaire that was given to the focus group participants.

Section 1. Critical Messages from Providers and Victims

The focus group discussions with providers and victims yielded several critical messages about victim needs relating to prisoner reentry, weaknesses in the reentry process from the victim perspective, and ways in which victim service providers can contribute to the planning and implementation of reentry policies. While there were differences of opinion, a number of clear themes emerged.

Enthusiasm for Collaboration and the Need for Leadership

Most victim service providers who participated in the project were convinced they could contribute to the goals of reduced recidivism and increased public safety. The vast majority wanted to be more involved in reentry programs and policymaking and saw themselves as untapped or under-used resources. Some participants drew attention to the lack of connection between those working with offenders and those working with victims and suggested ways to foster dialogue and communication. Most recognized the benefits of “cross-pollination” in terms of experience and expertise.

The enthusiasm for increased collaboration was notable and encouraging, but there were, nonetheless, concerns on some fronts. While some argued that collaboration was the only way forward in an era of restricted funding, others flagged shortages of resources as a barrier to participation in reentry initiatives. In addition, enthusiasm among some participants was tempered by what they perceived as a lack of leadership and vision necessary for success. Leadership affected everything. Individual service providers might be able to make an impact at the margin, but creating the desired changes in outlook and thinking on a statewide basis required a victim-centered vision that started at the top, set the standard, and lead the way.⁵

There should be more meetings between those in the trenches as well as those in leadership positions. There's such a huge disconnect. Just getting together to start a conversation would make a difference.

There should be a statewide advisory council or a task force or a roundtable to bring people together – victim advocates, domestic violence providers, parole, probation, court administrators, line workers.

⁵ It is notable that strong leadership and vision characterize innovative reentry initiatives such as the programs outlined in Appendix I.

We very seldom get a chance to be in a mixed group of professionals and we've never looked at the issues from a victim perspective, only at what the offender needs.

The parole officer dealing with the offender and the victim advocate who knows the victim and the history should both contact the victim to ask about safety issues at the point that parole was being considered.

There's less and less funding. The only way to push off is for providers to sit down and work together.

If you want to encourage the involvement of victim service providers and promote collaboration, you must start with funding.

If you haven't been a victim, you aren't sensitized to victim issues. Victim advocates should be active players because they are best placed to effectively bring attention to the victim perspective. But it won't happen in the absence of a leadership that gives greater priority to victim issues overall.

It's all about collaboration and how serious corrections is about the services. There are lots of reentry programs, but who is advocating for the services?

The reason victims don't get notified about parole hearings or the offender's release is because it has never been a priority for those at the top. Often there's no proper training for the victim-witness coordinators—how can they have a vision of what they've never seen or been taught? It's all too laissez faire with 21 different counties and philosophies.

You must mandate participation – it won't grow organically.

We need a victim-centered philosophy at the top – victim-witness coordinators come to work and have to put on a straitjacket – odds of a victim-centered approach are fifty percent.

Top-down and bottom-up support is needed for success.

Victim Needs

Successful reentry also means providing information and support to address victim needs.

There was consensus among the focus group participants that victims have specific needs relating to the release of their offenders that vary according to the nature of the crime, the relationship between victim and offender, and other factors. Many of the needs pinpointed by participants were interrelated or overlapped with each other. Service providers listed **victim safety, effective notification of the offender's release, information about the offender and the system, emotional support, and assistance with financial issues** as priority needs. Victim participants emphasized, in particular, their concerns about **offender rehabilitation and public safety and the need for more information.**

Safety and Security

For many service providers, safety was the number one priority regarding the return of prisoners from incarceration.⁶ Providers working with victims of family violence and child abuse focused on the safety of individual victims and the need to review safety options prior to the release. Victim participants whose relatives were victims of homicide were primarily concerned about the risk to public safety posed by the release of their offenders. Safety concerns intertwined with a whole host of issues: weaknesses in the notification system; the importance of victim confidentiality; the need for information about supervision arrangements; the uneven quality and uncertain impact of offender treatment and education programs; the need for victims to be realistic in their expectations of rehabilitation programs; and the need for victims to be educated about the limitations of sex offender treatment. Several domestic violence providers expressed frustration over the fact that they often learned of the offender's release from the victim and did not know in advance whether their clients were at risk. This hampered their ability to provide effective services in relation to safety issues.

We need to re-evaluate victims' safety plans when the offender's release is pending. This is a time when they need to review all their options, including relocation.

We must recognize that not all programs for offenders are equally good and that if programs are not effective, they may place victims at greater risk because they give a false sense of security.

⁶ Concern for victim safety is an important characteristic of some newer reentry initiatives such as those in Burlington, Vermont, Newhaven, Connecticut, and Washington outlined at the end of this report in Appendix I.

Families need much more education about the limitations of sex offender treatment because they have implications for the offender's return.

We tend to assume that if the victim doesn't call us, she is ok.

Adequate Notice and Effective Notification

In New Jersey, the office of victim-witness advocacy in each county is responsible for notifying victims about specific events in their case, including whether a convicted offender is eligible for parole and post-conviction release.⁷ Effective notification is essential if victims are to be able to exercise their rights to participate at key stages of the criminal justice process. The focus group discussions disclosed a notable degree of confusion about how the system is meant to work as well as considerable criticism about the way it operates in practice.

Some participants thought the system worked well: for example, in Camden, a well-maintained database and good management seemed to solve most problems. In contrast, many other participants were extremely critical about the way things worked, suggesting a lack of consistency in the notification system across counties. The weaknesses in the system meant some victims were notified much too late and others “fell through the cracks” and failed to receive any notice of the offender’s release.

Everyone, regardless of their assessment of the system, saw effective notification as critical to victim needs and interests. The length of notice received by victims had a direct bearing on safety issues; their ability to address financial and practical issues such as restitution, child support, and visitation rights; and their ability to prepare emotionally for the offender’s return.

From a safety perspective, the ability of victims to provide input into decisions about parole conditions and having sufficient notice of the offender’s release could both be crucial. It was important for victims to be able to consider their options and take whatever steps necessary to protect their safety *while the offender was still incarcerated*. Many providers suggested that six months notice prior to the offender’s release was necessary to give victims time to address safety and other issues. Some victim participants wanted to be notified one year ahead of the expected release, with further notices at six months and one month before the actual release date. Some providers serving domestic violence victims complained that they received no independent notification and typically heard about an offender’s release from the victim. This made it difficult if not impossible for

⁷ New Jersey Department of Law and Public Safety Crime Victim’s Guide to the Criminal Justice System. See: <http://www.state.nj.us/lps/dcj/victimwitness/guide.htm>

them to effectively serve their clients, for example, by reviewing safety options and helping with practical issues prior to the offender's release.

Standard letters are sent out. It works in most cases, although every once in a while things go wrong. We also notify law enforcement where the offense took place and where the victim resides. Even where there are no addresses for victims, efforts are made to find them and notify them.

We have to remember, there's a high illiteracy rate in New Jersey and notification by letter is only in English. We need a better post-prosecution notification system. Even victim service providers find it hard to get accurate information about release dates.

Not everyone has access to technology and, in any event, information provided through Web sites may be out of date. There has to be someone who can dispel the confusion. At the moment, calls might go out to the victim when the victim is dead, and the notification should have gone to relatives.

To the victim, the accountability of the system is non-existent. The system is not prepared because of lack of computerization, staff turnover, and other problems. It is not able to incorporate a victim perspective because it is an antiquated system.

Information about the Offender and the System

Another critical need for victims was having information about the offender and the system.⁸ Concerns about individual and/or public safety, worries about practical issues such as child support and visitation rights, and the desire to know whether the offender had participated in educational and treatment programs were among many reasons why it was so important to victims to have information. Generally, victim participants wanted much more information than they received and one of their greatest concerns (reiterated in comments by providers) was finding out whether their offenders felt remorse for what they had done.

Victims also wanted information about the way the system worked: for example, the minimum time the offender had to serve, the earliest date the offender might be released, what information they could give to or receive from parole officers. Provider participants

⁸ It is worth noting that the need to provide victims with increased information is one of the critical issues being addressed in the Reentry Partnership Initiative programs. See for example, Byrne, Taxman, and Young, "Emerging Roles and Responsibilities in the Reentry Partnership Initiative: New Ways of Doing Business."

described the issues in similar terms, some highlighting the problems faced by victims through references to problems they had themselves encountered. There was no consensus on solutions, but many participants believed the system could be more user-friendly from a victim perspective. Some thought, for example, that more information about offenders could be released, despite rules protecting offender privacy and confidentiality, by explaining to offenders why victims wanted the information and asking them to sign waivers.

We relive the homicides all the time. We worry about what the safety's going to be like. Does he have any remorse? I want to know if the offender is remorseful—I want to know whether he's changed his life, whether he has been rehabilitated—whether he will recidivate, whether 25 years has been enough.

The boy who killed my son was on parole. My son was the 8th person he killed—the 8th of 11 bodies. Why was he out?

The prosecutors believed he would offend again. I have no contact with parole, and I have a lot of questions.

We want all kinds of information. What programs or treatment the offender had in prison, whether he has done something to change his attitude and behavior, what kind of supervision he's going to get, what conditions he'll be under when he comes out, how long supervision will last, where he is going to live, what he is going to do with his life.

Victims need to understand their rights and how to navigate through the system. They need to know who to approach if they experience problems relating to the offender's return, whether they or their family members can pass information to the parole officer about parole violations. Victims don't know about victim services—when the person who has committed the crime is a parolee, the family/victim can't understand what happened. They feel slighted because some individuals go on committing the same offenses over and over.

If I don't identify myself, I can't reach individual officers. There should be a central victim coordinator. The problem is that parole is looking at the offender from a global perspective—at all the issues—and a call from a victim may not necessarily be seen as important.

There could be more communication and information if offenders were asked to sign waivers allowing the release of additional information to victims. Many offenders will sign waivers if asked.

Emotional Support

There was widespread agreement that victims need a lot of emotional support at the time their offenders return to the community. Notification of the offender's release acts as a trigger, reviving painful memories. It can provoke a wide range of emotional responses including feelings of re-victimization, symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder, fears for personal safety, and anxieties about whether the offender has been rehabilitated. Providers working with homicide survivors emphasized the importance of preparing their clients emotionally for the offender's release. This meant providing victims with information well in advance of the actual release date as well as offering support and counseling.

In many cases, psychological issues relating to the crime had never been fully addressed by the victim. Occasionally, this might even provoke thoughts of revenge. Young children and older children victimized at a younger age often needed specialist counseling to help them prepare for the offender's return. There was also a need expressed for broader support to help victims cope with the offender's return, especially in cases where offenders maxed out and were not subject to any parole supervision on their release.

Victims feel re-victimized when offenders are released. At sentencing, they tend to shut down. They aren't hearing a lot and may not reach out to either counselors or peers at that time. It's often a case of untreated PTSD. Victims need support to hold them together emotionally—a lot of family members don't go to parole hearings because it's so hard.

When the offender's release is pending, homicide survivors need to know they aren't alone. They often find support groups invaluable. We also train survivors to be mentors because relatives of homicide victims often prefer talking to other survivors than to professionals—the mentoring system gets rid of the professional aura.

If the offender is going to return to the victim's neighborhood, the victim feels punished; "Why should I be the one who has to move?" This is a huge issue.

I'm concerned about whether someone in my family will try to take revenge when he comes back—I have a 25-year-old son and a 16-year-old, and there's my son's father. The impact on them has been huge and I worry about what they might do.

Restitution and Other Financial Support

Providers serving victims of domestic or family violence highlighted the financial issues many victims face when their offenders return. It was particularly important, for example, for victims to know whether the offender would pay/continue to pay child support and/or restitution. Other participants stressed the importance of providing victims with options, letting them decide for themselves whether they wanted to pursue the offender for restitution. There were different views about the significance of restitution when payments were often so small: some participants suggested that anything short of full restitution was meaningless; others took the view that even small weekly payments could be meaningful for some victims and make a difference.

Restitution may be very important and the offender may have been paying this while incarcerated. The DOC [Department of Corrections] takes funds from inmates while they are incarcerated and continuing payments to the victim may be a condition of parole.

Financial issues surface very early—but some victims don't want everyone to learn what happened to them and will choose poverty to preserve their privacy and confidentiality. We need to make sure that victims have a choice.

Offender Rehabilitation and Supervision

Amid comments that reflected a mix of personal anguish, anger, and anxiety about community or individual safety, the victim participants showed remarkable concern for the rehabilitation of their offenders, even in the most heinous cases. However, they—like many service provider participants—had little confidence that the system was giving rehabilitation sufficient priority and saw the need for much greater efforts to be made on many fronts including offender education, job training, and treatment for substance abuse.

I have often been overwhelmed by the compassion of many victims for juvenile offenders. They worry about what kind of help they have received and what will happen when they are released.

When I saw the scrawny boy who killed my son—my youngest child—

I couldn't believe it. What had gone so wrong in this boy's life that he did what he did? His mother didn't even show up at the trial. What went wrong? Why didn't someone do something for him? We relive the homicides all the time. We worry about what the safety's going to be like.

If you go into an institution like a prison, there are different spirits and forces. The offenders—they feel like they are the victims, and a lot of them are. They have had no life. No life at all. These crimes were committed in a passionate moment. There's no thinking there.

I think from childhood, something has been terribly wrong in their lives—crackheads living together, no one paying attention to them, helping them.

Families have no faith in the system. I don't see any rehabilitation going on in halfway houses or prisons. They need substance abuse treatment, mental health and health services, education—general education, not just about the impact of crime, and jobs. This is major. Why is no one doing anything?

It's all about collaboration and how serious corrections is about the services.

Failure to Supervise Released Offenders

Worries about neglect of offender rehabilitation were coupled with deep concerns about inadequacies in the supervision system. While some participants pointed out that offenders are often held accountable—i.e., many do get returned to prison for violations of parole, as the statistics demonstrate—many others (both victims and victim service providers) expressed total disenchantment with the system. Providers echoed victim concerns about the absence of spot checks to keep offenders in line and the ease with which they manipulated their parole officers. For some, the answer lay in a much tougher supervision regime; for others, lack of faith in the parole system seemed to strengthen their conviction that there had to be more effective rehabilitation during incarceration.

The offenders know the system so well. They build relationships with the parole officer, and the officers go that extra mile to get them services, and then they just manipulate them.

The offenders—they've got the system all worked out. They can manipulate everything—the drug tests, the curfews.

Supervision is much too mechanical. There's no element of surprise. Offenders generally know when parole officers are going to check on them. I've had victims

phone me to tell me they just took a message from the parole officer saying when he was coming.

Offenders should be required to have two years of counseling and rehabilitation—with drug screening for all offenders twice weekly (whether or not they are users)—just to keep them on their guard and make them take everything more seriously. You have to show the offender he couldn't do what he did and get away with it.

They can't do anything to help us, but we can help prevent the same thing happening to someone else. We need to know that parole is going to protect the public.

There can be no round-the-clock watching. We know that. That's why we need to know whether the offender has been rehabilitated.

Concerns about Continuity and Continuation

The need for continuity between in-prison and post-prison programs was another theme that emerged from the focus group discussions. There were special concerns about the lack of programs for offenders after their release. For example, juveniles might make great strides while incarcerated, perhaps improving two or three grade levels; but when they come out, they have nothing and risk losing everything they had gained. Some providers highlighted specific gaps in community-based programs and pointed more generally to the lack of community resources in places such as Newark to which large numbers of prisoners return each year.

There must be something in place to let offenders continue their education when they are released—otherwise they will just continue their education on the streets.

We have no drug rehabilitation centers in Newark. We have jails, but no community centers.

Roles for Victim Service Providers

All focus group participants believed that victim service providers could contribute in one way or another to the effectiveness of reentry policies. For many, the most obvious role was participation in impact of crime programs—educational efforts designed to bring home to offenders the consequences of their crimes for victims and communities. Some saw roles for themselves in programs that provide counseling and support to incarcerated offenders with victimization histories or newly released parolees. Many thought victim

service providers should be involved in the development of reentry policies and in the education of parole officers and allied professionals on victim issues relating to the return of their offenders.

Impact of Crime Programs

The majority of participants, including victims, believed that “impact of crime” programs were an important aspect of offender rehabilitation. Many praised the New Jersey Department of Corrections “Focus on the Victim” program that involves victims and victim service providers as guest speakers. (See Appendix I for further details). Among its most enthusiastic supporters were participants who had actually been involved in this program. While some participants pointed out that incarcerated offenders were not always (and, in some cases, never) ready to hear the messages that impact of crime classes sought to communicate, even skeptics conceded that the appearance of victims recounting their experiences first-hand could sometimes trigger changes of attitude. Some believed impact of crime programs were especially suitable for juvenile offenders—a population perceived to be more receptive to the messages of restorative justice than adult offenders. Restorative justice is defined in many ways but typically stresses offender accountability and the need to repair the harm caused by the crime through some kind of participatory process involving victims and the community.⁹

Many offenders are not ready to hear these messages. They are too angry to be receptive.

Youth offenders are at the crossroads and victim impact education is an important component in their rehabilitation—to break the cycle—even if they are themselves victims, they have built walls around it.

If offenders think committing crime is worth the risk, they will re-offend. But there may still be opportunities to change their outlook through “values enhancement” classes that involve victims and teach cognitive skills.

If you can save just one, it’s worth it. To me, if I can help someone else’s kid, I will do it.

Counseling and Support for Prisoners with Prior Victimization

Not all participants thought it was desirable for victim service providers to become involved in offender programs other than impact of crime classes. However, some believed their participation in counseling and treatment for prisoners who had

⁹ See for example, Leena Kurki, “Incorporating Restorative and Community Justice into American Sentencing and Corrections,” (Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice, 1999).

experienced victimization was entirely appropriate. Indeed, one participant criticized domestic violence providers who were reluctant to offer services to formerly incarcerated victims of domestic abuse. This added to the stigma they experienced and made it harder for them to reintegrate on their release. Another praised recent initiatives that had resulted in the provision of services to high-risk parolees with victimization histories. The involvement of victim service providers was part of broader collaborative efforts that aimed to reduce recidivism and increase reentry success among a high-risk offender population.

It's one thing to work with abused women incarcerated for drug offenses—I look at this population differently. I don't think I would feel the same about working with a man who has conviction for sexual assault or homicide.

My involvement in the Greater Newark Safer Cities Initiative has enabled us to offer services to a client population we haven't served hitherto—offenders who are also victims. This is a client population we wouldn't normally see and I've had to overcome my biases. We don't have an “us against them” attitude and I think this is good.

Education for Parole Officers and Victim Service Providers

Another important theme that emerged in all the focus groups was the need for more education: for parole officers, so they understand and grasp the importance of victim concerns relating to reentry; and for victim service providers, who are often uninformed or unclear about the reentry process, and, consequently, unable to effectively address many victim needs and concerns stemming from the release of their offenders from incarceration.

Need to Educate Parole Officers

There was a general consensus that parole officers had insufficient appreciation of victim reentry needs and concerns and required much more education about the victim perspective (even in relation to safety issues) than they currently received. They have to understand why victims are so often concerned about the offender's return, why they want information about the offender, and why it is important for the system to be sensitive to victims' needs and concerns.

Providers working with domestic violence batterers stressed the need for parole officers to understand the cycle of violence and the dynamic of domestic abuse. They also pointed out how important it was for officers to appreciate the significance of victim confidentiality and avoid inadvertent disclosure of information to offenders that could

jeopardize victim safety. Wherever there is a history of domestic violence, irrespective of the crime for which the offender is currently incarcerated, safety is a critical reentry issue. Parole officers must be alert and careful as they work with offenders on reentry issues. For example, prisoners who have been domestic abusers often seek to reunite with their victims: they may give the victim's address as their place of residence on release, irrespective of the victim's wishes or a restraining order designed to prevent contact. Even when victims willingly reunite with their offenders, they may be at risk. Ignorance of the offender's past can endanger the victim as well as increase the likelihood of parole violations and recidivism.

Education for those who operate the notification system is very limited—they get one class a year and need much more intensive training.

Corrections and parole officers need to know that addressing domestic violence involves much more than participation in an anger management class.

We need to be conscientious about how information received from victims is used. There is a real risk of re-victimization of domestic violence victims if information is used unwisely. Parole officers must be very cautious about what they disclose to the offender.

They only see the prison side of things and need to know what the victim has gone through and is going through—they don't see the domestic violence side of things enough.

Roles for Victim Service Providers in the Education of Parole Officers

A number of participants were convinced that victim service providers could help educate parole officers on victim issues and mentioned prior involvement in trainings for allied professionals such as law enforcement and corrections officers. While acknowledging the challenges, several believed, on the basis of their personal experience, that victim service providers can influence attitudes and working practices. In particular, they felt their first-hand experience made a difference in terms of their ability to effectively communicate key messages about the impact of victimization and appropriate responses to victims. Some stressed, in particular, the need for early and continuing education on victim issues. Everyone supported the idea of well-designed, quality trainings and continuing education. But there was also a strong feeling that victim service providers could be especially influential in informal, non-training settings—for example, working alongside parole and law enforcement officers as colleagues. There was a sense that failure to encourage collaboration meant an important opportunity for mutual education was being missed.

Victim service providers can do work inside the system, training people to understand victim issues and provide effective offender education, asking questions about remorse, understanding...the impact of the crime on/damage to the victim and the community—a big potential contribution is being missed.

Attitudes are tough to change. But programs for police and corrections on DV and child abuse can be effective—if the officers are given something that grabs them, such as a victim who relates her personal experience.

I have taught officers at the Police Academy and I believe teaching about victims' emotional responses to trauma can be effective. I think I helped to raise consciousness about the issues.

I find it's great to do trainings with the graduating class of police cadets. Teaching about victim needs should start early and continue.

To communicate effectively with parole officers, victim service providers needed a 360-degree perspective that only comes from experience providing services for offenders. Communicating with parole officers as a victim advocate is very different.

Informal learning may be more effective than formal training—being part of an ongoing collaboration is likely to be better than a one-shot deal.

Need to Educate Victim Service Providers

It was not only parole officers who lacked training and education. Many victim service providers candidly admitted that they understood far too little about the reentry process and needed much more information about the way the system worked. There were a host of issues they needed to grasp, including, for example, rules protecting offender confidentiality and privacy. Many victim advocates – including domestic violence providers – did not have a sufficiently clear picture to enable them to educate and inform victims or effectively address their reentry concerns. Being better informed would also increase their credibility and make them more attractive as potential partners for those working with offenders.

Many of us who serve victims are ill-informed about the system – we don't always understand the rules and can't answer victim questions, e.g., on computation of perpetrator credits that affect release date, restitution.

Many clinicians ignore the court system like the plague. This is a huge issue. They don't even know what they don't know.

We need a resource manual – the state could provide this – and it would be a great help.

Section 2. Lessons Learned

The focus group discussions touched on many topics that often overlapped or were interrelated. But clear themes emerged. These carried important messages about reentry processes from a victim perspective and ways in which victim service providers can help enhance reentry policies. These messages are synthesized below in terms of key “lessons learned” from the participants.

Several of these lessons reflect some sharp criticisms of the parole system that were articulated by many of the victim service providers, as well as the victims, who took part in the focus groups. It should be noted, however, that parole officers are often constrained by limited resources and legal mandates (for example, regarding offender confidentiality and privacy). The findings from this project emphasize the need for an ongoing dialogue between victim service providers, victims and all organizations involved in reentry efforts.

- **Many victim service providers want to be involved in reentry.**

Many victim service providers believe they can contribute to the effectiveness of reentry policies if given a chance. They want to be at the table when policies are formulated because failure to address victim concerns weakens reentry programs. Many want to participate in “impact of crime” programs designed to change offender attitudes. Some believe they have an important role helping incarcerated (and released prisoners) with histories of victimization. Overall, the enthusiasm among providers for involvement in reentry collaborations was striking and impressive. Nevertheless, as some pointed out, whether (or the extent to which) providers could participate substantively to reentry initiatives ultimately depended on funding. The majority of nonprofit providers were already severely stretched: to elicit their participation, they had to be fairly compensated for services they provided.

- **The notification system has troubling weaknesses.**

The system for notifying victims about parole hearings and offenders’ release dates appears to work well in some parts of the state but less well elsewhere. For example, some victims are not notified in a timely manner (or at all) about the offender’s release date. In addition, service providers may only learn about a release from a distressed or angry victim. The flaws in the notification system undermine the ability of victims to participate in the justice process (e.g., attend parole hearings), address practical issues (e.g., reviewing safety plans), and prepare themselves emotionally for the offender’s return. These shortcomings also make it harder for victim service providers to serve victims effectively.

- **The release process is not user-friendly from a victim-perspective.**

Many victims do not know where to turn or who to call when they have concerns relating to the offender's release. They do not know whether the parole officer will accept a call from a family member or what information he/she is entitled to receive or release. They are confused about their rights and cannot easily navigate through the release process. Even victim service providers may be unable to answer their questions or provide the information they want.

- **Parole officers need a much better grasp of victim issues relating to reentry.**

Parole officers need to understand victim issues relating to the reentry of their offenders. They need to have a general grasp of victim needs and concerns and a specific understanding of the dynamics of domestic violence. Parole officers must appreciate the risks that any prisoner with a history of domestic abuse may pose on release, regardless of whether he was incarcerated for a domestic violence offense or another crime.

- **Victim service providers are well-placed to educate parole officers about victim needs.**

Although it is hard to change attitudes, experience suggests that victim service providers are well-placed to educate parole officers, in formal and informal settings, as a result of their first-hand experience working with victims and their understanding of responses that help victims stay safe and recover from the impact of crime.

- **Victim service providers need to become better informed about reentry processes.**

There is no common understanding of reentry processes and this hampers the ability of victim service providers to explain it to their clients. As a result, providers are less effective in addressing victim needs at reentry than they would otherwise be. Lack of knowledge and understanding about reentry processes may also undermine the credibility of victim service providers as potential partners in the eyes of correctional and parole officials.

- **For lasting change, there has to be a victim-centered vision and leadership from the top.**

Individual victim service providers may be able to make an impact at the margin, but without vision and leadership from the top, meaningful and enduring change on a statewide basis will not occur. This will only happen when all relevant elected and appointed leaders embrace victim-centered policies. To promote successful reentry collaborations, the Attorney-General, the Police Commissioner, the Commissioner for

Corrections, the Chairman of the State Parole Board, the Executive Director of the Juvenile Justice Commission, members of the Judiciary, and others in senior leadership roles must all share a common vision and actively play their part.

Section 3. Recommendations

The following recommendations are informed by the lessons learned from focus group discussions and research on victim-focused reentry initiatives in New Jersey and elsewhere in the country, a few of which are summarized in Appendix I. The recommendations are practical suggestions for increasing the involvement of victim service providers in reentry on various fronts.

1. New Jersey reentry policies and the victim perspective

As reentry policies are developed and implemented, ensure that victim advocates and service providers are included in all policy discussions about reentry and involved at all levels. For example, to the extent that the state implements the "Prisoner Reentry State Action Plan" developed through the National Governors Association Prisoner Reentry Policy Academy, victim advocates should be included as full members of all policy and management teams and work groups. Victim advocates should also participate in other bodies or initiatives that address rehabilitation and reentry, such as the Criminal Disposition Commission, the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative, and the community task forces developed through the State Parole Board's local forums with community and faith-based groups. Most victims and offenders do not live in separate worlds: typically, they are part of the same communities and sometimes reside together. To strengthen reentry policies and programs, it is vital to incorporate the victim perspective. To achieve this, victim service providers must be full partners in the collaborative efforts that are seeking to reduce recidivism and increase public safety.

2. Notification system

Initiate an immediate review of the notification system to identify barriers to efficiency and effectiveness (including the process, the adequacy of the notice period, and other issues) and the changes needed to improve the system. Whatever means are chosen to undertake such a review, ensure that victims, victim service providers, and representatives from the county prosecutor's offices participate, in addition to members of the Parole Board and the Department of Corrections. Pending the outcome of such a review, the Parole Board, for the benefit of victims and victim advocates, should compile and publish information about what is supposed to happen under the current notification system.

3. Department of Corrections "Focus on the Victim" program

Expand and develop the Department of Corrections program by increasing the involvement of victim service providers.

- Recruit more victim service providers and victims to enable more inmates to participate in the program.
- Include a segment in the program to specifically address the question of the victim's desire for more information and the ability of the offender to facilitate release of information by signing a waiver.
- Establish a working group that includes victim advocates to explore ways in which the roles of victim service providers and victims in the program can be expanded.

4. Education for parole officers about victim needs in the reentry process

Expand and develop training opportunities and educational resources for parole officers. In particular:

- Recruit victim service providers to develop and operate systematic trainings for parole officers on victim needs relating to offender reentry.
- Commission victim service providers to create a resource manual and other user-friendly material to help parole and corrections officers understand victim reentry needs.

5. Education for victim service providers and others

Develop a set of resources on reentry, including, in particular, a comprehensive manual on the reentry process for victim service providers. In addition, review the adequacy of existing information available to victims and the general public (for example, information from the Attorney-General's Office of Law and Public Safety, the Parole Board, and the Department of Corrections) with the assistance of victim advocates. If more accessible and user-friendly materials are needed, ensure that victim-witness coordinators and private nonprofit victim service providers participate in decisions about their content and form.

Section 5. Conclusion

In recent years, much attention has focused on the complex challenges of prisoner reentry, but there has been relatively little focus on the needs of victims when offenders return from incarceration. Yet, the success or failure of reentry policies is directly relevant to victims and those who serve them. The basic premise of this report is that the incorporation of a victim perspective into thinking about reentry is not only necessary to address the needs of victims but also to strengthen policies whose aim is to reduce recidivism and increase public safety. The focus groups in Newark, Trenton, and Camden demonstrated that many victim service providers are willing and ready to play an active role as New Jersey implements its Prisoner Reentry State Action Plan. It is in the interests of victims, offenders, and the whole community that they are included. They are waiting to be invited to the table.

Appendix I. Reentry Initiatives with a Victim Perspective

The need for more effective reentry strategies that increase public safety and reduce recidivism among returning prisoners has resulted in many new initiatives. Some specifically address reentry challenges from the victim perspective. To give a sense of the variety and creativity reflected in these initiatives, a few examples of victim-focused reentry programs are summarized below.

New Jersey Department of Corrections “Focus on the Victim” Program

This 14-week educational program comprises 2-hour sessions for groups of 14 inmates. The program addresses community justice, robbery and property crimes, drunk driving, hate/bias crimes, domestic violence, child abuse, crimes against the elderly, sexual assault, and homicide. It also explores the psychological impact of crime through audio-visual materials, writing assignments, and structured discussions. Offenders considered unsuitable because of their negative attitudes and lack of receptiveness to the program’s goals are not eligible to participate.

The program involves a prison social worker, the prison chaplain, and prison educational staff, with victims and victim advocates invited as guest speakers. Approximately three Victim Impact Speakers discuss the impact of the crime on their life, family, and community in each cycle. The program also includes three counseling sessions for the participants; if inmates disclose prior victimization during these sessions, they may be referred to a prison psychologist. Constraints on program expansion stem from staff shortages. The program has approximately 600 graduates to date and Rutgers University is in the process of creating a pre- and post-test evaluation tool.

Reentry Partnership Initiative Program, Burlington, Vermont¹⁰

The goals of Vermont’s restorative reentry partnership program (being piloted in Burlington, Vermont) are to help released prisoners successfully reintegrate and engage and restore the community. At the start of their sentences, inmates undergo a comprehensive assessment that guides their enrollment in specific in-prison programs. Prisoners are required to participate in an educational curriculum with a restorative justice focus and given instructions on how to develop an *Offender Responsibility Plan* (ORP). The ORP encourages and supports offender success, but shifts the case planning emphasis from offender deficits to acknowledging and incorporating the needs of victims and the expectations of communities. The ORP becomes a basis for reentry and reflects activities in which the offender will become involved in prison and post-release under community supervision.

¹⁰ For additional information contact Paul Heath, Community Corrections Project Supervisor at 802-863-7450 or go to http://www.reentrymediaoutreach.org/sp_public_vrrp.htm.

Another key feature of the program is the *Reentry Panel*. This consists of groups of citizens who monitor progress while the offender is incarcerated, receive reports on treatment progress and other issues, and meet with inmates via video conferencing. Prior to their release, offenders meet with the Reentry panel to explain what they have learned and accomplished in prison and the specifics of their release plans. Throughout the process, the panel has opportunities to make input and recommendations to the offender and DOC staff. Post-release, former prisoners continue to meet face-to-face with the panel, approximately every 60 days. Victims are contacted at the outset of the process to give them the option of being involved. Other features of the Vermont program include networking, partnering, and collaborating with citizens, victims, victim services groups, law enforcement, housing agencies, workforce development, and community treatment providers.

Intensive Sex Offender Supervision Unit, New Haven, Connecticut¹¹

The New Haven sex offender supervision team consists of a full-time victim advocate, two therapists, three probation officers, and one relapse prevention probation officer. The addition of the victim advocate resulted from a collaboration among the state Court Support Services Division, treatment providers, and Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services. The purpose is to systematically include the victim's perspective in decision-making and ensure contact with victims and their families. The advocate's primary role is to initiate and maintain contact with victims and their families to provide information about their offender's release, explain the work of the supervision unit with its emphasis on victim safety, and act as liaison and advocate for the victims and their families.

Among other tasks, the victim advocate works with offenders' families to help them understand the dynamics of sex offending and offenders' manipulative behavior. The team meets routinely to discuss how to optimize their collaborative efforts.

RSVP, San Francisco Sheriff's Department¹²

Resolve to Stop the Violence Project, or RSVP, is a restorative justice program created by the San Francisco Sheriff's Department. Working in partnership with many community-based organizations, the Department has developed an innovative violence prevention reentry program that includes victim restitution, offender accountability, and community involvement. The goals are to bring together victims, offenders, and the community to create opportunities for restitution and prevent future violent crimes from being committed. There are three integrated components. The first is the victim

¹¹ For additional information on the New Haven model, see the Center for Sex Offender Management (www.csom.org).

¹² For additional information, see www.ci.sf.ca.us/sheriff/jailpgms.htm#RSVP; see also Sunny Schwartz, Michael Hennessey, and Lelie Levitas: Restorative Justice and the Transformation of Jails: An Urban Sheriff's Case Study in Reducing Violence. *Police Practice and Research*, 2003, Vol 4, No 4, pp 399-410.

restoration program designed to transform victims into survivors and advocates. The second involves community restoration and public education through workshops and discussions about violent crime. The third component focuses on reentry.

The third component uses a peer-based job-training model to help violent offenders with the transition back into the workforce and society, re-educating them and equipping them with life skills. Inmates participate in an intensive program of drama classes, group learning, and group counseling, six days a week for 12 hours a day, designed to make them re-examine their lives. On release, they enter a six-month substance abuse program or the Post Release Education Program and are also required to participate in community restoration activities. Graduates of the program can enroll in the Internship Program. This trains them to become facilitators at male batterer intervention classes and case managers in the field of violence prevention. The interns participate in mandatory classes and sessions conducted by the Sheriff's Department. They also serve as mentors and participate in outreach efforts in schools and neighborhood centers. The participants also write and perform for community theaters in programs that involve survivors of violent crimes. RSVP has been evaluated by Harvard University and shown to be extremely effective in reducing recidivism and increasing job retention and advancement.

Victim Wrap Around Services, Department of Corrections, Washington

The Washington state Department of Corrections (DOC) sees comprehensive “wrap around” services for victims as an essential ingredient of successful offender reentry. Starting with passage of the Offender Accountability Act in 2000, Washington effectively reinvented probation and parole through broad-based partnerships and the development of a new community-oriented model of offender supervision.¹³ The basic premise was the need for collaboration that is now manifested in two separate but related processes: Risk Management Teams that work with offenders; and Victim Wrap Arouns that work to keep victims and their families safe from the offender. Both include DOC staff, victims or their advocates, law enforcement, treatment providers, and community members. Central to the initiative is the concept of “enhanced guardianship of places, victims and offenders.”¹⁴ A guardian is anyone who as a result of his/her proximity or relationship to an offender or a victim has the capacity to influence the behavior of the offender or the safety of the victim or a potential victim, or the safety of places. While an Offender Accountability Plan outlines the strategies for case supervision and the interventions that are needed and the Victim Wrap Around meeting process brings together criminal justice

¹³ Joseph Lehman, “Reinventing Community Corrections in Washington State,” *Corrections Management Quarterly* 5(3) (1999). See also, www.doc.wa.gov/stories/victimwrap.htm.

¹⁴ Joseph Lehman, Trudy Gregorie Beatty, Dennis Maloney, et al, “The Three “R’s” of Reentry,” (Washington, DC: Justice Solutions, 2002).

agents, victim advocates and the victim's natural support system together to develop safety plans for the victim.

Appendix II. Focus Group Questions

The following questionnaire was distributed to the focus group participants before the discussion began. Participants were asked to complete it and return it before the end of the session. It was used as a tool to help people think about the focus of the group discussion.

1. If you can, please name one successful collaboration (of any kind) in which you have been involved.

What was the most important reason the collaboration achieved its goals?

2. Indicate prior involvement in any of the following types of reentry initiatives. Where you answer “YES,” please respond to questions (1)-(4) below.

(a) *In-prison or post-incarceration offender education programs* YES NO
 Examples of education programs include impact of crime, victim impact panels, anger management, relationship violence

- (1) Was it a good program? YES NO
- (2) Do you think this program should be expanded or developed? YES NO
- (3) Were there obstacles to success? YES NO
- (4) If there were obstacles, state briefly how they were overcome.

(b) *Training of parole/corrections officials on victim issues* YES NO

- (1) Was it a good program? YES NO
- (2) Do you think this program should be expanded or developed? YES NO
- (3) Were there obstacles to success? YES NO
- (4) If there were obstacles, state briefly how they were overcome.

(c) *Supervision of offenders in the community* YES NO

- (1) Was it a good program? YES NO
- (2) Do you think this program should be expanded or developed? YES NO
- (3) Were there obstacles to success? YES NO
- (4) If there were obstacles, state briefly how they were overcome.

- (d) *Restorative community service programs for returning prisoners* YES NO
- (1) Was it a good program? YES NO
- (2) Do you think this program should be expanded or developed? YES NO
- (3) Were there obstacles to success? YES NO
- (4) If there were obstacles, state briefly were they overcome.
- (e) *Programs/strategies to address victim reentry needs* YES NO
- (1) Was it a good program? YES NO
- (2) Do you think this program should be expanded or developed? YES NO
- (3) Were there obstacles to success? YES NO
- (4) If there were obstacles, state briefly how they were overcome.
- (f) *Support/services for offenders with histories of victimization/abuse* YES NO
 Examples include counseling and education about the impact of victimization and abuse
- (1) Was it a good program? YES NO
- (2) Do you think this program should be expanded or developed? YES NO
- (3) Were there obstacles to success? YES NO
- (4) If there were obstacles, state briefly how they were overcome.
- (g) *Other (please specify)* YES NO
- (1) Was it a good program? YES NO
- (2) Do you think this program should be expanded or developed? YES NO
- (3) Were there obstacles to success? YES NO
- (4) If there were obstacles, state briefly how they were overcome.

3. **Considering prisoner reentry from a *victim* perspective, name three priorities regarding the return of prisoners to the community.**

4. **Name one significant way in which victim service providers can enhance the effectiveness of reentry initiatives and promote reentry goals.**

5. **Looking to the future, indicate one way in which you would promote the involvement of victim service providers in reentry initiatives.**

Appendix III. Provider Participant List

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Appendix IV: New or Pending Resources for Victims in New Jersey

The following initiatives represent new and promising resources for victims and for victims service providers in the state.

State Parole Board: Updated Website: The New Jersey State Parole Board maintains a website (www.state.nj.us/parole) with a wealth of information about the parole process, contact information, and lists of inmate eligible for parole.

New Resource Guides: The Parole Board will shortly be publishing new Parole Handbooks for adults and juveniles, as well as a new brochure that specifically describes the victim input process. These publications will be available to inmates, families of inmates and parolees, and victims. They will be in simple English and contain up-to-date information. They will also be available in Spanish.

The VINE System: The Attorney-General and the Department of Corrections are developing an automated victim notification program known as VINE, which stands for Victim Information and Notification Everyday. This is a toll-free automated inmate information and notification service (available 24 hours a day, seven days a week) that has already been adopted in some states. VINE enables a victim to call a toll-free number and receive an inmate's current location and tentative release date and/or register to receive an automated notification when an inmate is released, transferred, escapes, is placed in a work release facility, transferred to another jurisdiction, or dies while in custody