

VICTIMS FIRST

BEST PRACTICES/NATIONAL GUIDELINES LEARNED OVER YEARS OF MASS CASUALTY CRIMES

We – our network of families from other mass shootings over many years – have repeatedly gone in after mass shootings to advocate for victims who are too traumatized to speak for themselves and to help counties, cities and states understand what is actually needed for victims and how best to help. This best practices/national guidelines list has been put together in order to help you.

After a mass shooting, your community will become a circus of media, well-wishers, gun violence prevention (gvp) groups, those wanting TV exposure to promote their own organization for fundraising opportunities, self-described “experts” also wanting media attention, and inappropriate calls for museum archiving for temporary memorials before family members are even buried. You will also be inundated with calls from community nonprofits from other mass shootings offering their “help.” Depending on the nonprofit, what they will tell you may result in the re-traumatization and re-victimization of those suffering most.

Typically, people think that federal and/or state victim agencies help to take care of things, and while helpful, they don't even scratch the surface of what is actually needed. Here is what we learned from the Victim/Survivor perspective to help you while making sure that victims are not re-victimized:

FUNDS & FUNDRAISING:

-- Immediately establish one, centralized fund and make certain that 100% of the donations collected from Americans/Corporations/Donors worldwide actually go DIRECTLY TO the victims/survivors. We -- over 130 parents of murdered children, those injured and those who survived from **Columbine, Va Tech, NIU, Tucson, Aurora, Oak Creek Sikh Temple, Newtown, Alturas, Santa Barbara (Isla Vista), Roseburg, San Bernardino, Orlando Pulse Night Club, Las Vegas as well as one of the 9/11 fathers** who worked with Sen. Ted Kennedy to make sure victims were compensated – all endorse One Centralized Fund where 100% goes directly to victims. Other mass shooting victims across the country from more recent mass shootings such as **Uvalde, Allen and Nashville also endorse the use of One Centralized Fund for victims.**

Jeff Dion is the top expert in the United States to distribute a Centralized Fund to take care of ALL victims: families of the deceased, those shot, injured and those who survived (present).

One Centralized Fund helps to end the decades of re-victimization and makes sure donor intent is actually fulfilled. Money collected through other funds usually go everywhere but to the victims themselves. **It also helps to eliminate fraud and keep victim privacy.** (Note: Historically about 10% of donations won't be able to be verified so keep that in mind.)

VictimsFirst is a 501(c)3 and exists solely to distribute tax-deductible donations to victims of mass tragedy. When called upon, we can activate when a mass tragedy happens, collect donations, and distribute those funds directly to the victims in an equitable manner. We work in conjunction with Jeff Dion.

--**Be transparent** about what the funds will be used for. **This has been accomplished in the past by setting up two funds:** One for Victims and the other for Community needs. **Do not co-mingle donations** meant for victims with donations for community-area nonprofits. Be fully transparent with the language that is used. "Supporting the victims" or "Help the victims" does not mean "100% directly to victims" and our families of mass shootings know the difference.

Transparency means to provide the victims' families/survivors and the public with frequent updates on how much has been collected (and/or raised), if this is not updated in real time (ie, via GoFundMe). Be clear about where the money is going and in what amounts/percentages. After a Protocol is established, provide the victims' families/survivors and the public with a clear timeline and frequent/weekly/daily updates.

-- **Organize all possible funding sources that for immediate financial needs.** This is one of the missions of VictimsFirst, to help with immediate, mid-term and long-term needs. Immediate financial help is necessary. Visa, MC gift cards should be bought and granted immediately to families of deceased and all those already identified as victims.

-- **VERY IMPORTANT: If a celebrity, company, etc. wants to deliver a large donation immediately directly to victims, find out first which victims' families are on federal and/or state aid as no one wants a large financial gift to negatively impact their Medicaid or SNAP programs.** There are ways around this so people CAN give and it will not impact their benefits.

-- **Issue an Immediate release of emergency funds directly to victims** (usually the state victim compensation fund can do this). We suggest \$5K immediately once victims are all identified. Let them know help is coming. Incomes for some families have been cut in half. Stress comes also in the form of not knowing how they are going to pay bills while out of work and from belongings (like personal belongings – phones, etc. -- being confiscated during the investigation).

-- **Establish a credible, point person/s to birddog non-profits** to expose fraudulent funds and report them to law enforcement. This should be immediately done by the State Attorney General's office who oversees this kind of thing. Manage fundraising *immediately*.

-- **Memorial Funds** can be a bone of contention for those directly impacted while they watch hundreds of thousands of dollars pour into a Memorial fund while victims themselves cannot pay their bills because of the extreme trauma they are enduring, often unable to work. There is a time and place and it is after the victim base is identified and immediate financial needs are met.

Important note: After a mass shooting, victims' families and survivors immediately sense a loss of control. Allowing victims and survivors to decide for themselves on what they need is an important reason for a Victims Fund (outlined above) to be established. It allows them to cope and manage their trauma the way they need to without having to ask for funds already intended for them, which can be humiliating and degrading.

FUNERALS:

-- **A point person is needed to connect victims with the Office of Victims Assistance (and VOC in their states) that can help with funeral expenses** (typically, victims have not known about this in the past and neither have many victim advocates) and help them fill out any paperwork. PTSD takes hold right away and filling out paperwork can be overwhelming. Let families know that it is available to help financially; that helps to alleviate stress

****This should be done for the entire victim base, not only families of the deceased. Here are state victim comp offices:** <http://www.nacvcb.org/index.asp?sid=6>

-- **Make sure families know that funeral costs covered generally do not include** the buying of burial plots and headstones. For both the big donor and the victim's sakes, make sure efforts are not duplicated by state/federal programs. Realize that travel costs are covered and vary by state. (For example, professional services for funeral/burial services, flowers, caskets, urns and grave markers can be covered in Texas along with transportation of deceased over 50 miles, but these reimbursements are limited to \$6,500).

-- **Provide security at funeral services and establish national guidelines for communities to follow** when protestors (such as the Westboro Baptist Church) wish to make a media event out of a private day of mourning. Establish minimum distances and proximity requirements to ensure that funeral services are not desecrated.

-- **Pact immediately with hotel and airlines and Uber/Lyft** to help families who must fly in to identify their loved ones bodies or be at their hospital bedside.

COMMUNICATION:

-- **Provide interpreters.** Know your victim base and make sure you have interpreters for all victims, including providing translations on your website.

-- **Make sure there are trauma specialists who can be on call 24/7.**

-- **NoNotoriety Policy.** Make sure First Responders and Politicians (ANYONE deemed to speak to the media) are all on the same page, focusing on the victims and heroes and not the shooter. Teach people about media sensitivity not only for **public safety** reasons but to stop re-victimizing victims. There IS a proven contagion effect and copycats or threats will definitely follow. www.nonotoriety.com

-- **Make sure all key first responders (law enforcement) have cell phone numbers of city and community leaders and vice versa.** Designate one or two competent people to organize all of this for the sake of the victims and communities.

-- **Language is important** and the words someone uses can be very re-victimizing to those directly impacted. For instance, using the word "lost" when referring to a child so violently ripped from one's family. **Family members shot and killed were not "lost."** They were murdered, taken from our families, lives stolen, stolen from us.

Similarly with the use of 'anniversary' of the shooting. It is nothing to celebrate and many prefer using the words **"year mark"** as in the first year-mark or **"remembrance."**

After a mass shooting, never say, "It could have been worse." For families of the deceased, it can get no worse.

Avoid the word "healing" because for families of the deceased, there is only the path of learning how to cope and manage the trauma.

-- **Give victims the option of being able to talk to other families of the deceased and survivors of past mass casualty crimes** so you can have questions answered by those who know, who have lived through it, and be prepared for what will be experienced in both the short-term and long-term. Victim advocates, while well-meaning, can add more stress and others who have been through these tragedies who have the experience and knowledge, understanding and sensitivity, should work in conjunction with

advocates to reduce stress. Usually the FBI creates a wall. That is the opposite of what should be happening.

-- **Have victims from previous mass casualty crimes work with politicians and those in the community so the proper words and language are used** when speaking to and about victims of crime. Make sure they have the proper pronunciations of names of the deceased. (For example, those who are deceased are not “lost” rather they were murdered, shot and killed, taken).

-- **A name and number from both federal and local law enforcement** to each family for other issues that always arise (stalking, death threats, bullying on social media, fraudulent victims funds, conspiracy theorists, violation of privacy issues, and many others such as how to remove your home address and phone number from Internet people search sites or remove fraudulent social media accounts).

-- **After the mass casualty crime, property will be confiscated.** This creates its own issues for victims in regards to needing phones, medical equipment, etc. After the investigation, property will be returned. For families of the deceased, it is an excruciatingly hard day. If there is a trial, it will be longer. But, please coordinate with trauma specialists for survivors on these days.

MEDIA:

-- **Assist families/survivors in controlling the use of images of the deceased.** Frequently, media outlets and fundraising groups will gather images of the victims from the internet and use them without consent of the owners of those images. Misuse of images of the victims re-victimizes the survivors and disrespects the deceased. Again, much of this can be avoided by having approved images released through the wire services for use by news media outlets.

-- **Have victim advocates assist families of the deceased/injured also with putting together a statement for the press about their loved one.** While in horrible grief, we have been hounded in the past by the media to do this and if not done, the media puts up their own information, thereby re-victimizing victims’ families yet again.

-- **Provide professional Communications person to help victims with the crushing amount of media and groups reaching out** to try to get to the victims. There is simply no way for them to sift through any of it. The scope is beyond comprehension.

SCHOOL CHILDREN:

-- **Local School District/Principal should be aware that it is re-victimizing for families** to have their deceased loved ones immediately purged out of the school’s files. Offer to talk to each family – either directly or through the victim’s advocate -- to see what their individual wishes are. Some want to gather up their children’s or loved ones records.

In addition, certain activities designed to create a perception of safety for returning survivors (such as the presence of increased armed security personnel, active shooter drills and clear backpacks) have added to, not reduced, feelings of trauma and victimization for students.

-- **Bereavement counselors and trauma specialists for schoolchildren and teachers in schools** both directly inside the community impacted and indirectly in neighboring communities when needed. It will be a scary time for both children and teachers/adults whether the shooting/terrorist attack impacted them directly or not.

-- **Behavioral health programs should be proactive, not reactive, in nature.** Many children may not recognize the need to seek care, particularly teenagers. In addition, seeking care may be challenged by

stigma, fear, availability of resources and payments. The goal of the school and community programs should be proactive and long-term in nature and include population-based screening, navigation to appropriate, individualized services and management of progress over time.

– **Of utmost importance is having an alternative for school kids** who are so traumatized that they are not sure they can finish their education. Children cannot learn if they don't feel safe. We need something to help them (We have seen kids go from straight A's to C's and the school gives no alternative to finish their education). There are K12 programs already in 33 states. There are also Independent Study programs at schools.

HOW POLITICIANS CAN TRULY HELP:

-- **Make sure families can recover their loved one's bodies quickly** to avoid the risk of re-traumatization including the violation of religious preferences.

-- **Work with D.A./Coroner's office to keep autopsy photos and reports from being made public.** It should be up to the individual families as there are other siblings, relatives, etc. that are also impacted.

-- **ASK the families what THEY want** instead of doing what city officials want. In one incident, only a week to 10 days after the shooting, families were *unbelievably* asked if they wanted to attend a memorial inside the building of their loved ones killing ground. Oftentimes, memorials, scholarships and city events are set up without knowledge or any input from the families themselves. This is the opposite of what should be happening.

-- **Work to get Priority Processing of SSA** for victim/survivors who are deemed unable to work for life as a result of a mass casualty crime.

– **Work to extend Medicare, Medicaid and CHIP** for those who need it a year after the final appointment at the hospital for medications, supplies and care for those shot and trying to heal.

-- In the past, **hospitals have generously absorbed the initial bills of the victims** (thereby relieving overwhelming stress). The city or state should reach out to see if this is possible.

-- **Make sure cities immediately apply for federal and state grants** for mental health. There are MULTI-MILLION dollar grants that can come in later.

– **Point people for the victim base to make Worker Comp claims (if applicable) go smoothly** so victims aren't denied crucial medical care and medications (which happened in San Bernardino).

CRITICAL: Work across the aisle to establish a Mass Violence Care Fund in your state for long-term needs. While a reactive Victims Fund is necessary for emergency relief, a proactive Mass Violence Care Fund is needed to offset ongoing medical and mental health costs not covered by insurance after the 3-year mark. VTVCare.org offers a sustainable & perpetual endowment/investment model that has proven to work. It is already being implemented across the country (i.e. VA, Maine).

HOW BUSINESSES CAN TRULY HELP:

-- **Immediate point people on the victim contingent side and community side who can work together to find and fulfill short-term help** (childcare, pet care, getting groceries, shoveling sidewalks, mowing lawns, help filling out forms and a host of other vital, day-to-day help that most people don't even think about). Businesses in the community often want to offer help.

-- **Coordination of efforts between businesses** wanting to give gift cards to the families and the need ... they will flood in from everywhere. If it is high-profile, letters will flood in as well for the victims.

-- **Help victims/survivors who need it find disability accessible housing, transportation, etc.** Make sure you know where your Independent Living Centers are and have a conversation with them about what is needed in the first year and beyond and see if you might be able to bridge the gaps. (see below)

-- **Medical Supply store gift cards.**

-- **Help provide local contractors who can make homes accessible.** There are significant costs for a victim who is new to living with a disability. Carpets need to be removed and new flooring laid so wheelchairs and walkers can glide over them, doors widened, counters lowered, shower stalls redone for roll-ins, etc. We have had victims who had to bathe outside with a garden hose.

-- **Do not use any tragedy-based buzzwords to help sell products, goods, or services, unless 100% of proceeds go directly to assist victims.** (i.e. MV Strong, MV United) All too often victims watch businesses profit while victims directly impacted struggle to pay their bills because of trauma and physical injury.

-- **If you are a utility, rent, phone companies, student loan providers, medical facilities, credit card companies, etc. who serves someone who has been directly impacted by mass violence,** offer them Debt Deferments. Victims often suffer from loss of work and wages or struggle to find time and bandwidth to keep up with regular due dates. Give grace however possible without additional interest.

-- **Provide employment for those from mass shootings. Why?** There is an ongoing problem afterwards for victims, especially those injured, in finding employment that can actually SUSTAIN A LIFE. Employers generally don't want to hire a person that they know will have ongoing medical issues, but this is desperately needed. Remote jobs are welcomed by all.

FIRST RESPONDERS:

-- **Make sure victims can connect with First Responders who helped them** if they want. It can help all involved.

-- **Bring in other First Responder brothers and sisters** who have been through similar incidents so those uniformed who have been traumatized have emotional support. Medical teams need the same.

OTHER ISSUES:

-- **Ambulance chasing lawyers will always come in.** Make sure that families know there are lawyers at the ready who can provide free consultation until they find their own lawyer.

“Resiliency Centers”

This can be a bone of contention for those directly impacted as victims watch hundreds of thousands of dollars poured into establishing a “Resiliency Center” while they themselves cannot pay bills. Do not take donations away from victims to establish these centers Victims directly impacted should be asked if they want this. Also, there is a real concern for those out of state who cannot partake of the Center and then watch their portion of donations meant for them go into a building, sometimes that costs upwards of \$1 million. These Resiliency Centers should never be long-term. Generally, the drop off of those going into these centers is significant three months after the event. Do not waste money.

Scholarships or Memorials

Do not set these up or move forward without speaking directly to the family members of the deceased for whom it's for. Do the victims' families want that done? What would they like done? Listen to them.

Memorials are for the deceased as the living do not need to be "memorialized." Please make sure of appropriate solemnity during memorial programs. Make sure that the victims' names are not only spelled correctly but also pronounced correctly. Make sure that the names of the deceased are included in the memorial.

Museums

Directly impacted communities may be immediately contacted by museum curators in the aftermath of a mass shooting who will encourage the collection of items from temporary memorials. It is often done even before families have a chance to bury their children, which we find unbelievably disrespectful to both the victims' families and the community itself.

Allow families and survivors to bury their children, mothers, fathers, brother and sisters and loved ones first. Later, let the families of the deceased lead the conversation of any memorialization, scholarships, benches, and remembrance in their loved ones' names when *they* are ready. First foremost, respect the victims' families wishes.

The intent behind objects left at temporary memorials outdoors is part of the collective grieving process. The first consideration should always be the physical, emotional, spiritual, and financial needs of victims—those *directly* impacted by the mass shooting.

If local communities seek to document the temporary memorials, make sure that the families – not museum curators from cities outside of the community where the mass shooting occurred -- are allowed to choose what they would like to keep from those public memorials, first and foremost.

Do not collect memorial items for preservation or exhibition unless the families allow the donation to the institution with that specific purpose.

We find it extremely distasteful to try to create a tourist attraction off the murders and suffering of our loved ones.

SOCIAL MEDIA:

– **Establish one website where victims/survivors can immediately go to get information.**

-- **Establish a social media presence so those in the community can send messages of love to the victims.** Love to Aurora. Love to Orlando. Love to Las Vegas. Love to Parkland. Love to Santa Fe. It helps to actually see that others care.

WHAT CITY OFFICIALS/MEDICAL TEAMS NEED TO KNOW FOR THOSE CATASTROPHICALLY INJURED:

--Victims face multiple surgeries over years. Some want to try Stem-cell treatment. Pain management is a big need.

--Possible future amputations.

--Repeated trips to ER (sometimes the fear is greater than the problem)

THERE WILL BE A NEED FOR:

--Prosthetics

--Reclining wheelchairs so the stress is off the body and patients won't get sores.

--Pressure relief mattresses/beds (one that is easy to get out of so that has the adjustable bed bases, which are costly).

--**New and/or Accessible Housing** (if they rent) or help with moving homes, packing, unpacking OR changes to existing housing to make it handicap accessible (which includes ramps, widening doors, lowering countertops, etc., and changing the carpet to allow the wheelchairs to move more easily over them).

We were able to get the local **Home Depot** to help us behind the scenes in Aurora as well as a local realtor to help along with construction workers who agreed to help one of the most injured survivors.

--**Handicapped accessible vans are very important**, transportation to and from rehabilitation sessions (in many mass shootings, it is hard to find vans for our victims and they are very expensive).

--**HEMOCARE** and the expense that comes with that. Some victims will not be able to be left alone and, in fact, we would suggest they are not left alone as the nightmares are severe. That usually falls on the family, but it exhausts an already traumatized family member. Everything from getting groceries to getting to and from doctor offices, etc.

--Colostomy bags and the expense that comes with changing those out all the time.

--**Physical therapy costs** can be very high because often it last years and many of the places don't take Medicare.

--As they heal, some may need specially equipped cars for handicap accessible driving. They will want this power to heal mentally as well.

--Medical Supply store GIFT CARDS would help as some of those expenses are not covered by Medicare. Wheelchairs are very expensive and transportation is outrageously priced (i.e. vans).

--Pain management help from nerve pain.

--Cognitive problems so help filling out the simplest of forms (hence, help needed filling out Medicare forms from friends or family or medical workers).

--Speech therapist help or learning to communicate differently (brain injured will find this).

--Mental support, especially if their family is small or they are far from home.

--PTSD issues

Big problem afterwards for catastrophically injured is finding employment that can actually SUSTAIN A LIFE as employers don't really want to hire a person that they know will have ongoing medical issues and those for the badly disabled don't provide a living wage.

*** Physical wounds and/or overwhelming grief are compounded by the lack of coordination and sensitivity after mass casualty crimes and it truly needs to change. Emotional wounds are real wounds. Our families care about ALL victims. ***

LONGER TERM LEGISLATIVE ISSUES:

Establish a Mass Casualty Act National Protocol encompassing all things covered here.

Extend Medicare for those who need it a year after the final appointment at the hospital for medications, supplies and care for those shot and trying to heal.

Mandate Priority Processing of SSA for victim/survivors who are deemed unable to work for life as a result.

Deem Mass Casualty Crimes Victims as a class.

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