

From: VOD-Network@googlegroups.com [<mailto:VOD-Network@googlegroups.com>] **On Behalf Of** Hilander, Sally
Sent: Friday, October 10, 2008 4:17 PM
To: VOD Network
Subject: Offender families as victims

Hi friends – Last week, I asked for your guidance on an issue regarding victim impact panels. I received much interesting feedback, so I have compiled it into the following. There is consensus on how to proceed and I have invited the offender family members to meet with me for further discussion. I most certainly will ask the other volunteer speakers how they feel about this, before we schedule a panel. Thanks everyone! Sally

Original question

I have two excellent volunteers for victim impact panels. Both have sons who committed egregious crimes (one attempted homicide, one very high profile deliberate homicide). These offender family members are not primary victims, but they have been brutalized emotionally by the actions of their sons. Knowing that some victims don't view offender family members as peers, I'm wondering if you have any experiences or advice regarding inclusion of these men on victim impact panels? I believe their contributions could be extremely valuable, but I don't want to alienate our other speakers. [Sally K. Hilander, Montana DOC](#)

Responses

Sally, we have had that conversation around DUI impact panels and whether those who were drinking and hurt should be included. We have one survivor who drank a lot, and drove a lot and was arrested for it, but was hit by a drunk driver while he was walking along the side of the road. He is included in DUI Victim Impact programs because the other speakers really like him and because he was actually not drinking and driving when he was injured. However I let the folks know that I think that we need to make the distinction between a "victim" impact panel and an "impact of crime" panel. It sounds like your speakers would be billed as the latter and not the former. While I wouldn't call the family members "victims" I would define them as "impacted parties." [Amy Holloway, Vermont DOC](#)

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We do use offender family members, recognizing that many families are indeed victims. However, we never include them at the same time as other victims of crime, and we screen carefully to make sure they don't use this as a platform for all the faults of CJS (which may or may not be true; but it is not the right time or place to address these things). We also find that inmates can relate first to their personal families, and when they understand that they hurt them, they can generalize that understanding to victims of their crime. We also find that inmates learn WELL from other inmates that GET IT, and are proving themselves successful on the outside (even paying restitution). Some of our counselors say those inmates can do in and hour what it may take the counsel 6 weeks to accomplish it. [Sheryl DeMott, Tennessee DOC](#)

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I went to the initial train the trainer for ICVC classes in Stockton with Kip Lowe. They suggested having offender families come in to talk to the guys about how their loved ones crime affected them. In fact, they had a video they showed of a woman whose son committed seven murders and was on death row. She talked about losing her friends and then her church support. Very impactful. I think it is a great idea.

And, I believe these guys need to know how far-reaching the impact is.

I would actually try to schedule them at different times rather than having them serve at the same time. This was recommended by Kip Lowe from California Youth Authority. [Kay Crockett, Missouri DOC](#)

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Sally et al - In Iowa, we have had offender family members as speakers for our Victim Impact Classes - particularly for the topic of Drugs & Society to highlight how offender families are also victims of these crimes. For Drunk Driving, we have had the wife of an offender share the impact on them, not just the offender's imprisonment and loss of financial and emotional support, but also trying to live with the fact that he had killed someone. Powerful panels!

Some issues that I believe are important to consider, from our experience, when prepping an offender-family speaker:

1. If you are going to have this person present along with a victim family member, make sure they are both OK with this - that they have a chance to meet prior to speaking, and to discuss issues that may be difficult in speaking together. This type of presentation can be very powerful as well, but really need to use caution.
2. Make sure the speaker is able to stay focused on the harm caused by the offenders action, rather than veering off into how unfair the system is, etc. - or that they don't get into victim blaming - that issue needs to be very clear in preparation.
3. Is easier with this type of speaker for the class and speaker to get too focused on the offender and what happened with him/her, etc. - so, facilitators need to make sure the class stays focused on impact on victims.

Hope that is helpful - and I hope other programs are open to having this type of speaker. As Kay mentioned, this is an area of victimization the offenders often do not consider, and may certainly impact some of the offenders more readily than other types of victims. [Mary P. Roche, Iowa DOC](#)

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I agree with Mary. There is a fine line when putting both on the same panel however. If possible, I would have them speak on a separate panel so that the victim panelist wont feel like their victimization is minimized. I have done this in the past and it works well. Most often victims wont tell you if it bothers them to sit on the same panel with offenders families or other types of victimizations. (Unless they have been speaking for awhile) It's like mixing panels of different crimes. A property crime victim will minimize their own victimization when listening to another panelist who was a rape victim. Other than that, certainly there is a huge impact for offenders listening to family members of offenders. [Linda Sorenson, Iowa DOC](#)

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They certainly are secondary victims/survivors and could be very effective additions. Personally, I would talk to my other speakers about doing this (explaining what those family members might say in the presentation) and see whether they have any problem with their inclusion. You certainly would not want to anger or harm your regular survivor speakers by adding someone who might create distress for them. I would do the same thing any time I think that the addition of one speaker make cause potential emotional problems for another speaker.

If you go ahead, let us know how it is received. Best wishes, [Janine Geske, Wisconsin](#)

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If I were in this situation, I'd immediately ask the other speakers how they'd feel. You could probably do a lot of good just by raising the question with those others. All they want is for their experience to be acknowledged and respected, and if they are invited to consider the situation the family members are in, they will feel grateful and acknowledged, in my opinion.

Obviously, this would be an exponentially more complex situation if the other speakers were survivors of the family members' offenders. Does this help at all? [Jon Wilson, Just Alternatives, Maine](#)

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