



Parole Board
of Canada

Commission des libérations
conditionnelles du Canada

EVALUATION OF THE FEDERAL VICTIMS STRATEGY

September 2010

BACKGROUND

Since the 1970s, the federal government has been actively involved in the development of policies, programs and law reform to address the concerns of victims of crime. The Department of Justice, the Department of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, the RCMP, the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) and the Parole Board of Canada (PBC) have been responsible for these initiatives.

In 1992, the federal government enacted the *Corrections and Conditional Release Act* (CCRA), which formalized the rights of victims of crime in corrections and conditional release and set out in law, the responsibilities of CSC and PBC for sharing information with victims.

In 1998, in response to the recommendations from a comprehensive review of the role of the victim in the justice system, by the House of Commons Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights, the government enacted amendments to the *Criminal Code* to enhance the role of victims and launched the federal Victims of Crime Initiative (VCI) with funding spread over five years. The VCI is administered by the Department of Justice and is now in its second mandate following renewal of its funding in 2005. The activities of the Department of Justice, through the Policy Centre for Victim Issues, include criminal law reform and policy development; research, consultations, federal/provincial/territorial coordination, Crown Witness Co-ordinators in the North and communications and public legal education activities, as well as the administration of the Victims Fund.

An evaluation of the VCI, conducted, in 2004, revealed that while the Initiative is highly relevant to its stakeholders and to the Government's agenda, much more was needed over the longer term. The Government therefore committed an additional \$13M per year for four years, in 2006, to expand the VCI and create the Federal Victims Strategy (FVS). The funding was to be used to give victims of crime a more effective voice in the federal corrections and justice system and greater access to services and to establish the Office of the Federal Ombudsman for Victims of Crime.

Since the early 1990s, the overall involvement of victims in the criminal justice system has been steadily rising as information about available services becomes more accessible and better understood. For the PBC, a review of multi-year data demonstrated an ever increasing involvement of victims who are requesting access to PBC services including: requests for offender information, requests to observe and/or present statements at hearings, as well as accessing information through the Board's decision registry. From 1993 to 2010, the number of contacts that the Board has had with victims almost tripled, going from just over 8,000 in 1992 to over 22,000 in 2010.

The PBC is involved in a number of ways with victims that range from responding to initial requests for information, providing and processing observer applications, providing information about upcoming hearings, liaising with other agencies involved with victims, as well as answering questions through the hearing process. Specialized PBC staff also attend hearings where victims are present to provide on-site support as part of the hearing process. It is important to note that victims who request to observe hearings also typically access other types of information available, such as PBC decisions from the decision registry. As a result, the Board's overall contact and involvement with victims for other services has also continued to increase.

PAROLE BOARD OF CANADA INITIATIVES FUNDED BY THE FEDERAL VICTIMS STRATEGY

While consultations with victims of crime in the past have indicated that victims generally express a high degree of satisfaction with the quality and timeliness of the information they receive from the PBC and the manner in which they are treated by PBC staff and Board members, areas for improvement that were identified are as follows:

- the need to provide clearer, more accessible information to address continuing uncertainty among victims regarding the specific roles of the PBC, CSC and the Department of Justice in criminal justice and corrections processes;
- the difference between a trial and a hearing;
- the ability of victims to benefit from interpretation services at PBC hearings;
- the quality of voice amplification equipment in hearing rooms; and
- the need for national consistency in dealing with victims.

In order to enhance its capacity for providing victims with the information they need, the PBC, as part of the FVS, received funding of \$450,000 in 2007/08 and \$440,000 in each of the three years from 2008/09 to 2010/11. The funding was to be used to improve communication with victims through enhanced outreach, staff training, interpretation services, voice amplification equipment and web site improvements as well as supporting an evaluation on the PBC's new measures.

Enhanced Outreach

The resources received for outreach activities are being used for two types of outreach activities. The first involves the distribution of posters and brochures, produced in 2007/08, for use by PBC's criminal justice partners such as, courts, police services, victim-service providers, and community organizations. The rest of the resources received for enhanced outreach are being used to strengthen the capacity of PBC's regional offices to engage communities, including victims of crime, in discussion of victims' issues and the role of victims in conditional release processes.

Training

The increasing number of victims coming forward for information, the number of new staff hired in recent years and the potential for more new staff to replace those that are retiring, required additional resources so that the PBC could enhance its training. This training will assist the Board in maintaining its capacity for the effective provision of information and assistance to victims consistent with the provision of the CCRA and current standards as reflected in the victims' feedback in various surveys. The resources received through the FVS are being used to provide annual national training sessions for staff members from PBC regional offices and the national office who are directly involved in the provision of information and assistance for victims. In addition to the broad national training on victims, the PBC received resources to develop and provide Aboriginal Perceptions Training in 2007/08 and 2008/09 for regional staff to provide them with the building blocks to have more effective interactions with Aboriginal victims. National training is also being supplemented by training for staff and Board members in the PBC regional offices.

Interpretation Services

By law, the offender determines the language of a hearing. On occasion, unilingual victims attend or present statements at hearings conducted in the other official language without understanding what is transpiring. To improve the experience of victims at PBC hearings, the PBC received resources through the FVS to develop the protocol so that it could offer simultaneous interpretation or, if required logistically, whisper interpretation services for unilingual victims attending hearings held in the other official language. This service allows more victims to come forward and participate in the conditional release process.

Voice Amplification Systems

Respondents to a past PBC Victim Questionnaire raised the issue that the acoustics in many hearing rooms are such that many victims cannot hear what is being said. Resources were provided through the FVS in 2007/08 for the PBC to purchase 25 voice amplification units for use in various hearing rooms across the country.

Web Site Improvements

To make more victims aware of the conditional release process and the range of services available to them, the PBC was given resources through the FVS in 2007/08 to make improvements to its web site to make it more user friendly for victims, to develop and install a graphic program illustrating the steps in the hearing process and to describe the layout of a hearing room and the function of all participants. In addition, the web site provides links to victim-serving agencies. Resources were also provided in the other years of the FVS to improve and/or maintain the web site.

PBC Total Costs

	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	Total
Training	\$110,000	\$150,000	\$150,000	\$150,000	\$560,000
Interpretation Services	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$200,000
Voice Amplification Equipment	\$25,000				\$25,000
Develop Victims' Web Site	\$100,000				\$100,000
Web Site Improvements and Maintenance		\$25,000	\$25,000	\$25,000	\$75,000
Outreach	\$165,000	\$215,000	\$215,000	\$215,000	\$810,000
Total O & M, Vote 35	\$ 450,000	\$440,000	\$440,000	\$440,000	\$1,770,000

CONTEXT

This evaluation is being conducted as a requirement of the FVS in order to determine the effectiveness of the PBC initiatives undertaken as part of the FVS. The FVS provided that the evaluation be conducted in the last year of funding. The PBC proceeded at this time so that the results can be used to support a request for continuation of funding to be submitted prior to the sunset of the FVS in 2010/11.

This evaluation focuses on the achievement of short-term outcomes as it is still too early to assess fully the impacts and effects of the FVS.

METHODOLOGY

The evaluation was conducted by the Policy, Planning and Operations Division of the Parole Board of Canada using in-house resources. The methodology consisted of a survey of victims as well as surveys of staff.

Survey of Victims

In 2009, the PBC conducted a survey to examine the level of satisfaction of victims with the PBC's services and how it provides those services. While the survey did not focus solely on the effectiveness of the initiatives funded through the FVS, it included questions relevant to those initiatives. The survey was distributed to a random sample of 3,393 registered victims and victim agents. Eight hundred and forty (840) completed questionnaires were returned, which represents an approximate response rate of 26%.

Survey of Staff

In 2009, the PBC also conducted a survey of regional staff who deal with victims to obtain their feedback on the effectiveness of the PBC's initiatives funded through the FVS. Twenty responses were received which represented a 100% response rate.

Surveys of staff were also conducted following each of the national training sessions which were given in the first three years of the FVS. About 15 responses were received per questionnaire.

FINDINGS

The survey of victims conducted in 2009 revealed that the majority of respondents were satisfied with their experience with the PBC. Board staff was deemed to be helpful and considerate and received highly positive feedback in such spheres as professionalism, competence, ability to answer questions, offering and providing guidance throughout the process, along with empathy and compassion shown in a respectful manner. Receiving regular updates about the offender's status was one of the most important things to victims and a positive evaluation in the communication aspect demonstrated the PBC's success in this area. The Board was also commended for providing quick and efficient responses to queries, setting up a well-functioning communication system and for offering person-to-person contact.

The following paragraphs present additional findings from the various surveys conducted, organized according to the initiatives undertaken with the funding received through the FVS.

ENHANCED OUTREACH

With the funds received through the FVS, the PBC enhanced its outreach to victims by developing and delivering information sessions to victims in different communities across Canada. The main goal of the sessions is to provide victims with information about access to PBC services. Information sessions also allow victims to ask questions and have face-to-face contact with the Regional Communication Officers (RCOs) and with other victims.

National and regional staff also made formal and informal presentations on the PBC's services to different victim services groups, the police, youth groups, employment groups, the courts, students, CSC and at victim information fairs.

In addition, the PBC produced, in March 2008, a large poster as well as a brochure which provides clear, accessible information about the role of the PBC in the criminal justice and correction process. The poster was distributed nationally to victim-serving agencies, police, crowns and the RCMP and the brochure was distributed across Canada through Service Canada kiosks. The regions also produced or updated their own promotional materials using funds received through the FVS. These materials were developed to meet the specific needs of victims in their communities.

Staff Survey Results

Eighty-five percent (85%) of the staff surveyed had distributed promotional materials on victim services within the past two years. The type of material distributed most frequently was pamphlets and contact information. The information was distributed mostly to victim service providers, the police and the courts. All of the staff who had distributed promotional materials in the past two years felt that the materials were useful as they educated victims and the public as well as providing victims with a point of reference. One respondent felt that the material could be in plainer language and in languages other than French or English.

Eighty percent (80%) of staff surveyed had delivered PBC informational sessions in the community in the past three years. The number of sessions delivered during the period varied from 1 to 25 and were delivered to victim services groups, the police, the courts, parole officers, students and the community at large either through formal or informal information sessions or information kiosks. Staff were of the opinion that the information sessions are valuable to the community as they serve to educate victims and the public and promote understanding of the PBC's role and mandate. Staff were of the opinion that with more time and resources the PBC could be more proactive in finding outreach opportunities and developing partnerships so that it could reach a larger audience.

Victim Survey Results

Thirty-eight percent (38%) of the victims surveyed indicated that they had seen promotional materials from the PBC, including posters, brochures and contact information. When questioned, victims stated that they would like to see promotional materials distributed through victim-service providers (78%), the courts (75%) and the police (74%). This was followed by the PBC web site (57%), information sessions (56%) and Service Canada (54%). Some other venues were also suggested such as hospitals and clinics, local media outlets and schools.

Victims were not asked to comment on their satisfaction with the type of information provided in the promotional materials.

Being a fairly new service, only 6% of the victims surveyed were aware of the PBC information sessions. Of that six percent, 64% had attended one of the sessions. Seventy-nine percent (79%) of the attendees were satisfied or very satisfied with the information provided. Respondents were also given an opportunity to provide feedback on the information sessions they attended through open-ended questions where they were asked to provide general impressions about the information sessions attended. Fifty-four percent (54%) stated that they appreciated being informed about the process and they were pleased that victims' rights are acknowledged in this manner. Twenty-two percent (22%) noted that PBC staff are professional and competent, noting also their consideration and politeness. For 17% of the respondents it was also important to be able to pose a question and to be among other victims.

When asked what was in need of improvement; the most common suggestions were to have more information about how to access information services that was clear and easy to understand and to have more time for questions and answers.

TRAINING

With the funds provided through the Federal Victims' Initiative, the PBC has held, to date, three three-day national training sessions for RCOs, with a fourth scheduled in February 2011. The topics covered in the training sessions included, among others, emotional distance without indifference, videoconferencing, decision registry, presentation techniques, dealing with people in crisis and communications.

To supplement the national training, the regions have held numerous workshops on various topics relating to victims in order to enhance the capacity of staff to provide information and assistance to victims in the different communities in their regions in an effective and timely manner.

The PBC also received funds to develop and deliver Aboriginal Perceptions Training for RCOs to provide them with the building blocks to have more effective interactions with Aboriginal victims. In late 2007, the PBC contracted with two Aboriginal facilitators to develop and deliver a pilot three day session on Aboriginal Perceptions. In February 2008, the pilot session was delivered to a representative group of PBC staff including RCOs and managers as well as Board members. After the pilot session, the PBC determined that there was a need to re-develop the training material and the mechanism for training staff and Board members on Aboriginal issues. The PBC is continuing its development of an Aboriginal training strategy that will include some revised material from the pilot that meets the needs of both PBC staff, including RCOs, and Board members.

Staff Survey Results

2007-08 National RCO Training Survey Results: 80% felt that the workshops added to or somewhat added to their ability to deal with victims on a daily basis.

2008-09 National RCO Training Survey Results: In rating whether the six workshops given were informative, the ratings varied between 87% and 100%.

2009-10 National RCO Training Survey Results: In rating whether the six workshops given were informative, the ratings varied between 60% (one session) and 100%. The majority of the ratings were between 80% and 100%.

Victim Survey Results

While victims cannot respond specifically as to the effectiveness of the PBC's training for the RCOs, victims were asked to comment on their overall satisfaction in dealing with the PBC. As a victim's point of contact with the PBC is the RCO, any comments received would be a reflection, at least in part, on the type of training the staff had received.

Seventy-four percent (74%) of victims surveyed reported that they were very satisfied or satisfied with their experience in dealing with the PBC. Analysis of the textual responses revealed that victims were satisfied with the professionalism, competence and sensitivity of PBC staff as well as with communication in general.

PBC staff was deemed to be professional in most areas of information support. Respondents highly appreciated such qualities as competence, ability to answer questions, guidance throughout the process as well as empathy and compassion shown to the victims in a respectful manner. Many stated that staff were patient in providing help and explaining and clarifying the information and that they respected victim's confidentiality.

With regards to communication in general, many victims recognized that this area contains a lot of difficulties and delicate zones due to privacy laws, however, they remarked on the PBC's excellence in several communication aspects. These include quick and efficient responses, a well designed communication system (that provides regular updates by mail or telephone) and having one contact person.

While many respondents showed understanding in respect to the difficulties of how communication between victims and RCOs is set up, 35% of the 108 concerns voiced touched upon this aspect. Among concrete examples, most prominent are irregular updates on the offender's status, sporadic availability of staff and intermittent contacts and late arrivals of updates.

INTERPRETATION SERVICES

To improve the experience of victims at PBC hearings, the PBC received resources through the FVS with which it developed the protocol so that it could offer simultaneous interpretation or, if required logistically, whisper interpretation services for unilingual victims attending hearings held in the other official language. This service allows more victims to come forward and participate in the conditional release process.

Staff Survey Results

In the past two years, only two of the staff who responded to the survey had been required to arrange for interpretation services. One request was for sign language interpretation and two were for English interpretation. Staff received only positive feedback on the quality of the interpretation services provided.

Victim Survey Results

Only six victims who responded to the victim questionnaire required interpretation services and provided their feedback. Four respondents requested English interpretation and two requested French. In five out of the six cases the interpretation services were provided. One person reported not being able to get a French to English interpreter. It is not known if this request predated the availability of interpretation services at PBC hearings.

One victim was very satisfied with the services provided, one was satisfied, one was neutral and two were very unsatisfied. Among those who had a positive experience using interpretation services, some stated that they appreciated having an option. One case reported on the high quality of interpretation as well as the professionalism of the interpreter. Those who had a negative experience reported on the bad quality of the actual interpretation and the need to have clearer instructions on how to use the equipment. There was also a suggestion to inform victims immediately of the language of the hearing, particularly if the language of the victim is not the same as the language of the offender.

VOICE AMPLIFICATION EQUIPMENT

With funds received through the FVS, the PBC purchased, in March 2008, 25 voice amplification units to improve the acoustics in various hearing rooms across the country. This was deemed necessary to address the concern voiced by victims, in the past, that they could not always hear everything that was said during the hearing.

Staff Survey Results

Only 60% of staff surveyed stated that they were able to clearly hear all those who speak at a hearing and only five stated that voice amplification systems were used at every hearing. Some staff are of the opinion that voice amplification systems should be used at every hearing, while others feel that it should depend on the room size and whether there are observers or victims present.

Improvements suggested by the staff surveyed ranged from having all hearing rooms equipped with permanent voice amplification systems to having smaller, lighter and more up-to-date portable systems. Concern was also expressed by one respondent that with limited availability of voice amplification systems in the regions, issues arise if the equipment is required on the same date in different locations. It should be noted that as CSC provides the hearings rooms for PBC hearings, it is difficult for the Board to make permanent changes to CSC hearing rooms.

Victim Survey Results

As voice amplification is a relatively new feature at PBC hearings, not many of the victims who responded to the victim questionnaire had had an opportunity to attend a hearing where voice amplification was used. However, the responses to the questionnaire reinforced the need to have voice amplification as 24% of those who attended a hearing reported having problems hearing what was said.

Of those respondents who had attended a hearing, 74% stated that to their knowledge a voice amplification system was not used. Among those who attended a hearing without voice amplification, 34% stated that they believed that it would have helped them in hearing better. Thirty percent (30%) said it would not have helped them suggesting that they heard perfectly and did not need a voice amplification system. Thirty-six percent (36%) said that they did not know if voice amplification would have helped them.

About 10% of the general concerns of respondents with regards to the process of observing a hearing were related to difficulties in hearing those who were speaking. This in turn affected the respondent's level of satisfaction with PBC services overall.

WEB SITE IMPROVEMENTS

To assist victims in understanding the role of the PBC in the parole process as well as to provide information to victims on the steps in a parole hearing process, the PBC developed an interactive program for victims on its web site. The program allows victims to see the physical layout of a hearing room, to read and/or hear a brief description of the roles and responsibilities of the persons who may be present at a hearing and to become familiar with the steps in the hearing process. Links to this program [Parole Board of Canada - Virtual Hearing](#) were distributed nationally in March 2008. The Board's interactive hearing room was identified as a success story during the National Victims of Crime Awareness Week in 2009.

Staff Survey Results

Ninety percent (90%) of staff surveyed stated that they refer victims to the PBC's web site. The main reasons the staff refer victims to the web site is to download forms and fact sheets about the parole process. Only three of the staff surveyed had received any feedback on the PBC's web site from victims. However, the feedback that was received was positive.

Nine-five percent (95%) of staff surveyed are of the opinion that the PBC web site is a valuable tool for victims as it is available 24/7 and allows quick and easy access to the PBC's forms. Staff also stated that the web site allows victims to obtain information on their own time and to perhaps absorb it better as the situation is often overwhelming for victims.

Some suggestions from staff for improving the web site were to ensure that information is continually updated and that the site is user-friendly, to add links to other sites that provide information for victims, to have PBC's site linked to pages that victims often visit prior to accessing the PBC's site and provide a feedback page so that victims could have input on an ongoing basis.

Victim Survey Results

Ten percent (10%) of respondents to the victim questionnaire had accessed the PBC web site within four months prior to receiving the questionnaire.

Sixty-seven percent (67%) of participants who responded to the question regarding the user friendliness of the web site for victims rated the user friendliness as excellent or good, 14% were neutral and 19% rated the user friendliness as poor or fair. Sixty-five percent (65%) of participants who responded to the question regarding the usefulness of the information on the web site rated the information as excellent or good, 13% remained neutral and 22% rated the usefulness of the information as poor or fair.

The virtual hearing room, a new feature on the PBC web site, was accessed by 13% of web site users or 11 respondents. All 11 respondents rated the service on its user friendliness and usefulness of information. Of those, 73% rated the virtual hearing room as excellent or good regarding the aspect of user friendliness for victims, while 27% rated it as fair. In terms of the usefulness of the information, 70% rated it as excellent or good, 20% as neutral and 10% as fair.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the PBC's involvement with victims is steadily rising as information about the services provided by the PBC becomes more accessible and is better understood. For the PBC, a review of multi-year data demonstrates an ever increasing number of victims that request access to PBC services, including requests for offender information, requests to observe or present statements at hearings as well as accessing information through the PBC's decision registry.

Each year since the PBC began receiving funding through the FVS, the PBC has had approximately 21,000 contacts with victims, on average 222 victim presentations at hearings, about 665 victims who request to observe hearings and on average 2,600 victims who request access to the PBC's decision registry.

The number of contacts that the PBC has with victims is expected to increase in the coming years due to pending changes to the CCRA that will further acknowledge victims as well as increased awareness resulting from PBC outreach activities to various victim communities.

With respect to the workload involved with victims, PBC staff is involved in a number of ways including the processing of applications to observe hearings, providing information about the dates and locations of the hearing, confirming security requirements are met, attending hearings where victims are present, processing requests for access to the decision registry as well as assisting victims who wish to present statements at hearings. PBC staff also deliver information sessions to victims and victim groups in the community.

The evaluation findings suggest that the funds provided through the FVS have been used effectively as it has allowed the PBC to meet its objectives of increasing victim awareness of the services provided by the PBC as well as enhancing victim's experiences when dealing with the PBC.

To be able to sustain the progress made in the past three years in improving the quality of the services it provides to victims, it is imperative that the PBC receive ongoing funding. The PBC must ensure that information regarding the PBC's role in the correction process is accessible to all victims as well as ensuring that all staff involved with victims have the specialized training and the expertise they require to continue to provide the high quality of service that victims have come to expect from the PBC.

RECOMMENDATION

The PBC must continue to expand its outreach to ensure that its services are accessible to all victims as well as fulfilling its mandated responsibility of assisting an increasing number of victims who wish to present statements at hearings, observe hearings or access the decision registry. The PBC is therefore recommending that the funding received through the FVS be renewed so that outreach can be enhanced and so that victims can continue to receive the high quality services that they expect from the PBC.