
UTAH VICTIM SERVICES COMMISSION STUDY

Structure and Membership of the Commission

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INTRODUCTION

The Utah Criminal Justice Center (UCJC) conducted a comprehensive evaluation of the Utah Victim Services Commission (VSC) across six research activities. This report presents the purpose, methods, and results for examining the structure of the Commission. Interviews were conducted with Commission members and focus groups were conducted with members of the five subcommittees. The research team analyzed data regarding the perspectives of individuals who held a seat on the Commission, or participated in a subcommittee, from inception through the second year. This report characterizes the perceptions of VSC members, and subcommittee participants, of the Commission structure, membership, and processes, during its first two years.

Results

A total of 18 individuals participated in interviews, representing 90% of the full Commission. This sample comprised a diverse group of individuals, including service providers, state-level agencies, and coalition representatives. At least one member of the leadership of each subcommittee was included in these interviews. In addition, focus groups were conducted with the leadership, and some members, of the five subcommittees (Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault, Child Abuse, Multicultural, and Lived Experience).

VICTIM SERVICES COMMISSION HISTORY

History and Context

Findings classified under this theme refer to events and dynamics that existed prior to, or during, the formation of the VSC, and which influenced how the Commission functioned at the time of the interviews. In Utah, victim rights and services have historically been codified and funded by multiple entities, resulting in fragmentation with respect to the statewide response to crime victims and fostering competition between service providers when applying for federal and state funding. To improve coordination, the Utah Victim Services Commission (VSC) was established under H.B. 244 (2023)¹ as a means "to generate unity to reduce and eliminate the impact of crime on victims through a comprehensive and evidence-based prevention, treatment, and trauma-informed justice strategy" (state of Utah, n.d., para 1). This legislation situated the VSC under the Utah Department of Criminal Justice (DOCJ), with the following statutory responsibilities:

- Review and assess the duties and practices of the DOCJ regarding services and criminal justice policies pertaining to victims;
- Encourage and facilitate the development and coordination of trauma-informed services for crime victims throughout the state;
- Encourage and foster public and private partnerships for the purpose of: i) assessing needs for crime victims throughout the state; ii) developing crime victim services and resources throughout the state; and iii) coordinating crime victim services and resources throughout the state;
- Recommend and support the creation, dissemination, and implementation of statewide policies and plans to address crimes, including domestic violence, sexual violence, child abuse, and driving under the influence of drugs and alcohol;
- Collect information on statewide funding for crime victim services and prevention efforts, including the sources, disbursement, and outcomes of statewide funding for crime victim services and prevention efforts;
- Consider recommendations from any subcommittee of the commission; and
- Make recommendations regarding: i) the duties and practices of the DOCJ to ensure that:
 - A) crime victims are a vital part of the criminal justice system of the state; B) all crime victims and witnesses are treated with dignity, respect, courtesy, and sensitivity; C) the rights of crime victims and witnesses are honored and protected by law in a manner no less vigorous than protections afforded to criminal defendants; and D) statewide funding for crime victim services and prevention efforts (Utah Victim Services Commission and Victim Services, 2023).

In 2024, H.B. 532² restructured the VSC, in part by shuttering the Utah Council on Victims of Crime (UCVC) (State Boards and Commissions Modifications, 2024). The VSC

¹ Full text of H.B.244(2023) can be found here: <https://le.utah.gov/~2023/bills/static/HB0244.html>

² Full text of H.B.532(2024) can be found here: <https://le.utah.gov/~2024/bills/static/HB0532.html>

inherited some of the UCVC's responsibilities, including planning an annual Crime Victims Conference and oversight of processes for ensuring victims' rights are upheld in the criminal justice system. Within VSC, a Victim Rights Coordinator serves as a single point of contact for the victim rights committees in each of the eight judicial districts. The **Utah Office for Victims of Crime (UOVC)** remains an operational division within DOCJ that administers compensation claims, administers state and federal funding to victim service providers, and provides training and technical assistance.

The VSC collaborates closely with other statutory and state agencies to promote integration across Utah's systems for responding to crime and victimization. The **Domestic Violence Offender Treatment Board (DVOTB)**, the **Sex Offender Management Advisory Committee (SOMAC)**, and the **Utah Substance Abuse and Mental Health Advisory Council (USAMHAC)** collaborate with the Commission when considering initiatives and policies that impact victims. Other state partners with some oversight for administering processes related to crime victimization include the **Utah Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS)**, through divisions such as the **Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS)** and the **Utah Department of Corrections (UDC)**. UDC provides services directly to victims and conducts treatment programs for those who have committed sexual offenses. DHHS administers funding for domestic violence shelters, sexual assault prevention, and treatment for individuals who have been convicted of domestic violence offenses. The **Utah Department of Public Safety** coordinates the **Lethality Assessment Protocol (LAP)** and provides victim services. The Utah Department of Workforce Services administers **Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF)** and homelessness funds to domestic violence shelters. The **Utah Commission of Criminal and Juvenile Justice** administers **National Sexual Assault Kit Initiative (SAKI funds)**, and the **Utah Attorney General's office** administers the **Children's Justice Centers** and provides victim advocacy.

As part of a statewide effort to reduce the size of state commissions, the 2024 legislative session eliminated several positions within the VSC membership: the representatives for the Children's Justice Centers Standing Committee Chair or their designee (CJC), DHHS, and victims.

Purpose of the Commission

The scope and role of the VSC is mandated by statute, as described above. Given the broad range of that scope, there was some variation among members with respect to the priorities they expected the Commission would address first, including amplifying victims' voices, addressing federal funding shortfalls for victim services, and reviewing proposed legislation with potential impacts on crime victims. Given these differing perceptions, members were sometimes uncertain regarding the specific tasks the Commission should engage in to enact its goals. Because the organizational structure was so new, members were not clear on how to prioritize responsibilities or the processes for making those decisions and concern was expressed that the novel purpose of the Commission could be diluted:

[The victim services system] need[s] lots of initiatives and training[s] and people, I mean all the things. But I don't think that's the role of this Commission. I think it is the role of coalitions and administrators like UOVC. I think this commission needs to work on a system level.

The 2024 legislative changes, which modified membership and assigned additional duties to VSC, added to this confusion. In part, this was because so many Commission members participated in the committee that led to the legislation that created the VSC. As such, members came to early meetings with strong, and pre-existing, expectations about the VSC's composition and purpose. The elimination of the victim representative was perceived as undermining the Commission's purpose. In addition, the inherited duties required substantial time and effort on behalf of VSC staff, who had just recently been funded to facilitate work related to the Commission's statutory mission. Members expressed concern that these new tasks diverted resources and focus from the VSC's original purpose.

Respondents expressed enthusiasm regarding the novelty of the Commission structure, which was perceived to provide greater opportunities to collaborate across agencies, develop new initiatives, stabilize funding, and engage in legislative processes. In its first year, members perceived that Commission had inherited "old ways" of talking about victimization, thereby replicating fragmentation that it was intended to address. For example, respondents noted that the Commission, to date, had disproportionately focused on the needs of service providers, rather than victims themselves and the broader challenges of creating and maintaining an adequate response to crime victimization across the state.

Membership Composition

As delineated in statute, VSC membership is intentionally comprised of a wide swath of victim service partners, including criminal justice agencies, health and human service agencies, and private and non-profit service providers. Respondents endorsed the importance of this breadth of representation, as it brought together the range of entities with a primary role in funding, administering, and responding to crime and crime victims. As noted above, in its first year, historical relationships and processes complicated the development of a unified vision for supporting and enhancing victim response systems. Differences in how the VSC should set priorities and make decisions were attributed, in part, to the longstanding competitive funding model through which victim services have been resourced:

I believe the way we structured funding for these non-profit groups, federally and state level, has been a huge disservice to building relationships, positive relationships. And my hope is, and that was a big part of our push [for] funding in '23 is that we've got to move away more from the competitive funding model. And at least be able to provide more of the base operational cost-funding needs so that these directors . . . they're not making decisions based on, "Am I going to be able to run this program a year from now?"

As victim service providers explained, ongoing financial circumstances, related to sharp drops in federal funding and the impending end of one-time state funding, continued to impact victim service organizations. Participants wanted to work together toward a broad approach for responding to crime victimization, including funding for victim service providers. That was difficult to do in the existing economic context, in which there was no identified solution to the existential financial threats programs were facing.

Barriers to developing a unified response for funding and organizing responses to crime and victimization were also attributed to the fact that members represented agencies with differing mission and purpose:

*I think a lot of times we assume that there's going to be consensus around how to approach particular issues, because it's all supposed to be about victim rights, but there's a surprising amount of **diversity of approach and perspective depending on the subsets of areas or the subpopulations that we're working with.***

As noted above, the VSC was intended to bring a range of partners together to work toward the common goal of improving services and response systems for victims of crime. Participants articulated enthusiasm for the unique potential of the VSC to create new opportunities for communication and collaboration. A primary benefit to the structure was the fact that it brought the range of interested parties together in a way that had potential to overcome rifts and disagreements:

[P]rior to two years ago, I would say [we] were not all as cohesive and friendly. So I think this Victim Services Commission has created a space that we all have to sit at this table and we have to communicate, and we have to come up with resolutions and create space for everyone. So it has been really, really good.

In addition to the positive impacts of the VSC, there were also “*growing pains*” identified as members adapted to this new entity. Participants noted that perspectives that had historically dominated conversations around victims’ needs and experiences often prevailed, even under this new structure:

[M]y observation right now is that the VSC is turning into the new version of the Crime Victim Council, which is just, again, it's like picking at little statutory changes, it's putting on a conference, it's talking about the victim rights district committees, which are important, but are very tiny impact on victims. And I think it was always going to be hard to keep it from turning into that, but then to have the very next legislative session after it was created, to have everything else dismantled and put into it.

Participants noted how important it was to maintain focus on the primary purpose of the Commission, which was to bring victims and victim service providers into ongoing conversations regarding the criminal justice system. State entities, such as DOCJ and the Sentencing Commission had a long history of working together, but the victim services landscape is less homogenous and so was more difficult to locate the official “victim/survivor space.” The Commission was intended to be a place that centralized that voice:

...what we really felt was lacking is having both the conversation about victims and also having community-based services be involved in that conversation, not just [the] criminal justice response. And so when we look at the intersection of those and why these pieces are so important, they don't exist in another space.

Some participants felt this dynamic was exacerbated by the fact that representatives from state agencies tended to have more experience than non-profits and smaller organizations working with, or being a member of, a formal commission. As a result, some members were unsure in terms of roles and processes, while simultaneously feeling that other members were very confident in understanding the procedural framework through which VSC operates. This was described as contributing to a feeling among some members that their voice was not as impactful as others, despite that all members have an equal vote.

The elimination of some representatives during the 2024 legislative session was perceived to negatively impact the Commission's ability to achieve its statutory goals. In part, this was because VSC's process was impacted by legislative actions outside of its control, which served to undermine members' sense of the Commission as an independent body. More symbolically, the removal of the victim representative from an entity intended to improve services for victims undermined members' confidence in the potential of the VSC to make meaningful changes. Even after the creation of a Lived Experience Subcommittee, to address that change, members felt victims should have a formal and statutory role on the VSC:

[I]t has a huge impact where we no longer have a proper victim voice, and it just feels . . . What's the point of having a Victim Services Commission if we're not going to hear straight from our victims? I like that we're elevating our victim services and advocates and having this space, but ultimately we serve victims of crime and their voice needs to be part of this. [Otherwise] we risk making] assumptions as to how [our decisions will] impact the victim . . . [or] disrupt their life?

Respondents did not expect that the VSC legislation would never be modified. Rather, the aforementioned changes happened at a time when the Commission was so new that members were still figuring out how to do the work that was statutorily assigned to them. Moving forward, members endorsed the need to make statutory changes to the VSC as it continues to establish its footing and evolve. One member noted:

My hope then for the Commission is that . . . we do have to make some adjustments, revisit membership, revisit structure, revisit even the statutory responsibilities . . . because . . . this is the first time we've ever tried something quite like this.

Victim Services Commission Structure

Findings under this theme describe participants' perceptions of the VSC regarding authority, independence, and relationships among members as determined by the Commission structure.

Statute

Participants were unsure of the degree to which the Commission was expected to align with the governor's stated priorities and positions on issues. Members questioned whether the VSC was able to publicly endorse, or disagree with, positions or legislation that differed from the opinions of the executive branch. Notably, many participants indicated that they did not know if the Commission was expected to act in accord with the governor's office, but perceived that to be true. This contributed to a sense that the Commission's role was limited to proposals

sanctioned by state leadership, rather than serving as an independent body capable of shaping new policy and practice for responding to crime victimization.

Participants described several factors that contributed to these perceptions. The fact that the Commission is administratively housed within the executive branch (DOCJ) fostered a sense that government agency administration members were expected to vote in alignment with each other. The membership structure intentionally gives equal say (in the form of a vote) to community service providers as it does to representatives who work for state agencies; however, participants perceived that state agency representatives were more aligned, and therefore more influential, in some discussions and votes. Both non-profit and state agency representatives identified a power imbalance between state agencies and community- and system-based providers. Despite the structure giving each representative an equal vote, one administrator acknowledged:

I am confident that the organization I lead, because it's a state entity, will have a voice in this process. And even if I don't have a vote, I'm not going to be ignored. I'm pretty sure that nonprofit entities and advocacy organizations across the state don't feel similarly if they were left out in the process, because they don't have the same kind of leverage that a state agency does.

This dynamic was exacerbated by the fact that community- and system-based providers, if they spoke in opposition to a proposal, were potentially disagreeing with the state agencies from whom they were requesting funding.

There were also differences in terms of the degree to which participants were experienced working within the structure of a commission. Participants expressed enthusiasm about the novelty of VSC and the potential benefits of being organized as a commission, while also describing the challenges this structure introduced. Many noted that this was their first time sitting on a government commission; subsequently, they were not confident regarding procedures and processes, even with training. One participant noted: *I think one of the biggest things is just structure, where it's a new commission. How do we interact? How does it work?* As discussed below, in 'Implementation,' this uncertainty included understanding of the processes for setting the agenda, procedures around voting, and decision-making. Several respondents wanted additional training on the formal processes governing commissions, including the application of procedural rules, while others were very comfortable in commission settings. This knowledge gap was perceived to create barriers to effective participation in discussions and decision-making. The lack of familiarity with the culture and work of a commission, influenced the perception that processes were being guided by factors external to the VSC.

Capacity

Participants believed a primary benefit of the Commission structure was the creation of staff positions to ensure sufficient time, resources, and coordination existed to accomplish the VSC's goals. Given the scope of the VSC's responsibilities, however, members worried about the operational capacity of VSC staff, members, and subcommittees. As noted earlier, members felt that the work of staff was vital for organizing work and maintaining continuity of Commission efforts. There was the feeling that added activities, such as planning an annual conference,

pulled resources from the Commission's statutory purpose. In addition, community service providers reported some strain in balancing Commission and subcommittee duties along with the duties of their day-to-day job. These capacity challenges were described as potentially impeding the Commission's ability to accomplish its goals:

I have been surprised by just the workload that this has put on me, outside of my [job]. I think it was probably not a wise decision to cut the Utah Council on Victims of Crime Victims, to take away the Crime Victim Reparations Board. That divvied up some of the workload that we now have to take on, and I'm hearing now we have to meet weekly [due to the legislative session]. All of that, I didn't anticipate getting added to what I already do, I think it's a lot to ask people to take on.

VICTIM SERVICES COMMISSION IMPLEMENTATION

Working as a Commission

As noted earlier, some participants were unfamiliar with the procedural rules for how a commission functions. Because the VSC was so new, participants identified varying levels of expertise among members with respect to operating within a political space. In its inception, members did receive instruction on the procedural rules. Participants suggested that more structure and training was needed to help members understand how this Commission differed from previous initiatives:

I think the Commission, and we're in the process of doing that because it's fairly new, but the Commission has the ability to educate and train people on how to operate in this space. It's a very unique space and most people have never spent any time in the political arena. And I think we have an ability to, through administrative rules, setting up processes and structures that help support that to discussions that occur in meetings where we're maybe directing someone or correcting something that's happening and saying, "Yeah, Robert's Rules say we can't do that, but we need to do this." So, I think . . . we should be the informed voices that can help educate and train and then bring all that together in a way that's actually usable to the elected officials.

As another example, respondents were unclear how decisions were made as far as setting the agenda. This emerged with respect to items such as the differential amount of time that could be allocated to two individuals speaking from different perspectives on a single topic. The perception that the processes for setting the agenda were opaque persisted, even though many respondents noted frequent solicitations to put items on the agenda:

But I really don't feel like we play a role in setting the agenda. I mean, everyone says, "Who wants agenda items?" But we're kind of really clearly told that if it doesn't align with what [government entity] is wanting to do, it's not going to be a priority of the group³.

The comment above is representative of the perception that some conversations and decisions were happening outside of the actual VSC meetings. This feeling was influenced by the aforementioned dynamics related to community-based providers and state administrators. As noted above, this perception may also reflect the relative inexperience of some members in terms of working on a commission. Because the state administrators participated in multiple commissions and committees together, there were members who reported feeling that the VSC's priorities were "pre-determined," and therefore felt excluded from decision-making processes:

³ Of note, this quote is included as it represents participant perceptions that influence how the VSC functions. All commissions created by the state legislature have the duty to make recommendations that may include contrarian issues or action items. Decisions made regarding those recommendations are at the discretion of the legislature not commission members or staff.

It does tend to be an echo chamber. All the different leaderships, because everyone's showing up to these meetings, are the same individuals that are showing up to other committee meetings or other commission meetings.

Role of Subcommittees

The VSC was initially comprised of four statutorily mandated subcommittees (Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault, Child Abuse, and Multicultural). Subsequently, VSC assumed oversight over the Judicial Victim Rights Committees and created a Lived Experience Subcommittee. The four statutory subcommittees are led by co-chairs; those positions are designated in the legislation. Respondents expressed interest in having VSC staff more involved in running subcommittees to ensure horizontal integration, across the groups, and mitigate duplication of efforts between the broader Commission and external initiatives. One participant noted:

I think that one of the other challenges of the structure . . . is subcommittees can be really, really challenging in that, how do you make them meaningful? How do you keep them moving forward? How do you figure out how to help them coordinate or complement with other similar efforts without feeling completely duplicative? I worry a little bit that then the subcommittees, in some ways, they're ending up harboring the goals and projects of the coalitions. Which again, not a bad thing, but I would rather us just then have the conversation about that and how we then maximize those relationships. Because I worry that sometimes people just get a little bit frustrated with that.

The participation of VSC staff in subcommittee work was also described as a mechanism for maintaining continuity in the wake of planned, and unexpected, turnover in leadership and membership.

There was substantial variance in participants' understanding of the subcommittee's scope of work, which is not specifically defined in statute. In some cases, subcommittee members were unclear whether they were expected to send recommendations to the larger Commission or to receive assignments from the Commission or even legislators (see below for analysis of focus groups with subcommittees for more on this). Amongst some respondents, there was concern that the subcommittee topical areas reified existing silos between agency types (e.g., domestic violence, sexual assault, and child abuse); this was articulated as a contributing factor to aforementioned difficulty aligning perspectives across members.

Collective goals

Overwhelmingly, respondents endorsed the promise of VSC as a novel mechanism for unifying state strategies and resources to ensure an adequate response to victims of crime. The Commission's diverse membership, in terms of agency home and victimization focus, was perceived to be both necessary for achieving statutory goals and the cause of some tension, when there was not alignment across members' understanding of the most pressing problems, proposed solutions, and processes for setting and achieving goals. Participants expressed the need for a conversation focused on defining the purpose, expectations, and functioning of this new group, focusing on both its diverse membership and operational structure. One member identified the

need for a conversation regarding the collective goals of this diverse group: *“I think we should have started with a really deep dive . . . what are we here to do? What are our collective values? What are our collective goals?”*

Because the Commission is so new and has inherited both the tasks and organizational dynamics of previous victim service initiatives, respondents endorsed a need for conversations to clarify how the work of this Commission differs from pre-existing efforts or organizations. One member noted:

[T]hat's the conversation that I think needs to happen. How are we different than past groups and why are we different? What do we hope to accomplish together through that difference? And what are the expectations?

VICTIM SERVICES COMMISSION SUBCOMMITTEE FOCUS GROUPS

One-hour focus groups were conducted with all five Utah Victim Services Commission (VSC) subcommittees: Domestic Violence, Sexual Violence, Child Abuse, Multi-Cultural, and Lived Experience.

Opportunities

Across all focus groups, participants felt that the VSC created a novel, and important, mechanism for working collaboratively to support victims across agency- and crime-type. Regular meetings facilitated the development of new relationships and fostered an interdisciplinary lens on problems, and solutions, which allowed participants to imagine new ways of thinking about how the state responds to crime victimization. One participant described the opportunities created by the VSC structure:

One thing that's very helpful is being able to meet with and understand the agencies that are attending... having a spotlight where someone comes to talk about their program and unique challenges they've seen... able then for the subcommittee to put heads together and come up with solutions to refer to the VSC.

Participants characterized the collective expertise that existed within each group as strength of the subcommittees. The combination of subject matter specialization, and structured committee meetings, facilitated work that comprised a much “deeper dive” than happened previously. Members described subcommittees as a mechanism for prompt identification of needs, a place to inform other interested parties about issues, and an opportunity to generate collaborative solutions. The VSC in general, and the subcommittees specifically, were perceived as valuable because they provided a direct line to the legislative process, which meant that agencies did not have to do that work as individual entities.

Resources

While many discussions within VSC subcommittees were extensions of prior work, participants felt that the additional resources, in the form of staff and structure, greatly increased the scope and continuity of that work. Because many providers that work with victims are under resourced, in terms of staff and funding, participants felt they had limited capacity for engaging in system and policy work. With the creation of the VSC, members saw new momentum for the initiatives they were proposing:

[We] used to have a similar policy group for many years, but the biggest thing that has kept this group going is staff and having that consistency that staff provides. As service providers, [we] often lack the funding, capacity, and structural expertise of being part of the legislative arena. So having staff for that consistency and the structural support and understanding is what gives this subcommittee that momentum.

Barriers

Across all focus groups, participants experienced some disconnect between the work of their subcommittee and the larger VSC and also other subcommittees, with one respondent commenting: “*I have no visibility to other subcommittees.*” The latter was described as a problem to the degree that it resulted in duplicated efforts, when two subcommittees were unknowingly working on the same problem. Furthermore, members of one subcommittee may not realize that an issue they were addressing also impacted victims of other crime types. In that case, participants expressed concern that proposed solutions were not as robust as they could be if there were cross-committee collaboration. Members wanted regular opportunities for subcommittees to work together and identify areas of overlapping concern:

Sometimes we have issues that overlap with other subcommittees... maybe [we could create] more facilitated time where the other subcommittees come together to work on the same issues.

The siloed nature of the work done in subcommittees reflected larger concerns about the fragmented processes through which victim initiatives were talked about and funded, both prior to and in the VSC. A primary problem with this fragmentation is that it puts programs in competition for limited resources. While the VSC was designed to eliminate those siloes, the current subcommittees, which are largely organized by type of victimization, somewhat replicates the fragmentation:

And so I think in some ways, we're going to have to prioritize what is available and what are the priorities. And I think that comes from the, maybe the Commission more than an individual subcommittee, because we can each, it almost feels like when we report on our committees, they're all fabulous things, but they're all, they're in towers and they're not cohesive, right? Because If I wanted to get a bill that said we need more funding for the elderly, it probably pulls from somebody else and you don't want to be guilty of that. And I can tell when we report on our subcommittee, sometimes it's like, oh, that's nice, but it feels just, it feels separate from.

Another form of isolation centered around the relationship between the individual subcommittees, the VSC, and the larger range of partners working on issues related to crime victimization. This was amplified because of inexperience among some members in terms of understanding legislative processes and the best mechanisms for communicating with legislators. More broadly, members were unsure how the subcommittees were intended to influence the legislature and wanted clarity on how to convert discussions into policy:

We come up with so many great ideas, so just want clarity - are we giving those recommendations to the VSC, and the VSC gives them to the legislature? Is anything being taken [to the legislature and] being taken seriously [by the legislature]? How do we know what was and wasn't taken seriously and what was done with it? What is our role/the larger picture here?

The desire for more communication between subcommittees and other entities working on initiatives related to victimization was reiterated across the focus groups:

[I] would love if policymakers, agencies, etc., as they are contemplating changes, ask this subcommittee first and start a conversation about the issue (rather than getting halfway through legislation and being stalled for issues).

The disparate allocation of resources for victims—depending on both crime type and victim characteristics—emerged as a topic of concern in all subcommittee conversations. To the degree that siloes continued to exist within the VSC structure, participants worried that they were still “in competition” with each other rather than working collaboratively to improve response and services for all victims.

Subcommittee-Specific Findings

Child Abuse Subcommittee

The Child Abuse Subcommittee is somewhat unique, in that the systems for responding to crimes against children are legislatively structured to be multidisciplinary. As such, many participants of this subcommittee were already participating in interdisciplinary response teams, even prior to establishment of the VSC. For this subcommittee, some of the new opportunities created by the VSC were less novel than for members working with adult victims. One participant noted:

Sometimes the work of the subcommittee feels duplicated to what we do in the Commission on Criminal and Juvenile Justice and [the] children's justice centers.

Much of the focus of VSC is to identify system wide concerns and develop statewide solutions for victims of crime; focus group participants noted that the children's justice centers have already been functioning this way. As a result, there was uncertainty regarding the degree to which participation in the VSC was actually changing how the systems that respond to child abuse function: “*Which work is specific to the subcommittee?*”

Members felt that the child abuse subcommittee facilitated a better understanding among VSC members of the specific issues attendant to child victimization, including those related to geography and age of the victim.

Domestic Violence Subcommittee

While members from all subcommittees expressed some concern that the work remained siloed, they also provided examples of new processes for identifying issues and developing solutions, particularly with respect to domestic violence:

[We had a] really good previous meeting where they discussed issues that wouldn't have come up/the insights wouldn't have come up in other settings, where these specific [domestic violence] challenges with the system can be raised... didn't solve the world's problems, but able to have a meeting where all the different “silos” could actually come together and share information, knowledge, and challenges.

For members of this subcommittee, a primary concern was that the Utah Department of Health and Human Services, a primary funder of domestic violence shelters in the state, was eliminated as a voting member of VSC.

Lived Experience Subcommittee

The Lived Experience Subcommittee was created after legislative changes eliminated the victim representative from the larger VSC. While the elimination of that position sparked a negative reaction among members of the VSC, participants of this subcommittee expressed less concern about being a voting member of the Commission. Instead, they welcomed the opportunity to influence crime victims' experiences with reporting and recovery:

I was just excited for the opportunity . . . I think anytime that you get the chance to have a voice in something like this, I mean, it doesn't really matter if that's a seat on . . . the primary committee or a seat on a subcommittee. . . being able to share experiences.

That said, participants did express concern that they were organized as a single subcommittee rather than being integrated into the other groups. This isolation meant that members felt excluded from some important conversations and questioned who was representing victims' voices in the other subcommittees:

[I want] a little bit more support or acknowledgment that we are an important part of the conversation. When we are separated from other groups is difficult, attending other groups when appropriate would be helpful, what are they talking about, and how can we influence them.

Of note, the importance of having victim representation on the VSC was echoed across all subcommittees, as noted by a respondent from the Child Abuse Subcommittee: “*the invaluable opinions of victims need to be more represented in all subcommittees.*”

Participants expressed concern that the scope of the VSC, at least in terms of its name, was too limited in its focus on the services available to victims. They expressed a desire for Commission members to understand victims' experiences both with service providers and in the criminal justice system. Much of this feeling stemmed from their own experiences in those systems and a desire to improve things for others, including the need for ongoing support after a criminal case is closed:

Once sentencing was done, and the responsibility of my victim's advocate with the district attorney [was done], you know we touched base occasionally, but . . . I'm no longer a responsibility. I'm kind of a free-range victim.

That desire to improve the system's response to victims was couched as a way for members to make meaning of their own experience of being victimized, and as a mechanism to rectify harm they experienced:

[I] want my negative experience to inform the system so those things do not happen to others . . . surrogate justice.

Multicultural Subcommittee

Participants of this subcommittee described some difficulty prioritizing tasks and topics to address, in part because the Multicultural Subcommittee was intended to address issues that impacted all populations, victimization types, and identities. This resulted in members feeling like they were responsible for identifying problems and solutions regarding the victimization of immigrants, undocumented individuals, marginalized populations, and also adult victims of all crimes that were not domestic violence or sexual assault. The struggle to set priorities was influenced by the relative novelty of the VSC and also by recent turnover in committee leadership. Participants' lack of surety was also attributed to the current VSC structure, wherein subcommittees work in isolation from one another; as such, they were not always sure what victims were experiencing related to multi-cultural issues:

I think since we are figuring out our kind of mission and what we're working on, I think right now the question of are there opportunities to collaborate and hear how they [other subcommittees] think their specific issue is being impacted by a multicultural lens, I think that has value. I also think this subcommittee will be able to work on things that they won't work on.

Similar to the Lived Experience Committee, members of this group felt like their concerns could impact the work of all the other committees and wanted structured opportunities to do collaborative work. There was concern among this group that the purpose and potential of VSC had not yet been fully realized, in part because of the structure of the subcommittees:

[In one session, another subcommittee] mentioned how there are children that are undocumented or their parents are undocumented and they don't feel comfortable reporting. So now we're talking about child abuse. We're talking about domestic violence cases. And it all ties together, but it's still, we're still siloed in a way when we talk about services for victims as a whole.

This subcommittee, in particular, has been impacted by the current political climate and local and federal conversations about immigration and also diversity, equity, and inclusion. Members expressed confusion about what types of action they could take, as a governor's commission, and also what they could discuss publicly. Of note, this concern was also identified in interviews with Commission members, in that case related to the implications of being administratively located in the governor's office.

Yeah, I mean, particularly us too. I mean, I think that's one of the biggest problems is that question of how challenging it is to really have a frank conversation about working with populations who are undocumented right now. And I think the message that we're getting is very confused and it isn't clear. And so how we work with that's a big challenge.

Sexual Assault Subcommittee

The Sexual Assault Subcommittee felt that the VSC provided a meaningful opportunity move the state towards a multidisciplinary team response to sexual assault. In particular, this

was framed as a desire to create a systemic response to adult sexual assault that mirrored the processes in place for responding to child abuse:

[We hope] to create a similar framework as the multidisciplinary team used for child victims. [It] is valuable to get everyone on the same page and get all of these different disciplines together.

In order to accomplish this goal, members felt like their subcommittee needed additional resources, including staffing from VSC and funding to create a structure similar to the children's justice centers. Participants strongly endorsed the important contribution that VSC staff had made in moving the committee's work forward. There was also concern that staff is stretched "too thin" and that more capacity (funding, structural expertise) is needed to meet the workload in committees. Concerns about members' capacity to move initiatives forward were also evident in the interviews with VSC members, many of whom work for non-profits with small budgets and limited experience with legislative processes.

Members of this subcommittee also wanted to use the victim rights violation process, in a systematic fashion, as a means to identify, and develop solutions for, statewide issues impacting victims of sexual assault:

[We want to hear] concerns and issues that need attention regarding victim rights complaints – an opportunity to have a "review" of the complaints coming in related to sexual assault that gives an idea of areas that still need some focus – [this] might be a valuable resource for this group to have.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis presented here indicates that members believe the Commission is a novel initiative that can function as the recognized voice for the “victim/survivor space” with the legislature. The Commission’s diverse membership brings valuable insight, collective power, and resources to conversations about Utah’s victim response systems. That diversity, and the relative inexperience of some members when working in a political arena, has also contributed to fragmentation and uncertainty about roles and priorities, as members tend to feel that they are representing their home agency. Events that occurred outside of the Commission also proved distracting during its inception, pulling focus from the VSC’s larger goals and interrupting the creation of a new working culture. To the degree that members feel uncertainty about purpose or procedures, respondents felt the group sometimes lapsed into previous ways of working together, rather than entering a new space. The following recommendations are suggested based upon the results of this report:

Membership

Participants felt that the Commission could only accomplish its statutory goals if membership included all agencies with substantial responsibility for administering state and federal monies for victim services. The Utah Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) was eliminated from the Commission after the first year. In order to systematically address problems with how victim service agencies are funding, DHHS should be reinstated as a member of VSC. Legislation to do so could also require regular review of victim services funding, to ensure membership is regularly updated to include entities with statewide responsibility for administering victim response and services. Participants also indicated that the lack of victims’ voices on the Commission was both functionally and symbolically problematic. The Lived Experience Subcommittee created a space for victims to be heard; however, members wanted more integration of victims’ perspectives in Commission discussions. This could include reinstating a victim on the full VSC; updating the statute regarding subcommittees to ensure victims are included on all subcommittees; updating the statute regarding subcommittees to include the Lived Experience Subcommittee; and/or advocating for the creation of another entity that would advise the VSC on victim’s perspectives (e.g., akin to the Utah Council on Victims of Crime).

Clarify Mechanisms for Action

In both the Commission and its subcommittees, participants were unclear how to convert ideas into legislative action. One part of this relates to how the Commission itself functions: how decisions are made, agendas are set, and the role of subcommittees and subcommittee leadership. One mechanism for addressing this would be the creation of administrative rules that could be used to train and guide members on how to function in the novel space of the VSC. This should also include position descriptions for the VSC chair and vice chair and subcommittee leadership. The VSC, with subcommittees, should create written descriptions of the scope and focus of the subcommittees, mechanisms for determining what tasks subcommittees should embark on, and how the work should be presented to, and aligned with, other subcommittees and the broader VSC. These documents should include descriptions of VSC staffs’ role in leading the Commission and supporting the work of subcommittees.

In addition to work within the VSC, members indicated that they were unclear how they were expected to align with the governor and influence the work of the legislature. As noted above, processes and procedures should be developed that defined how members were expected to balance representing their home organization with the work of the Commission. This should also clarify expectations around taking positions on proposed policies and legislation. Finally, legislators should be trained on the Commission itself, including the best processes for soliciting feedback on proposed legislation. Ideally, the legislature would send requests to the Commission or subcommittees asking for input into a particular issue. The Commission, subcommittee, or *ad hoc* work group, would then solicit information from relevant partners and produce a report. This report should be used when developing proposed legislation that impacts victims.

Setting Priorities

Given the broad scope of the Commission's statutory responsibility, and the diversity of memberships, there should be regular discussions to establish a shared purpose, identity, and set of priorities for the Commission. This could be an annual discussion, focused on the upcoming year, but should also include long-term goals. Those discussions should be informed by the work of subcommittees and also available data relating to crime victimization, availability of services, and crime victim rights violations. Within the scope of this project, victim service providers developed a set of goals for the victim services system. Those goals, listed below, should inform discussions on priorities and identification of systemic issues in the state's response to victims.

Context

The following core goals were drafted by a working group of Victim Service Commission members (service providers and coalitions). These goals will inform the ongoing study that the Utah Criminal Justice Center is conducting of the VSC. These goals are intended to apply across the entire victim service cascade (i.e., community service providers, system service providers, funders, administrators, legislative bodies). These goals were approved by the full VSC, but not unanimously.

Core Goals for the Utah Victim Services System:

1. Accessibility across a range of domains that include crime type, geography, and culture
2. Collaboration between service providers and stakeholders to ensure there is "no wrong door" for accessing assistance
3. Information regarding the range of criminal justice, community, and other options available
4. Survivor-led focus on treatment, engagement, and identifying and addressing needs
5. Quality services that are delivered as intended
6. Addressing root causes of vulnerability

The existing subcommittee structure replicates historical fragmentation in how the response to victims is discussed and resourced. In order to develop more unified solutions that apply to all victims, the legislature could consider revising the statutory subcommittees to focus on identified issues and problems to solve. For example, there could be subcommittees that focus on funding victim services, training responders to work with victims, and solving problems in the criminal justice system. Alternatively, the existing VSC subcommittees could identify problems that need to be solved and invite members from other subcommittees to participate in *ad hoc* work groups.

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APPENDIX A: METHODOLOGY

The Utah Criminal Justice Center (UCJC) utilized a mixed methods approach to evaluate the following aims: 1) identify duplication of voices and absence of stakeholder voices representing all populations and processes impacting victims of crime on VSC and subcommittees; 2) determine how the VSC is comparable to other state bodies with a similar focus of supporting victims; 3) identify any overlapping responsibilities that the Commission has with other state or community agencies, offices, boards, or councils and other groups identified in the landscape analysis; 4) provide recommendations based on 6a and 6b for addressing current barriers as well as streamlining to eliminate silos and duplication; and 5) evaluate impact and outcomes related to membership size and merging of responsibilities from the Crime Victims Council. This was accomplished through two phases. Phase one included a detailed content analysis of Utah Code 63M-7-902 and Utah Code 63M-7-903 and publicly available VSC documentation (e.g., agendas, minutes, attendance, handouts). This facilitated a detailed examination of the existing responsibilities of the commission to establish a baseline for comparison to other state or community agencies.

Phase two consisted of semi-structured interviews and focus groups conducted with VSC members, subcommittee members, and service providers to address aims 1, 2, 3. Qualitative data was collected from three groups. The research team will conducted interviews with VSC members to explore perspectives regarding VSC operationalization from within (e.g. director of the Utah Office for Victims of Crime, executive director of the Department of Health and Human Services, executive director of the Department of Corrections, executive director of the state domestic violence coalition, executive director of the tribal coalition for this state, an individual who is a victim of crime, etc.). Second, the research team will conduct focus groups with VSC subcommittees (N=4). These subcommittees focus on domestic violence, rape and sexual assault, child abuse, and multi-cultural. The purpose of this inquiry was to identify differences in the adequacy of state resources across crime type and demographic characteristics.

UCJC conducted both interviews and focus groups for this portion of the study in order to collect data on the shared goals and concerns of partners (focus groups) and to also facilitate transparent responses from participants, given that they have more privacy and confidentiality, which is not always feasible in focus groups (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). This is critical in the study context, in which many stakeholders have pre-existing relationships that predate the coalition. Both semi-structured interview guides and focus group guides focused on participant perspectives regarding VSC composition, comparison of Utah service provision to other states, and perspectives on duplication of services and duties. Participant interviews were conducted via Zoom, phone, or in person, depending on participant preference. Interviews were recorded via Zoom and transcribed. Qualitative data was analyzed using an inductive coding approach.

APPENDIX B: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

Victim Services Commission Semi-structured Interview Guide

Role in Commission:

Agency/organization type:

Counties agency serves:

Target population you serve:

Job title:

Years in field:

Years in current position:

VSC Priorities and Purpose

1. Can you tell me what brought you to the Victim Services Commission (VSC) and your role?
2. What do you view as the main duties and goals of the VSC
3. How were these duties identified?
4. Are there duties you feel should be included?
5. Can you speak to how the duties of the commission reflect community and victim priorities?
PROBE: Can you speak to the role that crime categories play into this?
6. What, in your understanding, is the problem that VSC is intended to address?
7. What are the activities of the victims services commission
8. What role do you see the VSC having in the development of local, state, or national performance measures, policies, regulations, or guidelines?

Evaluation of Services

What is your definition of a victim service system that works?

What outcomes or benchmarks would you expect to see to indicate services are adequate?

VSC Structure and Membership

1. This Commission has recently made changes to its membership. Can you describe those changes and how decisions were made and communicated? What have been the impacts of these changes?

2. Can you speak to your perspective regarding the adequacy of representation the voices on the VSC?

PROBE: Are there any groups/communities/identities missing?

3. How is the Commission structured in terms of authority and decision making? Can you describe the functioning of the primary commission and subcommittees?

If subcommittee chair:

4. How do you feel the subcommittee structure is working?
5. Do you have thoughts on improving the leadership structure of these committees?
6. How does this impact communication? Effectiveness for accomplishing VSC duties?

VSC Process and Communication

1. In your opinion, what are the impacts of the VSC taking the form of a commission rather than a coalition?
2. Within the context of your VSC role, can you describe your working relationship with stakeholders relevant to the VSC?
3. Who are the primary stakeholders you work with?
4. When asked if there are any stakeholders she would like to work with more, she said law enforcement?
5. How do you see the Commission's statutory duties fitting into the existing victim services landscape in Utah (community, state, grassroots)? Are there duplications?
PROBE if not discussed: specifically, victims and/or lived experience individuals?
6. How do you typically find out about new information, such as new initiatives, accomplishments, issues, new staff, staff departures relevant to the VSC?
7. Can you think of a time when there has been a disagreement among VSC members (either between members or with other stakeholders)? How, if so, was this resolved?
8. How do you think the VSC's culture (general beliefs, values, assumptions that people embrace) affects its functioning and effectiveness?
9. To what extent are new ideas embraced and used to make improvements in the Commission?

FINAL THOUGHTS – Is there anything else you want to add that we haven't discussed or asked you about?