

# Chapter 3: Victim and Family Assistance

**"Every mayor should have a family reunification plan."**

– Kathy Devault, Orlando FL (established Family Assistance Center)

## Chapter Summary

Following a mass shooting, victims and their family members have short- and long-term needs. Cities often establish specialized centers to meet these needs: the **Family Reunification Center** (aka Family Reception Center), followed by the **Family Assistance Center**, and then in many cases, the **Resiliency Center**. A background section on the role of these centers has been provided for your general information.

During the **preparedness** phase, develop a family reunification and assistance plan as part of your overall emergency management plan for mass casualty incidents. Convene the American Red Cross (ARC), mental health experts, and victim service providers—including local law enforcement and the FBI Victim Services Division (FBI-VSD), prosecutors, and community-based organizations—to determine and coordinate the victim services that will be needed in the event of a mass shooting.

In the **response** phase, focus your attention on meeting the needs of victims and families. Ensure that areas or centers where family reunification and assistance are provided have a secure perimeter and are separate from the Joint Information Center (JIC) where the press will be located. Work with law enforcement and the coroner's office to speed the process for notifying family members of deaths. Ensure all families have privacy when needed and are assigned an advocate to connect them to services and help them apply for crime victim compensation.

Contact the ARC and the FBI-VSD, as well as local partners, to help you establish victim and family services. Meet with victims and families directly to ensure their needs are being met, to solicit their input for vigils, and to comfort them.

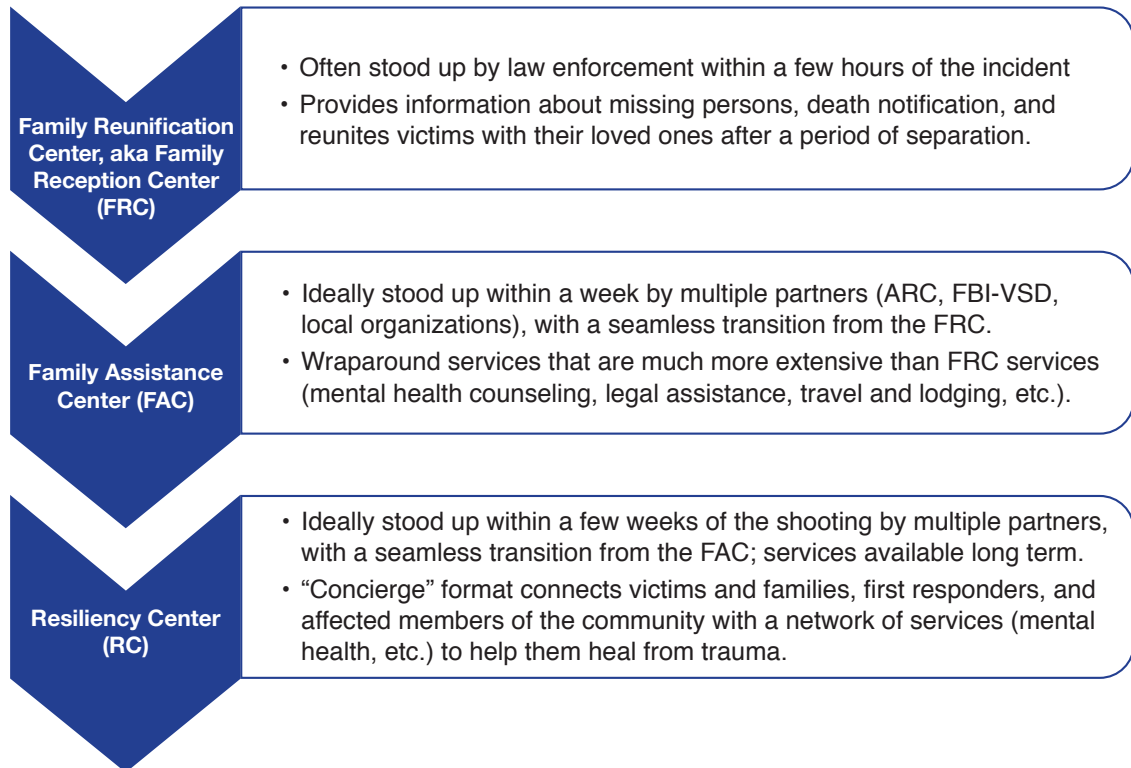
As the response transitions to the **recovery** phase, continue your outreach to, and support of, victims and their families. You may need to establish—and find funds for—a Resiliency Center to meet their ongoing recovery needs. Separately, families and victims will need mental health and security services if the shooter is prosecuted and goes to trial. Consult with the families to solicit their input on remembrance events or memorials. For more information, see Chapter 9 on Commemorations.



# Background

## Overview of Centers for Victims, and Families and Friends

Victim and family assistance is usually provided in phases, as summarized below.



*Figure 2: Overview of Centers for Victims, Families, and Friends*

### Family Reunification (or Reception) Center (FRC)

In the immediate aftermath, a Family Reunification Center (FRC) provides a place for families and friends to gather and receive updates, be reunified with their loved ones, and receive death notifications.<sup>1</sup> The FRC can also facilitate the return of some personal effects (those not part of the crime scene) and provide psychological first aid and other services. The FRC is often jointly operated by emergency management and law enforcement and is closed once a Family Assistance Center is ready to open.

<sup>1</sup> Note that the ICPTTA program recommends calling the FRC the “Family and Friends Reception Center” instead of the “Family Reunification Center” out of respect to families of victims that were killed, who have said the word “reunification” gave them false hope. However, we point out that “reception” has celebratory connotations that may also be inappropriate under the circumstances.



## **Family Assistance Center (FAC)**

After the FRC closes, a Family Assistance Center (FAC) provides continuing assistance and wraparound services for victims, families, and affected members of the community. Ideally, the FAC should open within 24-48 hours of the shooting. The FAC may be collaboratively operated by the city, local agencies and businesses, law enforcement agencies, the ARC, and FBI-VSD. Plan for a seamless transition between the FRC and the FAC so that the families receive services without interruption.

## **Resiliency Center (RC)**

Similarly, there should be a seamless transition from the FAC to the Resiliency Center (RC) during the recovery phase. The lasting effects of trauma are addressed by the RC, which often offers “concierge” services. The RC serves as “safe place” for victims and families, first responders, and the affected community to heal. It connects them to a network of mental health care and other services they will need over the long-term.

## **Agencies and Organizations that Provide Victim Services**

Get to know the state and local organizations and agencies that provide services to victims of crime in your city. In addition to law enforcement agencies, these may include special offices or divisions within prosecutors’ offices, regional or county agencies, and state agencies that distribute Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) funding. These state agencies offer victim advocacy and support services, support to nonprofit organizations serving victims, and referrals to services that may be needed in the aftermath of a mass shooting. There may also be community-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that specialize in trauma recovery and can provide mental health services to victims of crime or social services to their families.

Familiarize yourself with federal agencies and national organizations and their resources. The FBI’s Victim Services Division (FBI-VSD), the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC), and the American Red Cross (ARC) are almost always involved in a city’s response to a mass shooting (see below for information about the role they can play).

Local organizations and businesses can provide essential services to victims and families, which can vary depending on the community and nature of the crisis. Examples of services that may need to be provided at the FAC include:

- Healthcare
- Behavioral health care services specific to disasters/mass violence
- Referrals for long-term behavioral health services
- Childcare and pet care
- Crime victim compensation
- Crime victim advocacy (victim advocates work directly with the victims to support them with services that meet their individual needs and may stay with them for years in some cases)



- Employee assistance
- Insurance and legal guidance
- Travel assistance
- Assistance with funeral and medical costs for victims (especially the uninsured)
- Assistance with funeral and medical costs for victims (especially the uninsured)

See also Chapter 7 on Partnerships for help identifying partnerships you may want to establish in advance of a crisis.

## Preparedness

### Convene Partners to Plan Victim Reunification and Assistance Services

Plan victim and family services for your community, which at a minimum should include protocols for family reunification and operating a FAC and potential locations for these operations. Convene a meeting with potential partners using the OVC toolkit below. This meeting should be part of your overall emergency management planning described in Chapter 2 so that victim and family services are integrated into city and regional emergency management plans.

The OVC funds a program called the ICPTTA (Improving Community Preparedness to Assist Victims of Mass Violence and Domestic Terrorism) to help you and your partners plan the services needed by victims and families and to integrate your planning into the emergency management plan and other protocols. The OVC Training and Technical Assistance Center and the ARC can also assist in the planning process.

#### Key Resource: Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) Toolkit

##### Office for Victims of Crime Training and Technical Assistance Center (OVC TTAC), Helping Victims of Mass Violence & Terrorism Planning, Response, Recovery, and Resources:

This publication is focused on victim assistance for a wide range of disaster events that require coordinated, cross-sector responses. Includes links to the following Toolkit materials: Partnerships & Planning, Response, and Recovery. Each section includes checklists, samples, a glossary, and victim assistance resources.  
<https://ovc.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh226/files/pubs/mvt-toolkit/index.html>

##### Improving Community Preparedness to Assist Victims of Mass Violence and Domestic Terrorism: Training and Technical Assistance: <https://icptta.com/>

Mass Violence Victimization Resource Center website:  
<https://www.nmvvrc.org/>



As part of the planning process, mayors and other experts we spoke to recommended:

- Identify potential locations for the FRC and FAC during the preparedness phase. Using a grid of the city, determine possible locations in different parts of the city near places an attack could take place. Look for buildings large enough to host victims and families (ideally scalable), in a secure area away from the press, with adequate parking. Examples include stadiums, hotels, and institutional buildings. Make a list of available facilities and update it regularly.
- Ask law enforcement agencies and victim service providers about their protocols for operating an FRC and FAC and keep these on file and accessible.
- Determine who may need to be contacted to provide mental health care and essential services in the event of a mass shooting (see examples of potential partners and essential services in the background section above).
- Plan to incorporate the command of the FAC into the existing Incident Command Structure so that the unified command stays intact and there is clear leadership.
- Make plans to secure the perimeter of the FRC and FAC using local law enforcement assets, private security contractors, or mutual aid agreements.
- Keep in mind that not all victims and family members will be from your city. To stay connected to them, you may need plan to offer remote services, hotlines, or partner with organizations with national reach.

### **Key Resource: Family Assistance Center**

**Mass Fatality Incident Family Assistance Operations:** National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) and the FBI Office for Victim Assistance developed this guide for local and state agencies involved in the response to mass fatality events. It explains how to set up a family assistance center to provide services to victims and family members.

<https://www.nts.gov/tda/TDADocuments/Federal-Family-Plan-Aviation-Disasters-rev-12-2008.pdf>

**OVC Bulletin on the role of the Medical Examiner and Family Assistance Center after a mass casualty event:**

[https://www.ncjrs.gov/ovc\\_archives/bulletins/prfmf\\_11\\_2001/188912.pdf](https://www.ncjrs.gov/ovc_archives/bulletins/prfmf_11_2001/188912.pdf)

**Examples of Family Assistance Center plans:**

<https://files.asprtracie.hhs.gov/documents/aspr-tracie-ta-facs-for-mass-fatality-incidents-092817-508.pdf>



## Other Considerations:

- Language: The FRC and FAC may need interpreters and/or translators. For example, some families and victims did not speak English in Oak Creek, WI. Community members stepped up as volunteer interpreters for both law enforcement and the media. After the Pulse Nightclub shooting in Orlando, the majority of victims and their families received services in Spanish.<sup>1</sup>
- Cultural practices: learn about the cultural practices of minority groups in your community so that services provided are culturally appropriate. In Pittsburgh, understanding Jewish traditions relating to caring for the dead was essential in responding to the Tree of Life shooting. In Oak Creek, vigil attendees covered their heads out of respect for Sikh traditions. In Orlando, service providers needed to understand that the LGBTQ+ community broadly defines “family member” to include close friends and partners, and some victims did not want to be “outed” by the media.<sup>2</sup>
- Residency status: Public mass shootings often affect undocumented residents and foreign citizens. This was the case in the Oak Creek, Orlando, and El Paso shootings. All victims of crime are eligible for victim services regardless of residency status, but some victims hesitate to access services due to fears of immigration consequences. Family members living abroad may need help gaining an emergency visa to come to your city. At the FRC and FAC, these issues pose unique legal challenges and may require immigration attorneys to provide victim services. If you suspect they will be needed, include immigration attorneys (contact your local bar association for volunteers) and organizations trusted by undocumented groups in the planning process.
- Online services: OVC recommends establishing an FAC website to provide services to those who cannot or will not visit the FAC in person.
- Advocacy: Designate a family liaison for each family to ensure they get the services they need and to facilitate communication with your office.
- Privacy: Some families will need a private, quiet space where resources are available but not intrusive. Plan for private rooms that offer beverages, informational pamphlets, soft toys for children, and above all—peace and quiet.
- Vetting: At the FRC and FAC, service providers and volunteers should use an entrance/intake area separate from the entrance used by families and victims.



## Best Practices Tip

The Family Reunification and Assistance Centers should be:

1. **Separate** from Joint Information Center, volunteer intake process, and the press
2. **Scalable** to meet the needs of any number of victims and families
3. **Secure**, with access controlled by law enforcement and closed off to the press



## Response

### Work with Law Enforcement to Establish the Family Reunification (aka Reception) Center (FRC)

Emergency management and law enforcement officials typically establish the FRC, which operates for the first 24-48 hours or so. You have four primary roles:

1. Ensure the FRC is situated in an appropriate location away from the press and provides the protections and services families will require. This includes a secure perimeter and private rooms where family members can meet with counselors. If at all possible, ensure the meeting rooms are physically separate so that difficult discussions cannot be heard by others.
2. Work with law enforcement and the coroner's office to speed the process of victim identification to ensure families and friends can be notified as quickly as possible. See the Legal Considerations Chapter for more information.
3. Ensure that every family has a dedicated victims advocate to make sure they get the services and information they need immediately and over time.
4. Contact the ARC and FBI-VSD. The ARC has responded to nearly all public mass shootings in recent years but must be invited as it is not statutorily authorized to respond to mass shootings on its own. Therefore, instruct your Emergency Management staff to contact the ARC immediately to request assistance with the FRC and FAC. Basic services delivered by the ARC include health care, mental health services, and spiritual care. Your local ARC chapter can mobilize a response from the ARC national headquarters, including experts who have responded to similar incidents. Likewise, the FBI-VSD can provide comprehensive services (even if the FBI is not the lead law enforcement agency), but must be requested. Contact your state's FBI Special Agent in Charge (SAC).





**Image 5:** An FBI Victim Assistance member carries a bag of personal effects from the site of the November 2018 mass shooting at Borderline Bar and Grill in Thousand Oaks, California, to the nearby Family Assistance Center for collection by its owner (Courtesy of FBI Multimedia Database).

## Track Victims

Experts recommend a centralized system for tracking victims as they are identified by law enforcement. This system should be made accessible to your staff if possible. The tracking system allows FRC and FAC officials to know which victims are being treated and released from which hospitals and communicate this information to families and friends. This may be a challenge due to the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), but can often be accomplished through hospital consortiums and the ARC, which is HIPAA-exempt during disasters. In Orlando, Mayor Dyer called President Obama to discuss HIPAA regulations and request a waiver, which may have helped to speed the release the names in compliance with the law.

## Engage with Hospitals

Hospitals may also establish limited victim and family services at their facilities, but families and victims need to be connected to the larger response. If needed, direct your staff to contact responding hospitals and medical facilities to request access for outside responders (e.g., victim advocates or the ARC) to brief families and victims on which services will become available and how they should receive them. These families and victims should also be provided remote access to the family briefings that take place at the FAC.

## Establish Family Assistance Center (FAC)

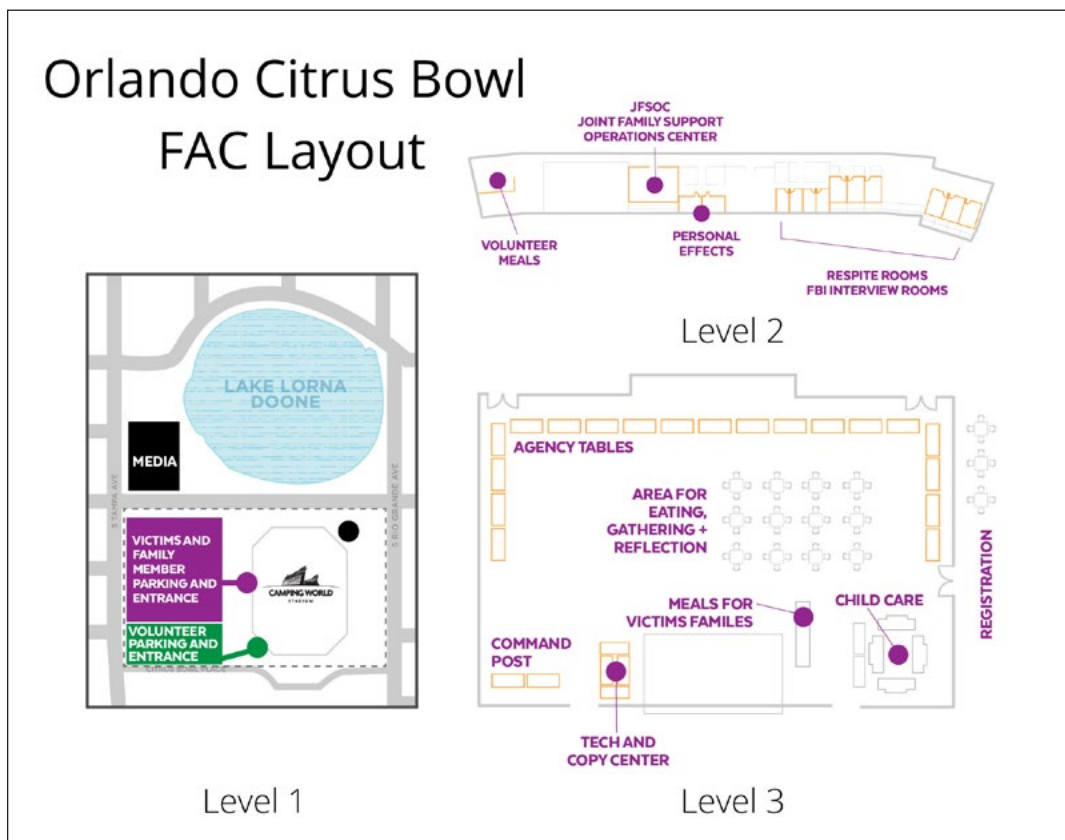
Meanwhile, you can oversee the establishment of the FAC. See the preparedness section of this chapter for planning steps, resources, and a list of essential services that may need to be provided at the FAC. During the response, you should take the following actions to establish the FAC:

- Convene law enforcement officials and victim services providers, the FBI, the OVC, and the ARC to develop a FAC protocol (or implement an existing one) and determine the services that will be provided at the FAC (see above).





- Identify the location for the FAC, make legal arrangements for its use, and arrange security.
- Coordinate with ARC and FBI-VSD to contact local partners to operate the FAC and provide services.
- Define who is eligible for services (typically the lead law enforcement agency or the District Attorney makes this call). Advocate for a broadly inclusive definition.
- Discuss the cost of services with partners, determine who can donate funds or provide pro-bono or in-kind services.
- Urge law enforcement to retain incident command for the FAC. It is recommended to transfer the incident command to the FAC.
- Assign roles for city staff, if needed. They can brief you regularly so that you can ensure victims' needs are being met and troubleshoot as needed.
- Document the elements of the plan for use by FAC service providers.
- Begin communicating the location and services of the FAC to the public.
- In the recovery phase, seek reimbursement from OVC and other sources.



**Image 6:** The layout of the Family Assistance Center in Orlando following the Pulse Shooting, showing separate entrances for victims/families and volunteers, private rooms, and a secure perimeter with a separate area for media. (Courtesy of City of Orlando staff).

## Connect with Victims and Families

### One mayor told us, “nothing shows you care like showing up.”

Mayors who have responded to a mass shooting emphasize that nothing can prepare you for the difficult conversations you will have with victims and family members.

Nevertheless, here are a few suggestions:

- Be composed and compassionate.
- Be well-briefed so that you can provide information about available resources.
- Anticipate anger, anguish, and pain, so know your limits.
- Be authentic: Draw on beliefs and trainings that give you strength and inspiration in difficult times. For example, one mayor spoke about relying on his faith when engaging with his community.

### Visit the FAC

You may want to visit the FAC to speak to victims and family members, check on the operation of the FAC, and liaise with victims’ services professionals. Request a briefing from FAC officials when you arrive. Expect to meet in a private area with victims and family members who have agreed to speak with you. Do not expect photo or video opportunities with them.

### Visit the Hospital

All the mayors we interviewed said they visited victims in the hospital. Here are a few best practices:

- Contact the hospital’s media relations department or office of community outreach to inform them of your visit and determine which victims you will visit (this may involve obtaining informed consent from patients).
- Your staff should coordinate with the hospital’s media relations department about press coverage resulting from your visit, including compliance with patient privacy laws and hospital policies. Families and victims should be informed ahead of time about potential press coverage so that they are not taken by surprise. Press coverage of hospital visits should be limited to noting your visit but should not include live coverage that may be viewed as exploitative. As at the FAC, hospitals are not appropriate opportunities for photos or videos, out of respect to victims and families. (Remind visiting VIPs of this concern as well).
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not possible to visit victims in the hospital. Some healthcare facilities established new systems for providing video conferencing software to allow remote patient “visits.”<sup>3</sup>



## Recovery

### Transition from the FAC to the Resiliency Center (RC)

Most survivors of a public mass shooting show resilience over time. However, others experience ongoing mental health problems. Experts say that providing a place for collective healing does the most to strengthen families and communities during the recovery phase.<sup>4</sup> That's why a Resiliency Center (RC) may be needed.

While the FAC is still operational, plan what will happen when the national partners (*e.g.*, the FBI-VSD and ARC) pull out. Engage local partners to begin planning a RC to connect victims and families to ongoing services. Cities that established a RC after a public mass shooting or bombing include Orlando (see below), El Paso, Aurora, Newtown, Las Vegas, Parkland, and Boston. The Office for Victims of Crime Training and Technical Assistance Center (OVC TTAC) consultants can help you write a grant proposal for OVC funding, which can help fund the RC for a limited period.

Given the long-term effects of trauma, RCs often operate for years following a mass shooting. For example, the Resiliency Center in Orlando (named the Orlando United Assistance Center, or OUAC) is still operating five years after the Pulse shooting.

#### Mayors in Action: Resiliency Center

Orlando launched the Orlando United Assistance Center (OUAC) immediately after the FAC closed. The OUAC is a collaboration with the City of Orlando, Orange County Government, and Heart of Florida United Way. Services available at the OUAC include:

- Case management working directly with an OUAC Case Manager
- Navigation of community resources
- Referrals for mental health and counseling services
- Referrals for housing assistance, emergency financial assistance, employment, training, and educational opportunities



OUAC is now managed by the LGBT+ Center of Orlando and continues to provide individualized care to those impacted by the Pulse tragedy. For more information about the OUAC: <https://orlandounitedassistancecenter.org/>.



## Victim Services During a Trial

In cases where a shooter is prosecuted, victims and their family members will need support services throughout the legal proceedings. These will be coordinated by Victim Advocates connected to the prosecuting office (District Attorney or U.S. Attorney). Your office can collaborate with partners and agencies to ensure these services are comprehensive. The Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) recommends establishing safe havens (physical locations) where families and victims can receive coordinated services. Also, you can develop a media plan to limit press contact with the families. You should also consider providing security for victims and families who attend trial proceedings.

### Key Resources: Victim Services During a Trial



**Providing Services to Victims Viewing a Trial at Multiple Locations:** OVC provides a protocol for providing standardized services to victims of mass violence during the trial, sentencing, and other court proceedings.

[https://ovc.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh226/files/publications/infores/trials\\_cctv\\_for\\_victims/welcome.html](https://ovc.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh226/files/publications/infores/trials_cctv_for_victims/welcome.html)

**Prosecution-Based Mass Violence Response Toolkit: A Guide for Victim Advocates Responding to Mass Violence Incidents When the Offender will be Prosecuted:** a guide for victim advocates who will provide standard services during court proceedings, including templates, considerations for advocates' self-care, and advocacy protocols.

<https://www.trynova.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Mass-Violence-Prosecution-Victim-Advocate-Toolkit.pdf>

## Crime Victim Compensation

Both federal and state agencies provide financial support to victims of crime, including victims of a public mass shooting. The FAC team (or your staff) can connect victims to crime victim compensation. Note that state crime victim compensation programs are not the only source of victim assistance. Public donations supplement these programs. However, it is important to understand that families' access to donations may impact their eligibility for crime victim compensation.

A summary of crime victim resources is provided in Appendix C on Funding. See Chapter 5 on Donations for more information about establishing a victims' fund.



## Mayors in Action: Victim Compensation

In Dayton, a state victim compensation fund made available through the Ohio Attorney General's office paid out \$102,731 to 29 victims of the shooting.<sup>5</sup> However, at least 19 victims were denied state assistance.<sup>6</sup> The legislature later enacted reforms to address these victims' difficulties.<sup>7</sup> For instance, victims were denied assistance because of prior felony charges unrelated to the mass shooting, or because they had drugs in their system when they became victims.<sup>8</sup> The legislature also proposed to expand the definition of "victim" to cover more affected individuals, increase the maximum claim for grief counseling, and lower barriers to receiving compensation.<sup>9</sup> Mayor Nan Whaley advocated for these changes.



## Ongoing Engagement with Family Members

Continue to meet with victims and families as appropriate or requested to ensure their needs are being met and to solicit their input for vigils and permanent memorials. El Paso Mayor Dee Margo recommended following up with victim's families every few months for the first year to inquire how they are doing. In El Paso, a caring staff member made the regular check-in calls and advised the Mayor when he needed to make a personal call.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Olga Molina, Bonnie Yegidis & George Jacinto, *The Pulse Nightclub Mass Shooting and Factors Affecting Community Resilience Following the Terrorist Attack*, 15 BEST PRACTICES IN MENTAL HEALTH 1–15 (2019).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION, *Management of Visitors to Healthcare Facilities in the Context of COVID-19: Non-US Healthcare Settings*, September 15, 2020, available at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/non-us-settings/hcf-visitors.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Amy Novotney, *What happens to the survivors?*, 49 MONITOR ON PSYCHOLOGY 36 (2018).

<sup>5</sup> Josh Sweigart & Laura A. Bischoff, *State leaders looking at victim compensation reforms after Dayton Daily News investigation*, DAYTON DAILY NEWS (2020), <https://www.daytondailynews.com/news/state-leaders-looking-at-reforms-after-dayton-daily-news-investigation/AG6MO3NH4ZESBFY2GN76QSXHAU/> (last visited Jun 2, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> Ohio S.B. 369, <https://www.legislature.ohio.gov/legislation/legislation-documents?id=GA133-SB-369>.

<sup>8</sup> Sweigart & Bischoff, *supra* note 6.

<sup>9</sup> Ohio S.B. 369, <https://www.legislature.ohio.gov/legislation/legislation-documents?id=GA133-SB-369>.



# VICTIM AND FAMILY ASSISTANCE CHECKLIST

## Preparedness

- Meet with law enforcement, the FBI Victim Services Division, the American Red Cross, and community-based organizations to develop a plan for victim and family reunification and services.
- Identify potential locations for the Family Reunification and Assistance Centers.
- Review state and federal victim compensation and assistance funding sources.
- Identify potential service providers for victims and families.

## Response

- Establish the FRC and FAC and ensure they are separate from the JIC and have a secured perimeter.
- Communicate FRC and FAC locations and services in press briefings and social media channels.
- Visit victims and family members at the FAC and hospital.
- Begin planning for the RC.
- Identify local resources that can address unmet needs of victims and families, such as translators, immigration attorneys, and/or religious services. Help connect them to the FAC.

## Recovery

- Work with partners to establish the Resiliency Center.
- Ensure victim services related to a criminal trial are provided, if relevant. This may include providing victims security and protection from the press.
- Work with state and federal agencies to ensure all available funding is provided to victims (directly) and to victim assistance providers.
- Apply for funding to cover unreimbursed expenses relating to victim and family services, including police overtime to provide security.

