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I. Basic Guidelines on Approaching Victims of Crime**

**Background**

    The way people cope as victims of crime depends largely on their experiences immediately following the crime. As a law enforcement officer, you are usually the first official to approach victims. For this reason, you are in a unique position to help victims cope with the immediate trauma of the crime and to help restore their sense of security and control over their lives.

    Circumstances of the crime and the crime scene determine when and how the first responding officers are able to address victims and their needs. This publication recognizes that each crime and crime scene is different and requires officers to prioritize their performance of tasks in each situation. Generally, officers must attend to many tasks, including assessing medical needs, determining facts and circumstances, advising other personnel, and gathering and distributing suspect information. It is helpful to keep in mind that apprehension of the suspect is the primary duty of law enforcement and that accomplishing this task helps not only the suspects current victims but potential victims as well. Sometimes the first responders must delay their attendance to the victims if the situation requires. For example, if the crime is ongoing, or if the collection of evidence or investigation of the crime is extremely time-sensitive, first responders may not be able to direct their immediate attention to the victims. However, as soon as the most urgent and pressing tasks have been addressed, officers will focus their attention on the victims and their needs. At this point, how the officers respond to the victims, explain the competing law enforcement duties, and work with the victims is very important.

    By approaching victims appropriately, officers will gain their trust and cooperation. Victims may then be more willing to provide detailed information about the crime to officers and later to investigators and prosecutors, which, in turn, will lead to the conviction of more criminals. Remember that you are there for the victim, the victim is not there for you.

    You can help victims by understanding the three major needs they have after a crime has been committed: the need to feel safe; the need to express their emotions; and the need to know “what comes next” after their victimization. The information in this handbook is designed to show you how to meet these needs.

**Tips for Responding to Victims' Three Major Needs**

*Victims' Need To Feel Safe*

    People often feel helpless, vulnerable, and frightened by the trauma of their victimization. As the first response officer, you can respond to victims' need to feel safe by following these guidelines:

* Introduce yourself to victims by name and title. Briefly explain your role and purpose.
* Reassure victims of their safety and your concern by paying close attention to your own words, posture, mannerisms, and tone of voice. Say to victims, “You're safe now” or “I'm here now.” Use body language to show concern, such as nodding your head, using natural eye contact, placing yourself at the victim's level rather than standing over seated victims, keeping an open stance rather than crossing your arms, and speaking in a calm, sympathetic voice.
* Ask victims to tell you in just a sentence or two what happened. Ask if they have any physical injuries. Take care of their medical needs first.
* Offer to contact a family member, friend, or crisis counselor for victims.
* Ensure privacy during your interview. Conduct it in a place where victims feel secure.
* Ask simple questions that allow victims to make decisions, assert themselves, and regain control over their lives. Examples: “Would you like anything to drink?”; “May I come inside and talk with you?”; and “How would you like me to address you, Ms. Jones?”
* Assure victims of the confidentiality of their comments whenever possible.
* Ask victims about any special concerns or needs they may have.
* Provide a “safety net” for victims before leaving them. Make telephone calls and pull together personal or professional support for the victims. Give victims a pamphlet listing resources available for help or information. This pamphlet should include contact information for local crisis intervention centers and support groups; the prosecutor's office and the victim-witness assistance office; the State victim compensation/assistance office; and other nationwide services, including toll-free hotlines.
* Give victim's—in writing—your name and information on how to reach you. Encourage them to contact you if they have any questions or if you can be of further help.

*Victims' Need To Express Their Emotions*

    Victims need to air their emotions and tell their story after the trauma of the crime. They need to have their feelings accepted and have their story heard by a nonjudgmental listener. In addition to fear, they may have feelings of self-blame, anger, shame, sadness, or denial. Their most common response is: “I don't believe this happened to me.” Emotional distress may surface in seemingly peculiar ways, such as laughter. Sometimes victims feel rage at the sudden, unpredictable, and uncontrollable threat to their safety or lives. This rage can even be directed at the people who are trying to help them, perhaps even at law enforcement officers for not arriving at the scene of the crime sooner. You can respond to victims' need to express their emotions by following these guidelines:

* Avoid cutting off victims' expression of their emotions.
* Notice victims' body language, such as their posture, facial expression, tone of voice, gestures, eye contact, and general appearance. This can help you understand and respond to what they are feeling as well as what they are saying.
* Assure victims that their emotional reactions to the crime are not uncommon. Sympathize with the victims by saying things such as: “You've been through something very frightening. I'm sorry”; “What you' re feeling is completely normal”; and “This was a terrible crime. I'm sorry it happened to you.”
* Counter any self-blame by victims by saying things such as, “You didn't do anything wrong. This was not your fault.”
* Speak with victims as individuals. Do not just “take a report.” Sit down, take off your hat, and place your notepad aside momentarily. Ask victims how they are feeling now and listen.
* Say to victims, “I want to hear the whole story, everything you can remember, even if you don't think it's important.”
* Ask open-ended questions. Avoid questions that can be answered by “yes” or “no.” Ask questions such as “Can you tell me what happened?” or “Is there anything else you can tell me?”
* Show that you are actively listening to victims through your facial expressions, body language, and comments such as “Take your time; I'm listening” and “We can take a break if you like. I'm in no hurry.”
* Avoid interrupting victims while they are telling their story.
* Repeat or rephrase what you think you heard the victims say. For example, “Let's see if I understood you correctly. Did you say. . .?”; “So, as I understand it, . . .”; or “Are you saying. . . ?”

*Victims' Need To Know “What Comes Next” After Their Victimization*

    Victims often have concerns about their role in the investigation of the crime and in the legal proceedings. They may also be concerned about issues such as media attention or payment for health care or property damage. You can help relieve some of their anxiety by telling victims what to expect in the aftermath of the crime. This will also help prepare them for upcoming stressful events and changes in their lives. You can respond to victims' need to know about what comes next after their victimization by following these guidelines:

* Briefly explain law enforcement procedures for tasks such as the filing of your report, the investigation of the crime, and the arrest and arraignment of a suspect.
* Tell victims about subsequent law enforcement interviews or other kinds of interviews they can expect.
* Discuss the general nature of medical forensic examinations the victim will be asked to undergo and the importance of these examinations for law enforcement.
* Explain what specific information from the crime report will be available to news organizations. Discuss the likelihood of the media releasing any of this information.
* Counsel victims that lapses of concentration, memory losses, depression, and physical ailments are normal reactions for crime victims. Encourage them to reestablish their normal routines as quickly as possible to help speed their recovery.
* Give victims a pamphlet listing resources available for help and information. This pamphlet should include contact information for local crisis intervention centers and support groups; the prosecutor's office and the victim-witness assistance office; the State victim compensation/assistance office; and other nationwide services, including toll-free hotlines.
* Ask victims whether they have any questions. Encourage victims to contact you if you can be of further assistance.