

NY CRIME VICTIMS LEGAL HELP'S VICTIM COMPENSATION TOOL: DEVELOPMENT OF A RESEARCH-INFORMED RESOURCE



CENTER FOR HUMAN SERVICES RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY AT ALBANY State University of New York

Founded by the Center for Human Services Research, Empire Justice Center, Pro Bono Net, and the New York State Office of Victim Services, the New York Crime Victims Legal Network (CVLN) is a partnership of organizations designed to connect victims of crime with civil legal (non-criminal) information, resources, and assistance through its website, [NY Crime Victims Legal Help](#) (the website). The site includes information and self-help resources pertaining to victims' rights, finding an attorney, accessing legal forms, and filing for victim compensation. This work was initially supported by federal funds; since 2020, it has been funded by the New York State Office of Victim Services (NYS OVS), with the other three organizations as grant partners. Over the course of the past several years, project partners have expanded the content, improved the site design, and enhanced the tools available on the website to best meet the needs of victims and service providers.

One goal of NY Crime Victims Legal Help is to support victims of crime in filing for victim compensation from the NYS OVS. Victims of crime may be eligible for compensation to cover costs associated with their experience, including medical and mental health care costs, lost income, and property repairs or replacements. However, victim compensation funds are often underutilized; many victims are not aware of these funds or are unable to successfully complete the application process. The core partners of the CVLN developed the Victim Compensation Guide to assist victims in applying for funds. This brief presents an overview of the process of developing the Guide and demonstrates how the partnership used research to inform the content and design of this tool.

METHODS

Staff from the Center for Human Services Research (CHSR) conducted interviews and focus groups with sixteen service providers familiar with victim services, some of whom had extensive experience assisting victims with compensation claims. Interview and focus group questions were designed to elicit input around the content and design of a guide to assist victims in completing the OVS application for compensation. Participants were asked about the challenges inherent in filling out applications and how a guide may alleviate these challenges, the types of information that should be included, and how to best present this information. Feedback was coded, summa-

alized, and shared with the partners to inform the development of the Victim Compensation Guide. Below, we present examples of how provider feedback and suggestions influenced the content and design of the final Guide.

THE VICTIM COMPENSATION GUIDE

Providers emphasized the importance of presenting content clearly and succinctly, yet with sufficient detail to enable users to understand the application process at a granular level. The content also needed to be presented in a manner consistent with the rest of the website. These considerations are exemplified in the landing page, which provides a brief and accessible introduction to victim compensation and links to more detailed information about preparing to file a claim, how to file a claim, and what to expect after filing a claim.



Preparing to File a Claim

Providers indicated that victims may not know if they are eligible to file a claim and may not know what kind of information they will be required to provide in any application; a “checklist” or “pre-screen tool” was suggested to help victims understand eligibility requirements. Accordingly, the partners developed an interactive tool called the Victim Compensation Claim Navigator, which walks the user through a set of questions to determine eligibility.

Submitting an application (i.e., filing a claim), having it reviewed, and ultimately receiving compensation may take a considerable amount of time; participants suggested that we make this “really clear” to victims, so they are aware of the process. The “Timeline” tab and graphic were included specifically to address this point.

Victim Compensation Claim Navigator





Filing a Claim

Furthermore, the Guide contains specific information about the documentation required for each part of the claim application, as illustrated below:



Providers felt this level of detail was important, as the requirements are key to a complete application.

After You File a Claim

Since the filing process is so extensive, providers reported that victims might need additional support to ensure all final i's are dotted, t's are crossed, and loops are closed. Their tips and ideas became the "Make sure you..." notes.



They also suggested including examples of letters that OVS may request when a claim is reviewed; the content on the "Forms and Sample Documentation" page includes links to sample letters and notes on what they reflect.

CONCLUSION

The development of the Victim Compensation Guide epitomizes the utilization of research in practice: CHSR researchers gathered feedback and experiences from providers to inform the development of a comprehensive, user-friendly guide to assist victims in filing for compensation.

Since its implementation, the Victim Compensation Guide has been the most visited page of NY Crime Victims Legal Help, demonstrating the demand for such a resource. Analysis of site usage data indicate that for the first six months of 2022, the website had 8,941 visits, and the Guide itself was viewed 6,658 times.

The CVLN team was recently awarded a new grant from the NYS OVS to maintain and enhance the NY Crime Victims Legal Help over the next 3 years, using this same research-to-practice model. The partners will obtain feedback from service providers and victims to continue to expand site content, develop tools, and enhance design in the interest of best meeting the needs of victims of crime and those who serve them.