A Conceptual Framework for Measuring Criminal Justice Success in Responding to Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) Crimes

Project Background

In 2020, the Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) the funded the Violence Against Women Act Measuring Effectiveness Initiative (VAWA MEI), which is part of the Catherine E. Cutler Institute for Health and Social Policy at the University of Southern Maine's Muskie School of Public Service, and the Justice Research and Statistics Association (JRSA), to develop and pilot test a set of indicators for gauging success in the criminal justice system's response to the VAWA crimes.

Specifically, the purpose of this project was to develop a research-based conceptual framework that logically connects the interventions being undertaken by OVW's funded grantees to the longer-term outcomes experienced by victims.[1] At OVW's direction, the project focused specifically on law enforcement's response to VAWA crimes. In addition, the project identified key outcomes measures that can be collected and reported in a reliable manner to demonstrate the effectiveness of VAWA-funded programs. These recommended measures were rooted in research, generated from existing data when possible, and field-tested by a volunteer pool of grantees. This brief presents both the narrative and visual depiction of the finalized conceptual model.

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[1] The project focused on outcomes for adult victims (e.g., over the age of 18). Child victims are a distinct population with unique needs and are treated differently by the legal system.

The Conceptual Model

The following conceptual model visually depicts how OVW-funded law enforcement activities are hypothesized to flow logically to the desired long-term outcome of enhanced victim well-being. Starting on the left with the **strategic initiatives**, or activities of OVW funded grantees, the model proceeds to the right to demonstrate the progression of outcomes or results of these activities. The large blue box describes the specific **efforts and outcomes of actions taken by law enforcement agencies and law enforcement officers**. The blue box to the right depicts the mid-term outcome that is expected when the short-term outcomes are achieved: law enforcement agencies understand and work to support the rights and interests of victims. As the model illustrates, both the short- and mid-term outcomes of law enforcement efforts subsequently impact and influence the outcomes for victims.

Outcomes for victims: This model contends that as law enforcement agencies and officers work toward short and mid-term outcomes, these achievements influence a victim's experience of procedural justice, access to adequate services, personal safety, and reduced re-victimization. We also include two outcomes for offenders that should result from these programs: increased offender accountability and reduced offender recidivism. The conceptual framework contends that when these outcomes for offenders are met, victims experience increased safety and reduced re-victimization. Although not depicted overtly, the model recognizes an inherent tension that exists between law enforcement agencies and officers and victims: agencies and officers, who are tasked with enforcing the law, sometimes take actions that conflict with the wishes and needs expressed by victims.

Ultimate result: As demonstrated in the literature and by this conceptual model, an improved system response yields greater procedural justice, adequate services and supports, and increased safety for victims, which ultimately leads to improved health and well-being in the long-term.

Externalities: Included on the bottom of the model is a list of externalities – underlying factors that may impact activities and outcomes that are outside of program control. These include turnover and attrition among law enforcement personnel; the resources available to an agency (e.g., staff, time, funding, etc.); the array of local services available; local prosecutorial and court systems; and local, state and federal laws.

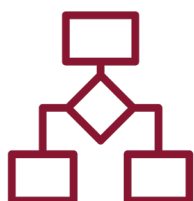## Strategic Initiatives ···▶ Short-term Outcomes ···▶ Mid-term Outcomes ···▶ Ultimate Result

Engage in coordinated community response

Develop, revise, or implement policy and procedures

Enhance data systems and infrastructure

Provide training for law enforcement personnel

Develop and implement specialized units

Law Enforcement Agencies

- Increase trauma-informed system response to victims
- Improve resource coordination for victims and offenders
- Enhance cross-agency information sharing
- Improve cultural competence
- Prioritize capacity-building for responding to or preventing VAWA crimes
- Agency culture holds itself accountable to VAWA crime victim

Law Enforcement Officers

- Increase knowledge of VAWA crimes & best practices
- Improve perceptions of VAWA crimes
- Engage in clear and transparent communication with victims and offer all options
- Increase prompt victim and offender referrals to needed supports
- Improve investigations (taking victim reports, collecting evidence)

Outcomes for Law Enforcement Agencies

- Law enforcement agencies understand and work to support the rights and interests of victims

Outcomes for victims

- Increased procedural justice
- Access to adequate services
- Increased safety
  - *Increased offender accountability*
- Reduced re-victimization
  - *Reduced offender recidivism*

Victims experience enhanced well-being

Externalities: LEO turnover and attrition, agency resources (staff, time, finances), local service array; local prosecutorial and court systems; federal/state/local laws.

This conceptual model illustrates the logical progression of how OVW-funded work should lead to the ultimate result that victims of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking experience enhanced well-being. Reading from left to right, the model depicts how grantee-funded activities improve outcomes for law enforcement agencies and officers; the subsequent results chain illustrates how these short-term outcomes connect to victim well-being in the longer term.
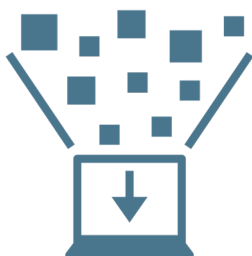
How can you use this conceptual model?

1. **To align your goals with measurable outcomes by developing your own logic model!**

Consider…

- Where do you see your activities and interventions in the model's strategic initiatives?
- Which short- and mid-term outcomes (or goals) are you working toward?

2. **To think about collecting data!** Use the accompanying Indicators Matrix to select metrics and start tracking your progress toward these outcomes (or goals).

Consider…

- What data are you already collecting that relate to these outcomes/goals?
- What 1-3 new indicators would be both meaningful and feasible to start collecting?

3. **To use data to improve your practice!**

Consider…

- Does the data help identify what's working well in your program?
- Does it show opportunities for improvement in your program?
- How can the data be used to refine your program and practices?