

**Best Practice Guidelines**

for

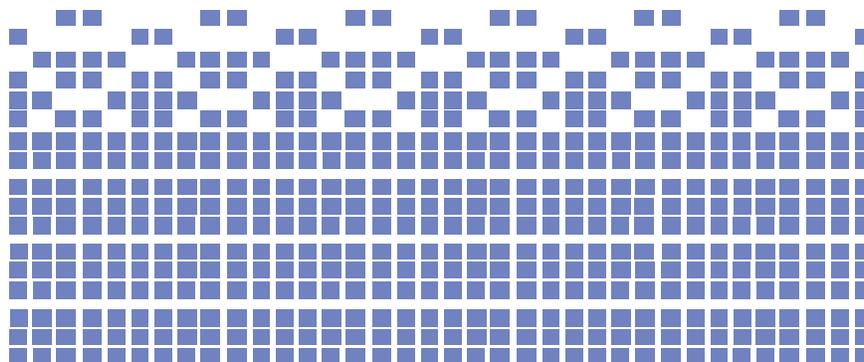
**VICTIM**

**IMPACT**

**PANELS**

within

**Pennsylvania's Juvenile Justice System**



“Best Practice Guidelines for Victim Impact Panels” was prepared in response to numerous inquiries concerning the implementation of victim impact panels. This document was developed for the Pennsylvania Council of Chief Juvenile Probation Officers, under the direction of the Joint Review Committee of the Juvenile Advisory Committee and the Victims’ Services Advisory Committee of the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency. Additionally, the Victim Services Committee of the Pennsylvania Council of Chief Juvenile Probation Officers was invaluable in the development of this document.

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I anticipate that you will find this document helpful as you seek to implement restorative practices in your jurisdiction and/or agency.

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# Introduction to Victim Impact Panels

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As Pennsylvania's Juvenile Justice System strives to adhere to the principles of Balanced and Restorative Justice, one practice dominates discussions concerning how to increase victim empathy. That practice is the Victim Impact Panel. As more and more juvenile justice professionals are exposed to Victim Impact Panels, they attest to the power of hearing first-hand from a victim how crime affects not only the primary victim but also those in the victim's circle of friends and family.

Just what is a Victim Impact Panel? In its simplest form, one or several well prepared victims give a presentation to an equally prepared audience concerning a crime(s) committed against them. The victim may choose to discuss specific details of the crime. These details include features like the financial, psychological and physical impact of the crime. Due to the nature of the presentation, the atmosphere is often highly emotionally charged for both the victim and the audience.

To assist probation departments in the implementation of Victim Impact Panels, the following guidelines have been developed under the direction of the Joint Review Committee of the Juvenile Advisory Committee and the Victim Services Advisory Committee of the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD). Mothers Against Drunk Driving, the Governor's Office of the Victim Advocate, the Juvenile Court Judges' Commission and the Pennsylvania Council of Chief Juvenile Probation Officers as well as other victim advocates from counties across the state collaborated in the project.

Please read the guidelines carefully before sponsoring a Victim Impact Panel. Although adhering to the guidelines takes extra effort and time, it also provides a reasonable assurance that neither the victims nor the audience will suffer any ill effects from the panel. In fact, a carefully prepared and sensitively implemented panel may promote the restoration of the victim, offender and community.





# Guidelines

## for Victim Impact Panels

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A victim impact panel is a very powerful tool of Balanced and Restorative Justice and, as such, should be incorporated into a broad-spectrum approach for assisting victims and educating offenders. In a victim impact panel, presenters (victims) relate to the audience their personal experience with crime. Frequently, both the presenters and audience experience a wide array of emotions. Therefore, it is necessary to carefully prepare everyone involved for the event.

It is essential that appropriate victim-centered crisis and support services be available for victims before implementing Victim Impact Panels. To this end, working with a victim service agency and/or the victim advocate in Juvenile Court is crucial to setting up a victim impact panel. Victim service agencies and advocates are sensitive to the needs of victims and are best equipped to make the initial contact with victims and assess with the victim their readiness to talk with offenders.

A collaborative effort between the juvenile probation department and the victim service agency will generate the most productive outcome, which focuses on the needs of both the victim and the offender. The following are suggested elements for making contact with local victim service agencies. (Keep in mind, basic programming ensuring services to victims must be in place before setting up impact panels.)

### COLLABORATION

1. Call the local victim service agency and introduce yourself. Explain the mission of your department and that you welcome their involvement.
2. Meet with the local victim service agency at their office. Provide the agency with specific information on how a victim impact panel is incorporated into your curriculum.

3. Learn the mission of the victim service agency.
4. Describe details of the impact panel: when/where it will be held, who will attend. Make the victim service agency an equal partner in these plans.
5. Ask the victim agency to help identify expenses victims may incur when participating on a panel. Make definitive plans for reimbursement.
6. Be open to suggestions.

## The Benefits of a Victim Impact Panel

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When Victim Impact Panels are developed in the spirit of Balanced and Restorative Justice, focusing on the needs of both the victim and the offender, the following values may be realized:

### BENEFITS FOR PRESENTERS

- The presentation may help the healing process.
- Victims may wish to effect change in offenders and therefore help prevent someone else from going through the suffering they are enduring.
- Victims have a voice and are heard.
- Victims are empowered.

### BENEFITS FOR OFFENDERS

- Offenders see and hear first hand the physical, emotional and financial damage caused by an offense.
- Offenders learn how crime impacts on many persons, including family, friends and others the offender may not have considered.
- Images of real people are imprinted on the offender's mind. These images may support the offender's efforts to change his/her behavior.





## Preparation and Follow-up with Panel Members

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The following steps are necessary to ensure that a victim presenter is not further traumatized by his/her experience as a victim panel member. The Victim Impact Panel must be treated as a potential trigger event for the victim presenter, no matter how many times s/he has presented or has had previous positive experiences.

### ADVOCATE'S RESPONSIBILITIES:

1. Prior to the Victim Impact Panel, arrange for a victim advocate to be present during the panel presentation. Have the advocate meet with the victim presenter before the presentation to provide assistance with the preparation, presentation and follow-up of the Impact Panel.
2. The victim advocate should assess and address the concerns of the victim regarding physical safety and security issues as well as emotional safety.
3. Accept only crime victims who have been referred by a victim services program.
4. If there are security regulations where the panel will be held, advise the victim of these regulations.
5. Ask the victim if s/he would like to be accompanied by a support person of his/her choice.
6. Inform the victim of how the Victim Impact Panel fits into the overall probation program.
7. Offer the victim an explanation of the juvenile court process.
8. Tell the victim who the audience is in terms of crimes committed. Some victims may choose to speak to only certain types of audiences.
9. Ask the victim who the offender was in his/her case. Make sure the offender is NOT present at the Victim Impact Panel. Tell him/her that the offender will not be present.

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10. Videotaping and/or media involvement can only be used when victims are informed and give **PRIOR CONSENT**. Prior consent must include a clear presentation to the victim of who will own any video and how, where and when it would be used.
  11. Ask the victims ahead of time if they wish to take questions. Also ask if they prefer a prepared list of questions or are comfortable with questions directly from the audience. Make sure they know they can “pass” on any question.

#### PANEL FACILITATOR AND/OR ADVOCATE'S RESPONSIBILITIES:

1. Meet the presenters at the door and escort them to the location of the presentation.
2. Ask the presenters how they would like to be introduced. Be aware that some presenters may prefer just their first names without further identification.
3. Have nametags available for the presenters with their first names only. The nametags help the audience identify the victim.
4. Do not have offenders provide amenities to the presenters without their express consent. Make the boundaries that offenders will observe clear to the presenters.
5. Ask the presenters if the room arrangement is comfortable.
6. When introducing the presenters, avoid the phrase “telling their stories.” The word “story” sometimes makes the experience sound fictional or unreal. It is better to say that the presenters are “telling what happened in their lives”.
7. Have tissues within reach of the presenters.





IT IS EXTREMELY IMPORTANT THAT A VICTIM ADVOCATE OR OTHER QUALIFIED PERSON EXTEND THE FOLLOWING VICTIM-CENTERED SUPPORT SERVICES TO THE PRESENTERS IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE VICTIM IMPACT PANEL:

1. Ask the victim how s/he felt about the experience. Give the victim as much time as possible to talk and ask questions.
2. Get feedback from the victim on:
  - Was the experience comfortable for the victim?
  - Would the victim like to talk about anything the audience said or did?
  - What changes, if any, would the victim suggest for future Victim Impact Panels?
  - Would the victim be interested in ever doing another session

Although the above listed guidelines have been prepared for victim panel members, please be aware that people in the audience may also have been personally touched by crime. Therefore, be alert that the Victim Impact Panel experience may trigger a crisis reaction in audience members as well as in the guest speakers.

## Preparation and Follow-up with Offenders

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Attendance at a Victim Impact Panel should be in support of a larger program dedicated to teaching youth the impact of crime. Offenders must have developed at least a minimal sense of the harm they caused before exposure to victims. Offenders should also be exposed to basic information about Victim Impact Panels: what they are, what purpose they serve, how the panel fits into the larger program in probation. The following points may guide a discussion on Victim Impact Panels.

1. When the offender committed an offense, it had an impact on a person's life. That person may never be the same.
2. Attending a Victim Impact Panel does not make up for the harm the offender caused to his/her victim. However, it does give the offender the opportunity to do something right by listening to the pain of another person.
3. A Victim Impact Panel is not about the needs of the offender. It is about the victim. Hearing about the suffering of a victim may make the offender feel bad. Ask the offender to set aside his/her feelings and listen closely to how the victim feels in order to better understand from the victim's point of view.

### INSTRUCTIONS FOR PREPARING OFFENDERS FOR SPEAKERS:

1. Display appropriate respect for the presenters: good posture, attentiveness, attitude, and non-verbal responses.
2. Do not talk with peers, interrupt the speaker or walk around during the presentation.
3. If allowed to ask questions, do not use foul or aggressive language.
4. Remind offenders that the speakers are relating a very personal and sensitive experience. Offenders should be respectful of the sensitive nature of the dialogue.





5. Instruct offenders to inform the probation officer if they recognize any of the presenters so that the offender's participation can be discussed with the presenter.
6. Tell offenders that this may be the first time the presenters have addressed juveniles adjudicated of a crime.

Offenders may have difficulty in dealing with what was revealed at the impact panel and may need assistance in dealing with their own trauma. Therefore, a specific plan for follow-up, either in groups or individually, must be in place for offenders.

**AS A FOLLOW-UP TO THE VICTIM IMPACT PANEL, A QUALIFIED PERSON MUST BE AVAILABLE TO THE OFFENDERS TO:**

1. Give the offenders the opportunity to discuss how they feel about the information presented. Give offenders as much time as possible to talk and ask questions.
2. Get feedback from the offender on:
  - How comfortable or uncomfortable was he/she during the panel?
  - Would the offender like to talk about anything the victim and/or audience said or did?
  - What changes would the offender suggest for the next panel?
  - Would the offender recommend this experience to his/her peers?
3. Give offenders instructions on whom they may contact if they need further help processing their feelings after the panel.



For additional information on Victim Impact Panels, please contact your local victim service agency. Your local agency is in the best position to provide assistance.

Other available resources:

Mothers Against Drunk Driving  
PA State Office  
2323 Patton Road  
Harrisburg, PA 17112  
Phone: 1-800-848-6233

Office of the Victim Advocate  
PA Board of Probation and Parole  
Riverfront Office Center  
1101 S. Front Street  
Suite 5200  
Harrisburg, PA 17104  
Phone: 1-800-563-6399

Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency  
Bureau of Victim Services  
3101 N. Front Street  
Harrisburg, PA 17110  
Phone: 1-800-692-7292

Juvenile Court Judges' Commission  
Room 401, Finance Building  
Harrisburg, PA 17120  
Phone: 717-705-2290  
[www.jcjc.state.pa.us](http://www.jcjc.state.pa.us)



A victim impact panel is  
a powerful process that can benefit  
crime victims, juvenile offenders,  
and communities.

The success of any restorative justice  
intervention is dependent on the  
thoughtful implementation of the program.

Attention to these best practice guidelines  
will help assure a safe and satisfying  
experience for all those involved.

