

Beyond Words: Defining and Implementing Victim-Centered Practices

PURPOSE

This publication shares high-level findings from practitioners who convened to explore and improve victim-centered approaches in anti-trafficking efforts and offers multidisciplinary task forces and individuals practical guidance and recommendations.

Beyond Words: High-Level Findings

1

The foundation of being victim-centered is caring.

4

A victim-centered approach is complex and multilevel.

2

“Victim-centered” definitions have the same core principles.

5

Being victim-centered requires support.

3

“Victim-centered” is a dynamic concept.

6

The field needs practical guidance on being victim centered.

This document’s findings offer deeper insight into implementing and improving a victim-centered approach to enhance and evolve victim-centered responses. The findings represent what to consider and discuss as efforts develop. The practical guidance and recommendations offer specific actions individuals and task forces can take in their daily routines and as they plan, develop, and evolve.

The Enhanced Collaborative Model Task Force to Combat Human Trafficking is a DOJ OVC program that provides grant funding to jurisdictions to bring together key stakeholders to develop, expand, or strengthen multidisciplinary task forces to combat human trafficking. The observations and findings described in this publication are intended to help the field continue to improve and evolve with implementing victim-centered responses.

INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Department of Justice’s (DOJ) Office of Justice Programs’ grant-funded human trafficking programs are grounded in victim-centered principles and practices. This important foundation is reflected and emphasized in the following:

- **Grant solicitations** (Office for Victims of Crime [OVC], 2024-b, p. 9; OVC, 2024-a, p. 8).
- **Trainings** (OVC Training and Technical Assistance Center [OVC TTAC], 2018; see also OVC TTAC’s training “[Understanding Human Trafficking](#)”).
- **Standards of care** (OVC, n.d.-b).
- **The Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) website** (OVC, 2015).

These principles are echoed in the efforts of other federal agencies as well (Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, 2023-b; U.S. Department of State, n.d.; Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, 2023-a; U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2024) such that 24 years after the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, most people involved with anti-trafficking work are familiar with the term victim-centered.

While victim-centered has become a common term in describing the response to human trafficking, response tactics have not kept pace. The practical realities of implementing a victim-centered approach can pose significant challenges—most anti-trafficking professionals can likely recall situations where the victim-centered route wasn’t obvious.

Recognizing this gap, as part of the provision of technical assistance, Project Roadmap,¹ in collaboration with OVC, convened a group of experts in November 2022 to define and develop practical guidance on victim-centered practices across disciplines. The event included 24 nonfederal and 9 federal attendees, each from key Enhanced Collaborative Model Task Force disciplines² and representing a range of different geographies and demographic backgrounds.

¹ Project Roadmap, an ICF program funded by DOJ, has been providing training and technical assistance to the Enhanced Collaborative Model Task Forces since 2020.

² This group included task force directors, service providers, law enforcement, prosecutors, and individuals with lived experience. In those disciplines, attendees were from the District of Columbia and 13 different states and represented federal, state, local, rural, and urban jurisdictions.

During a 1.5-day session, the participants explored the concept of victim-centered. The discussion critiqued existing definitions, brainstormed lists about what to do and not do (“dos and don’ts”), and considered the practical challenges of implementing these principles. In June 2023, the group reconvened in person for another 2 days to delve into the core components of victim-centered practices identified in the first meeting, sharing insights and examples across disciplines.

FINDINGS

Below, we explore the findings from these discussions in further detail.



FINDING 1

The Foundation of Being Victim-Centered is Caring about the life, safety, mental health, physical well-being, and future of victims.

Why it Matters: This might seem apparent, but through our discussion we realized that “caring” is shorthand for a few key traits. Caring involves conscientiousness, accountability, reflection and empathy. It touches all aspects of task force work—supporting victims’ and colleagues’ well-being, ensuring the team can fulfill individual and collective roles, and advocating to improve systems not originally designed to be victim-centered.

Recommendations and Practical Guidance

- **Acknowledge the whole person:** Recognize victims as individuals with a past, present, and future. Understand each individual has agency, a voice, rights, and unique interests.
- **Recognize the expanse of the victim’s life:** Approach your interaction with victims as a brief moment within their dynamic lives. Consider the broader context beyond that specific encounter.
- **Challenge assumptions:** Avoid making assumptions based on preconceived notions. Stay open-minded and receptive to new information.



FINDING 2

“Victim-Centered” Definitions Have the Same Core Principles: While the definition might differ based on the context of interests and priorities of those implementing it, all definitions have similar principles at their core. We suggest grounding the work in these commonalities while recognizing and naming members’ different interests and related tensions.

Why it Matters: Recognizing common principles helps task forces address challenges while respecting context-specific priorities. It provides a framework for balancing competing interests.

Given that this conversation and guidance are for OVC-funded human trafficking task forces and individuals who work with victims, we start with the definition of a “victim-centered approach” in OVC’s online publication, *Achieving Excellence: Model Standards for Serving Victims & Survivors of Crime (Model Standards)*.

OVC’s Model Standards Definition of “Victim-Centered Approach”

“Placing the crime victim’s priorities, needs, and interests at the center of the work with the victim; providing nonjudgmental assistance, with an emphasis on client self-determination, where appropriate, and assisting victims in making informed choices; ensuring that restoring victims’ feelings of safety and security are a priority and safeguarding against policies and practices that may inadvertently re-traumatize victims; ensuring that victims’ rights, voices, and perspectives are incorporated when developing and implementing system- and community-based efforts that impact crime victims.” (OVC, n.d.-a)

Recommendation and Practical Guidance

- Name and address conflicts between disciplinary mandates and victim-centered principles.



FINDING 3

“Victim-Centered” is a Dynamic Concept: Victim-centered is a philosophy, a mindset, and a set of skills and committed practices. To be victim-centered means a commitment to continual practice, cultivation, reflection and improvement.

Why it Matters: Understanding victim-centered as a dynamic concept, and not just a basic skill, enables practitioners to look past their individual actions and acknowledge the influence and impact others may have on a victim, as well as identify areas in need of systems change.

VICTIM-CENTERED IS A:



PHILOSOPHY: serves as a foundation, providing the most basic beliefs, concepts, and attitudes of an individual, group, or multidisciplinary team



SKILL: something that is learned and applied



MINDSET: describes a way of thinking that guides actions



PRACTICE: a commitment to repeated performance and growth to improve or maintain one’s proficiency

Recommendations and Practical Guidance

- Recognize that victim-centered is a dynamic philosophy, mindset, skill, and practice requiring continual growth, reflection, and improvement.
- Encourage practitioners to commit to ongoing practice and improvement.



FINDING 4

A Victim-Centered Approach Is Complex and Multilevel, existing and operating within a complex interplay of different systems and at different levels, including individuals, agencies, disciplines, and task forces.

Why it Matters: Developing and implementing a victim-centered approach goes beyond individual efforts. By understanding the interplay between different levels (such as agencies, disciplines, and task forces), we can pinpoint necessary changes, identify reasons for shortcomings, and identify where we can make an impact.

Recommendations and Practical Guidance

- At the **individual** level: Recognize the challenges of being victim-centered and name and address them where possible.
- At the **agency/organization** level: Understand that victim-centered is a philosophy. Strive to embed it as a mindset throughout the entire agency.
- At the **discipline** level: Recognize that many disciplines and systems pre-date the concept of “victim-centered” and others were not necessarily designed to prioritize a victim-centered approach. Transforming them requires deliberate efforts from all involved.
- At the **task force** level: Engage in open discussions within the task force. Understand the different interests and tensions that impact the response and collaborative effectiveness.



FINDING 5

Being Victim-Centered Requires Support: Effective implementation of victim-centered practices requires support systems. Practitioners must have access to resources, training, and guidance to navigate complexities and challenges.

Why it Matters: Anti-trafficking work is challenging and often requires adapting existing practices and procedures. Support systems sustain practitioner well-being, prevent burnout, and enable empathetic responses in intricate victim-centered situations.

Recommendation and Practical Guidance

- Offer supervisors training or orientation to help them understand the meaning and demands of victim-centered to better support staff needs.

Examples of Support

✓ Recognize that these cases take longer, both for investigations and service provision.

✓ Create opportunities for team members to interact in no-pressure environments, encouraging open conversation and mutual support.

✓ Make time outside of casework for team-building activities.

✓ Ensure support from within the agency. This includes supervision, peer support programs, employee assistance programs, and other formal initiatives.

✓ Provide individuals with the necessary space and time to work on cases and process their emotions. This allows for better focus and emotional management.

✓ Implement policies that support mental health by offering flexible work hours and liberal leave.

✓ Organize events like annual conferences or after-hours gatherings to strengthen team bonds and improve collaborative efforts.

✓ Recognize the emotional toll of the work and allow time for processing and recovery.



FINDING 6

The Field Needs Practical Guidance on Being Victim-Centered to recognize tensions and help individuals navigate challenging situations to continue providing victim-centered responses.

Why it Matters: Victim-centered work involves intricate situations. Practical guidance equips practitioners with tools to navigate challenges, address trauma, and provide empathetic responses.

Recommendation and Practical Guidance

- Develop materials offering practical guidance for multidisciplinary teams and individual practitioners on implementing victim-centered approaches. (Project Roadmap will continue to share additional resources and practical guidance.)

Practical Guidance: Eight Core Components

The Beyond Words convenings identified and discussed eight core elements for effectively implementing and enhancing victim-centered approaches:



Being victim-centered is challenging but doable with hard work, practice, and support. As previously stated, the conversation about what it means to be victim-centered in practice is ongoing. The group that engaged with OVC and Project Roadmap continues to work on practical guidance for each task force discipline and the field at large. We will continue to develop tools to share with the field. Stay tuned and visit the [Project Roadmap website](#).

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