

NOMINEE: Pennington County Sheriff's Office, Victim Specialist Program

There is no better candidate for the National Sheriff's Association Crime Victim Services Award than the Pennington County Sheriff's Office Victim Specialist Program.

Located in South Dakota, the Pennington County Sheriff's Office (PCSO) sets the standard for a model law enforcement based victim services program: leadership from the top down makes serving crime victims everyone's job, partnerships within the community provide seamless delivery of services and collaboration fills gaps. The Victim Specialist Program continues to evolve to provide a stronger law enforcement response and more resources for victims.

Leadership

Leadership starts at the top and that leader is Sheriff Kevin Thom, whose long and decorated 40+ year career in law enforcement has always focused on supporting crime victims.

In 2005, as Director of the South Dakota Division of Criminal Investigation, he created the first state-wide Victim Specialist Unit, one that worked with law enforcement and prosecutors across South Dakota. He saw first-hand the unique role law enforcement plays, and how important it is that a victim's first contact with law enforcement be a positive one – both for the recovery of the victim and the ability to bring a perpetrator to justice.

When Thom was elected Pennington County Sheriff in 2011, he set about creating a program that would provide an appropriate response for victims in his jurisdiction as early as possible in the process.

His jurisdiction covers about 2,800 square miles and 110,000 people. Pennington County borders the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation to the south. Four reservations are in close proximity. While 10% of the population of Pennington County is Native American, 45% of the crime victims served are Native American.

Sheriff Thom explains his vision this way: "Getting victims and families the right services at the right time and not letting victims fall through the cracks in the criminal justice system."

To accomplish this vision, Sheriff Thom instilled the belief in all of his 432 full and part time staff and 125 volunteers that serving victims is everyone's responsibility, not just the victim services staff. Training is a priority and equips first responders and investigators with the knowledge and skills to ensure that the first contact with law enforcement is a positive one.

Staff receives training on victim rights and victim issues, and hands out information at the scene about victim rights and referrals. This training equips investigators in their work with victims as the case moves through the investigative process.

Staff in the Criminal Investigation Division also get specialized training on child abuse, domestic violence and sexual assault. While the State of South Dakota requires two hours of domestic violence training every four years, the PCSO more than doubles the requirement with four hours of training every three years.

The PCSO also provides training to ensure that the response to Native Americans is appropriate, and that their unique needs are met in a culturally competent manner. One training was delivered by Emory Keoke, a member of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and co-author of the *Encyclopedia of American Indian Contributions to the World*. Keoke provided five hours of in-service training for the entire law enforcement staff.

On an ongoing basis, all post-Law Enforcement Academy new hires also receive one to two hours of this type of cultural sensitivity training.

The Victim Specialist Program and the Leadership Behind It

In his effort to put the right people in the right position, Sheriff Thom charged now retired Captain Corey Brubakken, as head of the Criminal Investigations Division, with responsibility for beginning the Victim Specialist Program in 2016.

For most of his adult life, Retired Captain Brubakken focused on working with people either as a social worker at the Department of Social Services Child Protection Services or as a law enforcement officer. He has been with the Pennington County Sheriff's Office since 1997. He started in patrol, and then worked investigations for five years before returning to patrol as sergeant. He was head of the Criminal Investigations Division from 2013-2020. Most recently Brubakken returned from retirement as a law enforcement officer to the PCSO as the full-time Wellness Coordinator for the agency.

Brubakken noted that Sheriff Thom provided the leadership to be able to expand resources available to help victims, not just in his jurisdiction but throughout the state.

In 2013, as part of a major criminal justice revamp called the Public Safety Improvement Act, Sheriff Thom brought forward the idea and advocated for a Statewide Automated Victim Information & Notification (SAVIN) System. South Dakota was one of only a handful of states that did not have such a system.

Working with the legislature, Thom helped secure a million dollars in funding for the program that provides a statewide platform for unprecedented collaboration between agencies. Pennington County/Rapid City was the first jurisdiction to implement SAVIN notification.

The greatest resources available under Thom's leadership are the two full-time Victim Specialists that comprise the Victim Specialist Program.

The two have been in place since August of 2016, and are funded through a grant from the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA). Each is uniquely qualified to provide direct services for victims of crime and their families, and participate in the partnerships that are key to the program's success.

Scott Hultgren had been a volunteer chaplain for the PCSO when he took on the role of Victim Specialist. He has 25+ years' experience in local church ministry throughout the Midwest, working with families and youth. He has a degree in ministry from Nebraska Christian College.

Teresa Kenrick had worked in child protection for almost five years before becoming a Victim Specialist. At Child Protective Services, she had worked with investigators from the Pennington County Sheriff's Office and the Rapid City Police Department and appreciates the opportunity the Victim Specialist position offers to provide more direct services to children and families.

Victim Specialist Program Helps Others Help Victims

One of those "services" is a major resource available to victims, families and other agencies through the Victim Specialist Program: transportation.

Each Victim Specialist is assigned a vehicle. This can be especially important given the rural nature of much of Pennington County and the specific needs of the more impoverished Native American population.

Presentations to partner law enforcement agencies explain how the victim specialists are available to help them. They can respond immediately when called to the scene to provide onsite support to victims, and help stabilize a chaotic scene. They can also transport family members to the hospital, and as shown in the next section, help get victims where they need to be for services and participation in the criminal justice process.

Both Victim Specialists have attended the Basic and Advanced Training provided by the South Dakota Network Against Family Violence and Sexual Assault - Victim Assistance Academy.

They also attend trainings offered by the PCSO that helps them be more trauma-informed and able to meet the needs of the Native American community, such as training on historical trauma and oppression, and ACES training.

Victim Specialist Program Partners With Others for Seamless Support of Victims

Being victim-centered has been “in the DNA” of the Pennington County Sheriff’s Office for many years now.

“Keeping victims at the forefront of investigations is how we always did our work,” said Brubakken. “Through the leadership of Sheriff Thom, we have evolved to be even stronger. Even as caseloads have grown, and we encounter more challenges, we are providing better services.”

Brubakken notes that he and the Victim Specialists worked to craft a Victim Specialist Program that matches the Sheriff’s vision of the “right services at the right time.” Their goal has been not to duplicate services, but to fill gaps, so victims get what they need when they need it.

Today, strategic partnerships are key to the success of the PCSO Victim Specialist Program. Victim Specialists collaborate with other agencies to provide a multi-disciplinary team approach that provides a seamless and appropriate response to victims, beginning at the scene of the crime and continuing throughout the criminal justice process.

Current criminal investigations division Captain Tony Harrison has been a law enforcement officer for over 25 years, he has served in a number of positions before becoming a Captain. He has seen the importance of good victim care throughout his career. Harrison says, “Any investigation case or traumatic incident that has a victim or victims who likely have suffered, are deserving of extra attention and assistance. Our Victim Specialists are able to help them navigate through what they are experiencing.” Captain Harrison is appreciative of the leadership that Sheriff Thom has demonstrated in helping PCSO to be victim-centered in its approach. “Sheriff Thom continues to remind us that successful law enforcement must always keep the victim(s) in mind.”

How Partnerships and Victim Specialists Program Support All Victims

Rapid City Police Department (RCPD) – Victim Service Specialists also provide services for victims of crime being investigated by the police department. This collaboration greatly increases the resources available to victims of crime across Pennington County, no matter which law enforcement agency is in charge, and is part of what makes the program so unique and successful.

Victim Specialists are able to engage in prolonged involvement with crime victims giving them an advocate who knows them and their case, and can act as the “go between” with law enforcement. Victim Specialists are able to help victims with any number of issues that may prevent them from actively participating or staying engaged in the criminal investigation process, important to both victim recovery and a successful investigation. Law enforcement benefits by knowing that victims in an active criminal

case are taken care of and notified of recent developments in victim's cases and that they have a resource in communicating necessary information and actions to be taken. Assistance starts immediately after a reported crime has occurred, and stays with the victim as the case moves through the process.

The Pennington County Sheriff's Office also manages the joint Domestic Violence Unit and Child Abuse Unit in the county. Victim Specialists work closely with PCSO investigators and RCPD detectives to keep victims informed of their rights and available services to help rebuild their lives. The program increases the Sheriff's Office's ability to assist all types of crime victims in Pennington County and centralizes resources to maximize assistance available to victims.

Working Against Violence Inc. (WAVI) is the local domestic abuse/sexual assault shelter. WAVI funds a specialized Domestic Violence Victim Advocate that is co-located in the sheriff's office alongside the two Victim Specialists. In place since 2008, the WAVI advocate has a long working relationship with investigators, so the connection between law enforcement and victim services is embedded across the organization. Victim Specialists assist with meeting victims' physical needs such as safe shelter, food and clothing by connecting them with WAVI and other local agencies. They also provide assistance in filing for protection orders and state offered crime victims compensation.

Pennington County State's Attorney Office has had victim advocates in place for a long time. The PCSO Victim Specialists Program has strengthened the handoff to State's Attorney Victim Advocates from cases that move to the prosecution stage. Victim Specialists assist victims with extending their SAVIN notification to include court actions and movement of the offender after conviction. They also transport victims and families to pre-trial hearings and trials, and witnesses to hotels.

Child Advocacy Center (CAC) of the Black Hills - Victim Specialists often transport children and families to the advocacy center for forensic interviews and counseling sessions.

Rapid City Regional Hospital SANE team (Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners) - Victim Specialists respond when necessary to the hospital emergency room to support sexual assault survivors during the forensic exam by specially trained nurses. Information is provided on the investigative process, as well as resources.

South Dakota Department of Social Services - Child Protection Division - Victim Specialists help families dealing with various forms of Child Abuse to find resources and referrals for programs, counseling and assistance. Given multi-generational nature of child abuse, training provided to victim specialists helps families navigate these difficult circumstances.

Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) – The Task Force is a combined city, county, state unit based in Rapid City. When ICAC identifies a victim, the Victim Specialist is called upon to work closely with the victim and family.

PCSO Takes Care of Their Own

Part of the evolving nature of law enforcement's response to victims is recognizing the impact helping victims of trauma and violence has on those who do this work. It is the vicarious trauma-informed organization that is not only aware of the risk, but takes on the responsibility to mitigate that impact on both law enforcement and victim advocates.

The Pennington County Sheriff's Office does that – knowing that taking care of their own not only keeps staff healthy, but keeps services of the highest quality.

The PCSO has a Clinical Psychologist who helps with pre-employment and hiring, and pro-actively provides psychological services for employees who may suffer negative consequences from their exposure to vicarious trauma. The Psychologist is engaged in all critical incident debriefings. In addition, training is offered on vicarious trauma and resiliency, recognizing that staff cannot simply “un-see what they have seen.”

As former head of CID and the Victim Specialist program, upon retirement Corey Brubakken returned to PCSO as the agency Wellness Coordinator. Corey has an open door policy, encouraging staff to discuss difficulties they may be having in providing law enforcement services. Staff can vent about how their job may be affecting them or how an incident has impacted them, and then “get back in the saddle” and do what needs to be done. Wellness is encouraged, and people are not stigmatized for coming forward. Corey has also introduced a new partner to the Wellness team - his Labrador “Harley” in training to be a “therapy animal”. Harley joins Corey at various times of the week to provide welcome stress relief to PCSO employees.

Five local volunteer chaplains under Brubakken's supervision also work closely with the Pennington County Sheriff's Office and are available day or night to provide emotional support, guidance and crisis intervention.

Victim Specialist Program Model for Law Enforcement's Response to Victims

The Pennington County Sheriff's Office has a long history of assisting victims of crime in South Dakota. Since late 2016, the PCSO Victim Specialist Program has been assigned to 1239 Criminal Investigation Cases involving the most violent crime types. During that time, both Primary and Secondary Victims of Crime numbering 1,946 people have been provided service. Approximately 45% of those individuals served are of Native American descent.

The PCSO Victim Specialist Program has improved services for all victims through partnerships and collaboration that benefit victims not only in its jurisdiction but statewide as well. It remains the only program in a city or county law enforcement agency in the state of South Dakota.

As the Victim Specialist Program continues to grow and evolve, it provides a model for law enforcement based victim services around the country.