

*An Interview with...*

## Victoria Hougham, MSW

Director of Victim Services

VictimConnect Resource Center

### Q: What is the Victim Connect Resource Center?

A: The VictimConnect Resource Center, a program of the National Center for Victims of Crime, is a resource for crime victims to learn about their rights and options – confidentially and compassionately. We serve victims of any type of crime in the United States and can assist them with locating appropriate local, national, and online resources. Our services can be accessed through a traditional telephone-based helpline or through our innovative online chat and text services. In addition, our website includes the Connect Directory which has information and service referrals in a searchable map-format.

*“We’re fortunate to have incredible partnerships with other issue-specific national hotlines.”*

### Q: How is VictimConnect different from other national helplines?

A: VictimConnect is unique because we are able to assist victims of all crimes, including those who have experienced multiple types of crime. We’re fortunate to have incredible partnerships with other issue-specific national hotlines. We constantly leverage those relationships so we are able to focus more attention on historically underrepresented or underserved victims. Though we hear from victims of all types of crime, our current outreach is focused on elder abuse, stalking, financial crimes, and homicide.

### Q: What kind of training do the Victim Assistance Specialists receive and what kind of support does management provide?

A: Upon hiring, victim assistance specialists participate in 40+ hours of training, which includes both presentations from internal and external experts on crime-related subject matter as well as a multi-phase shadowing and experiential learning component. This training curriculum is designed to be interactive and engaging in order for victim assistance specialists to be prepared for the range of calls they will receive from victims. This initial

training focuses on working with victims who call VictimConnect and later training encompasses chat and text skills. We also have monthly professional development sessions in which we ask National Center for Victims of Crime staff to present on their focus areas or bring in partners and community members to train. For example, in the past year, we’ve had a local therapist teach us about mindfulness and grounding techniques to use for ourselves and when working with victims, help us understand delusional disorders, practice clinical victim-centered interaction skills, and assess stalking as it relates to technology. In addition to formal training, we have a monthly team meeting and biweekly check-ins with a

supervisor which serves as time for the staff to process the work together and learn about any new protocols or practices.

**Q: VictimConnect has phone, text, and online chat options. How are these options beneficial for victims?**

A: When designing the helpline, we wanted victims to be able to reach us with the technology they are using regularly. Many people now prefer to communicate through text or online chat. Equally important is the fact that we want to be able to serve all victims of crime and having text and chat options eliminates one barrier for victims who are deaf or hard of hearing. Additionally, sometimes it is not safe for victims to call, but they can text or chat. We want to be accessible to anyone who needs our services. The platforms that we use for these programs have been built by RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network) and are customized to best serve the visitors that utilize our services.

---

***“Sometimes it is not safe for victims to call, but they can text or chat. We want to be accessible to anyone who needs our services.”***

---

**Q: How frequently does the VictimConnect Resource Center hear from victims of stalking?**

A: Our victim assistance specialists speak with victims of stalking regularly. Since the helpline began operations last year, we have had over 1,000 calls about stalking from victims, family members, and providers. Stalking calls consistently make up about 15–17% of all calls and about 5% of all chats to the helpline when the crime is explicitly stated. This means that we average about 3 stalking calls per day. Our protocol for working with stalking victims is based on the Stalking Resource Center’s best practices.

**Q: What are the most common needs and referrals for victims of stalking?**

A: When our victim assistance specialists speak with stalking victims, we hear a variety of needs because each situation and response is unique to that person and their experience. Often, we discuss options like filing for protection orders, reporting to law enforcement, keeping logs and files that document the stalking behavior, and safety planning. Unfortunately, the message that we often have to relay to victims is that there are a few dedicated stalking resources, so we often have to patch support from a variety of different places together when coordinating a response. We try to leverage the resources that may be available within domestic violence or sexual assault advocacy centers, court houses, district attorney’s offices, online, and in every other possible place. When we speak with stalking victims, the needs we see most frequently are support groups, assistance in working with law enforcement, legal representation, and safety planning.

Recently we have seen an increased interest from victims regarding the psychological profile of a stalker. We’ve seen questions regarding how long stalking behaviors are typically exhibited, if filing protective orders typically escalates a stalker, and if any personality disorders typically pair with someone who stalks. It also challenging to find programs that work specifically with victims of stalking because the field is just now recognizing stalking as a crime that requires specialized resources and responses.

**Q: You also manage the DC Victim Hotline, a local hotline for all crime victims in the District of Columbia. How does the DC Hotline function differently than the National helpline?**

A: While the DC Victim Hotline (DCVH) has the same mission and goals as the VictimConnect Resource Center, to help victims regain control through information, DCVH is on the ground level. Because it is a local hotline, the specialists constantly communicate and work closely with partner agencies to ensure that victims are receiving the best coordinated care the city has to offer. Additionally, the specialists are often doing outreach in the community and supporting local events, interacting with stakeholders, community leaders, and the victims they serve. Since the specialists also live in the DC area and are affected by the same polices and experiences, DCVH staff have a deep level of investment in the shared community.

**Q: What advice do you have for state or local programs who operate hotlines and who may get calls from victims of stalking?**

A: I would encourage those programs to speak with victims and challenge themselves to see how they can serve stalking victims within their existing services and programming. If it cannot be incorporated based on limitations with funding or staffing, I'd encourage programs to see how they can grow in order to serve these victims as their needs are urgent. From what we hear, stalking is an insidious crime that shatters a person's foundation of safety. Services and advocacy are essential to that person's success. At this point, not all law enforcement officials and not all courts are trained to understand the nuances of stalking and how to best respond to these victims so having a state or local program that understands and can help is essential.