



# Communities of Practice and SVAAAs

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## Introduction

Communities of practice (CoPs) have been around for as long as people have been sharing interests, goals, and information. It wasn't until educational theorist Etienne Wenger published his 1998 book, *Communities of Practice*, that the concepts at the center of this notion were articulated in a systematic way. Wenger's book captured the foundational elements of how CoPs are formed, develop, and behave. It was with this new model and language that our understanding of CoPs began to grow, and the applicability of the concepts started to become clear. Wenger continues to be a primary leader in the research, development, and promotion of CoP activities and thought. In this paper we will outline how the CoP concept applies to State Victim Assistance Academies (SVAAAs) and examine how they can benefit from incorporating this perspective into their development and operations.

## What is a Community of Practice?

Not all communities are communities of practice. Rather, a CoP is defined by the presence of three distinct characteristics which differentiates it from any more broadly formed or defined community.

1. **Domain** – members share a particular interest and a commitment to that shared interest
2. **Community** – members share information, learn from each other, support the development of each other's efforts, and interact with each other even if indirectly (e.g., policy makers and direct service providers, researchers and practitioners)
3. **Practice** – members are actively engaged in actions and "practices" relevant to the domain and the other community members

For example, your neighborhood, apartment building, or condo complex may constitute a community due to the physical proximity you share with others, but this is not a community of practice. Mere physical proximity or even simply sharing interests with others does not constitute a community of practice. Communities of practice require regular sharing, interaction, and activities that further the domain—the area of common interest to which members are collectively committed.

In 2016 the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC), in an effort to provide consistent support for the development and maintenance of SVAAAs, established the SVAA Resource Center. The Resource Center team provides training and technical assistance to SVAAAs at any stage of development. The SVAA Resource Center recognizes that numerous CoPs currently exist in the field of victim services and, by bringing together a diverse group of members from those CoPs to form an

SVAA CoP, we can enhance training in the field of victim services (via SVAAAs) with the goal of ensuring the delivery of high-quality services to all types of crime victims.

## **Victim Service Communities of Practice**

Undoubtedly, a wide variety of providers, policy makers, agencies, and coalitions are working across the country to promote and improve services to crime victims and survivors. Within every state and territory in the nation, individual providers in countless roles are working directly with victims and survivors on a daily basis. Mental health and health care professionals, victim advocates, nurses, doctors, clergy, police, prosecutors, educators, journalists, and others regularly engage with victims/survivors and are committed to improving their lives and reducing the impact of their criminal victimization.

On a national level, policy makers, victim service associations, and professional training and credentialing bodies work consistently toward establishing standards, policies, and best practices that will help anticipate and respond to the needs of crime victims. Their efforts support the creation of emotional, physical, and financial safety nets across the country for those impacted by crime.

Coalitions and victim service agencies frequently work on an organizational level within and across jurisdictions to identify the needs of crime victims/survivors and then develop programming and support services that will meet those needs. These entities are often responsible for providing training programs to service providers, educating the public on relevant issues, and advocating for funding, legislation, and additional resources for victims/survivors across their identified regions and/or among their delineated constituency.

Though each of these constituent groups has its own specific role, function, and activities, they share a common purpose. In Wenger's terms, their domain or shared interest can be summarized as: *seeking to provide accessible support for crime victims/survivors and consistently improve the services they receive*. The SVAA Resource Center considers this shared interest/domain to be the cornerstone of our SVAA CoP. We believe this common purpose demonstrates the shared domain, community, and practice(s) across national, state, and local entities working together as members of the SVAA CoP.

## **The SVAA Community of Practice**

In the late 1990's, OVC first outlined the need for state-specific training programs, which would assure foundational level professional development for victim service providers and allied professionals. This recognition stemmed from an earlier initiative, known as the National Victim Assistance Academy, which created a national training program for basic victim services provider training. However, with the understanding that processes, laws, and resources vary from state to state, OVC set out to establish SVAAAs in states and territories across the country in order for states to develop trainings that aligned with their unique demographics, patterns of victimization, and victim rights laws.

OVC recognized that national level curricula could be complementary to, but not replace, state curricula and laid the groundwork for forming the SVAA Community of Practice.

## National Level

On the national level, the SVAA CoP benefits from the leadership and contributions of OVC, the SVAA Resource Center and members of our SVAA Resource Center Advisory Board. This evolving group of national experts and thought leaders involved in the broad field of victim services are able to serve as SVAA ambassadors and assist the SVAA CoP with planning, curriculum development, resources, tools, research, evaluation, best practices, and information about emerging needs and trends. The national advisory board champions the importance of elevating training and education for victim service practitioners. Toward this end, board members and SVAA Resource Center team members collaborated on the development of an SVAA Values Statement which highlights the importance of training and education in the victim services field. The national advisory board members communicate individually and as a group to exchange information, suggestions, and promising practices. They have also contributed to quarterly webinars, incorporated SVAA workshops into their agency conferences, and disseminated information about SVAA to their respective networks.

## Statewide Level

Some of the most robust SVAA community building takes place at the statewide level. By convening representatives from agencies and organizations across one's state/territory, the SVAA Director is facilitating a statewide CoP, which is instrumental to the development and maintenance of the SVAA. Steering committees are the cornerstone of a vibrant statewide CoP and a critical foundation for Academy planning and implementation. Agencies and organizations that support and assist victims/survivors have a shared interest or domain that unifies them. Representatives from a broad range of victim service agencies, allied organizations, and disciplines as steering committee members, faculty, mentors, sponsors, or as academic partners create the SVAA *community* necessary to carry out the *practice* of improving services to crime victims/survivors.

But the role of each state/territory in the overall SVAA CoP goes beyond its own borders to play a role in the CoP on a national level as well. Sharing resources, guidance, tools and experience with other states/territories helps achieve a vibrant national CoP, which betters the community as a whole. Information shared, questions posed, resources and tools offered via our closed social network (Chatter), at our annual SVAA Leadership Symposium, and through our online Resource Library all help strengthen the national CoP.

## SVAA Level

Utilizing an SVAA to develop the CoP on the local level among the students, faculty, and staff who participate in the Academy is perhaps the most critical of the three CoP levels—national, state, local. These individuals represent the “boots on the ground” and the importance of relying on one another for networking, sharing resources and providing direct care to the end-user, the crime victim/survivor. A strong community of practice at this level will both benefit from and inform the broader state and national levels of the CoP. One of the most consistent evaluation outcomes at SVAA nationwide is the degree to which attendees value the networking opportunities that are integral to an Academy. Foundational in the development and operation of the SVAA CoP is the time students, faculty, and staff have to develop strong relationships,

learn about each other's programs and services, share resources, and work toward coordinated responses to victims/survivors.

## Conclusion: Benefits of a Multi-tiered SVAA CoP

SVAA participants' direct, daily contact with victims/survivors and shared perspectives on the needs and challenges they face are key ingredients to working together to find solutions to problems, identifying ongoing needs, creating new and unique resources to benefit victims/survivors, and contributing overall to improvements in service and system change on the state and national levels.

As direct service providers who disseminate resources that are quite often funded at the state and national level, SVAA participants can provide valuable feedback regarding how well services and resources are meeting their intended goals and offer recommendations to funders and policy makers at the state and national levels. In this way, each component of the SVAA CoP plays a critical role in collectively and consistently advancing and improving services to victims/survivors on a local, state, and national level.

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### Work Cited

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

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