



## **Why We Need Victim Impact Programming for Incarcerated Men and Women By Verna Wyatt and Valerie Craig**

### **Introduction by Verna Wyatt**

In 1991, my sister-in-law was sexually assaulted and murdered. The impact from that horrendous crime devastated our family and turned my world upside down, setting me on a personal mission to prevent that kind of pain from touching other innocent families. In 1993, I became involved with a grassroots movement to prevent crime and assist victims and participated in volunteer efforts to assist victims in Tennessee and to prevent crime in our communities in the first place. In 1993 I became the Executive Director of this organization and for fourteen years advocated for victims while in this role. If you had told me ten years ago that I would someday be working with incarcerated men and women, I would never have believed you. I didn't like offenders one little bit. I didn't believe any of them could ever change, (actually didn't care if they could), and thought offenders to be heartless victimizers who were only concerned about satisfying their own selfish impulses. The recidivism rates supported my thinking, and my personal experience did the same. The man who murdered my sister-in-law was a repeat offender, and most of the victims I came in contact with on a daily basis were victims of repeat offenders. I knew the consequences of their actions first hand, and I saw that same devastation with every victim of crime that I encountered. They didn't deserve any special attention or consideration in my opinion. I wanted the offenders locked away forever so they could never have the opportunity to hurt others again, and I wanted harsh living conditions. "It's what they deserve", I thought.

But about 7 years ago, I had an epiphany that drastically changed my thinking about the incarcerated and what we should be doing with them. It began when I met an ex offender, who upon leaving prison, completed college, got his masters degree, started a non profit organization that ministered to at risk youth, and was living a life that blessed the community in a powerful way. After getting to know him, I thought about his "second chance", and how our community would have not be a better place if he hadn't been in it to make a difference. It wasn't long after this little eye opener, that the Tennessee Department of Correction victim liaison asked me if I would come speak to a class of inmates and share my personal story of victimization. It was a new program that was incorporating victim impact education for the inmates. My first encounter with inmates of sharing my story was very powerful – for the inmates, but also for me. The men in that class listened to my every word with an intense attention. You could see concern on their faces while I spoke. Many of them apologized to me afterward; some offered to pray for me, others asked about forgiveness. I know some of them could have been "conning" me, but I am certain, that day, my story touched the lives of offenders in that room. I left the prison that day thinking if only one inmate begins to think of victims as human beings, if only one inmate considers the pain victims endure when victimized, and then change their behavior because of it, then it certainly was worth my time to share my story with them. The next piece of the puzzle came as a jolt of reality when an Assistant Commissioner of Corrections told me, "Verna, 97% of the inmates who are incarcerated ARE going to be returned to the community. How do you want them coming back?" Well, I was really stunned at his question. Never once had I even

thought about the reality of the situation. I had been putting my head in the sand for so long, hanging on to the ideal of “locking them away and throwing away the key”. But now, I was faced with black and white reality - 97% of the incarcerated population will leave prison. It was sobering. I had to step back and re-evaluate my mission outlook. If I was truly dedicated to preventing victimization, and, if 97% of the incarcerated are coming back to the community, then as a victim advocate how could I ignore this population that we clearly know are capable of victimization? It was a no brainer! The inmates need attention, not because they deserve it, but because society does!

### **Why is victim impact important?**

At first glance, it might seem counter-intuitive for victim advocates to work with inmates. However, the truth is, victim advocates and corrections professionals are not adversaries. We actually share a common goal: “no more victims”. Conducting Victim Impact classes for the incarcerated is a team approach to preventing victimization. There have been several studies looking at the effectiveness of victim impact programs across the country. A 2007 Iowa Department of Correction Victim Impact Report, using two evidence-based studies, concluded victim impact is a contributing factor in reducing recidivism.

The National Office for Victims Of Crime has created a victim impact curriculum to be used with incarcerated men and women. Following their curriculum guidelines and using our experience as victim advocates, we have produced a victim impact curriculum that is easy to follow. It is based on our 20 years of working with victims of crime and also our 7 years of experience literally working with thousands of inmates. Our curriculum first sets the stage for the desired outcome, and the psychology in presenting this information to incarcerated men and women. When Valerie Craig and I began facilitating these classes 7 years ago, our idea was to make that offender understand all the pain he/she has caused. It didn't take very long for us to realize, if they don't understand what has brought them to the place they are now, they won't be able to extend empathy to their victims.

Our curriculum walks the facilitator through the steps of leading a victim impact class, and provides tools to use inside the classroom, from documentary videos featuring victims of crime sharing their stories to web links that can be used in the class. Our curriculum also weaves music into the curriculum. It is attributed that Plato once said *“Music speaks what cannot be expressed, soothes the mind and gives it rest, heals the heart and makes it whole, flows from heaven to the soul.”* There are music therapy organizations in the nation who use music in different ways to promote healing and improve quality of life. Studies have shown that music reduces stress, and even enhances motor skills and athletic performance. We provide the music and the lyrics that are to be used in class to illustrate the specific topics being discussed in class.

As victim advocates, Valerie Craig and I thought, “who better to talk about the impact of crime on victims?” Our passion for stopping victimization lead us to this path of working with offenders and we are solidly convinced that victim impact, properly facilitated, can have a positive impact on the offender, and that with other wrap around programs could be a vital part in reducing recidivism. That means, No More Victims! Proof of this is that over the 7 years of facilitating weekly classes, our pre and post-test with our class participants showed improvement in the offender's understanding of the impact of violent crime on victims. Anecdotal observation from prison and jail staff indicates an improvement of general attitude of our class participants.

We've learned from our class participants, that the majority of offenders never think about their victim as a human being. Many never even think about their victim at all. In one of our classes on domestic violence we talked about a victim who had been stabbed in the knees, and had to be hospitalized because she had diabetes and that condition contributed to an infection in her legs, and she was very close to losing her legs. After that class an offender came up to us and shared that he had abused a

woman who also had diabetes, and he never realized his actions could have been made worse by her health condition. Stunning, but he had never given any thought to the abuse he had shown this victim until our class. Others make themselves believe the impact of crime on a victim is fleeting. Most offenders do not understand that victimization has a trickle down effect that goes far beyond the primary victim. The following are examples of responses received from incarcerated men and women who have participated in our victim impact classes:

"I broke into houses and I always thought that I just made my victims angry. But I understand now that it was a lot worse than that. I made them angry, I made them feel violated. They don't feel safe in their own home. I will never make another person feel like that again. Whenever I heard about victims, they were faceless. But you've made it more real to me. Your class has made a bigger impact on me than anything else in this program."

"This is a very important class because you get to see crime through the eyes of the victim. The hurt and disruption that they constantly deal with because of someone else. I see how my decision-making affects other people's lives. This class makes the pain feel real. I wasn't raised to hurt people like this and I'm not gonna continue to do so. This class has played a major role in my desire to change!"

"I have really learned a lot from this class. I had never even thought about the victims' point of view or the way they thought or felt because of what I had done to them. I won't live the same life style again when I leave. I will be more accepting to change and being more aware of the people around me and their feelings."

### **What are the components of a good a victim impact program?**

Our victim impact curriculum covers ten topics: accountability, domestic violence, child abuse, drug addiction/drug dealing, DUI, property crime/burglary/robbery, sexual assault, hate crime/gang crime, crimes against the elderly, and homicide. Some programming professionals may believe it is not necessary to cover all these topics because not every offender has committed every crime. We believe it is important for the inmate to see that every crime has an impact, and that regardless of what the crime is, the impact for the victims is similar. We begin each class by telling the offender that we are covering these crimes, not as if we think they have perpetrated these crimes, but because we want them to see those similarities in the victim's impact. Every victim shares similar impact, and when we cover a crime and talk about impact to that victim, we tell the inmate we want them to think about their victim, because they had those feelings. We also talk about the difference between guilt and remorse. This class is NOT about guilt or making the offender "feel bad". Everyone in the world has done things they are ashamed of. You can't change your past. Guilt is very self-focused. It's all about "how bad I am" and "how no one can ever trust or forgive me, including myself". Remorse on the other hand is victim motivated. "I can't believe what that victim is experiencing because of my actions"- and – truly understanding the pain of the victim, the frustration of the victim, the financial expense of the victim, the long term impact for the victim. We want remorse from our class participants. Genuine remorse is a catalyst for changing behavior and making amends. Guilt holds back any kind of progress. We also cover all these crimes, because knowledge is power. Everyone knows or will know a victim of crime. When released, offenders will have information about these crimes that will allow them to respond appropriately to those in their sphere of influence who suffer victimization.

Our curriculum has a heavy emphasis on helping the offender connect the dots of their behavior. Core issues are discussed in every class because they are the root of self-destructive and criminal behaviors. Addiction, violence, anger, depression, and promiscuity are often mistaken for core issues, when in reality, they are symptoms of core issues. While symptoms must be treated, they are not the

root cause of negative or criminal behavior. Offenders must identify the source for their symptoms, which is often early exposure to family violence, childhood trauma, or sexual abuse. This is not an excuse for committing crime - offenders must take responsibility and accept the consequences of their actions. There is absolutely no excuse for victimizing behavior. However, there are “explanations”. And it is very important to understand what motivates negative behaviors if we want to address them. Knowledge of core issues can help offenders have a “light bulb moment,” realizing they are not crazy, or a bad seed. Connecting those dots, they can now work on their symptoms more successfully by tackling the issues driving the symptoms. Because many core issues are tied to child sexual abuse, and growing up in domestic violence homes, we spend more time in our victim impact classes talking about the dynamics of these crimes and the long term impact for the victim.

Our curriculum uses different teaching methods to connect with all learning styles: discussion, outlines, videos, music, and speakers. Outlines are used for each of the ten topics. Following along with the outline, we engage the inmate in discussion about the crime. Discussion brings to light what offenders are thinking, which allows the facilitator to address any denials, minimizations, or justifications. Videos featuring real life victims and real life situations created by crime, and some testimony by real life offenders, allow inmate participants to see and hear the information in another format, which also promotes interesting discussion. One of the most effective teaching tools is the use of survivors and successful ex-offenders as speakers. Many survivors, even of the most intimate crimes like sexual assault and child sexual abuse, are willing to come to prisons and jails to speak to incarcerated inmates. Victims share their experience with the hope that it will keep one inmate from victimizing behavior when they are released. The impact for the offenders hearing the story of the victim is very powerful and often dramatic. And in the four years we have been conducting victim impact classes, every victim who has come inside the prisons and jail has said that it was a very good experience for them. If facility guidelines allow, we also include successful ex-offenders as speakers. They model appropriate accountability and are an example that anyone can change, regardless of their past.

### **Who are the facilitators?**

Facilitators must have an understanding of victim impact issues and believe offenders can change. If either of these qualities is missing, the class will be less effective. The facilitator needs to understand that most offenders have experienced victimization in their past that set them on a negative path in life, but be clear that past history is never an excuse to victimize others. Although the inmate has been a victim in the past of some kind of trauma, they are in prison because they were victimizers. Two facilitators are better than one when it comes to managing the group dynamic, especially for groups of ten or more participants. While one facilitator is leading the discussion, the other can monitor the group’s response and provide additional insights. A good back and forth of facilitator presentation keeps the class more interesting. There is also less chance of burnout, as sole responsibility of the class does not fall to one person. They should be able to manage discussion and present opposing viewpoints without being defensive or argumentative. They must be open and inviting yet able to establish firm boundaries and respectfully confront cognitive distortions, minimization, and justification.

### **What is the best way to measure offender progress?**

Pretests and post-tests measure an offenders’ knowledge about victim impact before and after the class. Statistics from the classes that we have personally facilitated over the years indicate that 85% of offenders improve their scores from pre to post tests. The test includes several true/false questions such as:

If I left my car unlocked, I’d be asking for someone to steal it.

Women who wear sexy clothes are asking to be raped.

If you are jealous, it shows your partner how much you love them.

Drug dealers don't really have victims.

Personal surveys are administered to gain understanding of offenders past history of victimization, substance abuse, and criminal behavior. It provides a view of how offenders interpret their personal experiences. It is given at the beginning and end of class time to see if they view their personal experiences differently after taking the class. While the focus of the class is to help them understand victim impact, it is critical that they also begin looking at their past to figure out the reasons behind their criminal behavior. Of course, the ultimate goal is no more victims and reduced recidivism.

### **What are some challenges encountered during victim impact class?**

Some offenders may struggle with illiteracy, learning disabilities, or medical issues. The facilitator must be sensitive to these needs while balancing them with accountability. For example, an individual who can't read or write can still listen and participate in class discussions. If offenders have medical needs that take them away from class, the facilitator should make arrangements for them to do make up work such as writing an essay on the missed topic. Some offenders come into the class angry. They do not want to be in a victim impact class. But, our experience over the last seven years has shown that even the most hard, disruptive class member will eventually learn to participate and even appreciate the class. There will always be some offenders who present a bad attitude or act rudely. Certain behaviors such as sleeping, not paying attention, disrespectful talk, refusing to complete class work, or consistently showing up late should not be tolerated. The facilitator should first try to talk directly with the offender about the behavior. If the problem doesn't improve, the facilitator can talk to the offender again or assign additional work. For example, if an offender falls asleep while a guest speaker is talking, have them write an apology letter to the speaker and assign an appropriate essay topic. In group settings, people often feed off each other's negative attitudes. In this situation, confront the entire group first, without naming individuals. The offenders may be able to monitor one others behavior, holding each other accountable. If not, speak one-on-one to the individuals causing trouble. If problems persist, it may be necessary to make them retake the class or remove them from the program.

Some sessions may be difficult for offenders as topics like family violence and sexual abuse may trigger feelings about childhood victimization. This is a healthy response, and the facilitator should be prepared to offer options on how to handle such feelings. These options may include individual counseling, talking with a trusted friend, or journaling.

### **Train-the-Trainer**

Tennessee Voices For Victims is serious about promoting victim impact programming across the country. It can be an important tool to help offenders recognize their offending behavior, and motivate them to do something about it. We provide "train the trainer" trainings, and have conducted numerous trainings over the years with The Tennessee Department of Correction and with the Tennessee Department of Probation and Parole, (now Department of Parole). Just recently, we learned that one of our former attendees at a victim impact training, said she was so inspired by our training that she went back to school to get her masters degree.

## About the authors



*Verna and Valerie teaching Victim Impact Class at Metro Davidson County Correctional Facility*

Valerie Craig and Verna Wyatt have been advocates for victims of crime for twenty years. They know the impact of crime on all victims; rape, domestic violence, child sexual abuse, stalking, robbery, homicide. They have worked to help victims regain a new normal for their lives; they have presented thousands of programs over the years educating our community on these crimes with a goal of preventing them. They have used their boots on the ground knowledge of victims and offenders to create a curriculum that is easy to follow, and has the tools included to help with every class topic. They know victimization and have facilitated 5 weekly classes for 7 years, teaching thousands of incarcerated men, women and teen girls.

If you are interested in our curriculum and training, please contact Sara Kemp at [sara.kemp@tnvoicesforvictims.org](mailto:sara.kemp@tnvoicesforvictims.org).