



Vicarious Trauma Toolkit Helps Agencies Establish Priorities, Develop Response

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A police officer assigned to a special unit on sexual assault. A corrections officer who's seen too many incidents between inmates. A courts officer subjected to a parade of victims, day after day. These public safety professionals have at least one thing in common: They're experiencing vicarious trauma, and the U.S. Department of Justice's Office for Victims of Crime offers an online toolkit that can help their agencies help them cope.

Located at <https://vtt.ovc.ojp.gov/>, the Vicarious Trauma Toolkit offers tools and resources tailored for agencies in the fields of victim services, emergency medical services, fire services and

law enforcement. The toolkit also offers an assessment tool, available on the home page. The Vicarious Trauma-Organizational Readiness Guide (VT-ORG) tool helps agencies assess their current capacity as a vicarious trauma-informed organization, prioritize areas where there are gaps and identify resources in those focus areas.



Both the assessment and the Compendium of Resources are organized into sections relevant to each of the four intended disciplines and how agencies working in those fields deal with exposure to the traumatic experiences of other people, also known as vicarious trauma.

Compounding the challenge that agencies face in designing their responses is the fact that individuals' response to vicarious trauma is just that: individualized. Some people become hardened, some become fearful, some become more grateful for their own well-being and some respond in a mixture of ways. However, organizations can take action to mitigate the negative

impact vicarious trauma can have on individuals and organizations.

“When we started the process of developing the toolkit, we discovered nothing existed that would help agencies figure out how well they were dealing with vicarious trauma, and so we came up with the VT-ORG,” says Dr. Beth Molnar, principal investigator for the project. “During the development phase, we worked with more than 20 organizations to demonstrate its reliability and validity, and we showed them how to take our survey tool and put it into software tools like Survey Monkey or Qualtrics so they could easily send it out to their people and get back data that they could analyze.”

“VT-ORG helps an organization figure out where it is now and provides it with direction on how to get to where it wants to be,” Product Coordinator Karen Kalergis adds.

The development team offered technical assistance earlier in the project, but now organizations can get similar technical assistance from OVC’s Training and Technical Assistance Center (<https://www.ovcttac.gov/>). Using the agency-level survey and toolkit marks a change in approach from the traditional one of asking individuals to take care of themselves on their own time through their own health care regimen, says Project Director Janet Fine: “Traditionally they were expected to shoulder self-care on their own, but now there is recognition that agencies whose staff is chronically exposed to the trauma of others have a

responsibility to help. And although the toolkit is designed to work at the organization level, those organizations shouldn't dismiss the importance of the individual's response. Everyone reacts differently."

After completing the survey and obtaining the results, many agencies express relief to find out that although they might not have termed them vicarious trauma responses, they have a number of policies and procedures in place that can help staff deal with the issues, Fine says. And once agencies have used the VT-ORG to help them determine what areas they need to address, the toolkit has more than 500 helpful items waiting in the Compendium of Resources, which includes policies, procedures, practices and programs; research literature in abstract and full-text format on issues such as prevalence, impact, risk factors and intervention studies; new tools for the field; and websites, podcasts and videos.

"One of the keys in designing the toolkit was making sure that the products on the website were really appropriate for the four disciplines," Kalergis says. "We undertook a huge effort to go out in the field and find out what resources agencies were already using, and because we're providing access to items already being used in the field, it gives the toolkit more credibility."

While the compendium includes research literature that can be highly technical in nature, the New Tools

<https://vtt.ovc.ojp.gov/compendium?resource=new-tools-for-the-field>) quickly summarize available literature and resources on a specific topic in a colorful and easy-to-digest format, and videos on the home page provide an introduction to addressing the issue.

The need for creation of the compendium and the toolkit as a whole was influenced by OVC's Vision 21 Report, which was published in 2013. Molnar, who previously volunteered and now leads the board of directors at the Boston Area Rape Crisis Center, assembled what she referred to as a "dream team" of national and local organizations that performed numerous advisory roles in the development and dissemination of the toolkit. The OVC grant funding this work ends in September 2018.

"We heard over and over again, you can't just tell people to do more yoga or do more things to take care of yourself on your own time," Molnar says. "In the toolkit, we have something that's easy to use and it's all free. I think that no matter the size of your organization, there are some resources that will work for you."

Although organizations may have a response for how high-profile incidents such as a mass shooting affects their staff, Fine says the team had a goal of ensuring that organizations remain aware of the toll from day-to-day chronic exposure when designing their response. She adds: "They also need to be aware it's not a

one-shot deal to do some training, develop a policy and you're done. It's an area that requires constant attention."

Access the Vicarious Trauma Toolkit at <https://vtt.ovc.ojp.gov/> and OVC TTAC at <https://www.ovcttac.gov>.

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