

The logo consists of a red square with the letters 'TN' in white, serif font. Below the square is a horizontal blue bar.

**TN**

**Department of  
Finance &  
Administration**

A large, faint, light gray watermark logo is centered in the background. It features a circular border with three five-pointed stars arranged in a triangular pattern inside.

# **Office of Criminal Justice Programs**

# **Victim-Centered Forums FY 2026**

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### **OFFICE OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE PROGRAMS MISSION STATEMENT:**

*The Office of Criminal Justice Programs (OCJP) under the State Department of Finance and Administration functions as a strategic planning agency that secures, distributes, and manages federal and state grant funds for Tennessee. While collaborating with other public and non-profit agencies, OCJP utilizes these grant monies to support innovative projects statewide in efforts to reduce criminal activity, provide services for victims of crime and promote overall enhancement of the criminal justice system in Tennessee.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Each year, the Tennessee Office of Criminal Justice Programs (OCJP) conducts a series of victim-centered forums to hear from victims and other stakeholders across the state. The insights and feedback from these groups help to inform OCJP's strategic planning process. The forums focus on identifying areas of promise and excellence, as well as gaps in services for Tennessee victims of crime. On October 2, 2024, Tennessee Voices for Victims facilitated two such victim-centered forums for OCJP in a virtual format. These forums were composed of victims of crime, advocates, law enforcement victim advocates, and other professionals who work closely with victims of crime in all three grand divisions of the state; and their feedback is summarized in this report. The forums were organized into two groups: Victim Advocates, including Crime Victim Advocates, system providers and non-profit partners; and Survivors of Violent Crimes. Verna Wyatt and Valerie Craig, co-founders of Tennessee Voices for Victims, secured the participants, facilitated, and moderated each forum, and provided a subsequent summary report to OCJP. Several OCJP staff also attended each forum to listen for themes and topics of particular interest.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Tennessee Voices for Victims coordinated the forums, which were held virtually. The forums had statewide representation, incorporating both rural and urban areas, public and nonprofit agencies, and diversity in race, gender, and types of victimization. The conversations were guided yet proceeded organically. The group referred to as "Victim Advocates" consisted of crime victim advocates and staff employed by domestic violence shelters, sexual assault centers, and family justice centers, as well as those who work to address victimization through city initiatives, non-profit programming, and the criminal justice system. The second group, "Survivors" consisted of victims of crime ranging from domestic violence, sexual assault, hate crimes, aggravated assault, and homicide. The details of the forums, including the list of participants and questions that guided the discussion, can be found in Appendix.



## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The themes summarized below will directly inform OCJP's FY2026 Strategic Plan Addendum and will help to guide our office's funding priorities and project designs through the coming fiscal year. OCJP values the unique voices of victims, survivors, service providers and community partners across our state. We appreciate the valuable time and expertise that each forum participant provided; and we look forward to additional opportunities to hear directly from survivors and stakeholders throughout the year.

### **Victim Advocates**

*What are the barriers?*

- Financial needs:
  - Staffing – Other funding sources often don't want to pay for staff/operational costs such as overhead. Trained Advocates – Staffing issues lead to a decrease in trained advocates as the number of victims will continue to increase. This will open the door to well-intentioned volunteers trying to help who may, inadvertently, cause additional harm.
- Counseling needs:
  - There are not enough counselors, leading to on-going waitlists and fewer sessions to accommodate the waitlist.
  - Counseling services may be available in the community but are rarely free and may not be provided by a therapist trained in the trauma unique to crime victims.
- Staff retention:
  - Victims need a continuum of services –after the crime occurs through the duration of their healing journey so rapport, trust, and relationships can be built. Ideally, these case managers and advocates would be with the victim throughout the duration of their case to reduce re-traumatization. With turnover, this is not happening.
  - Burnout, replacing those who leave the field, unreasonable workloads, etc. are significant issues in serving victims consistently.
  - Having to turn away victims because there are not enough advocates for the number of cases, harder to keep employees.

*What are the best ways to improve these barriers?*

- Virtual counseling services/support group settings to reach more victims more efficiently.
- Preventative Trauma Work:
  - Providing education in broader settings such as hosting town halls on trauma, community trainings on PTSD.
  - Working with employers so they understand trauma and the impact PTSD can have on the employee in a new and unfamiliar setting.
  - Educating system partners (such as judges, district attorneys, medical professionals, etc.) about basic trauma responses following victimization.
- Training Opportunities:
  - Offering opportunities for providers to know what else is available in the community. Sometimes resources are present, but advocates don't know they exist.
  - Encourage agencies to implement policies that support staff by allowing them to work virtually, when possible, have flexible hours, participate in self-care/team building days on a regular basis, etc.

- Individualize retention plans as what is supportive to one employee may not be supportive to another.
- Work with agencies to focus on core services until diversified funding is secured to ensure staff are compensated well and not spread too thin.
- Assist agencies with sustainability planning so staff positions can feel more secure.

## **Survivors**

### *What are the barriers?*

- Counseling – Many victims don't have the resources to pay for weekly counseling sessions after leaving shelter stays or there may be a limited length of services provided.
- Feeling a lack of empathy, care, compassion from law enforcement. Victims report they were often made to feel like they were a burden to the system as law enforcement were difficult to reach or talk to.
- Streamline the Criminal Injuries Compensation (CIC) process – the process required too much paperwork, was confusing and required additional work with service providers, and CIC didn't cover certain things (i.e. memorial services vs. funeral costs).

### *What are the best ways to improve these barriers?*

- Trauma informed trainings need to be held with law enforcement, DA's offices, hospitals, etc. These entities need to understand how PTSD, stress, and shock work in a victim's body to make it difficult for them to retain and provide information.
- Law enforcement and district attorney offices in every county need to have a coordinator or advocate on staff that answers victims' basic questions about the system and can help train the rest of their staff to handle victims' questions in a trauma-informed way.
- A Survivor Conference and groups. A place to connect, learn together, form organic groups, support systems, etc.

## **Recommendations Based on Common Themes**

This section identifies the most common themes that were identified throughout the two forums.

1. Education, training, and outreach to system providers, community providers, potential victims, etc. Increasing and enhancing outreach, training, and education allows professionals to learn from each other, support collaboration, and potentially help close funding gaps in the system through collaboration, resource sharing, or donations.
2. Increased collaboration and communication is crucial. Co-located and multi-disciplinary models of service provision, such as Family Justice Centers and Coordinated Community Response groups, improve victim safety and cultivate trusting, collaborative relationships.
3. Ensuring staff are available and trained to provide core services that are already in-place. Frontline Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault staff, Law Enforcement, District Attorneys, victim coordinators, trauma-trained case managers, and all staff focused on educating victims, providers and the community on resources are all needed and seen as a valuable asset to providing services and support to victims and each other.
4. Leaders and administration need support to prevent staff burnout. Continued education and training for agencies relating to institutional and individual wellness, funding diversity and sustainability, and assistance with agency structure to ensure fair compensation and supportive work environments is needed.

## **APPENDIX**

### **Participants**

#### **Domestic Violence Advocates and Survivors**

##### **Victim Advocate Representation from the following entities:**

Madison County Sheriff's Office

Haven of Hope

Nashville Children's Alliance

Frontier Health

Love Doesn't Hurt

Hope Center

Safe Harbor Children's Advocacy Center

Anderson County Family Justice Center

Casa Luz

YWCA Memphis

Haven House

Street Grace

Metro Nashville Police Department Family Intervention Program

Chattanooga Police Department

##### **Survivors:**

Survivor of Domestic Violence

Survivor of Domestic Violence

Survivor of Domestic Violence

Survivor of Domestic Violence

Survivor of Sexual Assault

Survivor of Sexual Assault

Survivor of Hate Crime

Survivor of Aggravated Assault

Survivor of Homicide

Survivor of Homicide

Survivor of Homicide