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## My Voice One Victim's Journey to be Heard

**T**wenty years ago, at the young age of eight years old, I was handed the title of "crime victim" after a traumatic attack. Kidnapped in the middle of the night while sleeping peacefully in my bed for the first time, I was sexually assaulted and then left to die in a field in my hometown of Dickinson, Texas. I lay there, in that field, severely injured with a lacerated throat and trachea. Doctors would later say this would leave me permanently unable to speak. I believe it was in my attacker's plan for me to be silenced, however, that was not in mine.

I was discovered clinging to life by children playing a game of tag an estimated twelve to fourteen hours after the attack and was then transported by Life Flight helicopter to John Sealy Hospital in Galveston, Texas. Though I was in pain, felt afraid and physically had no voice, I could not bear the thought of being silent and not helping to capture this man who had so viciously attacked me. So I began to write detailed notes in the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit (PICU) of the hospital four days after I was found, describing my attacker. Then miraculously, and much to the surprise of my doctors, I regained my voice! With that

said, I truly believe I was given my voice back for a reason, which is to share my story in hopes that I can make a difference in the lives of others. I decided to use my voice to encourage and empower other victims to become victors by using their voices to stand up, speak out, and fight back against criminals and the cowardly acts they have consciously chosen to commit.

Within a couple of weeks of the attack, I regained my voice and strength and was released from the hospital to begin my 3rd grade year of elementary school. I had no clue what a long journey lay ahead of me, but did know that more than anything I never wanted another child to experience what I had at the hands of the man who attacked me. I strived daily to continue to remember every detail of what happened in the wee morning hours of August 10, 1990. I knew that the more I could remember, the better the chance there was of my attacker being caught. I just never imagined it would take so long! As the years passed, I grew older, matured, and began to understand exactly what sexual assault was and could really comprehend all I had survived. I found the more I used my voice to speak openly about my experience, the better I felt inside and I also

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**by Jennifer Schuett**

# The VICTIM'S INFORMER

## OUR GOAL IS TO PRINT NEWS OF INTEREST FOR VICTIMS AND VICTIM ADVOCATES

*The Victim's Informer* newsletter is published quarterly. Articles, meeting notices, and other submissions should be sent to TDCJ Victim Services Division, Texas Crime Victim Clearinghouse, 8712 Shoal Creek Blvd, Suite 265, Austin, Texas 78757-6899; faxed to 512-452-0825; or e-mailed to [tdcj.clearinghouse@tdcj.state.tx.us](mailto:tdcj.clearinghouse@tdcj.state.tx.us). For questions or comments, please call us at 800-848-4284 or 512-406-5931.

### **Please Note:**

You may access the publication at the TDCJ VSD Internet website. If you wish, we will notify you via e-mail each time *The Victim's Informer* becomes available on the TDCJ VSD Internet website and provide an electronic link to *The Victim's Informer*. Send your e-mail address to: [tdcj.clearinghouse@tdcj.state.tx.us](mailto:tdcj.clearinghouse@tdcj.state.tx.us)

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realized that I was not alone and that sexual assault was, unfortunately, not uncommon. I have to say that talking about what happened as much as I have has been the ultimate therapy for me. I wanted to and hoped I could someday make a difference and show other victims of sexual assault they didn't have to be afraid and that they too could rise above and conquer.

As I graduated from high school and entered college in my adult years, I wanted to make sure investigators hadn't lost sight of my drive to capture the one who had attacked me years before. Although I had continued to keep in touch with investigators over the years, my case had been handed off a few times and I found myself slowly becoming discouraged. I could tell investigators were too. No leads, no suspects—all we had was my recollection of events and some articles of clothing preserved in the evidence room of the Galveston County Sheriff's Office. I had to know the answer to the two questions that were still lingering in my head. Who had so brutally kidnapped and attacked me? And were there other victims?

In 2008, during a meeting at the Dickinson Police Department, I learned Detective Tim Cromie would be taking over my case. I couldn't help but cry as I felt like this was just one more time this "cold case" of mine was being handed off to yet another investigator. As I sat there crying, Detective Cromie handed me tissues to dry my

eyes, looked at me and promised that he wasn't going to give up on my case. He said he didn't care how long it took him to solve and that he was going to do everything he could to get me the answers I deserved. My frown quickly turned upside down. I had a new hope. I could see his determination and feel his drive. Little did I know my questions were going to be answered much sooner than I would ever know or expect. Detective Cromie partnered up with Special Agent Richard Rennison from the local FBI office in Texas City, Texas, and the three of us had another meeting. Things were coming together now. There was a plan. They both felt that the articles of clothing preserved at the Sheriff's Office just may be holding the answers to the questions we all had. After learning of new DNA testing technology, the clothing was submitted to the FBI lab in Quantico, VA. Now all we could do was wait.

In September of 2009, after receiving news of a match through CODIS (Combined DNA Index System), Detective Cromie and Special Agent Rennison began preparing for the arrest. On October 13, 2009, in North Little Rock, Arkansas, Dennis Earl Bradford was arrested, extradited back to Texas and charged with Attempted Capital Murder in my case. I was overjoyed, ecstatic and could not believe that this was finally happening. Now it was time to prepare for the trial. I worked for the next few months, busily preparing my victim impact statement night after

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night; sometimes until the wee hours of the morning. I had so much to say and felt strongly about facing Bradford in court. I had to let him know that I'd never given up on looking for him and that he was never going to hurt another person again. I was going to also take this opportunity to show him how I had been channeling the negative experiences of the attack into positive ones by sharing my story and encouraging others to speak out. This was my chance to stand up and show him that he had not silenced me by any means! However, my day in court would never come. On May 10, 2010, just a few months before we were to go to trial, Dennis Earl Bradford decided to take his own life in his jail cell. It took me a couple of months to move past the shock that I wasn't going to have my chance to be face-to-face with the person I had helped search for all of those years. I still have days now where I can't believe it, but have come to the realization that it's just another obstacle in this journey of mine that I will have to hurdle. It is not in my nature to just give up and not finish something I started and I definitely wasn't going to quit using my voice. So as the twenty year anniversary of my attack approached, I started to plan a trip to visit Bradford's gravesite. I knew that come August 10th, I'd want to sit there and read my victim impact statement since I wasn't going to have the opportunity to do so in a courtroom like I'd always hoped for. This was the closest I'd ever get to him. I contacted the funeral home I thought handled his burial, and they were kind enough to share the location with me. Pulling into the cemetery where Dennis Bradford is buried, my heart started to beat so hard it felt as though it was going

to rip through my chest. Finally, the moment I'd been waiting for was here. This was my chance to say everything I'd wanted to say for 20 long years. I walked down a gravel road and then up to the grave covered in rock with a small marker. I sat down on the dried grass and took a deep breath. I started to cry as I read his name out loud. DENNIS BRADFORD. Whew, I had waited to hear (and say) that name for a long time. The hardest thing about my journey was the unknown—not knowing who had done this to me. I now had a name and I was sitting with this person, if that makes sense. None of it was in the environment or way I wanted, but this was my opportunity. I read on for about ten minutes and when I finished, I got up and dusted myself off. I left that day feeling empowered and as though he had heard me, loud and clear. I feel that victim impact statements are very important in the healing process and I encourage anyone who has been victimized to write one and read it aloud in the courtroom (if you have the opportunity). If not, then find a location that suits your needs, even if it is in the comfort of your own home and read it. I wrote my victim impact statement not for Dennis Bradford, not to get any type of reaction or apology out of Dennis Bradford, but wrote it for myself as a healing mechanism and to be the voice of other victims everywhere. This was important to me after preparing it for countless nights; whether my words meant anything to him or not, I did not care. I wanted to do this to show not only Bradford, but others that prey on children (and adults for that matter) that we WILL fight for justice and conquer crime!

I still advocate for victims every-

where and will continue to use my God-given voice to share my story whenever the opportunity arises. Whether you are a victim, know someone who is, or have lost someone as a result of a crime, we owe it to ourselves and the ones we know or have lost to become a loud voice! Together it is my belief that we can conquer crime, one voice at a time. It is my hope that my story may inspire others to not give up in seeking justice. I waited almost twenty years for justice to be served in my case and as hard as it was at times, every year I had to wait only made me stronger. Fighting for justice and speaking out became my passion and purpose. I have used my experience to motivate myself in trying to understand what others in similar situations to mine are feeling. I've always wanted justice not only for myself, but for victims everywhere and can only hope that my story may show proof that justice does prevail! I have been fortunate enough to hear from crime victims locally and all over the world that have so graciously and bravely opened up and shared their stories with me. These stories have kept me feeling strong and comforted throughout my long journey for justice.

No matter how long it takes, or how many challenges we may face in the process, may we all feel victorious in using our voices to channel our negative experiences into something positive. I say, may we help not only ourselves, but each other along the way in healing as well as gaining the feelings that we all deserve of fairness, dignity, and respect! ★

*\*The Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) has developed a guide to help assist victims with cold cases titled "Serving Survivors of Homicide Victims During Cold Case Investigations: A Guide for Developing a Law Enforcement Protocol". You may access this resource at: <http://www.sheriffs.org/sites/default/files/uploads/guidefordevelopinglawenforcementprotocolaugust172011.pdf>*

# Mike Jones

## Program Supervisor III



In late August of 2011, TDCJ Victim Services Division (VSD) said farewell to Mike Jones, who was a part of the family for almost fourteen years. Faithful subscribers of the Victim's Informer know his work all too well from his richly articulated articles to his fresh formatting touches on the past forty issues. Mike decided to join the Division of Emergency Management at the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) where he will continue to design and produce state documents (while also pursuing his dream of becoming a Texas Ranger when he grows up).

Mike's journey with the Victim Services Division began in December of 1997, when he was chosen to fill the position for a Network Manager. He had to get real personal real fast due to sharing a tiny office with another employee, current Deputy Director Mark Odom. Luckily, it was a good fit and the two gave a fond nickname to their shared space at the central office in Austin. Even after VSD moved a few buildings down the street and the two were afforded their own space, they designated a small refrigerator which held only their personal consumables. I guess some bonds aren't meant to be broken.

By the end of 2008, Mike had made himself comfortable as the Program Supervisor for the Texas Crime Victim Clearinghouse. His former job title helped form his reputation as VSD's personal IT department, but his techni-

cal knowledge was best applied as the editor of the Victim's Informer newsletter. For the last ten years, Mike first helped to design the layout of the Informer before eventually taking on the task of crafting the whole thing. Mike passionately took the Informer on and never ran out of important stories or relevant ideas. The content he supplied always had a fresh approach and perspective.

I was lucky enough to be able to work closely with Mike and for the past two years, he never failed to impress me with his skills and passion to work with victims. His light-hearted sense of humor and wit were professionally conveyed in each article he wrote. It also kept a smile on everyone's face in the office. Mike offered so much to VSD staff, victims of crime and dozens of professional colleagues. I feel privileged to have gotten to know him and lucky to have learned so much from him.

Mike has effortless talent completing any task given to him. He left behind numerous accomplishments I hope he is proud of. Everyone at Victim Services sorely misses him—Mike became the designated provider of Big Red at every function, could be counted on to make your day better with his jovial sense of humor and always had a new phone. Even though our computer problems go unsolved and the once shared refrigerator is a bit understocked, we all wish him the best



at DPS. After settling in his new position, I asked Mike to reflect on the time he spent at VSD and this is what he had to say: "Even though I got to do an incredible array of jobs and experienced some very interesting and unique situations over the years, above everything else, the most important thing to me working in Victim Services was working one-on-one with victims. I felt I truly was blessed to have been given that opportunity, and I am very grateful to the people who gave me the chance to get involved. I hope I was able to make a positive change, even a small one, on each of the lives of the victims I got to work with."★

**by Lauren Reynolds**

*TDCJ Victim Services Division, Texas Crime Victim Clearinghouse*

**NEW!**

# VICTIM IMPACT STATEMENT



## 2011 Revision

The Victim Impact Statement (VIS) has been given a makeover! The Texas Code of Criminal Procedure (TCCP) 56.03 (h) states, “Not later than December 1 of each odd number year, the Texas Crime Victim Clearinghouse with the participation of the Community Justice Assistance Division of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice and the Board of Pardons and Paroles, shall update the VIS form.” This year the VIS Revision Committee was organized by the Texas Crime Victim Clearinghouse and consisted of Victim Assistance Coordinators (VACs) from across the state as well as representatives from the Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles (BPP), Texas District and County Attorneys Association (TDCAA), Texas Youth Commission (TYC), the Community Justice Assistance Division (CJAD), and the Office of the Attorney General of Texas (OAG). The committee was also grateful that a crime victim served on the committee and provided insight from a victim’s point of view. The committee met in June, July and August to discuss ways that the VIS could be improved. From the onset of the first meeting, it was clear that the committee’s main goal for this revision session was to make the VIS more user-friendly and easier for victims to complete. They believed by achieving that goal they would also meet their

secondary goal, which was to increase the rate of return of completed VISs by victims. The committee went through the VIS page by page, phrase by phrase, and word by word in an effort to identify the sections that tended to be more difficult to understand and caused the most confusion for victims completing the form. The meeting room became a literal “think tank” of creative ideas and innovative suggestions that led to a VIS makeover that will take Texas by storm! This article will walk you through the many improvements made to the new VIS.

### **Crime Victim Information Sheet**

One of the first things that the committee brought up was that the *Crime Victim Information Sheet* was filled with great information. However, because there is so much information on one page, the committee expressed concerns that the victims who receive the VIS may not take the time to read all of the information about the VIS and it’s role in the criminal justice process. The committee agreed to retain the *Crime Victim Information Sheet* because the information on it is very important to a victim. They addressed their concerns by creating a *Cover Sheet* for the VIS that briefly lists some of the main points made on the *Crime Victim Information Sheet*. The committee agreed that this new *Cover Sheet* will help to get the

victim’s attention and make him/her more likely to read it, and hopefully want to complete the VIS. As for the *Crime Victim Information Sheet*, minor changes were made in order to make it more specific and a graphic was added to the top to make it more inviting in appearance. No changes were made to the *Crime Victims’ Rights* page.

### **Confidential Information Sheet**

The next section that the committee tackled was the *Confidential Information Sheet*. There was a consensus among committee members that this page must be easy for the victim to understand. Any confusion might result in the victim not completing the rest of the VIS. VACs will notice several changes to the layout of this page. The *Offense Information* section (which is to be completed by the VAC) has a new format that gives the VAC the ability to list all the defendants on one VIS. The committee felt this was important so VACs can send one VIS to a victim when there are multiple defendants involved. In Section 1, *Notification*, the committee agreed that referring to the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) as “prison” would be an easy association for victims to make. The wording was also changed in the question that asks if the victim wants any contact with the defendant if he or she is sent to prison.

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**by Kristi Heiman**

TDCJ Victim Services Division, Texas Crime Victim Clearinghouse

The committee advised that the previous wording was too confusing to the victim. In Section 2, the information that the victim is asked to provide remains almost the same; however the information is now separated by boxes that make it more organized and easier to read. The committee agreed on the importance of getting the victim's correct contact information in order to provide them with notification, should they request it. This section of the VIS is vital to collecting this much needed information.

### **Victim Impact Statement – Page 1 of 2**

The committee then found itself ready to look at the actual Victim Impact information section—the part of the VIS that can be emotionally difficult for some victims to complete. They wanted to make this part of the VIS packet as user-friendly as possible for the victim. In the “Emotional/Psychological Impact” section, the committee replaced “Marital Problems” with “Marital/Relationship Problems” in order to include victims who are not married, but still feel the crime has impacted their relationship with a significant other. In order to give the victim the opportunity to indicate counseling needs and how the crime has affected his or her relationships, as well as those of his or her family, the following questions were added to this section:

- Has the victim or the victim's family sought counseling as a result of the crime?
- How has this crime affected you, your family or those close to you? Please feel free to discuss your feelings, thoughts, and general well-being. (Please attach additional page if used.)

Also, the offender information box at the top of this page now matches the box at the top of the *Confidential Information Sheet*.

### **Victim Impact Statement – Page 2 of 2**

On page 2 of 2, the committee shortened the wording for the “Physical Injury” section and added a line for the victim to indicate the medical center where he or she was treated for injuries. The “Economic Loss” section is now called “Financial Loss”. “Doctor/Hospital Bills” has been changed to “Medical/Dental Expenses” in order to cover a larger array of injuries that a victim may receive. The committee also discussed the “Amount Covered by Insurance” question and advised that many victims don't know yet what or how much will be covered by insurance. So the question was changed to, “Were any expenses covered by insurance or other sources? Yes or No”. By letting the victim know to attach receipts, bills, and canceled checks only if they have that documentation available, the committee hoped to ease some of the pressure and stress that victims feel when having to collect all of the documents they were originally asked to send in. In addition, the toll-free phone number to the Office of the Attorney General of Texas was added to this section in case the victim would like to apply for Crime Victims' Compensation (CVC). The victim will no longer be asked to provide the CVC claim number.

### **Victim Impact Statement Supplemental – Court Ordered Child Custody Orders**

At the meetings, the TDCJ Victim Services Division advised that a very low number of these forms are received by our office and of those received,

many do not need to be completed based on the circumstances of the crime. The committee discussed the confusion that the *VIS Supplemental* page may be causing for victims. Therefore, the *VIS Supplemental* page has been separated from the standard VIS packet, but can still be downloaded from the TDCJ VSD website.

### **Be on the Look Out!**

When the 2011 VIS Revision Committee meetings came to a conclusion, committee members expressed confidence that the newly revised VIS will be easier for victims to understand. On that note, they hope more victims will complete it. The opportunity to complete a VIS in the criminal justice system is an important right afforded to victims of crime. The new VIS aims to provide the court system and Board of Pardons and Paroles with a voice from the most important person involved with the case—the victim. The new VIS is available to print and download on the TDCJ VSD website ([http://tdcj.state.tx.us/publications/pubs\\_victim\\_impact\\_statement.html#vis](http://tdcj.state.tx.us/publications/pubs_victim_impact_statement.html#vis)). ★

# calendar

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## **December 13-15, 2011**

Responding to Crime Victims with Disabilities  
National Training Conference  
National Center for Victims of Crime

JW Marriott Orlando Grand Lakes,  
Orlando, Florida.

[www.ncvc.org](http://www.ncvc.org)

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## **January 5 & 6, 2012**

Child Abuse Conference  
presented by ChildSafe

Crowne Plaza,  
San Antonio, Texas

[www.childsafe.sa.org](http://www.childsafe.sa.org)

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## **January 8-13, 2012**

Texas District and Country Attorneys Association's  
January 2012 Prosecutor Trial Skills Course

DoubleTree North Hotel,  
Austin, Texas

[www.tdcaa.com](http://www.tdcaa.com)

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## **January 26 & 27, 2012**

2012 Conference on Family Violence

Collin College Spring Creek Campus,  
Plano, Texas

<http://cccfv.com>

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## **January 30 - February 2, 2012**

2012 OVC Mass Violence & Emergency National  
Training Conference

Hotel TBD,  
Jacksonville, Florida

[www.ovc2012.org](http://www.ovc2012.org)

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## **February 26 - March 1, 2012**

The Texas Association Against Sexual Assault  
(TAASA) 30th Anniversary Annual Conference

El Tropicano Riverwalk Hotel,  
San Antonio, Texas

[www.taasa.org](http://www.taasa.org)

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## **February 27 - March 1, 2012**

2nd World Conference of Women's Shelters  
(WCWS)

Gaylord National Hotel & Conference Center,  
National Harbor, Maryland

[www.worldshelterconference.com](http://www.worldshelterconference.com)

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## **March 19 & 20, 2012**

2012 Annual Conference on the Prevention of Child  
Abuse

Westin Galleria Houston,  
Houston, Texas

[www.preventchildabusetexas.org](http://www.preventchildabusetexas.org)



# Victimization of the Homeless

Some of you may remember the story of a homeless man named John McGraham who was set on fire and killed on October 8, 2008 in California. His murder sparked outrage, and spurred the National Coalition for the Homeless to lobby for two hate crime bills sponsored by Texas Representative Eddie Bernice Johnson to include homeless people as a protected class<sup>1</sup>. While these bills did not pass, other states, such as Florida, took the necessary steps to include crimes against homeless men and women as hate crimes.

Therefore, when Front Steps was approached by the Texas Crime Victim Clearinghouse to write an article on the victimization of homeless men and women, we were eager to accept the job. Front Steps is a non-profit organization that manages the Austin Resource Center for the Homeless, permanent and transitional housing programs and a Recuperative Care Program. Those of us that work and volunteer for Front Steps are very aware of our clients being victims of crimes. However, it was not until we delved into the research that we discovered the topic is not often discussed, reported, or tracked. While it is fairly easy to find data on the number of crimes committed by homeless people, it is much harder to find information about the crimes com-

mitted against them. We conclude:

1. Homeless men and women do not feel comfortable reporting these crimes to people in positions of authority, such as the police.
2. Homeless men and women are not aware of the number of crimes being committed against them—such as exploitation or fraud.
3. Homeless men and women do not feel that anyone will care, believe them, or act upon their claim.
4. Homeless men and women are not aware of services that may be available to them.

While the victimization of the homeless population is not an issue unique to Texas, there is a significant lack of data and information surrounding the subject on both the local and state level. One challenge is that the reports available from law enforcement do not reflect whether the victim or perpetrator of a crime is considered to be homeless. This lack of data poses a significant challenge in determining the number and nature of crimes against the homeless population. Additionally, public information sources do not make available the addresses of victims or perpetrators of crimes. No reported address by the victim would seem a simple method of determining whether that individual is homeless, yet law enforcement statistics either do not record, or

do not publish this information.

A second challenge in researching data on the victimization of the homeless is the under-reporting of crimes. The National Coalition for the Homeless reported that in 2009, ten Texas cities reported seven crimes committed, lethal and non-lethal, against homeless individuals among a total reported homeless population of 36,761. While this measure of safety and security would be considered ideal among advocates for the homeless, it is unrealistic to believe that a vulnerable population such as the homeless is isolated or protected from a higher crime rate. The under-reporting of crimes poses a significant challenge to law enforcement agencies gaining a clear picture of the volume and nature of criminal activity among a population, regardless of whether that population is housed or homeless.

For these reasons and for the purposes of this article, we decided that perhaps our best source for information on the victimization of the homeless would be the homeless population itself. The Austin Resource Center for the Homeless (ARCH), managed by Front Steps Inc., sees a daily average of 600 people in search of basic needs services and from whom data is collected as part of the intake process. The intake form used when assessing the

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**by Dawn Perkins, M.A. and Jennifer Denton, M.A. candidate**  
*Community Relations and Volunteer Coordinator/VISTA Homeless Coalition Liaison, Front Steps*

status of every ARCH client collects information required by the Department of Housing and Urban Development and includes information on domestic violence, but no other type of crime. Between September 2010 and September 2011 the ARCH collected information from 9,028 individuals, recording a total of 536 instances of domestic violence among individuals considered episodic or chronically homeless. Of those recorded instances, 291 were reported by males, 246 by females and 2 by transgendered individuals. Further breakdown reflected that of the 536 instances reported, 57 victims identified themselves as veterans, 368 identified as Caucasian, and 158 identified as Black/African American.

Another source of data on the victimization of the homeless population came from one Austin-area Emergency Room managed by the Seton Healthcare Family. From July 2010 through June 2011 there were 355 recorded instances of visits to one emergency room by homeless individuals, 72.39% of which were the result of homicide and or injury purposefully inflicted by another individual. The most commonly recorded incident, or cause of the injuries reported, was “assault by striking with blunt or thrown object (72 visits), assault by unspecified means (63 visits) and unarmed fight or brawl (60 visits)” (Seton, 2011).

In addition to the data collected from clients on intake and information received by Seton Hospital, we chose to collect survey data to determine the number and nature of crimes committed against the homeless population visiting the ARCH. A seven question survey was designed to elicit voluntary and anonymous responses from clients

over a seven day period. Beginning on September 28, 2011, survey boxes were placed in three locations inside the ARCH, with one additional survey box placed at an off-site service provider agency in hopes of capturing responses from a homeless female population who do not regularly frequent the ARCH. Information was collected on gender, age and if they had ever been the victim of a crime while homeless. If they answered yes, we asked the nature of that crime, to whom they reported it, and what resources they believe exist to protect themselves.

In one week, 83 total responses were recorded with 78.31% indicating they had been the victim of a crime while homeless. Of the 63 men that responded, 74.6% were victimized. There were 19 female responses recorded, with 89.47% of them reporting victimization. One victim identified as transgendered and reported being the victim of a crime while homeless. The most common crimes reported by all respondents were theft/robbery (46.9%), assault/battery (33.73%) and exploitation (26.51%) defined as “not being paid for work performed” or being taken advantage of. Domestic violence and sexual assault occurred at a rate of 24.10% and 8.43% respectively among the entire population, with rates of 42.11% (domestic violence) and 26.32% (sexual assault) among female respondents, and 17.46% (domestic violence) and 3.17% (sexual assault) among male respondents. Men were victims of crimes more often than women, with 33.73% of the total population reporting they were the victim of more than one crime. Among the 65 victimizations recorded, only about half (48.19%) were reported to the police. Women were more likely

than men to report their victimization to law enforcement.

Whether a crime was committed by another homeless individual or by someone outside the homeless population is difficult, at best, to decipher. One cannot determine simply by visual observation of another whether that person is homeless or housed, therefore we chose not to include a question about this on the survey. Surprisingly, we did receive one survey response from an individual who chose to anonymously self-report that he/she had been the perpetrator of a crime against someone else, but did not include the nature of the crime committed.

We were disappointed to find that while many homeless people stated that they reported their victimization to the police, there is little data available on crimes committed against homeless people. Of 83 surveys, only one person listed Safe Place as a resource to protect themselves, while a few mentioned having a lawyer or case manager to assist them. We found it interesting that more people listed “learn self defense”, “don’t walk alone”, and “spirituality” as resources to protect themselves.

So, what are the resources available to homeless victims of crime? If our homeless are escaping domestic violence, Safe Place has extensive services and an emergency shelter, though, like many agencies, they are limited in whom and how many people they can serve. Other agencies, such as Rio Grande Legal Aide, provide some legal services to people experiencing homelessness, but other than reporting the crime and perhaps going to the emergency room, there do not seem to be many outlets for support, advocacy, or therapy for the homeless who are vic-

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# FRONT STEPS



tims of crime.

Even while many agencies, such as Front Steps have Licensed Professional Counselors on site, it is hard for the counselors to provide therapy if they do not know the scope of the issues their clients may be facing. In the larger picture of homelessness, being a victim of a crime may not rise to the top of priorities when it comes to other issues such as “Where will I sleep tonight?”, “Where/How will I find employment?”, “How can I maintain sobriety?”, or “How can I get into permanent housing?”. Being a victim of a crime, especially a violent one, may be viewed as yet further evidence that this marginalized population have become so insignificant that even crime against them is allowed to go unnoticed and a lack of resources is acceptable.

In researching this article and talking with people who are homeless as well as agency representatives, we confirmed that crime against the homeless is an issue not often discussed or tracked in the Austin community. Though there are many individuals and organizations providing basic needs, housing, employment skills, advocacy and other programs, a gap in services and data exists for those who have been victims of crimes.

Considering national statistics that “Over 1 in 4 attacks that are reported against the homeless end in murder”<sup>2</sup>, the issue of crimes against the homeless is deserving of greater attention. As agency representatives, volunteers

and advocates discuss issues related to homelessness, we should include this topic in our dialogue and vocabularies alongside concerns regarding mental health, substance and alcohol abuse, cycle of poverty, lack of affordable housing and a Universal Living Wage. This issue also reminds us that in addition to suffering the hardships of having no safe place to call home, little to no support system, and barriers to housing and employment, the homeless men and women we serve must constantly guard their personal safety at risk of losing their very lives. At a minimum, service providers and advocates must encourage our clients to report crimes to local law enforcement and agency professionals and bring this issue of safety and security for all our community to the forefront. ★

<sup>1</sup><http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1852825,00.html>

<sup>2</sup><http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1852825,00.html#ixzz1aVBys4Tb>



# The Lost Pines

## A Visit to an Active Texas Disaster Zone

To be a Texan means you have seen it all and have earned the brand of resiliency. That definition was brought to a whole new level in 2011. A year long drought, almost 70 days of triple digit temperatures and severe strains on water resources combined to create horribly fantastic conditions for wildfires. Week after week, fires were spawned and spread across the state, pushing the limits of emergency services. In Austin and the surrounding areas, the month of September left behind nothing but resiliency and ashes. Labor Day weekend first brought a sliver of hope that everyone's prayer for rain would be answered by Tropical Storm Lee; however the only thing that swept in was wind over 40 mph. Crispy conditions coupled with the strong gusts left the holiday weekend as a charred reminder for residents of Bastrop County when on September 4, two power lines sparked a fire that changed the lives of thousands of Texans.

As the week progressed, so did the blaze. Local and state officials began describing it as "mean", "big" and "nasty". After several days it was only 60% contained and had already consumed 34 thousand acres in Bastrop County. The number of victims affected by the fire in such a short amount of time was astonishing—over 1300 homes were destroyed in six days. TDCJ Victim Services Division's Director, Angie McCown, inquired as to what was being done to assist the people who tragically had lost everything. That Friday,

September 9, I went to go find out.

As I headed east on highway 71, things seemed eerily normal. The ominous black and hazy smoke that signaled destruction was no where to be seen, the morning radio DJs happily chattered to me in the car, the sun shone bright and clear. It wasn't until I hit the intersection of highways 150/21 and 95 that things suddenly began to look surreal. The Bastrop Convention and Exhibit Center sits in the northwest corner of the intersection, behind an abandoned movie theatre. It was 9:00 am and the oversized parking lot teemed with emergency fire vehicles. It was extremely inspiring and humbling to witness how many different agencies had responded to the disaster: volunteer and professional fire departments from all over Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona, the U.S. Forest Service, and the Bureau of Land Management grouped together to organize and debrief before going to battle with the still-raging flames. Due to highway barricades I could go no further so I stopped at the Bastrop Christian Outreach Center and began my quest to document the aid being given to victims of the wildfire. The Outreach Center had initially opened it's doors as a shelter earlier in the week, but more organized, longer term shelters had since been created at other churches. Just because the Outreach Center was not housing victims long-term did not mean they had slowed down. They provided free legal aid, free hot meals

and planned to set up a tent in Tahitian Village—an area scoured by the fire—with donations directly available to the residents who had been allowed to re-enter the area. When I asked where I could unload my trunkful of donations from our office, I was directed across the highway to Foundation Christian Ministries. The church was teeming with volunteers swiftly moving and organizing donations—flatbed trailers full of water were being unloaded and stacked under a canopy and large piles of boxes filled with donated items were being sorted. A free showering area was set up as well for anyone to use. For all the donations and services both of these places offered, I didn't see many victims and began to wonder where everybody was. I decided to return to the Convention Center (deemed the wildfire headquarters) and noticed the firefighters had taken their trucks to go meet the blaze head-on. Clustered up by the front of the Convention Center were several news channel vans and satellites. I went inside and entered into a room full of press and local residents. A podium stood equipped with half a dozen microphones; cameramen bustled around, positioning themselves in the best available spot to shoot the apparent press conference. Wildfire victims milled about, some checking in at a table near the door, striking up conversation with strangers or carrying pets. The majority of them were silent with anxious expressions. Around 10:00 am, the Lieutenant Governor,

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**by Lauren Reynolds**

*TDCJ Victim Services Division, Texas Crime Victim Clearinghouse*

David Dewhurst addressed those in attendance and provided an update on the fire. It was day six of the fire and the level of devastation was still getting worse. Lieutenant Governor Dewhurst stated that since January 1, 2011, 18,876 wildfires had occurred in Texas, burning a total of 3.6 million acres—34 thousand of those in Bastrop County. Texas still had not been declared as a state-wide major disaster area, meaning FEMA was unable to provide any assistance. Several Bastrop County residents began asking questions and voicing their concern over looting and the lack of information provided to them about housing. The Lieutenant Governor explained they were entering Phase 1, which was to let people back into their neighborhoods as it became safe. Despite the briefing, people remained upset, frustrated and worried. One man was escorted out as he repeatedly challenged officials as to why they would not answer his questions. Fear was expressed through anger for many people and the atmosphere felt tense. I silently exited the room and by going through the double doors, anger gave way to gratitude. A woman stood next to a large smoky painting of firefighters hosing a blaze. The word “Heroes” labeled the top of the canvas. A sign invited people to sign the paint-

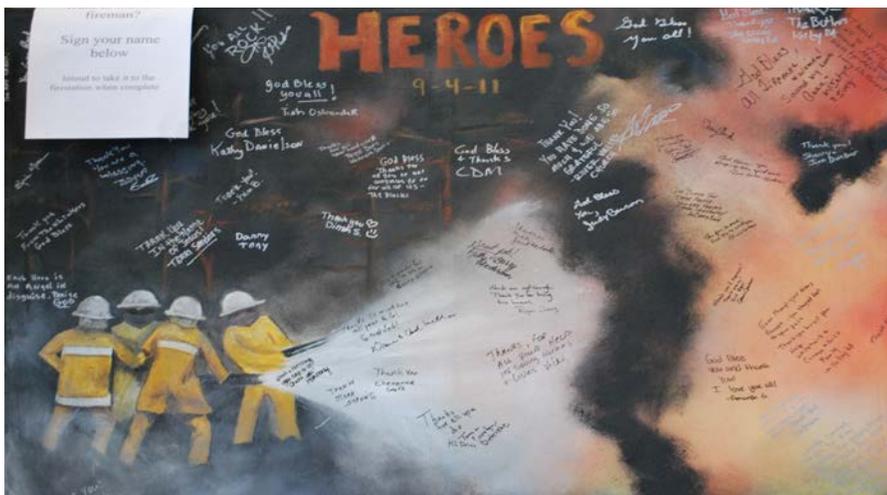


ing, thanking those who were risking their lives to save the community. As I passed, a mother and her teenage daughter paused to write a message on the painting. As they stood back and reflected on the artwork, I saw tears fall from the daughter’s face as her mother wrapped her arm around her shoulders. Outside, the Convention Center pillars were covered with pages upon pages of confirmed destroyed structures, all duct-taped together. Donations were piling up with a separate section specifically for firefighters. I assumed water and clothing would be at the top of the list, but surprisingly found chapstick to be the thing everyone needed most. Constant exposure to wind and smoke made the victim’s and firefighter’s skin dry and chapped.

I got back in the state car and turned north onto 95 to visit a long term shelter that was in operation at the Celebration Community Church. Taped to the glass door was a “Missing” poster with

photos of 5 family pets separated from their owner in the wake of the evacuation. Walking in, I was greeted by a volunteer manning a table of forms. I explained to her who I was and that I was interested in talking to someone about how the shelter worked and what services were provided. She told me a woman named Rachel was in charge, but wasn’t available at the moment. I ended up chatting with the volunteer who knew more than she thought! She explained all the forms to me that were displayed on the table. When a single person or family came to the shelter, they could go no further until they filled out an information sheet and signed it. FEMA papers were available for victims to fill out as well so that once FEMA was cleared to move in and help, the process would go much quicker. The shelter allowed for people to stay overnight as well as just stop in and take advantage of the available donations, services and aid. If you stayed the night, you wore a green bracelet. This allowed for shelter volunteers to keep a count of occupied cots. Sleeping areas were divided up—families in one area, single people in another. In the singles room, approximately 30 cots were set up. The church had opened its doors as a long term shelter on September 5, and was currently slated to provide services for three weeks. Victims could receive hot meals, showers, a cot

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to sleep on, legal aid and services provided by Chaplains, Bastrop County Sheriffs Department Victim Services and Bluebonnet Trails Community Services. As I asked my questions, several members of the National Guard began showing up. I was told the operation of the shelter was being taken over by the state (much to the relief of the volunteers and those in charge). The state had contracted the services out to the Baptist Child and Family Services (BCFS). Dr. Charles Dodson, Executive Director of BCFS, collaborated with the

of the National Guard sat side by side, enjoying a hot, hearty meal.

I had explored the assistance being given to victims in the form of basic necessities, but wanted to know if crisis services were being offered to victims as well. I can't imagine the feelings many of the victims had after losing their homes to such a monstrous disaster. I drove south, back to the Bastrop Convention Center. Pulling through the old movie theatre parking lot, I noticed a school bus parked in the middle of the unoccupied asphalt. Large packs,

fighting wildfires and setting up camp each night. I thanked them for coming all this way to help and wished them a safe experience.

I entered back into the Convention Center and approached the long row of tables where volunteers were giving information. I asked one volunteer if he knew what immediate counseling or grief services were being given to victims. After explaining who I was and what I was doing there, I was ushered into the back room and after much circling around, ran into Lisa Jackson,



National Guard. Soon enough, Rachel came to greet them and announce that lunch was being served—catered by Johnny Carinos. I introduced myself to Rachel and could tell she needed to be at about ten other places at that moment. She claimed she was grateful BCFS had arrived as she knew nothing about running a shelter. “I do mortgages!” she exasperated. Lunch was being served in a small room toward the back of the church. Clothing donations took up a third of the space and volunteers were separating garments into gender and size piles. Victims and members

spanning the length of the bus, lay on the ground and men dressed in green pants and black shirts mingled about. I read the back of one shirt: “Navajo Scouts Fire”. It looked like more help had arrived. I spoke to a couple of the men and discovered they were a fire-fighting team from Navajo Nation, Arizona. It took them 14 days to get to Bastrop on the school bus, but the crew was ready to go wherever they were needed. I asked them about the packs and they explained each one contained everything 1 man needs—the men are used to traveling around the country

who works for the Sheriff's office as a Victim Assistance Coordinator and handles critical incidents. She told me crisis counseling was being given in a small green building directly adjacent to the Convention Center. Lisa explained the importance in keeping a secure location and that volunteer counselors were going to the Convention Center during each briefing and giving information to victims who gathered there. Counselors from Bastrop and the surrounding area were volunteering their time to help the victims with no other resources. I sat down at the round table

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and began talking with Linda Seale, a licensed counselor, who was volunteering her time. She explained that when people come in, they mainly requested an ear. The majority of people just need someone to vent to and be able to talk about the magnitude of losing all their personal belongings. Linda told me the most helpful thing they could do was listen. People were confused, sad, angry, and felt helpless. They sat and listened to each story and if victims had no direction in where to go or what to do, they referred them to the insurance tents set up to receive claims, family crisis centers and sometimes offered pro bono visits to their private practice. Linda told me that earlier in the week she and a few other volunteers took some supplies to one of the short term shelters at the Bastrop Middle School. Linda's daughter works for Kohl's and they agreed to donate needed items. Among the various donations were a large stack of pillows. Linda explained how humbling it was when out of all the things they brought: food, clothing, toothbrushes, etc the thing people got most excited about were the pillows. One man, seeing Linda carrying a pillow, asked her if those were for the shelter. After telling him yes, the man asked her if he could please have one. Things we all take for granted every day, these people considered a luxury.

As I continued my conversation with the volunteer counselors, a man walked in and announced that he had lost his home, but was here to volunteer and help others. He introduced himself as Jim Davenport and wasted no time in detailing his story to the group. Jim explained that he and his wife had been at a wedding in Louisiana over the Labor Day weekend. On their way back home

that Sunday, they began getting phone calls alerting them certain roads were closed due to a wildfire. When they finally returned to the area, his neighborhood had been blocked off, but he and his son were able to get through a barrier and he photographed the scene. His pictures were already developed and he passed them around the table. Through the hazy smoke and burning trees, you could make out the remains of his home. His two dogs were gone and his wife was constantly checking the Facebook page established for the purpose of reuniting owners with their pets. Shelters posted photos of animals with singed whiskers and eyebrows as animals began turning up. His wife had gone to a shelter where she hoped their lab was waiting for them. Jim didn't seem to even take a breath and I realized Linda was right—these people just need to talk. With no prompting, Jim told us all of how he has lost everything except his suit he wore to the wedding and a free t-shirt he got from his insurance company when he filed his claim. Jim told us he was a guitar collector and stopped filling out his insurance claim when he hit 60K worth of guitars in one closet. His wife is a quilter and their home had several priceless antique quilts, now gone. He voiced his frustration with media coverage and admitted his anger mostly came from having to wait. This seemed to be the consensus of how the majority of victims felt. They could do nothing but wait; wait to discover if their home was spared, wait for temporary housing, wait for financial assistance, wait for their resilience to pay off. I couldn't help but feel selfish as I drove back to Austin to return to my home and possessions while all of those affected by



this extreme disaster had nothing but questions. The next week, the scorching fire was finally contained by the constant and dedicated work from the colossal group of firefighters, including the motivated group of Navajo Scouts. With the immediate threat of disaster over, families began to salvage what they could and grasp some hope for the future.

Jim voiced his frustration and I felt his emotion was one of consensus. So many people affected by the wildfire were all doing the same thing—waiting. Their patience only tested their resiliency, which is as strong as ever. Now, almost two months after the fire, people are rebuilding and starting over. Bastrop County has seen a boost in jobs as demolition work is in high demand and new construction is lined up throughout next year. As devastating as the wildfire in Bastrop County was, the resiliency of the residents there is shining through.★



*On behalf of our agency, I would like to thank all the volunteers who provided services to all the victims of all the wildfires across Texas.*