

County dialing back in-person support for rural crime victims

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The Pima County Attorney's Office is changing the way it serves crime victims outside of Tucson, leaving some advocates skeptical about the level of support available for rural victims.

For the past six years, a handful of Victim Advocates from PCAO's Victim Services Division has regularly visited the program's satellite offices – Green Valley, Sahuarita, Marana and Oro Valley – to support victims at crime scenes, provide crisis counseling services, and to serve as a court-liaison for individuals as they navigate the court system.

But by early May, those regular, in-person office visits will stop.

Instead, Virginia Rodriguez, director of the Victim Services Division, said her department will switch to serving satellite communities remotely – via email, phone or video conferencing – and will rely on local prosecutors to identify victims who may benefit from additional in-person support, as needed.

Need to 'restructure'

Since 1975, PCAO's Victim Services Division has assisted crime victims with a variety of on-scene and in-court support, compensation and counseling services to respond to the emotional, psychological and physical needs of victims in the aftermath of trauma.

But in light of an increasingly heavy caseload in the program's downtown offices – specifically felony cases – Rodriguez said her team saw a need to "restructure" how victim advocates were spending time to balance out the workload.

"What we have been doing is sending two advocates to these communities in-person about three times a week to help victims in court or whatever is needed. They would drive there, stay for a couple hours and wait to see if any victims showed up – sometimes they would, but for the most part they wouldn't and that's what has been happening," Rodriguez said.

In 2021, PCAO received 47 requests for victim advocate accompaniments among the four satellite locations. That same year, the department saw nearly 54,000 service requests from its downtown offices.

While some advocates continued to make the commute to outlying areas, Rodriguez said requests for victim advocates at Pima County Superior Court continued to pile up.

After reviewing the requirements under the 1984 Victims of Crime Act (VOCA), which largely funds expanded victim services in the satellite areas, Rodriguez said

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her team recognized they had some flexibility in the ways they were able to offer those services and began considering virtual options in place of regular office hours.

“We thought if we bring back those two advocates to take on more felony cases here, we can still serve our satellite communities through phone, through email and through prosecution, as well as going in-person if warranted and needed, and we can still have them here and be out in the community so they can help out with our felony caseload,” she said.

Instead of regular in-person visits, Rodriguez said her team will spend the next four to eight weeks transitioning to sending advocates to satellite locations only at the request of local prosecutors, working with staff to identify victims who may benefit from additional support.

“The prosecution might say, ‘Hey, I’m really worried about this victim. I think they’d benefit from the support of an advocate, could you come down here for trial? Or, could you follow-up via phone and make a connection with this advocate?’ There’s a variety of ways, and we’ll still drive down there in-person if we need to,” Rodriguez said.

“We had a lot of conversations about this, looked at the numbers to see what was the best utilization of our advocate’s time and resources, and decided this was the best thing to do all around.”

More, not less

But the service restructuring caught some staff members by surprise, raising concerns that the new model won’t provide sufficient support for victims.

Kristen Randall, court administrator with Green Valley Justice Court, said she only learned about the changes last week.

“We were trying to schedule to see if we could figure out the calendar and get (our advocate) down to Green Valley, and were informed the program was going away, and that our advocate was going to be using the next two weeks to clear his schedule and all the holdover cases he had,” Randall said.

“We’d never been informed formally this was on the table, and to find out so abruptly that they were pulling resources from the program and rolling it up...we haven’t really had time to figure out what we’re going to do,” she said.

As someone who has benefited from the support of victim advocates, Randall said her biggest concern in the absence of regular, in-person visits is the effectiveness of the service providers could be diminished.

“The court system can be a very scary, intimidating and overwhelming process. My advocate actually went with me to court, and just having that person who knows the process, who can let you know what to expect, and who will come and sit with you in the courtroom and walk you to your car afterward – that’s really important,” Randall said.

Trust and legitimacy concerns could impact a victim’s willingness to reach out for help, Randall said, and a reliance on virtual offerings could restrict an advocate’s ability to make personal connections at the point when a victim’s needs are greatest.

“When we’re talking about crisis counseling, how are you going to be physically present with a victim who’s terrified of a perpetrator when you’re on the phone? When there’s no connection, no trust being built between these folks and their advocate, when it’s just a voice on the other side, it’s not going to have the same impact, so I’m really concerned about these victims, especially when I think about our community here,” she said.

Randall said Green Valley's elderly and disabled population could find it more difficult to use technology effectively and that even phone service isn't a great option for many.

Ultimately, victims of crime, who may be experiencing some of the worst periods of their life, rely on victim services for support that is urgent and highly personal. The way those connections are formed – or not – can go on to have a big impact on case outcome, Randall said.

“Bottom line is we really should be doing the opposite of taking away services from rural areas...there is enough need that this program should be growing rather than contracting,” she said.

Pima County Supervisor Sharon Bronson, whose District 3 encompasses largely rural parts of Pima County, said news of the changes affect rural constituents was “stressful.”

“Most of this is going to hit the rural communities and we need these services – they shouldn’t go away and it’s just not acceptable,” she said.

Bronson added that if supporting these services were an issue of funding, she hoped PCAO could find alternative funding to continue to support victim advocates in satellite offices.

“If victims need help, then they need to get it. Period.”