



Office of Information  
Technology Services



## New York State Office of Victim Services Victim Services Portal

Project Initiated: 2013

Project Completed: 2015

Category: Digital Government: Government to Citizen (G to C)

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## Executive Summary

The New York State Office of Victim Services (OVS) supports victim services providers and individuals and/or their family members who have been victimized, through no fault of their own, in effort to help them cope with stress and trauma. The Office has a three-tiered mission to 1) provide compensation to innocent victims of crime in a timely, efficient, and compassionate manner; 2) fund direct services to crime victims via a network of community-based programs; and 3) advocate for the rights and benefits of all innocent victims of crime.

As part of the agency's core mission, OVS is responsible for processing and awarding claims for personal injury; death; and essential personal property (items stolen or damaged) as a result of a crime. This compensation, which in New York is broad and comprehensive, provides some financial relief to victims, who often suffer long-term financial loss, in addition to the harm caused by the crime itself. In fiscal year (FY) 2014-15, OVS provided more than \$23 million in compensation to nearly 12,800 crime victims and/or their families.

In an effort to streamline and refine the way claims are both submitted and processed, in spring 2015, the Office of Victim Services launched the **New York State Victim Services Portal** (<https://www.ovs.ny.gov/>) – *a portal that allows crime victims and their family members seeking compensation for medical bills, moving expenses, lost wages, and other forms of assistance to apply for compensation online*. New York State is one of only nine states to have an online portal or application for victim compensation, and has served as a model for many other states.

The Victim Services Portal was a two year project designed to aid victims by reducing the time required to process a victim's claim from the point of application through assignment to a Crime Victim Specialist, and to increase efficiencies for New York State. Prior to the implementation of the Victim Services Portal, all claims were either mailed or faxed to the OVS claims processing unit, where staff manually entered and processed each four page application received. This process was costly and time consuming, with an average backlog of 21 days from the receipt of the application to data entry. Applications were often difficult to read, missing key information, and because OVS staff manually keyed in the information from the application, the entries had a great potential for human error.

By reducing the time it takes to enter a claim in the Victim Services Portal, the Office of Victim Services has decreased the time a person may suffer from their loss as a crime victim. The successful implementation of the project has allowed OVS to provide compensation to innocent victims of crime in a *timely, efficient, and compassionate manner*, in alignment with their mission statement.

## Problem

The NYS Office of Victim Services supports 172 providers, administering 228 Victim Advocacy Programs that provide counseling, crisis intervention, advocacy and legal assistance, among other services to victims of crime in New York State.

Each year, OVS processes approximately 16,000 claims. In FY 2014-15 alone, the NYS Office of Victim Services received more than 17,300 paper-based claims from individuals or families seeking compensation. These applications, as well as those received in previous years, were either mailed in or faxed to the OVS Claims Processing unit, where OVS data entry staff keyed the contents of the hand-written 4-page application into the existing system and then scanned the application as an attachment to the claim. Since the applications were paper-based, and responses to the questions were handwritten, there were far too many cases where applications were not legible, and/or critical information was missing. In order to obtain missing or illegible information, OVS claims staff would reach out to advocacy programs by phone, letter or email requesting the information. Since the processing of claims could not begin until all required information was received, application processing could be delayed by a month or more.

Continuous back log also put a daily strain on resources at OVS. The average time for a claim to be entered into the system by a data entry administrator was 21 days. The backlog, plus an average time of 100 days to process, left victims often waiting four to five months for a recommendation to be made on a claim.

During that same time, the agency was also faced with significant reductions in staffing. This created a substantial challenge in keeping pace with current processing time. OVS knew they needed to develop a more efficient, streamlined solution in order to survive the staff reductions.

## Solution

In an effort to better respond to the needs of crime victims, keep pace with staff reductions, and increase operational efficiencies, OVS sought to refine the way claims were submitted, and to improve the overall experience for the victim, with a goal to:

- Improve quality of services, and provide more timely compensation to crime victims
- Decrease the number of returned claims for missing or illegible information within the claim
- Streamline processes, and improve efficiencies in each phase of the claims process with an automated workflow process
- Decrease costs and resources related to manual processing
- Minimize opportunities for human error associated with manual data entry and processing

In 2015, **OVS launched the Victim Services Portal** (<https://www.ovs.ny.gov>) – an online application system for crime victim compensation. The objective of the Victim Service Portal is to allow victims and Victim Advocate Programs to submit online personal loss claims for potential

compensation. The portal eliminates the 4-page application by allowing victims of crime, and/or their Advocate Programs, to submit all information including the upload of medical expenses, police reports and all other victim related information via the Portal.

In effort to ensure a seamless transition, the release of the Victims Services Portal was phased in over three months throughout the State, starting in Western, NY. The first phase, launched in April 2015, allowed 49 Victim Assistance Programs in the western region to file online claims. In May 2015, the online portal was rolled out to all 62 counties in New York State, serving 228 state-funded Victim Advocacy Programs. In June 2015, the reach was expanded even further to enable individuals seeking to file their own claims access to do so via the Portal.

The way OVS works now is smarter and more efficient.

- Improved efficiencies in each phase of the claims process, and an automated workflow
- Significant time and resource savings
- Furthered consistency in procedures and outcomes
- Automated process eliminates keying errors

The way OVS assists victims of crime is more responsive and timely.

- Claimants know instantly if they are missing documentation. Applications are no longer delayed for processing due to missing information. The Victim Services Portal will not allow submission of a claim until all required information is uploaded.
- Claimants can save, edit or delete existing applications. Related documentation can be uploaded to the claim.
- Claimants can track the status of claims or search claims.
- The application also has the potential ability for responsive web design for mobile applications.

The Office of Victim Services aims to process each claim entered into the portal within three months. The Victim Services Portal has enabled OVS to decrease the amount of time it takes for the claim to reach a Crime Victim Specialist for investigation, and decrease the time it takes to process a claim. This reduced the time a claim was entered into the system through processing by ~27 days, allowing OVS to meet targets. The previous backlog of 21 days is now reduced to zero (0).

The Portal has also enabled OVS to recommend more than 1,000 cases this fiscal year. Before the project was started, in FY 2014-15, Crime Victim Specialists recommended 15,498 cases. At the end of FY 2015-16, Crime Victim Specialists recommended 16,502 cases.

The Victim Service Portal Project was also created synergies between several NYS agencies. The Office of Victim Services, the Office of Information Technology Services, the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, and NYS Health worked together to streamline navigation from multiple agency websites to the Victim's Portal, and vice-versa. This was done in an effort to ensure navigation to and from the Victim Services Portal was user-friendly, and easily accessible.

## Benefits

The Office of Victim Services has been providing compensation and other services to one of the most vulnerable populations in New York State – *innocent victims of crime* – for nearly 50 years. OVS is continually seeking ways to improve service and to better respond to the needs of crime victims and/or their families. The Victim Services Portal meets both of these important goals.

### Claimants

Responding to 21<sup>st</sup> century citizen demands to access services, anytime from anywhere, the Victim Services Portal offers a number of benefits to its users:

- **24/7/365 availability.** The Portal is available to Victim Advocacy Groups or individuals wishing to file a claim 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.
- **Faster, more efficient filing process.** No more cumbersome paper filing. All information is input directly into the online Portal by the user.
- **Efficient search options, and the ability to check status of claims online.** Users can edit or modify applications prior to submission; electronically submit required documents, such as crime reports or medical records; and check the status of a claim.
- **More timely compensation:** By reducing the time it takes to enter and process a claim, compensation is provided to the victim in a shorter timeframe (~ 27 days).
- **The Portal is ADA/508 compliant:** The portal meets ADA/508 compliancy requirements for individuals who are visually impaired.

### The Office of Victim Services

The successful implementation of the Victim Services Portal has allowed OVS to deliver on its primary goal of providing compensation to innocent victims of crime in a timely, efficient, and compassionate manner.

- More than 9,800 claims have been entered into the Portal since inception (OVS still accepts paper applications < 50%).
- The average number of days to complete a claim, from start to finish, has been reduced by ~27 days.
- Since inception, claims intake data entry workload has decreased by 50%. This is a substantial resource savings for OVS, especially with shrinking resources. Staff are now able to focus their efforts on other duties.

With a new comprehensive solution in place, OVS is not only closing more cases in less time with fewer staff resources, but more importantly, they are able to provide more thorough, consistent decisions to the claimants served. The new processes to serve the victims are under continuous review for improvement. The management of claims processing has also improved tremendously. Through automation, OVS can ensure timely compensation, as reports are generated on claims that are not progressing according to the prescribed timeframe in the system.

## **Victim Advocacy Partner Agencies**

The successful implementation of the Victim Services Portal has allowed OVS to further improve and build upon its partnership with Victim Advocacy Agencies.

The feedback from the Victim Advocate Partner Programs has been outstanding.

**Former Bronx District Attorney, Robert Johnson** said, *“We consider providing services to the victims of crime one of the most important aspects of our mission. Our Crime Victims Assistance Unit facilitates claims processing, and now the new Victim Service Portal, will improve the ability for our staff to expedite the process of compensating crime victims in Bronx County.”*

**Niagara County Sheriff, James Voutour** said, *“The Victim Service Portal will allow victim advocates in my office, and advocates who work in partnership with Sheriffs' Offices and other law enforcement agencies, to file claims more efficiently. I commend the Office of Victim Services for this important step forward, which will result in crime victims getting the assistance they need in a more timely fashion.”*

**Karen Ziegler, LCSWR, CASAC, Director of Crime Victim and Sexual Violence Center in Albany** said, *“The Crime Victim & Sexual Violence Center has found the Office of Victim Service Victim Service Portal to be very user friendly. We have found that the portal allows staff to submit claims promptly. Overall, it is more efficient, allows victims to receive timely decisions, and most importantly, provides compensation expeditiously.”*

**Enrique Jerves from Hellenic American Neighborhood Action Committee (HANAC)** said, *“This software is easy and friendly to use. We save considerable time helping clients with their applications and also allow the advocate programs to update files that helps OVS investigators in client's claims. The system also notifies the advocate programs if there is any mistake in the application, regarding accurate or incomplete data. We have seen a claim decision in made in as little as 4 to 6 weeks when the information is submitted correctly. Before the Portal, the paper application could take 4 to 8 weeks to get updated it in the OVS database. I hope New York State will incorporate this type of technology in any service provided by the State.”*

**Colleen O'Brien from Vera House** said, *“The portal is very easy and it's nice to have the application in digital form.”*

## **New York State**

The Victim Services Portal is in alignment with Governor Cuomo's agenda to “make government work better, smarter, and more efficiently for the people of New York”.

This project supports NASICO State CIO priorities for 2016. Most specifically:

- **Priority 3:** Consolidation/Optimization: centralizing, consolidating services, operations, resources, infrastructure, data centers, communications and marketing "enterprise" thinking, identifying and dealing with barriers
- **Priority 4:** Legacy Modernization: enhancing, renovating, replacing, legacy platforms and applications, business process improvement
- **Priority 7:** Budget and Cost Control: managing budget reduction, strategies for savings, reducing or avoiding costs, dealing with inadequate funding and budget constraints