GOVERNMENT VICTIM SUPPORT IMPROVED?

An evaluation of the Victim Support Helpdesk pilot project
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- summary -

Dr. M. Timmermans
Drs. E. Tromp
Drs. G. Homburg

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Regioplan Policy Research
Nieuwezijds Voorburgwal 35
1012 RD Amsterdam
Tel.: +31 (0)20 - 5315315
Fax : +31 (0)20 - 6265199

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SUMMARY

1 Background information

New Victim Support Helpdesk pilot project
The New Victim Support Helpdesk pilot project was launched in late 2008/early 2009. The pilot project was conducted at four district public prosecutor’s offices in the Dutch districts of Amsterdam, Utrecht, Breda and Maastricht. The pilot project was developed in response to a large number of developments in the area of victim support during the nineteen nineties. The New Victim Support Helpdesk pilot project is based around the concept of appointing an independent coordinator for each helpdesk, setting up a steering group and a consultation network and adopting a centralised system whereby the public prosecutor’s office, the police and Slachtofferhulp Nederland (Help for Victims The Netherlands) work together through the various local helpdesks and have access to each other’s registration systems. The employees of these three chain partners should operate on the basis of their own functional profiles, as defined by the chain partners.

Regioplan Beleidsonderzoek evaluated the pilot project on behalf of the Ministry of Security and Justice’s Research and Documentation Centre.

New policy developments
Over the course of the evaluation, it became clear that the New Victim Support Helpdesk pilot project was being implemented in the context of changing legislation, organisational structures and ICT support systems. These changes affected both the performance of the victim support helpdesks and the feasibility of the evaluation. The most important changes in context include: the restructuring from nineteen to ten district public prosecutor’s offices and the implementation of new automated registration systems at the public prosecutor’s office and police. The restructuring of the districts also required a restructuring of the victim support helpdesks, while the introduction of the new registration system made it difficult to adequately record and access the services provided by the helpdesks. As a result, it was no longer possible or useful to include data on victims from the districts of Utrecht and Lelystad in (analysis of) the second victims’ survey. At the time of the second survey, only three of the four pilot districts and one of the two comparison districts remained as sources of useful victim survey data. This can be regarded as a constraining factor. More importantly, however, the evaluation did not yield any useful data to help determine whether innovation of the victim support helpdesks resulted in more efficient working methods.
2 Purpose of the evaluation and methods used

Objective
The evaluation aimed to provide insight into the extent to which innovation of the victim support helpdesks improved the effectiveness and efficiency of government victim support (greater customer satisfaction). The following research questions were formulated to this end:
1. What form did victim support take before and after implementation of the New Victim Support Helpdesk?
2. To what extent did implementation of the New Victim Support Helpdesk result in more efficient victim support?
3. How did victims experience and view local victim support before and after implementation of the New Victim Support Helpdesk (effectiveness)?

In order to answer these research questions, two measurements were held at the pilot helpdesks in Amsterdam, Utrecht, Breda and Maastricht and two comparison helpdesks (Haarlem and Lelystad) (early 2009 and late 2010/early 2011).

Evaluation activities
The two measurements involved the following evaluation activities:
- **Face-to-face interviews with various parties involved with the helpdesks**
  Both measurements involved seven interviews at each pilot district helpdesk (with helpdesk staff, the coordinator and the steering group members). Four interviews were held with helpdesk staff and management at each comparison district.

- **Registration analysis**
  All pilot project and comparison districts were requested to provide quantitative data on government victim support (such as the number of services provided).

- **Written survey of victims**
  Both measurements included a survey amongst victims in both the pilot district and the comparison district. Respondents were asked to describe their experiences with victim support and their level of satisfaction. The first measurement had an extremely low (six percent) response level. Over twice as many respondents (fifteen percent) took part in the second survey.

The following evaluation activity was only conducted during the first measurement:

- **Document evaluation in the pilot and comparison districts**
  Researchers examined documents and action plans relating to the organisational structure and intended implementation of victim support services by the helpdesks.
3 Government victim support: practical implementation by the victim support helpdesks

Legal services to victims
Both the pilot helpdesks and comparison helpdesks provided services in the form of written information and advice by phone (public prosecutor’s office, police), compensation for damages (public prosecutor’s office, police) assistance with regard to the joinder (Slachtofferhulp Nederland) and assistance with regard to written victim’s statements and the right to be heard (Slachtofferhulp Nederland).

Day-to-day practice at the pilot helpdesks

Physical centralisation
Physical centralisation - implemented as part of the New Victim Support Helpdesk pilot project - involves three different parties (public prosecutor’s office, police, Slachtofferhulp Nederland) working together to provide victim support from a single location: the victim support helpdesk. All pilot helpdesks achieved improvement in this area. Utrecht and Maastricht showed the greatest level of improvement. Physical centralisation was partially implemented in Amsterdam: Slachtofferhulp Nederland employees spend part of their time working at the helpdesk and part working at the regional Slachtofferhulp Nederland offices. Breda saw the least improvement in this regard. Although the three regional chain partners in that region cooperate and consult with one another at steering group-level, Slachtofferhulp Nederland still operates more or less individually at operational level. Furthermore, Breda police still offer damage mediation through the Safety Houses (Veiligheidshuizen).

Independent coordinator
All pilot helpdesks have appointed an independent coordinator responsible for supervising public prosecutor’s office, police and Slachtofferhulp Nederland staff. These coordinators do not supervise Slachtofferhulp Nederland staff that are still operating from the regional Slachtofferhulp Nederland staff offices. The coordinators are responsible for harmonising activities by the various chain partners at the helpdesk. They also supervise the consultation network and act as a liaison between the steering group (see below) and operational staff. The coordinators are employed by the public prosecutor’s office (Utrecht, Breda) or Slachtofferhulp Nederland (Amsterdam and Maastricht).

Steering group
A steering group representing the three chain organisations at management level was appointed at all pilot helpdesks. These steering groups supervise the helpdesks by means of the coordinators, on the basis of helpdesk progress reports.

Consultation network
The establishment of a consultation network represents a key aspect of victim support helpdesk innovation. All pilot helpdesks successfully established a consultation network. The independent coordinator acts as chairman of most consultation networks (five per helpdesk, on average). The steering group consultation and helpdesk consultation are the most important forms of consultation. The helpdesk consultation serves as a platform for helpdesk staff
to discuss current affairs, work in progress and potential staffing problems. As a part of the steering group consultation, the coordinator will update steering group members on helpdesk performance.

Access to registrations

During the introduction of the New Victim Support Helpdesk pilot project, the public prosecutor’s office and police organisation were in the process of transferring to a new registration system. As a result, staff at both the pilot helpdesks and comparison helpdesks had to use the new systems. At the time of the pilot, both the new and old systems were still in use.

Amongst other objectives, the New Victim Support Helpdesk pilot project was designed to offer police, the public prosecutor’s office and Slachtofferhulp Nederland staff working at the helpdesks access to each other’s computerised registration systems. Under the old situation, this access was restricted to the police and the public prosecutor’s office. The pilot project evaluation confirmed that public prosecutor’s office staff have access to both the old and new police registration system. And vice versa: police staff have access to both the old and new public prosecutor’s office system. However, Slachtofferhulp Nederland employees working at the helpdesk (pilot project helpdesks) only have access to both public prosecutor’s office systems and the old police system. They do not have access to the new police system. This means Slachtofferhulp Nederland staff must go to additional lengths to access information from the new system. In order to gain access, they will have to send a request to the police. This also creates an additional workload for the police. Slachtofferhulp Nederland staff that do not work at the helpdesk (comparison helpdesks) do not have access to either public prosecutor’s office or police registration systems. The Slachtofferhulp Nederland registration system at pilot helpdesks and comparison helpdesks is not accessible to public prosecutor’s office or police staff. In view of the nature of their tasks, these staff members do not need such access in order to do their jobs.

Harmonisation with parent organisation

Operational public prosecutor’s office, police and Slachtofferhulp Nederland staff at the pilot districts work on the basis of the same functional profiles applied by their parent organisation before introduction of the pilot project. The same applies to the comparison districts.

Harmonisation within helpdesk

As regards harmonisation between the chain partners, we can conclude that the various partners all carry out their own individual tasks. However, as a result of the physical centralisation these tasks can be more effectively harmonised under the supervision of coordinators. Amsterdam, Utrecht and Maastricht achieved the greatest improvement in this area. Breda’s lack of progress can be attributed to the lack of a full Slachtofferhulp Nederland team and police damage mediators at the helpdesk. This improved harmonisation is due to the fact that helpdesk staff can now consult (informally) more quickly and easily, and discuss specific cases. In addition, helpdesk staff can give each other files, thus resolving bottlenecks caused by information system failures.
Bottlenecks
The issue of access to registration systems represents an important bottleneck at the victim support helpdesks. Staff members from one organisation are not authorised to register information in the other organisation’s system. This leads to inefficient working methods at the helpdesk.

4 Efficiency

The evaluation showed a slight increase in staff deployment at the pilot helpdesks between the first and second measurements. This rise was partly due to the arrival of Slachtofferhulp Nederland staff at the helpdesks. The amount of staff deployed at the comparison helpdesks is substantially lower. Due to the lack of accurate registrations, we cannot make any statements as to whether the number of services provided has increased or declined. However, we can conclude that the majority of victim support services consist of written information and advice by phone.

Due to the lack of comprehensive registrations, we cannot draw any conclusions regarding the development of helpdesk efficiency on the basis of the ratio between services provided and the number of helpdesk staff. However, the various helpdesk stakeholders did identify several developments that are having a positive impact on efficiency.
- the short lines of communication between helpdesk employees as a result of their physical proximity;
- the consultation network structure and harmonisation of tasks during these consultations;
- supervision and harmonisation (both within the operational structure itself and between operational staff and management) by the coordinators.

According to the coordinators, the helpdesks also meet most of the organisational requirements defined by the New Victim Support Helpdesk working group at the start of the pilot project. Compliance with these requirements should result in more efficient and improved services to victims.

Bottlenecks
The main bottlenecks affecting victim support helpdesks are all related to the transition to new registration systems at the public prosecutor's office and police organisation during both the first and second measurement.
- Due to the complexity of these new registration systems, it takes helpdesk staff a lot of time to (accurately) register information in the system or access the information they need. This inefficiency also affects subsequent stages of the information process.
- Under the current situation, staff members still use two systems and, in some cases, even register information on paper forms. As a result, it is impossible to generate reliable/comprehensive overviews of the services provided to victims.

According to helpdesk staff and management, some of the bottlenecks identified during the first measurement (i.e. a lack of team spirit at the
helpdesks; the lack of harmonisation and cooperation at both operational and management level; fragmented, inefficient working methods) were largely resolved by the time of the second measurement. Other problems (such as staffing problems, but mainly the aforementioned registration system) remain.

5 Effectiveness: victims' views of victim support services

The section below provides a point by point overview of victims’ own views regarding support from the helpdesk and whether or not the quality of services improved over the course of the pilot project. The situation at the comparison helpdesks remained unchanged for the duration of the pilot project.

Results in terms of support services to victims:
- The percentage of respondents to receive information (within one month) regarding processing of the police report remained the same between the two measurements conducted during the pilot project and the comparison project.
- The percentage of respondents that interacted with the victim support helpdesk remained the same between the two measurements conducted during the pilot project and the comparison project.
- The percentage of respondents that received information on all aspects mentioned in the survey (information on further processing of the case, information on victims' rights and support during the trial) remained the same between the two measurements conducted during the pilot project and the comparison project. This also applies to the percentage of respondents that did not receive any information on any of the aforementioned aspects.
- The number of services provided declined significantly in the pilot group. There was no significant decline in the comparison group.

Results in terms of service appreciation:
- The percentage of respondents to receive effective support remained the same between the two measurements conducted during the pilot project and the comparison project.
- The percentage of respondents to receive rapid support increased in the pilot group (and remained the same in the comparison group).
- The average appreciation of services provided by the victim support helpdesk remained the same between the two measurements conducted during the pilot project and the comparison project.
- The percentage of respondents stating they were satisfied (above average) with the services provided remained the same between the two measurements conducted during the pilot project and the comparison project.

Results in terms of the three aspects of customer satisfaction:
For the purposes of this evaluation, the victims’ degree of satisfaction with the proceedings were characterised in terms of procedural fairness (the extent to
which victims view the proceedings as just, proper, smoothly organised, unprejudiced and clear), interactional fairness (the extent to which victims feel they were treated in a respectful, honest, proper, polite, patient and understanding manner) and affect (the extent to which victims have a positive feeling about the course of events after the proceedings have concluded).

- Respondents were moderately satisfied with the level of procedural fairness and affect (in both measurements). Satisfaction levels in the area of interactional fairness were somewhat higher.
- The pilot group and comparison group’s valuation of the three aspects did not change over time.
- Procedural fairness was valued more highly in cases where the perpetrator had been prosecuted or sentenced.
- Respondents also valued procedural fairness more highly if they had not suffered any damages (material or immaterial).
- This aspect of damages has the same effect on the valuation of affect: respondents that did not suffer any damages are more likely to look back on the proceedings with positive feelings than respondents that did suffer damages.

As the above results show, there is one indication that victims have been more satisfied with the level of support since the introduction of the New Victim Support Helpdesk. This relates to the more positive assessment of the speed at which support is provided. The results also show no improvement when it comes to victims’ assessment of the legal process (procedural fairness and affect). The aspect of procedural justice is especially correlated to the prosecution and sentencing of perpetrators and whether or not the victim has suffered damages. The correlation between procedural fairness and aspects outside the scope of helpdesk victim support – such as prosecution and sentencing of the perpetrator – limit the helpdesk’s ability to affect victim satisfaction levels to a certain degree. Even if the helpdesk were to perform optimally, the victim’s level of satisfaction would not be optimal if – for example – the perpetrator was not sentenced. Nevertheless, there is probably still room to improve victim satisfaction levels by further optimising helpdesk services, even in cases where the perpetrator is not sentenced.

At the time of the second measurement respondents designated the effective, timely and continual supply of information over the course of the proceedings as the most important point for improvement. Although the speed with which services are provided has improved, victims feel there is still room for improvement in this area. Finally, a comparison between findings from the victims’ survey and the extent to which pilot project helpdesks meet predetermined critical success requirements showed that coordinators paint a somewhat more positive picture than survey respondents.
6 Conclusions

The New Victim Support Helpdesk pilot project was based on a number of basic principles: an independent coordinator was to be appointed to each pilot project helpdesk. Furthermore, a steering group and consultation network were to be set up, and the public prosecutor’s office, police and Slachtofferhulp Nederland were to provide victim support from a single location (single helpdesk system), and gain access to each other’s registration systems. The new working methods were to result in more efficient victim support and a higher degree of victim satisfaction (effectiveness). Due to the lack of comprehensive and accurate registrations, it is impossible to determine whether the innovation effort has resulted in improved efficiency. This applies to both registration of the number of services provided and registration of the number of FTE employed at the various helpdesks.

Helpdesk staff and management do believe that the pilot project helpdesks succeeded in providing more efficient victim support. They believe this improved efficiency – which cannot be corroborated by figures – is due to the appointment of independent coordinators responsible for supervising and harmonising the three involved parties. Since the innovation effort, the three parties have conducted their own activities on a centralised basis, working from the pilot project helpdesks. Helpdesk staff and management also claim the consultation network has resulted in greater efficiency at both operational and managerial level. For example, operational staff discuss current issues, harmonise activities and discuss how to resolve operational bottlenecks. According to helpdesk staff and management, these consultations help harmonise the various activities and identify shortcomings more quickly. This also applies to the informal consultations made possible by the parties’ physical proximity. The establishment of a steering group for each pilot project helpdesk has ensured management-level assessment of helpdesk performance and allowed for the adjustment of targets and working methods. Although police, public prosecutor’s office and Slachtofferhulp Nederland staff now have greater access to each other’s registration systems at the helpdesks, the situation is still not optimal. Slachtofferhulp Nederland staff working at the helpdesks still do not have access to the new police registration system. Efficiency in this area has thus improved, but there is still scope for further optimisation.

When it comes to the effectiveness of victim support, there are few indications that quality has improved. Victims’ level of satisfaction did not increase in any of the pilot project districts over the course of the innovation effort. The innovation did not cause a rise in the number of victims stating they were satisfied (above average) with helpdesk services. However, a larger number of respondents did state that they received more rapid assistance from the helpdesk.