

No Room at the Inn

*An Open Letter to the Victim Services Community
from One of Your Own*

Whether you believe the story is true, a legend, or just a fantasy, the circumstances immediately preceding the birth of Jesus in the Christmas story from 2000 years ago strike me as eerily similar to what many victims, unfortunately, are facing when they seek help from victim service providers today.



If you aren't familiar, the story goes that a sudden change in life's circumstances forced Mary and Joseph to leave home for a strange town, just when the timer was about to go off on the Jesus-bun-in-the-oven. The tradition says that they were turned away from inn after inn for lack of space. Finally, one inn keeper shared that although his lodgings were full, there was a stable or cave available should Mary and Joseph want that. At last, a solution, though not ideal, was found.

As the executive director of a statewide victim advocacy coalition, I've been disturbed by the increasing number of victims that reach out to us after having been turned away from one or many *victim service* organizations. These victims consistently repeat a variation on one of a few refrains: "They said they were full." "They said I wasn't the right type of victim." "They said they didn't provide the service I was looking for." Sadly, we've been receiving calls to this effect from all over the country.

These victims were turned away without so much as another phone number to call for help.

My professional career has been dedicated to crime victim advocacy. Although I'm relatively young (having spent only nine years in the field,) what I was taught, how I've assisted victims, and my belief about how the field responds to victims is that we pull resources together. We help victims regardless of crime type, and if we don't have it, we find it. But we don't just say "No room," and close the door.

To a large extent, I still believe this to be true, especially for most victim advocates.

But.

While true for many, I cannot ignore the growing number of victims who have been left out in the cold to fend for themselves.

Yes, I know that resources are becoming more precious and difficult to find. However, I don't believe this is an issue of resource allocation. In every case in which a victim has contacted our office, we have been able to locate resources for them within their own communities. Sometimes, finding this information was a simple matter of knowing the right words to Google – something the first victim advocate that the victim contacted could have done.

The question I pose to victim service providers is: What kind of inn keepers are we, especially when our own "inn is full"? Do we turn on our NO VACANCY/ADVOCACY sign and turn in until the next grant? Or, do we help them locate other available resources – especially when it requires extra effort or creative thinking on our part?



This new year, I encourage you to take time to reinvigorate yourselves and others in the field to continue our standard of excellence in victim services. How? By helping every victim find what they are looking for every time – even when what they are looking for does not lie within our own doors.

At the Washington Coalition of Crime Victim Advocates we're leaving a light on for victims this holiday season and always. We hope you will join us.

Karla Salp
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