Grant Program: Effective Community-Based Approaches for Dealing With Missing and Exploited Children

Purpose

The purpose of this solicitation is to identify, research, evaluate, and document effective community-based, organizations from around the country that use multi-disciplinary team approaches to address the complex issues related to missing and exploited children and their families. The solicitation will identify a minimum of five (5) community-based organizations that provide a cross-sectional representation of the demographics of the country. The effective approaches being used in these communities will be developed into a training curriculum that will be used to assist communities in the establishment of an effective, cooperative, and collaborative community-based, multi-disciplinary team approach to missing and exploited children's issues.

The award will be made for a project period of three years. One cooperative agreement will be awarded with an initial budget period of 18 months. Up to \$250,000 will be allocated for the initial 18 month award. Subsequent funding support will be determined by the performance of the grantee and program development needs as determined by OJJDP.

Background

The term "missing children" has been used to describe many children who become missing or are displaced for various and differing reasons. Children may be missing because they have been abducted by a stranger or acquaintance. A surprisingly large number of children (354,000 per year) are abducted by a parent or family member as part of an ongoing divorce or custody battle. About half a million children run away from home each year. There are many children designated as "thrownaway" children because they have been abandoned or told to leave home. Other children wander away from home or become lost or injured for other reasons. While most children eventually are recovered or return home, they may be missing for a few hours, days, weeks, or years. Some children are found dead or are never recovered at all.

Society's understanding of the issues relating to these "missing and displaced" children and its response has been slow to develop. Since the passage of most federal and state legislation regarding missing children and the inception of the Missing and Exploited Children's Program in the Department of Justice, an array of

ground breaking research has been completed or is still underway. Much more is known about the issues surrounding missing and exploited children, and this information provides important direction for future action to improve the response to these victims.

No single health, social service, law enforcement, or judicial system exists to track and comprehensively assess the number and circumstances of child victimization on a national level, including child deaths. The same is true in most states and local jurisdictions as well. Data on child victimization resides in several different forms, including police crime reports, child protective service reports, and vital statistics. None of these sources contain information on all types of maltreatment of children.

Definitions are inconsistent across agencies and disciplines. The names and definitions given to child victimization, as well as how we address it, differs according to the relationship of the perpetrator to the child victim. If the offender is a family member or caretaker, it is called abuse; if the offender is a stranger or acquaintance, it is called an assault or some other type of "crime." Generally, the criminal justice system handles victimization of children by nonfamily members while social service agencies handle victimization by family members or caretakers.

National crime justice statistics, with the exception of abduction and homicide, do not include crimes against children under the age of twelve. It is usually worse on the local and state levels. Child abuse data is not included in criminal statistics. Some particularly violent abuse cases of children may be contained in police reports but not most of them. Child protective service agencies do not keep data on nonfamily, noncaretaker abuse of children. They usually refer such cases to the police and do not provide services to those children and their families. Most assaults against children are simply never reported to any agency.

Most communities approach the different forms of child maltreatment in a fragmented fashion with social services handling intra-familial cases of abuse and neglect, law enforcement handling nonfamily assault and abduction cases, and many child victims simply going unrecognized and untreated. At best, communities may have a vague picture of who the missing and exploited children are in their jurisdiction. If they look closely, they realize that these invisible children are frequently already known to their criminal justice and social service agencies as victims or perpetrators.

The experiences of many of these children and their families are not unlike that of abused and neglected children. There are many commonalities and linkages. Children often suffer multiple types of victimization and one form of victimization may directly or indirectly lead to others. Often runaway and thrownaway children have left abusive homes and are at increased risk for suicide, assault, exploitation, and murder while on the streets. Children who are neglected or inadequately supervised may be especially vulnerable to a variety of risks. Some children are reported missing by a parent who actually killed the child and is trying to conceal his or her act. The majority of family abduction cases involve families with histories of domestic violence. Most parentally-abducted children have suffered from being the focus of bitter conflict prior to being taken. Recovery of abducted children seldom means the end of the conflict or the traumatic effects of an abduction, yet these children seldom receive the mental health services that could help them cope. Recent studies indicate that children who come from households characterized by violence, abuse or neglect may be more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation by persons outside their home as well. Other studies indicate that the lines between incest and sexual abuse by nonfamily persons may not be as distinct as previously believed, i.e., many incest perpetrators also molest children other than their own.

Objectives

1. Identify five demographics representative community programs that have in place an active and working community-based process for addressing the needs of and issues related to missing, exploited, and abducted children and their families.

2. Research and evaluate the programs in the selected communities to determine their strengths and weaknesses in addressing such issues as: confidentiality; sharing of information; inter-agency agreements; cross-training; statistical information gathering and analysis; identification and resolution of system gaps; case and services management; establishing public-private partnerships; interacting with agencies on the state and federal levels; multi-level prevention education and awareness programs; conducting cooperative investigative practices; resource allocation and sharing; cultural diversity; education and awareness of policy-makers; recovery and reunification of the child victims with their family and community; and other