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Victim-to-Victim Care: Honoring survivors and families through a continuum of care on this year's Remembrance Day

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A group of Hokies gather around the memorial during the remembrance ceremonies on April 16, 2016.

Ben Weidlich / Collegiate Times

On the news, we hear constant coverage of the plethora of mass shootings that take place across America. After the immediate relief and national mourning, many forget about the families affected by mass shootings who continue to grieve years after their losses. Joseph Samaha, father of Reema Samaha, a victim of the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting, founded Victim-to-Victim Family Outreach Foundation (VTV) in 2009 along with other families and victims to address and advocate for campus safety. The advisory board of VTV is made up of surviving family members of those lost on April 16.

“As we hear of the recurrence of mass shootings, we brace ourselves and understand what lies ahead for those impacted,” Samaha said. “Our hearts break, but we need to focus and prepare to assist in their recovery.”

VTV's two-fold mission began with campus safety initiatives through the VTV Family Outreach Foundation and has since phased into providing continued support and relief to families affected by mass shootings through VTVCare. Whether it be group therapy or financial resources, VTVCare is dedicated to funding and supporting a continuum of care for victims of mass shootings and their families.

“The need to respond and find purpose to honor and remember our 32 Hokies and professors that were tragically lost, as well as 24 injured survivors, was at the forefront of our movement and mission,” Samaha said. “Members and supporters of VTVCare advocate for a continuum of care for mass shooting victims across the country. From our collective experiences, we

have found that there are three important phases that victim-survivors endure from day one: Response, Recovery and Resilience. The three R’s can last over a lifetime for those physically and psychologically traumatized.”

Financially, VTVCare provides money that covers any trauma-related care and fees that are not covered by insurance.

“Over a period of the last 12 years, members of the collective VTV families and survivors have been reimbursed approximately \$600,000 for out-of-pocket expenses that insurance did not cover,” Samaha said. “These are not taxpayer dollars, but (are) reimbursed through the Virginia Criminal Injuries Compensation Fund. VTVCare, through its endowment fund, emulates this unique donor assistance to those with long-term needs.”

Apart from the endowment fund, VTVCare also provides consultation services from professional trauma-informed specialists on its Advisory Care Council.

VTV additionally routinely organizes remembrance events and activities such as the VTV Gran Fondo cycling event in which all proceeds have gone toward improving school safety and assisting victims of mass shooting violence. Providing this assistance has been essential to affected victims and families as they navigate the journey to coping with trauma.

“(Families and victims) don’t realize that the journey (to recovery) is just starting and it’s going to go until the end of their lives,” Samaha said. “It’s not about learning how to deal with it, it’s learning how to cope and survive. But there are ways to do that through seeking help.”



Since its founding in 2009, VTV has made significant legislative progress in protecting affected individuals and taking proactive steps to stop further disasters. Financed by a federal grant, VTV created the 32 National Campus Safety Initiative which is a free, confidential and self-paced online self-assessment program that looks at key areas of campus safety. Using this new resource, colleges and universities can better assess themselves across nine important areas including campus public safety, hazing, mental health, missing students, sexual violence and much more. This program is being implemented in high schools and college campuses across the country and provides a safe and effective way for student safety to take priority in school administrations.

VTV additionally forefronted securing the passage of the Campus Sexual Violence Elimination Act in 2013, which updated federal campus sexual violence prevention and response guidelines, placing more emphasis on victim safety and health. The organization strives to keep support and protection at the heart of its actions as it adapts to new practices, unexpected costs and the politicized nature of mass shooting violence.

An integral part of VTV's current initiative is the Crisis Response Team (CRT). The CRT consists of VTV staff and family members who provide assistance to the victims of mass school violence. The team received responder training through the National Organization for Victim Assistance to offer stand-by support and assistance in trauma reduction for victims and families.

CRT members take their experiences working through tragedies to help others in need. Since the April 16 tragedy, VTV's CRT members have offered assistance to victims of mass shootings throughout the United States, including Chardon High School (Ohio), Northern Illinois University (Illinois), Aurora Century 16 movie theater (Colorado), Sandy Hook Elementary School (Connecticut), Umpqua Community College (Oregon) and Pulse nightclub (Florida).

In terms of future goals, Samaha hopes to grow VTVCare's endowment to \$1 million, as this will help serve even more groups of people affected by tragedy who can receive care. Additionally, VTVCare aims to form a coalition of those not often thought of when it comes to healing after a shooting; many first responders and emergency medical staff experience intense psychological trauma that should be properly addressed and treated. Understanding how this trauma can affect many of our nation's most important workforces is necessary to help those impacted after tragedy.

VTVCare was born from the community of Blacksburg and evolved to aid those all over the country. To learn more and support VTVCare, visit its website, Instagram and Facebook and sign up for the monthly newsletter which features articles written by the VTVCare Advisory Care Counsel.

Samaha emphasized the importance of donations as a way to help VTVCare grow its endowment fund and be able to provide care to victims and families of mass shooting violence.

Additionally, those in the Blacksburg community who have been impacted by mass shooting violence and may need financial help or support can fill out VTVCare's "I Need Help" form on its website.

"What we want to do is bring peace to people who have experienced this trauma," Samaha said. "Healing from April 16 is not something that happens organically -- it takes time, support, and professional and financial resources to cope and help heal. We don't heal in isolation, but in community. VTVCare can assist with a path forward."