

# Putting Victims First

An Interview with Anita Busch, President, VictimsFirst

**EDITORS' NOTE** Anita Busch and her family have suffered through two mass shootings – the theater shooting in Aurora, Colorado and the Route 91 concert in Las Vegas, Nevada. After her cousin, Micayla, was murdered at the movie theater massacre in Aurora that left 12 dead (and an unborn baby) and 70 injured, Busch helped create a new model for charitable giving to ensure that 100 percent of donations collected for victims of mass casualty crime actually go directly to those victims, so donor intent is honored.



Anita Busch

Busch gathered together parents and family members of those killed in 9/11, Columbine, Virginia Tech, Northern Illinois University, Aurora, Oak Creek Sikh Temple, and Sandy Hook – to craft the protocol for the National Compassion Fund which has been utilized after multiple mass casualty crimes, including Ft. Hood, Aurora, Chattanooga, Orlando Pulse, Las Vegas, Charlottesville, Parkland, Santa Fe, Jacksonville, Cincinnati, Highland Park, El Paso, Milwaukee, Atlanta, Indianapolis, Uvalde, and Louisville. She also served as a victim's specialist/advocate helping the Ventura County Community Fund distribute donations to survivors after the Borderline Bar & Grill shooting in Thousand Oaks, California. Busch is a key co-founder of the National Compassion Fund and currently serves as a Mass Violence Relief Specialist and Advisor to the Fund. To date, she has personally helped victims, survivors, and/or communities behind the scenes in over 45 mass casualty crimes. For over a decade, she has interviewed mass shooting families of the deceased, and those survivors injured both physically and mentally after mass shootings to

develop *Best Practices for Mass Casualty Crime*, a trauma-informed, live, victim-centric document which helps communities organize after these tragic events without re-victimizing victims. *Best Practices* has been shared by politicians, mass shooting victims and communities around the country and worldwide.

**ORGANIZATION BRIEF** *VictimsFirst* ([victimsfirst.org](http://victimsfirst.org)) is a network of surviving victims of mass casualty crime and trusted supporters

who have first-hand experiences of the problems and re-victimization that accompany these acts when there is a lack of coordinated effort and/or understanding of what survivors need. In 2021, *VictimsFirst* officially applied to become a 501(c)(3) to better serve victims of mass casualty crimes. The organization works pro bono and is a member of the Advancing Bereavement Care Coalition (ABCC), which represents millions of bereaved Americans and frontline practitioners across the nation. Collectively, these organizations have expertise supporting and advocating on behalf of bereaved individuals, including those who need bereavement leave due to pregnancy, stillbirth, child, sibling, spousal or parent loss.

**What was the vision for creating VictimsFirst and how do you define its mission?**

Our vision was to ensure that victims of mass violence receive the care and help that they need during the most excruciating time of their lives. We knew that a critical way to do this was by helping communities organize in the aftermath of mass violence in the best interests

of those most directly impacted: the victims and survivors. We created *VictimsFirst* in 2012 as a grassroots network of mass shooting families who banded together to provide mutual aid and fight against our own re-victimization in the aftermath of the Aurora theater shooting where my cousin, Micayla, was one of the 12 people murdered.

We were horrified when a nonprofit began collecting funds and the first \$100,000 went to other nonprofits instead of directly to the victims and survivors who desperately needed it, and they were using our murdered loved ones' faces to collect those donations. I learned that similar things happened to previous mass shooting families. Donors were surprised to learn this as well.

After the Sandy Hook school shooting, we worked behind the scenes to try to keep families and survivors on their feet and from being similarly re-victimized. I gathered families of the deceased together from Columbine, Virginia Tech, NIU, Aurora, Oak Creek Sikh Temple, and Newtown. Together, we put together a protocol, named, funded, and began the National Compassion Fund to administer Centralized Victims' Funds wherever a mass casualty crime was to occur throughout the country which guarantees every penny collected goes directly to survivors in cash payments in a way that is ethical, equitable, and transparent.

After that, I led the next generation of mass shooting victims, survivors, and trusted advocates to establish *VictimsFirst* as an official nonprofit. Over the past 10 years, I have personally worked behind the scenes on 47 mass casualty crimes. Our board consists of those wounded and injured in some of the most highly publicized mass shootings in America

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and they have responded to many shootings over the years.

I can tell you with certainty that VictimsFirst is the only nonprofit in the U.S. dedicated to helping victims of mass violence with 100 percent of funds raised going directly to victims’ families and survivors. We have the only National Mass Shooting Victims’ Fund in the nation that provides direct emergency financial assistance to survivors of mass violence at any time of need.

We are the first and only nonprofit in the nation providing an updated, victim-centric, trauma-informed Best Practices for Mass Casualty Crime which helps communities to organize in the best interests of the victims. Our Best Practices were written from the point-of-view of victims and survivors themselves, documenting what works and what doesn’t and how to better serve the victim base in the aftermath of mass violence.

Community preparedness is key, and we are there to shine the light on the path to make sure no one stumbles. We are also there to help victims and survivors get back on their feet with resources and immediate financial needs.

**What makes the work of VictimsFirst so personal to you?**

My family has endured two mass shootings: one in 2012, where a generation of my family was wiped out when Micayla was murdered along with 11 others in the Aurora theater mass shooting; and another in 2017, when Stacy survived by running for her life through a hail of bullets at the Rt. 91 concert in Las Vegas. I have known many other mass shooting families for over 10 and a half years – some of them have become lifelong friends and even family to me.

You often hear about the rash of mass shootings and the number of people killed,

but these are not numbers to us. These are our moms and dads, children, brothers, sisters, cousins, grandmothers, grandfathers, partners, and extended family. Because it is so personal, we have taken no salaries or administration fees. For added transparency, we collect donations to operate the organization separately.

VictimsFirst is now composed of over 20 years of mass shooting families from across the nation, from Columbine to Uvalde, Orlando to Colorado Springs, Aurora to Virginia Tech. We just want things to go easier for the next set of unfortunate families. We do not want anyone to endure what we have in the aftermath of mass shootings.

Who better to step up in the chaos and assist communities on how to organize in the right way while keeping victim/survivor dignity and privacy than those of us who have first-hand experience with this and over many years? Those who lived through this are the nation’s experts.

**Will you provide an overview of VictimsFirst’s programs and initiatives?**

First and foremost, we provide Best Practices for Mass Casualty Crime guidelines to communities in the aftermath of a mass casualty crime. We provide free consultation to community leaders and urge each community to first create a centralized victims’ fund to capture donations for the victim base immediately after a mass casualty crime. We urge communities across the nation to have a plan in place before mass violence hits.

We provide immediate emergency financial assistance for victims’ immediate family members and survivors while communities work to organize. We also fundraise for the specific victim base in a separate bank

account, and 100 percent of what we collect goes to whatever Centralized Victims’ Fund is created. For instance, in Colorado Springs and Uvalde, we raised funds for the entire victim base, while also keeping people on their feet there and across the nation with immediate and emergency financial needs through our separate National Mass Shooting Victims’ Fund.

In addition, we provide many, many other resources – be it assistance with sudden accessibility needs to finding medical specialists, trauma specialists, jobs, advocating for victims’ rights – honestly, whatever is needed, we find the resource or are the resource. For example, when a victim of a mass shooting is catastrophically injured, they cannot just leave the hospital and go back into their homes in wheelchairs and with walkers. In Colorado Springs, we found a flooring company that was able to replace the shag carpeting so when a victim who was shot multiple times returned home, his walker would glide easily over the floor. We have done this more than once and have assisted with other accessibility needs. Also, when trauma knocked a survivor out of their job in Uvalde, we sat down and helped them create a new resume and then culled together a list of possible employers to help them secure a new job. We have fixed cars so people can get to jobs and job interviews. We have bought groceries and paid rent, utility, and medical bills.

We do this for victims and survivors of any mass violence across America at any time in their path forward.

**Will you highlight VictimsFirst’s Best Practices and how this provides a roadmap for communities, families, and individuals to utilize if they are impacted by a mass casualty crime?**

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Our Best Practices for Mass Casualty Crime is a roadmap that we share with communities. It is the only resource of its kind and includes a wealth of information that empowers communities to respond in the best interests of the victims and survivors. Our Best Practices includes guidance on ethical fundraising, appropriate language use, immediate needs and resources, and what local businesses can offer. For instance, it explains that many people do not like to hear that their child was “lost” and would rather hear, “I’m sorry your child was stolen from you, taken from you, or murdered.” Similarly, calling the one-year mark of the shooting an “anniversary” is not the best choice of words as it is nothing to celebrate – rather use year-marks or year remembrances.

We also provide guidance to the media and others to focus on the victims and heroes and not the shooter – fully endorsing the No Notoriety campaign begun by Tom and Caren Teves after their son Alex Teves was murdered while successfully protecting his girlfriend in the Aurora theater shooting.

There are generous donors who want to pay for funerals, but funeral costs can be reimbursed by victim compensation programs. Through our Best Practices, we make communities aware of this while explaining that the cost of the burial plots and headstones are usually not covered and can be extraordinarily expensive.

We also address the issue of food insecurity after mass violence. For example, people often want to start meal trains to help families. Our Best Practices teach that there is a way to do this to keep victims/survivors’ addresses off the Internet, maintain their privacy, and keep them safe.

Our Best Practices addresses a wide variety of issues and is the go-to guide for truly helping victims and survivors of mass violence. We continuously update our Best Practices for Mass Casualty Crime after each tragedy, because every community, victim base, and incident is different and we always learn something new when we respond.

**What are the areas where communities, law enforcement, and politicians can do better if a mass casualty crime takes place in their community?**

We urge each community to immediately start a Centralized Victims’ Fund, one where 100 percent of what is collected into that fund goes directly to the victim base. This provides clarity and transparency for both the donors and the victims/survivors.

Oftentimes, nonprofits start collecting and nothing goes directly to victims when they truly need help. Nonprofits can apply for grants, but victims and survivors rely heavily on those donations to make ends meet when they can no longer work from trauma. It takes time to learn how to manage and cope after a sudden, violent act that rips a healthy child or parent away from your family. Physical rehabilitation or acclimating to a new way of life after being shot also takes time and survivors need every penny intended for them. We believe that after a tragedy, generous people give to help the victims and survivors directly. There is no doubt what their intent is, and it is important it is fulfilled.

After a mass shooting, you feel a loss of control. Having donations coming directly to you so you can make your own decisions on your own finances is critical to mental health. Oftentimes, community nonprofits want to hold onto funds for “long-term care,” treating the person or family victimized like children. We are all families who are already paying bills, rent, mortgage, car payments, taking care of children, putting them through college – no one appreciates having to go back repeatedly to a nonprofit, with hat in hand, to ask for donations that are already intended for you. It is re-victimizing to have that control further taken from you and being treated like a child by a community nonprofit.

We also urge politicians to put victims first before their careers. If you speak at a memorial, know how to pronounce the names of those who were murdered. Make sure your community takes advantage of the millions of dollars in mental health grants that are available at both the state and federal level and apply immediately for those grants.

Do not move forward on a memorial without the input of the families of the deceased. We have seen expensive park benches and scholarships be established in the victims’ names while the families themselves whose loved ones are being honored are unable to pay their bills. Ask the victims’ families what they want. Also, people are more important than construction projects. We have seen this in Orlando after the nightclub shooting where a nonprofit began collecting millions of dollars for a museum while the victims could not pay bills. This is wrong. The priority should always be ensuring the basic needs of survivors are met, first and foremost.

For law enforcement, please inform families as soon as possible that their loved ones have been murdered and do it with compassion. We have waited overnight; it was 19 hours for our family to receive the news that Micayla was murdered. And the way some parents have been informed lacked any semblance of empathy.

Every Attorney General or Secretary of State across America should be bird-dogging both fundraisers and nonprofits after a mass shooting to ensure donations collected for victims goes to victims and that nonprofits follow the law. VictimsFirst has been doing this on our own, and for years. In Uvalde, we turned in two questionable nonprofits/fundraisers to the Texas Attorney General’s office for further review.

And please, please make sure the families of the deceased are able to contact each other if they want to. This is key to helping people manage their trauma, and it’s just not being done right now.

**How important are metrics to measure the impact of VictimsFirst’s efforts?**

So much of what we do is not measurable, whether that’s talking to mass shooting survivors through a challenging time or out of suicide, reaching out to hospitals to ensure medical services are donated, or helping organize a press conference or event to amplify the voices of survivors.

However, there is a lot that we do that can be measured through various metrics. For instance, we keep track of the number of victims we help across the country, whether that’s with direct financial assistance or ensuring a survivor gets adequate mental health support. We also keep track of how much money has been raised and disbursed to victims’ immediate family members and survivors, whether that’s through our National Mass Shooting Victims’ Fund or our location-specific funds. For example, in 2022 we responded to eight mass shootings, collected a total of \$8,802,555.77 for five specific mass shootings – 100 percent of those donations, every penny, went directly to victims – and we distributed an additional \$206,342.28 directly to victims through our National Fund.

**What are your priorities for VictimsFirst as you look to the future?**

The older generation of mass shooting families are now preparing the next generation to take over the work. It’s sad to say there even is a next generation. The victims and survivors from the Orlando nightclub shooting, Las Vegas, Parkland, Uvalde are the next generation. Let’s hope there is not another. ●