

Witness Protection Programmes: The Role of Social Workers in Helping State Witnesses to Deal with Challenges

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Abstract

Admission of witnesses to the witness protection programme is necessary to protect their lives to ensure successful prosecutions. However, it poses serious challenges that result in the interruption of the functioning of a family such as social uprooting and isolation. There seems to be a shortage of literature on the protection of witnesses that focuses on their challenges and the support interventions they require to be able to adjust and cope in the programme. A qualitative research approach was followed to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of witnesses and the role of social workers in the South African witness protection programme. Non-probability, purposive sampling was used to select 30 participants, including witnesses, social workers and others. The findings describe the participants' lack of knowledge and awareness of the existence of the witness protection programme, their experiences of trauma, and their difficulties to access social work services. The findings also describe the shortage of social workers to provide support and the unsatisfactory reintegration and aftercare services. This article facilitates insight into the world of witnesses who live in the witness protection programme. It highlights the essential role that social workers can play to help them work through existing trauma, adjust and cope in the programme, and reintegrate into the community.

Keywords: witness protection programme; witness; social work intervention; social worker; support services; experiences and challenges

Introduction

Witness protection programmes are measures designed to protect the physical safety of the witness, investigations and criminal proceedings to ensure effective testimony and to fight crime (Kariri and Salifu 2016). The protection programme consists of two aspects, namely, physical protection, which entails protecting the witness from



intimidation, and psychosocial protection, which focuses on the management and recovery of trauma (Beune and Giebels 2013). The protection programmes are necessitated by the extent of intimidation of witnesses by the perpetrators. Intimidation of witnesses include assault, damage to property, defamation of character, harassment and death with the aim to discourage witnesses from giving testimony (Vincent 2016). Without protection, the criminal justice system is unable to prosecute criminals because of a lack of evidence and lawlessness prevails as a result (Fery 2012). Witnesses are expected to cut ties with their family and friends, conceal their real identity and start a new life in unfamiliar environments without their social networks (Bakowski 2013). This is because the success of the programme depends on the secrecy of the witness' identity and location (Kayuni and Jamu 2015). This requirement leads to isolation and loneliness. Witnesses consequently find it hard to cope and adjust in the programme.

Studies in the protection of witnesses focus on the success of the programmes with regard to physical safety and analysis of legislation, but concentrate less on the psychosocial challenges experienced by witnesses and required interventions. The study of Demir (2018) conducted in Turkey investigated the likelihood of a witness to give testimony in relation to age, gender and employment status. Dworzecki (2018) and Beqiri (2018) focused on the analysis of the legal framework in the Czech Republic and the International Criminal Court (ICC). Lamont-Dobbin (2019) described the cooperation between the ICC and various countries with regard to the relocation of witnesses. The studies which did focus on the psychosocial stress of witnesses are those by Beune and Giebels (2013), which looked at the social stress of witnesses in the Netherlands, and Mujkanovic (2014) who studied the importance of witness support in Croatia.

There is a lack of studies on the challenges and support of witnesses in Africa and especially in South Africa. Mahony (2010, 11) attributes this lack of literature to witness protection programmes in Africa being a "new and recent" phenomenon. Most African countries are only now beginning to establish witness protection programmes (Kariri and Salifu 2016). Although the witness protection programme in South Africa was established in 1999 under the Witness Protection Act (South Africa 1998), it has not been researched exhaustively within the South African context leading to a lack of knowledge about witnesses' experiences of the challenges in the programme and the role social workers can play to support them (Eikel 2012). The absence of such knowledge makes it difficult for the multidisciplinary team in the programme to design interventions that deal with the needs of witnesses and help them cope and adjust better. Availability of responsive interventions will contribute towards the reduction of witnesses who resign from the programme prematurely because of the difficulty to assimilate themselves to the covert environment.

The aim of this article, therefore, is to explore and describe the experiences of witnesses and the role of social work intervention in the witness protection programme in South Africa. In order to achieve this aim, the following research questions were asked:

- What are the experiences and challenges of witnesses in the witness protection programme in South Africa?
- What guidelines can be developed for social work intervention in this field?

Background

The protection of witnesses can be traced back to the United States of America (USA) in the 1960s (Demir 2018). Many countries have since adopted the same strategy in combating organised crime. Protection involves removing the witness from a danger area, in most cases their home, to a place of safety (Appleyard 2011). The protection programmes admit witnesses who are going to testify in court and judicial proceedings, whose lives are threatened because of their cooperation with the authorities (Nowroz 2015). In South Africa, a national programme called the Office for Witness Protection (OWP) was established in 1999 following the promulgation of the Witness Protection Act (South Africa 1998). South Africa remains a pioneer in setting up the protection programme in Africa and also plays a mentorship role in the African countries that are embarking on witness protection initiatives. Provision of psychosocial services in the OWP was introduced in 2012 through the appointment of four social workers who render services to the witnesses in South Africa's nine provinces.

Witnesses experience trauma by being exposed to crime and intimidation before joining the programme and the anxiety of taking part in judicial proceedings (Vincent 2016). The conditions of the programme that requires them to cease contact with family and friends, quit their jobs and start a new lifestyle, lead to anxiety. Whereas witnesses are permitted to enter the programme with their family, some are alone because of various reasons meaning they live a life of loneliness (Fyfe and McKay 2000). According to Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theory of coping, the challenges that are experienced by individuals, in this instance witnesses, result in a crisis which requires adequate coping mechanisms. Individuals who are affected by a crisis often present with symptoms such as decreased cognitive functioning, disequilibrium, emotional unrest and anxiety which affect their coping ability (Janssen, Oberwittler, and Koeber 2021). Cherry (2020) states that a crisis may be caused by life-threatening experiences that cannot be mitigated by applying previously used coping resources. According to Zhou, Wu and An (2016), trauma, if not treated, may lead to long-term mental illness and suicide.

It is necessary that witnesses are afforded psychosocial services to enable them to heal, prepare to deliver testimony and adjust to the programme (Fyfe and MacKay 2000). Koedam (1993, 367) asserts that without psychosocial intervention, the witnesses are likely to jeopardise their safety by contacting their family to seek support or resigning from the programme prematurely against the odds of being killed outside the programme without protection.

According to Kayuni and Jamu (2015), ideally psychosocial support in protection programmes should be provided by a team of social workers, medical doctors,

psychologists, and therapists to ensure a coordinated approach to service delivery. The study of Arnold (2007) revealed that there is evidence that successful prosecutions were achieved in Germany and the USA because of the testimony of witnesses who had access to counselling and therapy.

Some of the duties of social workers in the programme include to undertake psychosocial assessments of the witnesses during the admission phase with a view to determine their needs and coping resources, and to develop a protection plan which encompasses the physical safety and psychosocial well-being of the witnesses (Bendo 2015). Holistic support continues even after the witnesses have been discharged from the programme to ensure a successful reintegration process into the community through direct services or referrals to service providers in the community where the witnesses are resettled (Khan 2013). Provision of psychosocial support is indeed necessary to empower and strengthen the witnesses and their families to thrive during a period of stressful events.

The literature reinforces the need for this study to gain an in-depth understanding into the lived experiences of witnesses and the role that social workers can fulfil to help them manage such challenges.

Research Methodology

The qualitative approach and a collective instrumental case study design within the framework of exploratory, descriptive, and contextual research were employed in this study (Creswell 2014). This design enabled the researcher to collect data from more than one group of participants. The views of witnesses were corroborated by those of staff members, thereby strengthening the credibility of the study (Shaw and Holland 2014). The unit of analysis in this study was a witness in the witness protection programme.

Non-probability, purposive sampling was used to select the participants (Shaw and Holland 2014). One of the requirements in the criteria of inclusion was witnesses who have been in the programme for three years and longer, with whom the researcher never had worked or had interaction in her line of duty as a social worker. This was to ensure that the information provided by the participants would not be influenced by an existing work relationship with the researcher.

The sample was obtained from six provinces in South Africa: Gauteng, Mpumalanga, Limpopo, the Eastern Cape, the Northern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal. Data saturation was reached after interviewing 12 witnesses, 12 protectors, three social workers and three senior managers (Merriam and Tisdell 2016). The protectors are officials in the OWP who are mandated to provide physical protection of witnesses. The three senior managers are non-social workers and were from the administration and corporate section of the OWP. The reason for including them in the study is because they are

responsible for the policymaking and decision-making that affects the support of witnesses. The entire population of social workers and senior managers in OWP consists of four social workers including the researcher and three senior managers.

The participants were between the ages of 25 and 49 years. Six witnesses were Black, four were Coloured and two were Indian. Eight witnesses were male and four were female. Five witnesses were employed before being admitted to the OWP and seven were unemployed. The witnesses were in the programme between three and five years. Eight witnesses had been in the programme for three years, three for four years, and one for five years. Eight witnesses were in the programme with their significant other and four were in the programme alone. Regarding the staff members, eight were Black, five were White, three were Indian and two were Coloured. A total of 14 staff members were male and four were female. The length of employment in the OWP ranges from six to fifteen years.

The covert nature of witness protection makes it a sensitive area of research. The researcher first obtained written approval to conduct the study from the National Director of the OWP. Furthermore, approval was obtained from the provincial managers of the OWP who agreed to serve as gatekeepers and to identify the participants. A written approval was attained from the Departmental Research and Ethics Committee (DREC) of the Department of Social Work at the University of South Africa, after submission of a research proposal containing the possible risks and a mitigation plan. The researcher ensured that information on the operations of the OWP, the location of the safe houses and the identity of the participants was not disclosed.

The data were collected by means of face-to-face semi-structured interviews with a guide (Marshall and Rossman 2016). Examples of the questions posed to the witnesses are: What did you know about the OWP before you joined the programme? How did your life change when you became part of the OWP? What challenges do you experience in the OWP? How do you cope with such challenges? How can social workers help you to cope with your experiences and challenges of being in the programme? What are your suggestions on the way in which the OWP can improve the programme in response to your challenges?

The study was first introduced to the participants telephonically in order to request their permission to participate. This was followed by a letter of invitation detailing information on the nature and objectives of the study, a consent form and the researcher's contact details. The consent form was later signed during the data collection. The purpose of the letter was to provide the participants with enough information about the study to enable them to make an informed decision on whether to participate or not. At the beginning of each interview, the participants were reminded that their participation is voluntary, that they had a right to withdraw from the study at any point and that counselling services were available for any participant who were upset or traumatised by having participated in the interviews. A colleague at the

National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) had given written consent to provide such services as and when required. However, the service was not used as there were no incidents of trauma. The interviews were conducted between May and June 2018.

The interview guide was tested on two participants by means of a pilot study (Marshall and Rossman 2016). The interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed. The data were analysed in line with the eight steps of data analysis constructed by Tesch (in Creswell 2014). The researcher made use of an independent coder to review the study by analysing aspects such as the relationship between interviews and transcripts and also the development of themes, subthemes and categories. In addition, the following ethical considerations were observed:

- Ensuring confidentiality and anonymity: During the data analysis, the names of the participants were replaced with codes and pseudonyms while transcripts were kept in a safe, to be destroyed after five years (Beqiri 2018). The participants were reassured that their identity would not be exposed and that the only people who were to access the raw data were the study supervisor and the independent coder.
- Ensuring beneficence and avoiding deception: The researcher's conviction is that the outcomes of this study will help to improve the well-being of witnesses and contribute to service delivery improvement in the OWP. The participants were made aware that the study is part of a PhD qualification and that there was no direct and immediate benefit for their participation.
- Managing information: The biggest risk to the witnesses was the exposure of their identity and location. In mitigating this risk, the researcher ensured that the witnesses were each interviewed separately so that their identity was not exposed to each other. The witnesses were interviewed at their safe houses and the staff members at their offices. Furthermore, the raw data from the interviews were locked in a safe inside a strong room in line with the Minimum Information Security Standards Policy (South Africa 1996). A soft copy of the transcripts was password-protected on the computer (Wahyuni 2012).

In order to enhance the trustworthiness of this study, the principles of credibility, dependability, transferability and conformability, as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), were observed. The researcher made use of triangulation by collecting data from more than one source, i.e. the witnesses, protectors, social workers, senior managers, and the literature (Yates and Leggett 2016). The evaluation of the data and the process followed in the collection of the data were done through peer scrutiny. Consultation with the study supervisor throughout the process helped to enhance the quality of the study while the independent coder examined the data and formulated themes (Marshall and Rossman 2016).

The researcher used thick description by way of direct quotations from transcripts when presenting the findings of the study (Merriam and Tisdell 2016). With regard to dependability, the study was conducted in line with the plan that was approved by the

DREC and the study was further subjected to scrutiny by the external examiners (Shaw and Holland 2014). Transferability was complied with by providing a detailed account of the processes that were followed with regard to research methodology (Tracy 2013). In keeping up with the principle of conformability, the researcher applied bracketing to guard against own bias and subjectivity considering that the study was conducted in a familiar environment. This helped to put aside own personal insights and knowledge of the OWP and only focused on the vintage point of the participants. The researcher also observed the principle of reflexivity to ensure impartiality, honesty, self-reflection and awareness of own motive of the study.

Research Findings

Three themes emerged from the analysis of the data, namely, the participants' lack of knowledge about the OWP at the time of joining the programme, the need for psychosocial support of witnesses, and discharge, reintegration and aftercare services.

Theme 1: Participants' Lack of Knowledge about the OWP at the Time of Joining the Programme

The participants mentioned that the lack of awareness of the programme leads to unrealistic expectations, confusion and anxiety when witnesses are admitted to the programme. The witnesses revealed that even during the admission process, information provided to them about the programme was insufficient. The lack of knowledge is a challenge for both witnesses and staff members. Although the participants had knowledge of the OWP at the time of participating in the study, they did not have the same knowledge at the time of joining the programme. The absence of awareness of the existence of the programme appears to be a stumbling block for people who have witnessed crime to come forward with information as they do not know that they have an option to be protected. The lack of sufficient information for the police officers and prosecutors who are responsible for recruiting witnesses into the programme is likely to result in misinformation to the witnesses:

The Hawks¹ did not explain anything about the programme. They just told me that I have to sign for the programme. I think someone should have explained to me what is going to happen and also give me a chance to go and tell my mother about the programme. (Witness)

It was for the first time that I heard about OWP. I thought it is a programme that I will be attending for few weeks like those programmes that young offenders are sent by the

1 The Hawks are South Africa's Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation.

courts to attend, but only to find that I am here to stay. No-one explained to me what was going to happen. (Witness)

I did not know much about OWP except for what is being portrayed on TV because OWP is a very covert programme. There is not much information available on the internet either. (Protector)

Researchers (Kaur 2011; Stepakoff et al. 2017) note that the shock of entering the programme without preparing oneself psychologically makes it harder for the witnesses to adjust to the new living conditions. The participants who are staff members seemed to believe that these challenges could be mitigated by collaboration between the OWP and the Department of Social Development:

In terms of awareness we have established a link with all the detective academies nationally where we do presentations about OWP. One of the aspects in the presentation is the admission requirements and contact numbers of OWP. We have however not made any contact with the Department of Social Development and I think we should have so that they may disseminate information through their NGOs. (Senior manager)

The participants believed that social workers could play a vital role during the admission of the witnesses:

The social worker assists with the assessment of the witness at the inception by providing information, and recommendations on how best to manage the trauma. It is a function that informs the protection team on how best to manage the witness, also a liaison between the family, the OWP, and the witness. Some witnesses recover from their trauma by the time they go to court because of social work support. (Senior manager)

Khan (2013) and Vincent (2016) emphasise that a psychosocial assessment is an important aspect that is carried out at the initial stage of the protection programme to determine the needs and the management process of a witness. The Council of Europe (2018) states that protection programmes should circulate information pertaining to the programme to social institutions, authorities, and judicial institutions to ensure publicity. It should also transfer certain responsibilities to other stakeholders such as various government departments. The Manual on Human Rights Monitoring of the United Nations (2011) recommends collaboration between the protection programmes and other role players to ensure efficient service delivery.

Theme 2: The Need for Psychosocial Support

The participants suggested that the witnesses require psychosocial support to help them cope with the effects of social uprooting, to prepare for trial and to heal from the emotional wounds induced by the crime. The following subthemes emerged from this theme, namely: the witnesses experience anxiety and fear to testify in court, the witnesses struggle to cope and adjust in the programme without support, and the

witnesses struggle to access psychosocial services because of a shortage of social workers.

Subtheme 1: Witnesses Experience Anxiety and Fear to Testify in Court

The participants mentioned that the witnesses experience anxiety because of having to recount the traumatic incidents that led to their admission and the uneasiness of encountering the perpetrators in court:

Going to court is so terrifying for me. I am always thinking whether someone will kill me there or not. (Witness)

It was my first time going to court, I was a little bit afraid, I asked God to give me strength for the justice of my child. (Witness)

The fear of going to court among the witnesses was also observed by the staff members:

Many witnesses have not been exposed to the court environment before, so sometimes they are nervous. They are confident before they go to court but once they get there, they become scared as they have to face the perpetrators and they end up not giving good evidence in court. (Protector)

According to Vincent (2016), this is because of the intimidation that the witnesses experience from the perpetrators before they are admitted to the programme. Mujkanovic (2014) asserts that the anxiety of giving testimony is likely to compromise the quality of the evidence. Dulume (2016) states that without support and intervention to mitigate the impact of intimidation, some witnesses resort to changing their statements or withdrawing criminal charges to avoid coming into contact with the perpetrators. In some instances, the intimidation continues to take place in court through creepy gestures by the perpetrators and their supporters, especially in gang-related cases (Kayuni 2015).

The participants recommended the provision of psychosocial services to help witnesses to deal with the effects of intimidation:

Social workers assist us by offering moral support, emotional support and they try to help a witness to cope with the experiences that they had before they came to the programme. I believe all witnesses come to the programme with some amount of trauma. The fact that one has witnessed a crime means they are not well emotionally. Social workers assist us to find a way forward in our life and ensure that we will not revert to our past. They also help us to adjust to our new environments. (Witness)

Staff members made the same observation:

There was a witness recently who only wanted to talk to a social worker. Maybe she felt that social workers can help her from a humane point of view. There are a few witnesses who received social work services to help them cope and we were able to secure good

prosecutions with those witnesses. So yes, social workers have an important role to play, especially for the witnesses who are traumatised. (Protector)

The provision of counselling and therapy by social workers in the protection programmes resonates with the literature (Beqiri 2018; Kayuni and Jamu 2015; Vincent 2016). Such services include assessing the witnesses during their admission to determine the level of trauma and coping mechanisms, and providing debriefing, counselling and therapy. Social workers may also provide court preparation services, such as educating the witness about the role of various court officials, court processes and familiarising the witness with the inside of the court room. By sitting next to the witness in court during the trial, the social worker may help to reduce their anxiety and provide reassurance. Heffer and Willoughby (2017) state that the witnesses who are exposed to positive coping strategies can manage stress and anxiety better. Literature on coping and counselling suggests that individuals in general can manage stressful environments through counselling and therapeutic services (Lazarus and Folkman 1984; Padden, Connors, and Agazio 2011; Uys 2002).

Subtheme 2: Witnesses Struggle to Cope and Adjust in the Programme Without Support

The difficulties of witnesses to adjust to the programme and to cope with the conditions of the programme such as not being able to socialise, adapting to a new environment, strict rules and isolation were raised:

I can't make friends here. They will ask who I am and I cannot tell them the truth. I can't tell people who I am and where I am from. It is easy to lie to people for a day or a month but not for the whole year so most of the time I just sleep and avoid going out. (Witness)

It was very hard when we first got here. I told them [my family] I have to leave you guys, I don't have any choice. They didn't understand but eventually we have to cope. It was hard for us. I only see my children when we go to court. (Witness)

The views of the witnesses were echoed by the staff members:

No, I don't think they [witnesses] are coping, coming into an unfamiliar environment, having to make new friends. Witnesses find it difficult, obviously the rules were created for their safety but I think they are intrusive on witnesses. (Social worker)

That is a problem [isolation], it frustrates witnesses to an extent that they think it is not worth it to be on the programme, they feel lonely. Witnesses are also not allowed to travel far from the safe house. We can see that they are struggling to cope, very few witnesses are content to be on the programme. Mostly they just want to finish testifying and go out of the programme. The issue of being away from the family, sometimes the witness has not had an opportunity to see their family since they are on the programme. Because of loneliness some witnesses just leave the programme, without even telling us. (Social worker)

According to Fyfe and McKay (2000), being admitted to the programme means witnesses are removed from their families, quit their jobs and are resettled in unfamiliar areas far from their homes where they cannot be recognised by anyone. They are expected to abide by the strict life-changing rules, some of which restrict movement, impedes socialisation and freedom (Mack 2014). It appears that these rules result in unintended consequences that make it difficult for witnesses to lead a normal life, and also have an impact on their psychosocial well-being (Kayuni and Jamu 2015). Stepakoff et al. (2017) identified social uprooting and isolation as the main challenges faced by witnesses in protection programmes. The participants recommended social work intervention to help witnesses manage some of the challenges that make it difficult for them to cope and adjust in the OWP:

That [social work services] is very important for me because sometimes our children face challenges even at school. They cannot speak to me because I could be stressed and irritated to listen to them. That is why we need social workers to intervene, it will be nice if we could access a social worker at any time. Going through a protector and making an appointment sometimes takes too long as protectors often go away. We are not saying you must come every month but regularly. (Witness)

The staff members share the same views:

It would have been ideal and perfect to have a fully-fledged social service in each region, this is a very important function, it is unfair to expect one social worker to do assessments and also do aftercare. (Senior manager)

I think social workers are valuable here [in OWP], they can support witnesses. (Protector)

This suggestion is supported by Kayuni and Jamu (2015) who recommend access to a 24-hour on-call service by psychosocial personnel to enable witnesses to cope better and to improve accessibility. Beqiri (2018) proposes the following services that could be provided by social workers to alleviate witnesses' challenges: developing and implementing job placement programmes for unskilled witnesses to help them to secure jobs in order to augment the minimal financial allowance that is provided by the protection programmes. Rehabilitation programmes to assist in reducing the level of recidivism as some witnesses were part of committing the crimes. Without rehabilitation such witnesses revert to crime when they leave the programme. Social workers may also intervene to ensure that children of schoolgoing age are placed in schools soon after they are admitted to the programme to avoid falling behind with regard to their academic programme. According to Koedam (1993), the absence of sufficient psychosocial intervention of witnesses lead to premature withdrawal from the programme and some witnesses resorting to suicide.

Subtheme 3: Witnesses Experience Difficulties to Access Social Work Services

The participants reported that the witnesses struggle to access social work services because of a shortage of social workers in the OWP:

Witnesses in OWP wait for a long time before they can see social workers. I think OWP should adopt a model that is used in prisons where social workers are able to see inmates immediately instead of waiting for referrals. (Social workers)

I think social workers should visit witnesses regularly. A social worker is best suited to listen to the concerns of the witness and help them. (Protector)

The difficulty of accessing social work services is attributed to the shortage and availability of social workers in the OWP. Kayuni and Jamu (2015) are of the view that the shortage of essential services, such as social work in protection programmes, may result in further devastation of the witnesses. Mahony (2010) and Irish et al. (2000) found that the shortage of skilled personnel who are responsible for the management of psychosocial services of witnesses in South Africa is concerning. Mack (2014) stated that witnesses are likely to contact their families for support if they are not supported in the programme, and by so doing compromising their safety and breaching the protection agreement. The covert nature of the programme requires psychosocial services to be provided by internal social workers only to ensure that the identity of a witness is not compromised. However, this appears to be contributing to the challenge of accessibility of the service:

In general, OWP has social workers within but because of shortage of staff, we end up using external social workers. Social workers are important in terms of trying to rebuild the witness' confidence and well-being. (Protector)

I would say if government and management could make it possible that OWP be independent and get their independent professionals like social workers and psychologists, services will be better, and witnesses will relate more easily. When we admit witnesses, we tell them that they must not reveal any information about themselves. As a result, the witness does not know how much to reveal to the external social worker. It is not easy for them. (Protector)

It appears that the witnesses find themselves in a difficult position as they do not know how much information to share during therapeutic services with external social workers. Koedam (1993) states that holding back and keeping secrets in therapy work against the witness and the healing process. The literature suggests that every witness who enters the programme should be afforded psychosocial support that is responsive to their needs (Kayuni and Jamu 2015). The initial threat assessment of witnesses during admission should include a psychosocial assessment to ensure that social workers are able to attend to the needs of the witnesses timeously (Dulume 2016).

Theme 3: Discharge, Reintegration and Aftercare Services

A concern about the way in which the lives of witnesses are impacted after they exit the programme was raised. The challenge seems to stem from uncertainty about the future. The witnesses who are not able to return home because of persistent threats on their lives struggle to sustain themselves without support:

If we leave the programme in the middle of the year will OWP continue to pay for the education of my children? Otherwise, I will have to take them out of school because I do not have a job. (Witness)

We cannot go back home because the gangs definitely will kill us. There is a network of these guys, it doesn't help if some of them are in prison because they are so many. When we finish here in the programme we have to start all over again. Where are we going to get money for the house, furniture, my medical needs, I started to use a catheter, disposable nappies, the wheelchair and medicines. I sustained injuries from the incident where my daughter was killed by a gang. How are we going to survive? (Witness)

The staff members expressed concerns about the lack of sufficient support for the witnesses who are discharged from the programme:

When witnesses leave, I feel that OWP is pushy, many become destitute, they become lost because they cannot go back home, they don't have a house or anyone to go to. I feel that many times witnesses are pushed out of the programme because they are finished testifying, we don't know where they will end up going. It is like they no longer belong here. It is like the witness is no longer our problem. (Protector)

This concern was verified by Irish et al. (2000) that South African witnesses are discharged a few weeks after finalisation of their court case without providing aftercare services. An example of the struggles of witnesses was reported by Palezweni (2019) in the *Weekend Post*, which stated that two witnesses who were discharged from the OWP revealed their difficulties regarding the lack of aftercare and support to the newspapers. Fyfe and McKay (2000) contend that witnesses are often faced with a challenge of starting a new life without support because of the continued threat on their lives that prohibits them from returning home.

Support services to witnesses should not be terminated immediately after discharge from the programme because the threat often continues even after finalising the court case (Mack 2014). In addition, social workers may develop skills programmes to empower witnesses to become self-sufficient when they exit the programme, especially those who are unable to return home. Without skills, the witnesses who are used to benefitting from the proceeds of crime are likely to revert to crime in order to feed themselves.

Rehabilitation programmes would help to reduce the level of recidivism (Mahony 2010). It is important for social workers to oversee the discharge of witnesses to ensure

a successful family reunion and community reintegration. Social workers may also provide aftercare services to ensure continuity of services by linking witnesses with resources and services in the communities where they are resettled. This will enable them to start a new life and gain some level of self-dependency (Mack 2014).

The participants suggested social work intervention through interdepartmental collaboration as a possible solution to the challenges of unsatisfactory discharge, family reunification and community reintegration of witnesses:

It would work better if OWP could integrate with other government departments and discharge witnesses to other departments, such as the Department of Social Development because they render better aftercare programmes. (Protector)

I think OWP should provide witnesses with suitable accommodation when they leave the programme, especially those who cannot go back to their homes. I think we should find safe houses in certain areas outside OWP that can accommodate witnesses when they leave the programme. (Protector)

The literature emphasises the importance of a holistic and integrated approach in supporting witnesses (Bendo 2015; Dulume 2016; Vincent 2016). Appleyard (2011) and Irish et al. (2000) argue that the outcome of the psychosocial assessment conducted at the initial stages of the programme could be used to determine the support services that will be required by witnesses when they exit the programme. Fery (2012) emphasises the importance for the protection programmes to make arrangements for long-term support at the time of witnesses exiting the programme.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This article provided a description of the challenges experienced by witnesses in the OWP and the role that social workers can play to help them to adjust and cope better in the programme and to reintegrate successfully into the community. The witnesses encountered disappointments because of a lack of knowledge and information about the programme.

Experiences of intimidation leads to trauma; as a result some witnesses claim poor recollection of events and withdraw their statements because of fearing for their lives. This trauma, if not treated, affects the quality of the witnesses' testimony and result in long-term mental illness. The witnesses also experience a fear of giving testimony in court as they must come into contact with the perpetrators. They shared their experiences of social uprooting and isolation, resulting in difficulties to cope without psychosocial support.

The witnesses also highlighted the challenge to access social work services because of the shortage of social workers in the OWP. The lack of aftercare services contribute to

the uncertainty about the future for the witnesses. Without support, some witnesses are forced to fend for themselves, others resort to going back to the same danger areas from which they were initially removed to seek the support of family.

OWP social workers need to work with social workers in the Department of Social Development and the South African Police Service to develop and implement awareness programmes about OWP services. These services should target the police officers and prosecutors who are responsible for the recruitment of witnesses into the programme and victims of crime. People who have witnessed crime will also be encouraged to come forward with information, knowing that they will be protected. Awareness on the way in which the programme functions will empower the prosecutors and the police officers to provide correct information about the programme when recruiting potential witnesses to avoid confusion about services offered in the programme.

The threat assessment needs to be conducted in conjunction with a psychosocial assessment to ensure a coordinated approach to service delivery. This means OWP social workers need to play an active role from admission to disengagement and aftercare. OWP social workers could be provided with specialised training on trauma. It is important for the OWP to consider employment of additional social workers, at least one social worker per province, to ensure that the social work service is easily accessible to all witnesses. There is a need to forge collaboration between the OWP and the Departments of Social Development, Health, Human Settlements and Education to ensure provision of aftercare services. These services include family reunification, housing and access to medical care after the witnesses have left the programme.

Future research on the way in which the witnesses who were discharged from the programme managed to reintegrate successfully into their families and the community can make a further contribution to an understanding of the experiences and needs of witnesses after they have left the programme. As this witness testifies, OWP social workers does have a role to play but need to do so to a much greater extent: “Social workers assist us to find a way forward in our life and ensure that we will not revert to our past. They also help us to adjust to our new environments.”

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