



# Ohio Crime Victim Justice Center

Chairman Jay Edwards, Ohio House Finance Committee  
77 South High Street, 12th Floor  
Columbus, OH 43215

RE: HB 33, State Operating Budget

Chairman Edwards:

I'm writing on behalf of Ohio Crime Victim's Justice Center (OCVJC). OCVJC submitted a budget request for state funding of our services earlier in the deliberations of the state budget. OCVJC did not make it into the first version of the budget and I'm writing to you today to again request state dollars as we are in **dire need** of state assistance to help crime victims protect and seek enforcement of their rights. With this in mind, **OCVJC is seeking immediate assistance of \$4 million per year in the form of GRF funding.**

House Bill 343 from the last General Assembly passed and became effective April 6, 2023. This law harmonized Ohio's crime victim statutes with the rights given to crime victims in Ohio's Marsy's Law constitutional amendment. Ohio law now requires victim's to be given a [Victim's Bill of Rights Palm Card](#) identifying their rights and how to seek enforcement of their rights if they are denied. This card **must** contain contact information for OCVJC as we are the primary provider of pro-bono legal assistance to crime victims in Ohio with a proven 22-year history (ORC Section 109.42 (B)(1)(c)(IV) found on lines 1616-1619). In addition, every crime victim must be provided a [Victims' Rights Request Form](#). The Victims' Rights Request Form also provides crime victims with OCVJC contact information to request legal assistance if their rights are violated.

Within **four days** of our April 6, 2023 press conference announcing the effective date of HB 343, OCVJC saw a dramatic increase from crime victims in need of assistance. Some statistics:

- [The Ohio Victims Rights Toolkit](#) (a web-based portal that helps victims' understand their rights) has seen **traffic increase by 1800%**.
- [OCVJC website](#) traffic increased by 646%.
- **And requests for pro-bono legal assistance increased by 450%.**

This dramatic increase was due to one day of media coverage. At this time, we can only predict a 450% increase in requests from crime victims in need of legal assistance to protect and seek enforcement of their rights. However, when the Victims' Rights Request Form is fully

implemented and provided to all crime victims over the next few months, OCVJC will see an even greater increase in requests for assistance from crime victims.

**OCVJC simply cannot sustain or respond to this level of need without assistance.** Each of these cases involve Ohioans who are in some of the most dire and difficult situations. Ohio's Constitution and now Ohio law requires that their rights be protected in a manner no less vigorous than the rights afforded to the accused.

Financial support is needed to ensure Ohio Crime Victim Justice Center's ability to provide no cost legal assistance to crime victims across Ohio. **Without this critical funding, OCVJC will be forced to turn away thousands of crime victims in need of assistance.** This funding will allow OCVJC to:

- Provide sufficient no-cost legal assistance to crime victims throughout the state to protect and enforce their rights.
- Provide intake specialists to navigate the significant increase in requests for assistance from crime victims when the Victims' Rights Request Form and Marsy's Law Card are implemented.
- Provide assurance to crime victims who are concerned their rights are being violated when, in fact, they are not. As a victim-centered organization, crime victims are more inclined to trust in assurance from OCVJC that their case is going *right*. This in turn helps to build the trust between crime victims and criminal justice officials that is critical to ensuring victims maintain confidence in the criminal justice system.
- Conduct outreach and public education to reduce victims' rights violations with an emphasis on underserved populations.
- Provide victims' rights training to criminal justice officials and allied professionals to reduce victims' rights violations.
- Update and maintain OCVJC's Victims' Rights Toolkit.
- Establish and maintain a statewide victims' rights pro bono attorney referral network.

It's important to understand a brief history of the victims' rights movement in Ohio. It wasn't until 1994 that Ohio crime victims had any rights. It was a tremendous achievement to secure rights for crime victims at that time. Sadly, and unbelievably, there was a lot of opposition, and therefor the need for compromise to get the amendment passed. The compromises resulted in limitations that denied crime victims the ability to protect and enforce their rights.

My own personal experience as a survivor opened my eyes to the harsh reality that although crime victims had rights, there was nothing we could do to protect and enforce our rights. There was no place for us to report and receive legal assistance when our rights were violated. In fact, we were told we were not even allowed to have an attorney to help protect and enforce our rights. Victims' rights laws were illusory paper promises with no means of enforcement, and as a result, routinely ignored.

I founded Ohio Crime Victim Justice Center (OCVJC) in 2000 to provide crime victims a place to report and receive assistance when their rights are violated. I started the organization in my

dining room and used my savings to fund the effort because there was no available funding to provide these services to crime victims. Over the years, OVJC received limited funding from the Ohio Office of Criminal Justice Services and Ohio Attorney General's Office.

As the first and only organization in Ohio dedicated to protecting and enforcing crime victims' rights, **OCVJC has grown to become the primary provider of no-cost legal assistance to Ohio crime victims.**

**OCVJC is the primary provider of victims' rights training** for criminal justice officials and allied professionals, having trained over 11,630 law enforcement, advocates, prosecutors, judges, and other allied professionals since the passage of Marsy's Law.

**OCVJC is the developer of the [Victims' Rights Toolkit](#)**, an intuitive self-help resource that provides information about victims' rights during each stage of the criminal justice process and provides tools to help crime victims exercise their rights.

**OCVJC is the leading legal service provider for victims' rights litigation in Ohio**, generating favorable case law in Ohio's appellate courts and the Supreme Court of Ohio, which not only serves to protect individual crime victims, but serves to reduce future victims' rights violation.

**OCVJC is a national leader in the victims' rights enforcement movement.** OCVJC's favorable case law is utilized by victims' rights legal clinics throughout the country. OCVJC is routinely invited to provide victims' rights training via a variety of national platforms.

**OCVJC is known for its innovative work in protecting and advancing crime victims' rights.** OCVJC has received state and national recognition from the Ohio House and Senate, Ohio Attorney General's Office, Ohio State Bar Foundation, National Foundation for the Improvement of Justice, National Crime Victim Law Institute, National Organization for Victim Assistance, People Magazine and many others.

In 2017, the Marsy's Law Victims' Rights constitutional amendment passed by an overwhelming 83%. The amendment serves as a promise that victims' rights ***"... shall be protected in a manner no less vigorous than the rights afforded to the accused."***

However, the passage of victims' rights laws alone does not mean that all victims will be provided the opportunity to exercise their rights. This has been consistently proven since the passage of the first victims' rights constitutional amendment in 1994, implementing legislation in 1996, and the passage of the Marsy's Law constitutional amendment in 2017.

**For many crime victims, especially those who cannot afford to hire an attorney to seek enforcement of their rights, victims' rights are still illusory paper promises.**

**We all build trust with crime victims by working together to eliminate barriers to their access to justice.** Crime victims need and deserve access to no-cost legal assistance to protect

and enforce their rights. The dramatic increase in requests for assistance from my office demonstrates the need. I'm asking you to please help OCVJC help Ohio victims of crime. Please consider our request for funding.

Sincerely,

Catherine Harper Lee

CC: Vice Chairman Jeff LaRe

Ohio House Speaker Jason Stephens

Ranking Member Bride Rose Sweeny

Members, Ohio House Finance Committee