



House Public Safety Committee
March 13, 2025
Ohio Victim Witness Association
Elyse McConnell, Executive Director

Chair Stewart, Vice Chair Dovilla, Ranking Member Sweeney, and members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Elyse McConnell, and I am the executive director of the Ohio Victim Witness Association (OVWA). OVWA has been a statewide leader for victim advocates since 1978, promoting excellence and ethics in the field of victim services through education, best practice, public policy, and technical assistance. Today, we represent over 540 victim advocates and allied professionals in prosecutor's offices, nonprofits, police forces, healthcare systems, and more. Like ourselves, most of our member organizations are multidisciplinary in nature, providing comprehensive, empathetic services to victims of all types of crime. In a single day our members may provide services to victims of identity theft, labor trafficking, family violence, elder neglect, and discrimination.

Victim advocates play an essential role in the justice system. I encourage you to put yourself in the shoes of a victim in Ohio. Imagine that last night, your adult child was murdered as he made a late-night bank deposit for his job. You are deeply traumatized. The police who delivered the news were empathetic. They gave you pamphlets of information, but in your shocked state, you are having trouble comprehending any of it. You filled out paperwork with the police, but you cannot remember what any of it was. You feel lost.

A week goes by, and you get a call from the detective on your son's case. They have made an arrest. You are relieved, but anxious to learn more about the person who ended your son's life.

The next day, you get a call from the prosecutor's office. It is the victim advocate assigned to your case. This person will be there for you during the entire trial—and in some cases, beyond. They will listen as you relive the events and talk about your son. They will assist you in applying for Crime Victim's Compensation to help pay for your son's funeral. They will revisit the forms you filled out with the police to ensure that you are asserting the rights you want.

When the defense attorney files motion after motion and delays the case, you are annoyed but not enraged, because the victim advocate has prepared you for this probability. When the prosecutor suggests the idea of a plea deal, the victim advocate ensures that you are able to have your voice heard in the process.

This is the work that victim advocates do every day. They walk alongside victims as they pursue justice, healing, safety, and restitution. These services are time-intensive. Yet, today, victim



advocates are stretched thin as they work to do more with less.

Until 2018, most victim's services organizations were primarily funded by federal Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) grants. Over the past seven years, distributions from this fund to Ohio have diminished by 76%, devastating the field of crime victims' services—and in turn, Ohioans who have been the victim of a crime.

Over the past several years, the State of Ohio has stepped in to increase funding for several populations of crime victims, and we thank you for this support. This commitment has been incredible, and at the same time, there are victim services providers that are simply not eligible for the funding already set aside. This has left victims of homicide, assault, robbery, and other violent crimes receiving services from underfunded agencies. For this reason, I ask that you work to close this gap in services by supporting an amendment to allocate \$5 million annually for multidisciplinary victim services agencies through the Attorney General's office. Funds would be used to provide victims of crime with crisis response, victim advocacy, and other supportive services.

Studies have shown that victims who have connected with an advocate are more likely to participate in prosecution and to feel that the court process has been safe, fair, and responsive to their needs.¹ State support is needed to ensure that victims have access to the services that Ohio law now says they are entitled to.

Thank you in advance for your consideration of this request. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.

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<https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/docs/JCS/domesticViolence/topics/DVCourts/DVWorkingAdvocates.pdf>