



House Public Safety Committee
March 5, 2025
Ohio Victim Witness Association
Elyse McConnell, Executive Director

Chair Abrams, Vice Chair Miller, Ranking Member Thomas, and members of the House Public Safety 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 serve an essential role both inside and outside of the criminal justice system. Advocates walk alongside victims of crime, providing emotional support, advising them of their rights as crime victims, educating them on their options, and supporting them as they pursue the course of action the victim determines is best for them. This can look different depending on where the victims' services department is housed, but in general, services include:

- Information about the criminal justice process
- Information about their rights as victims of crime
- Assistance in exercising their rights
- Notifications of court actions
- Court accompaniment
- Accompaniment to law enforcement interviews, prosecutor interviews, and/or parole board hearings
- Crisis response
- Safety planning and protection order information
- Help with the crime victim compensation application
- VINE registration assistance
- Referrals to other wrap-around services



In Ohio, victims of crime have had rights since the 1990s, but these rights were expanded and implementation guidance was instituted more recently under Marsy's Law.¹ Every day, advocates educate victims on their rights and how to assert them. This is an essential role in ensuring that our justice system is accessible and fair.

The Problem: Most victim's services organizations are funded in part or in full by Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) grants. At the federal level, money for VOCA is drawn from the Crime Victims Fund (CVF). The CVF is not taxpayer-funded. Rather, deposits to the CVF originate from criminal fines, forfeited bail bonds, penalties, and special assessments collected by U.S. Attorneys' Offices, federal U.S. courts, and the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

In Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2018, receipts into the fund began to diminish due to a decrease in the federal prosecution of corporations in criminal actions like fraud and corruption cases and an increase in non-prosecution and deferred prosecution agreements. Compounding the issue was increased direct appropriations from the CVF to the Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) in FFYs 2018 and 2019, which further reduced the amount available for VOCA program purposes. These direct appropriations will continue.

In 2021, Congress passed the VOCA Fix to Sustain the Crime Victims Fund Act. The bill directed revenues collected from deferred prosecution and non-prosecution agreements to be deposited into the Crime Victims Fund. Although the passage of the VOCA Fix was necessary, replenishing the fund is taking a long time. Deposits into the fund simply have not been enough to shore up fund balances quickly enough to maintain level funding disbursements.

Year-after-year funding losses have been devastating to the field of crime victims' services—and in turn, to the Ohioans who have been the victim of a crime. As a result of the cuts, organizations have closed, discontinued victim's services, or severely reduced staff sizes. A 2022 compensation report² completed in partnership with our sibling coalitions confirmed that program directors are seeing higher staff turnover and high levels of burnout and trauma. Low pay, limited benefits, and poor work/life balance were all cited as persistent issues in the field of victims' services.

I ask that you support creation of a new line item with \$5 million each fiscal year for

¹ <https://codes.ohio.gov/ohio-revised-code/chapter-2930>

² <https://www.odvn.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/VSCQ-FINAL-Report-6.15.22.pdf>



victim services agencies. The fund as proposed would be overseen by the Attorney General's Office, through which similar but distinct funds are already administered. 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.³ 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.