



May 27, 2025

Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Members Hicks-Hudson, and esteemed members of the Senate Finance Committee,

I'm here on behalf of the Lorain County Prosecutor's Office Victim Witness Division to share insight into the critical services we provide to survivors of crime and to express the urgent challenges we face due to ongoing and significant reductions in funding. Our program has long served as a cornerstone of support for individuals navigating the aftermath of trauma. While our commitment remains steadfast, the resources we depend on to fulfill our mission have been severely diminished.

### **Background and Community Context**

Lorain County is among the 10 most populous counties in Ohio. It is home to several higher education institutions, correctional facilities, and rapidly growing suburban communities. In 2020, the county's population was 312,964. By July 2024, it had grown to an estimated 322,030 residents.

Over the past five years, the demand for our services has increased dramatically. In 2020–2021, our office served 11,237 victims. That number rose to 11,415 in 2021–2022, then surged to 14,151 in 2022–2023, and reached 16,761 in 2023–2024. In just the first two quarters of the current fiscal year (2024–2025), we have already supported 5,027 individuals. This represents a 49.2% increase in victims served since 2020, underscoring both the growing need in our community and the trust victims place in our services.

### **Staffing and Workload**

Despite this rising demand, our staff has not increased. In 2023–2024, our five victim advocates each supported an average of 3,352 individuals—approximately 67 people per week. These advocates serve six Common Pleas General Division courtrooms and three Juvenile Division courtrooms. They handle all incoming calls and walk-ins, provide crisis intervention, safety planning, court accompaniment, and ensure compliance with Marsy's Law (wherein Ohioans voted to enshrine specific rights for crime victims) and grant obligations.

This workload is unsustainable. While our team continues to do more with less, this is not a viable long-term model. No private sector organization would be expected to operate under such conditions, and our citizens deserve public services that are funded and staffed in alignment with their needs.

## **Funding Crisis**

The funding landscape has deteriorated significantly. VOCA (Victims of Crime Act) disbursements to Ohio have declined by nearly 77% since 2019 due to reductions in the federal Crime Victims Fund. Our program has experienced a 58.9% cut in VOCA funding—from \$263,000 in 2019 to just \$108,000 annually since 2022. These cuts have forced us to make difficult decisions, even as our caseloads grow in volume and complexity.

Currently, only four of our five advocates receive partial VOCA funding. The remainder of their salaries must be covered by our already strained general fund.

## **The Human Impact**

Our advocates are often the first point of contact for victims in crisis. They provide not only logistical and legal support but also emotional care and stability. The emotional toll on our staff is profound. They carry the weight of others' trauma while facing burnout, secondary trauma, and the stress of working in an underfunded system. Despite limited recognition or compensation, they continue to show up every day, driven by a deep commitment to justice and healing.

## **A Call to Action**

We are at a critical crossroads. Without the restoration and expansion of funding, we risk losing the infrastructure that allows us to serve victims effectively. The consequences would be devastating—not only for our staff but for the thousands of individuals who rely on us each year for safety, support, and a path forward.

We respectfully urge you to recognize the essential nature of our work and the profound impact that sustained and increased funding would have on our ability to serve victims with the dignity, care, and attention they deserve. Please support the creation of a new line item with \$5 million annually to support victim services agencies that serve a general victim population. Every victim deserves to be heard, supported, and protected. With your help, we can continue to make that a reality.

Thank you for your time, consideration, and commitment to supporting victims of crime.

Sincerely,



Billie Jo Belcher, Esq., CIPPE-E, CISSP

Chief of Staff

Lorain County Prosecutor's Office

225 Court Street, 3rd Floor

Elyria, Ohio 44035

(440) 329-5389

[Billiejo.belcher@lcprosecutor.org](mailto:Billiejo.belcher@lcprosecutor.org)