

May 30, 2025

Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Senate Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Sheri Sweeney, and I am the Program Director for the Lake County Prosecutor Victim Assistance Program. Part of the Office of the Prosecutor, our advocacy program provides essential services to victims and their loved ones who have experienced sexual assault, domestic violence, elder abuse, theft, stalking, and death of a loved one by homicide.

Our program provides and assists victims/survivors with:

- Trauma-informed advocacy
- Education and information about the criminal justice system
- Crime victim rights information (Legally mandated notifications if your office is tasked with providing this service by the prosecutor)
- Victim impact statements
- Court accompaniment
- Accompaniment to law enforcement, prosecution interviews, and parole board hearings
- Assistance in exercising their Constitutional rights as victims of crime
- Safety planning and information pertaining to protection orders
- Assistance applying to the Ohio Crime Victim Compensation Program and victim notification systems
- Referrals to local, state, and national programs
- Crisis response services
- Collaborative advocacy within the criminal justice system and local victim service programs
- Personal advocacy

The passage of Marsy's Law by Ohio voters in 2017 enshrined crime victims' constitutionally mandated rights. Victim advocates are essential in educating victims of crime about their rights and ensuring access to assert these rights. Victim advocates provide emotional support, education, and linkage with essential resources. Our advocates are the employees who complete the legal requirement to alert victims of upcoming hearings.

From 2018 to 2024, VOCA disbursements to Ohio decreased by almost 77% due to the decline of the Crime Victims Fund. Our program has seen significant VOCA decreases of approximately 60%, or \$286,000 since 2018. As a result of the drastic funding cuts, LCVAP lost one victim advocate and an administrative assistant. The loss of these two positions has resulted in increased caseloads and clerical work for the remaining advocates. In the past year, the caseload for advocates has reached 215 cases, with many cases involving several victims. In total, we served over 1100 victims in 2024.

Victim advocates work with the most serious cases and the victims need support. Advocates take their cases seriously and want the best trauma-informed care services for their victims. Many times, advocates are the only stability in victims' lives. It is not wise to switch advocates on a serious case where the victim is comfortable with the advocate, which leaves advocates frequently conflicted about canceling time off and being available for their victims. Often, advocates make it work to their own detriment. They are underpaid and overworked as increases in salary have been capped at cost of living only. However, they remain dedicated to the program.

Since 2018, there has also been increased staff turnover related to staff burnout because of increased caseloads. Two advocates have been employed for over 25 years and have become accustomed to the daily stress of the job. Newer employees are not used to the pressure of the cases. This has caused LCVAP to have a higher turnover than seen in the 30 years of its existence.

It is the responsibility of the Lake County Prosecutors Victim Assistance Program to ensure that crime victims' rights are upheld and that victims can exercise their rights within the criminal justice system. The role of advocates in this office is to provide services that assist victims in pursuing justice, accessing their constitutional rights, seeking restitution and providing the opportunity for healing while minimizing re-traumatization in the criminal justice system.

My boss, Charles Coulson tells me of a time where the child victim of a rape case was sitting outside of the courtroom alone because there were no victim advocates. We have come so far with victims' rights and ensuring that no victim will be alone. Without adequate funding, we are going backwards. It is not only about sending letters regarding court dates and notifications. It is about being present for the victims and giving some sort of comfort at the worst point in their lives.

With continued low levels of funding and/or further funding reductions, we will struggle in fulfilling our mission to empower victims and promote healing. I ask for your support of a budget amendment to create a new line item with \$5 million annually for victim advocates that serve a general population of crime victims. Thank you for your consideration of this critical request. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.