



Ohio Senate
Finance Committee
Interested Party Testimony - House Bill 33
Catherine Harper Lee, Ohio Crime Victim Justice Center
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Crime Victims Access to Justice: Fulfilling the Promise to Victims of Crime

Chair Dolan, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Sykes, and members of the Senate Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Cathy Harper Lee and I am the Founder and Executive Director of Ohio Crime Victim Justice Center.

Victims' rights violations cause significant harm to crime victims, their families, friends, and the community.

When victims are denied the ability to exercise their rights, it compromises crime victim safety, privacy, meaningful participation in the criminal justice process, and impacts their mental, physical and economic health and recovery. Crime victims often feel helpless, confused, angry, less inclined to cooperate with criminal justice officials, and less inclined to report future crimes.

Enactment of victims' rights laws alone are insufficient to ensure that crime victims can exercise and enforce their rights in practice. This harsh reality has been demonstrated time and again since the passage of the first victims' rights constitutional amendment in 1994 and 1996 implementing legislation. Crime victims' rights were routinely violated and crime victims had no place to report or receive assistance when their rights were violated. Even if a crime victim could afford to hire an attorney to protect and enforce their rights, they were told they were not allowed to do so.

The plight of crime victims had become so dire that an overwhelming 83% of Ohio voters passed the Marsy's Law Victims' Rights constitutional amendment in 2017. After 5 long years, H.B. 343, which updated Ohio statutes to be in compliance with the Marsy's Law constitutional guarantees, was finally passed in December 2022. Yet everyday crime victims' rights are still being violated.

A primary element of the Marsy's Law constitutional amendment is the promise that victims' rights *"... shall be protected in a manner no less vigorous than the rights afforded to the accused."*

To fulfill this promise, it is essential that the state provide funding so that crime victims can receive no cost legal assistance. Without state assistance, each year thousands of crime victims who cannot afford to hire an attorney will not have the ability to exercise and enforce their rights when violated.

Founded in 2000, the [Ohio Crime Victim Justice Center](http://www.OCVJC.org) (OCVJC) is:

- The **primary provider of no-cost legal** assistance to Ohio crime victims, having served over **5,470 crime victims** since the passage of Marsy's Law.



- The **primary provider of victims' rights training** for advocates and criminal justice officials having trained over **11,630** advocates, law enforcement, prosecutors, and judges since the passage of Marsy's Law.
- The **developer of the [Victims Rights Toolkit](#)**, an intuitive self-help resource that provides information and tools to help crime victims exercise their rights.
- The **leading legal service provider for victims' rights litigation in Ohio**, generating favorable appellate case law that protects individual crime victims and reduces victims' rights violation.

OCVJC and prosecutors' offices provide very critical, but very different, services to crime victims. Nearly 50% of crime victim referrals come from advocates, law enforcement, and prosecutors. Referrals from prosecutors have doubled during the past two years. Prosecutors from Butler, Fulton, Mahoning, Montgomery, and Summit counties, as well as the Cleveland Chief Prosecutor, submitted letters of support for OCVJC funding to the finance committee on 5/30/23.

Ohio law now requires victim's to be given a [Victim' Bill of Rights Palm Card](#) that includes OCVJC contact information for no cost legal assistance to help crime victims protect and enforce their rights.

Last year, OCVJC provided no-cost legal assistance to 1,237 crime victims and had to turn away 156 crime victims in need of assistance due to lack of funding.

As the *[demand for OCVJC services has increased, funding has decreased.](#)*

Due to **ONE DAY of media coverage** announcing the effective date of H.B. 343 on April 6, 2023, OCVJC **requests from crime victims increased by 450%.**

Over the coming year this 450% increase will equate to over 6800 crime victims throughout the state contacting OCVJC in need of assistance and a projected budget of \$4.6m in order to meet the need.

There are only two grants that provide limited funding for these services. Currently, OCVJC receives \$530,846 in VOCA funding and \$142,500 in JAG funding. OCVJC VOCA funding has been cut by \$416,081 per year.

Financial support from the state is needed to fulfill the constitutional promise to crime victims and ensure that crime victims have access to quality no cost legal assistance that they need and deserve.

OCVJC is respectfully requesting immediate legislative assistance in the form of GRF funding of \$2 million per year designated in the state budget for Ohio Crime Victim Justice Center. **Without this critical funding, OCVJC will be forced to turn away thousands of crime victims in need of assistance each year.**

Please help us fulfill the promise to crime victims.

Thank you for your consideration.

Catherine Harper Lee,



Ohio Crime Victim Justice Center

Catherine Harper Lee
Founder/Executive Director
cathyharperlee@ocvjc.org
www.OCVJC.org

Executive Director