

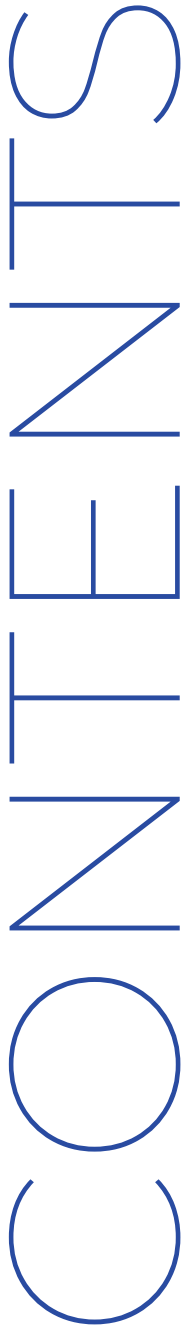


STATE OF CONNECTICUT
OFFICE OF THE VICTIM ADVOCATE

2023

Annual Report

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SUBMITTED, AS STATUTORILY MANDATED TO THE GOVERNOR OF THE
STATE OF CONNECTICUT, AND TO THE MEMBERS OF THE CONNECTICUT
GENERAL ASSEMBLY AUGUST 2024.

Constitution of the State of Connecticut

Article XXIX

Rights of Victims of Crime

In all criminal prosecutions, a victim, as the General Assembly may define by law, shall have the following rights:

ARTICLE
XXIX

- The right to be treated with fairness and respect throughout the criminal justice process;
- The right to timely disposition of the case following arrest of the accused, provided no right of the accused is abridged;
- The right to be reasonably protected from the accused throughout the criminal justice process;
- The right to notification of court proceedings;
- The right to attend the trial and all other court proceedings the accused has the right to attend, unless such person is to testify and the court determines that such person's testimony would be materially affected if such person hears other testimony;
- The right to communicate with the prosecution;
- The right to object to or support any plea agreement entered into by the accused and the prosecution and to make a statement to the court prior to the acceptance by the court of the plea of guilty or nolo contendere by the accused;
- The right to make a statement to the court at sentencing;
- The right to restitution which shall be enforceable in the same manner as any other cause of action or as otherwise provided by law;
- The right to information about the arrest, conviction, sentence, imprisonment and release of the accused.

The General Assembly shall provide by law for the enforcement of this subsection. Nothing in this subsection or in any law enacted pursuant to this subsection shall be construed as creating a basis for vacating a conviction or ground for appellate relief in any criminal case.

MISSION STATEMENT

The Office of the Victim Advocate (OVA) seeks to ensure that victims of crime become an integral part of the criminal justice system. Through public education of the rights and services available to crime victims, collaboration with law enforcement and service providers, as well as court and legislative advocacy, the OVA believes that the voices of crime victims are a necessary component of the criminal justice process.

www.ct.gov/ova

CONNECTING WITH THE COMMUNITY

Helping

The OVA's small, but efficient team, handles a high volume of calls, emails, inquiries, and on-line complaint submissions every day. The OVA's mission is to provide comprehensive support, information, resources, and assistance, if necessary, to ensure each caller is prepared to navigate through the criminal justice system and has access to the resources available to crime victims.

Courts

The OVA provides advocacy to crime victims when an alleged violation of their state constitutional rights is at issue. The OVA works to ensure that crime victims are an integral part of the criminal justice system.

Stakeholders

The OVA provides valuable referrals through our strong connections with local community and non-for-profit agencies that provide a variety of services to victims of crime.

Government

The OVA was statutorily established in 1998 as an independent state agency charged with the protection, promotion and enforcement of the state constitutional and statutory rights of crime victims in Connecticut. The OVA is statutorily defined as a criminal justice agency.

Legislation

The OVA undertakes legislative advocacy to promote and advance the rights of crime victims. The OVA monitors all legislative proposals that may impact crime victims' rights and/or services and testifies, when necessary, regarding various proposals.

Public Safety

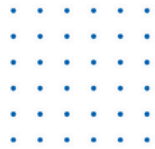
The OVA provides information and referrals to crime victims, particularly victims of family violence, concerning obtaining an order of protection. The OVA also provides information to victims about the various notification programs available that promote victim and public safety.

Commissions

The OVA is an active member on various state boards, councils, and commissions. The OVA's role is to ensure that crime victims' rights are at the forefront of policy initiatives and criminal justice reforms.

Outreach

The OVA provides free trainings to state agencies and other entities to promote the state constitutional rights of crime victims and available resources. The OVA participates in various informational events around the state to further promote awareness and education about the rights of crime victims.



OVERVIEW

The Office of the Victim Advocate (OVA) was statutorily established in 1998 as an independent state agency charged with the promotion and protection of the constitutional and statutory rights of crime victims in Connecticut (C.G.S. §46a-13b). Among its many responsibilities, the OVA provides oversight of state and private agencies that provide services to crime victims, and advocacy for crime victims when a violation of their state constitutional and statutory rights are at issue.

In order to fulfill the mandates of the OVA, the State Victim Advocate may:

- Evaluate the delivery of services by state agencies and entities that provide services to victims.
- Coordinate and cooperate with other private and public agencies concerned with the implementation, monitoring and enforcement of the constitutional rights of victims.
- Review procedures established by any state agency or other entity providing services to victims with respect to the constitutional rights of victims.
- Receive and review complaints of persons concerning the actions of any state agency or other entity providing services to crime victims.
- Initiate formal investigations into the circumstances of a complaint so as to remedy the concern in a systemic manner.
- File a limited special appearance in any court proceeding to advocate for any right guaranteed to a crime victim by the State Constitution or any other right provided to a crime victim by general statutes.
- Recommend systemic changes in state policies to ensure the proper treatment and protection of crime victims.
- Conduct programs of public education, undertake legislative advocacy, and make proposals for systemic reform.
- Monitor the provision of protective services to witnesses by the Chief State's Attorney.
- Ensure a centralized location for victim services information.

The OVA currently operates under the following statute when determining who is a "victim of crime" or "crime victim:" C.G.S. Sec. 1-1k: Except as otherwise provided by the general statutes, "victim of crime" or "crime victim" means an individual who suffers direct or threatened physical, emotional or financial harm as a result of a crime and includes immediate family members of a minor, incompetent individual or homicide victim and a person designated by a homicide victim in accordance with section 1-56r.A

CLIENT ADVOCACY

The OVA opened 129 cases, received 54 online complaints, provided 199 instant referrals, and monitored 17 juvenile offender early release cases. The OVA often gets requests for assistance from crime victims in areas that are not under the purview of the agency. These are considered “instant referrals” and were made to the following resources or organizations:

- 211
- Board of Education
- Board of Pardon and Parole
- Center for Family Justice
- CT Alliance to End Sexual Violence
- CT Coalition Against Domestic Violence (CCADV)
- Community Renewal Team (CRT)
- Connecticut Community for Addiction Recovery support groups
- Danbury Police
- Department of Aging
- Department of Children and Families, Hotline
- Department of Children and Families, Legal Division
- Department of Children and Families, Ombudsman
- Department of Consumer Protection
- Department of Emergency Services & Protection, Internal Affairs
- Department of Labor
- Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services
- Department of Social Services
- Division of Criminal Justice, Office of Probation
- Eviction resources
- Family Court
- Family Relations Office
- Florida Victim Services
- Hartford Community Court
- Legislators
- LOVE146
- Meriden Police
- New Britain YWCA
- Office of the Attorney General
- Office of the Chief Public Defender
- Office of the Chief State's Attorney
- Office of the Chief State's Attorney, Conviction Integrity Unit
- Office of Victim Services, Compensation Program
- Office of Victim Services, New Britain Court Victim Advocate
- Office of Victim Services, Waterbury Court Victim Advocate
- Private Attorneys
- Probate Court
- Probate Court, Conservatorship Program
- Secretary of the State
- Stamford Police
- Statewide Grievance Committee
- Survivors of Homicide
- Witness Protection Program

CRIME VICTIMS' RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

Clients reported that all ten (10) constitutional rights granted to crime victims were violated during the criminal court process, as follows:

- To be treated with fairness and respect.
- To a timely disposition of the case following an arrest.
- To be reasonably protected from the accused throughout the criminal justice process.
- To receive notification of court proceedings.
- To attend the trial and all other court proceedings.
- To communicate with the prosecution.
- To object or support a plea agreement.
- To make a statement to the court at sentencing.
- To receive financial restitution.
- To receive information about the arrest, conviction, sentence, imprisonment, or release of the accused.

These violations were conducted during criminal cases involving arson, assault, criminal mischief, criminal trespass, disorderly conduct, domestic violence, harassment, harassment/stalking, home improvement contract violations, homicide, illegal dissemination of intimate images, illegal possession of weapons, larceny, murder, sexual assault, stolen motor vehicles, strangulation, theft, threatening, and violation of protective and restraining orders.

Crime victim rights were violated in cases before the following courts: Danbury Superior Court, Fairfield Judicial District, Hartford Superior Court, Milford Superior Court, New Britain Superior Court, Rockville Superior Court, Stamford Superior Court, Torrington Superior Court, and Waterbury Superior Court.

The crimes were committed in: Avon, Bridgeport, Bristol, Danbury, East Windsor, Greenwich, Hamden, Hartford, Manchester, Meriden, Middletown, Milford, New Britain, Newington, Norwich, Orange, Ridgefield, Stafford, Stamford, Stratford, Torrington, Waterbury, and Wethersfield.

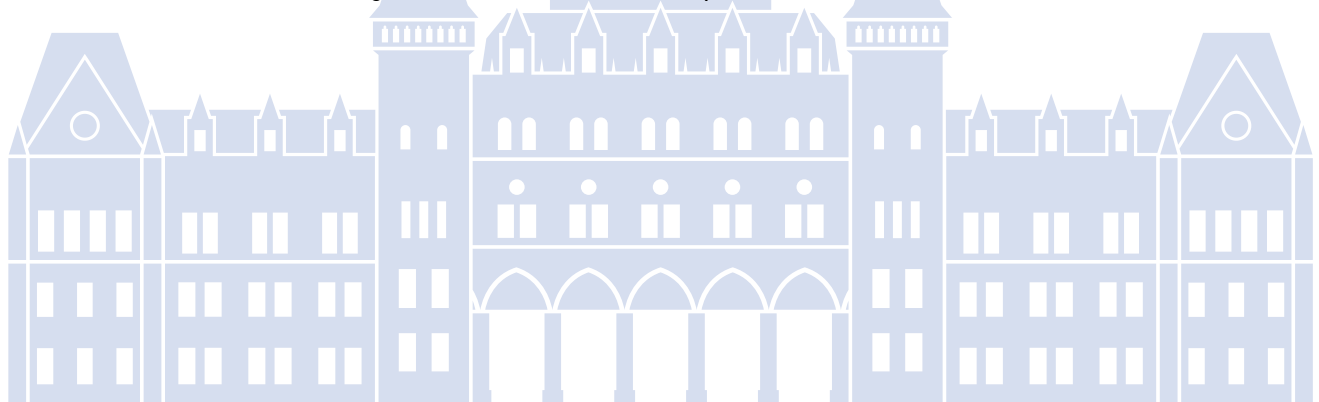
LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY

The OVA monitored 161 bills and submitted testimony before the Aging, Appropriations, and Judiciary Committees.

SYSTEMIC ADVOCACY

The State Victim Advocate is appointed to the following boards and commissions to address the needs and concerns of victims of crime: Connecticut Information Sharing System, Criminal Justice Information System Governing Committee, Criminal Justice Information System Digital Evidence Study Steering Committee, Connecticut Sentencing Commission, Criminal Justice Policy Advisory Commission, Domestic Violence Criminal Justice Response and Enhancement Advisory Council, Eye Witness Identification Task Force, Governor’s Task Force on Justice for Abused Children, Juvenile Justice Policy & Oversight Commission, Racial and Ethnic Disparity Council, SAFE Advisory Committee, Task Force to Study the Regulation of Professional Bondsmen, Bail Enforcement Agencies, and Surety Bail Bond Agents, and the Trafficking in Persons Council.

In 2021, PA 21-33 (Section 14) amended notice requirements to crime victims to include notification of whether or not the conviction is eligible for automatic erasure in the future. The OVA, under its role to evaluate the delivery of services by state agencies, asked the Chief’s States Attorney how this mandate would be implemented uniformly across the thirteen (13) State’s Attorney’s Offices. As a result of this inquiry, a comprehensive written policy was completed in November 2023. This issue is important to crime victims because when a case finally ends victims are told the maximum period of an offender’s sentence. However, crime victims need to know that offenders may be released early, and that the conviction may be erased at some point in the future.



COMMUNITY ADVOCACY

01

TRAINING

The OVA staff presented and conducted trainings for the Office of Adult Probation, The Office of Victim Services, the Bloomfield Senior Expo, and the Franklin Senior Center.

02

OUTREACH

The OVA staff created and shared new brochures and legislative information with the public.

03

NCVRW

National Crime Victims Rights Week was commemorated from April 23–29, 2023. The 2023 NCVRW theme was Survivor Voices: Elevate. Engage. Effect Change. It called upon communities to amplify the voices of survivors and create environments where survivors have the confidence that they will be heard, believed, and supported. The OVA hosted 2 canvas painting events, one in Hartford and the other in Milford, CT, for crime victims to fellowship and share information about the legislative process.



OVA STAFF

With a team of dedicated professionals, the OVA staff works tirelessly to provide resources and support to those who have been impacted by crime.



Natasha M. Pierre, Esq., State Victim Advocate – Ms. Pierre was appointed as the State Victim Advocate on November 28, 2014, by Governor Dannel P. Malloy and assumed her responsibilities on December 26, 2014. The Legislature confirmed her appointment in February 2015.

Merit Lajoie, Complaint Officer --- Mrs. Lajoie joined the OVA in May 2000. She advocates for clients during the criminal justice process, assists in legislative advocacy, conducts public education and outreach, and represents the OVA on boards and commissions.



Hakima Bey-Coon, Esq., Staff Attorney 3 --- Ms. Bey-Coon joined the OVA in March 2006. She provides legal counsel to clients concerning crime victim rights and represents the OVA on boards and commissions.

Vanessa M. Torres, Administrative Assistant --- Ms. Torres joined the OVA in January 2011. She conducts intakes, manages office and budget administration, and implements social media and public education and outreach strategies.



CT OVA

The Office of the Victim Advocate (OVA) is charged with the promotion and protection of the constitutional and statutory rights of crime victims in Connecticut. The OVA provides oversight of state and private agencies, and advocacy to crime victims when a violation of their rights is at issue.

CONTACT

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