



NATIONAL CRIME VICTIMS' RIGHTS WEEK CELEBRATES PROGRESS, WORKS TOWARD FUTURE GOALS

by Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott

FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT, VICTIM ADVOCATES and others who are dedicated to serving and protecting victims of violent crime, April marks an annual opportunity to observe National Crime Victims' Rights Week (NCVRW). This year marks an important 30-year milestone of championing support and services to crime victims through the Victims of Crime Act. As NCVRW celebrates three decades of defending victims' rights, we are reminded how far we have come – and how much more we can do to reach and serve every victim.

Thirty years ago, the world was very different for crime victims and their families. Local service providers who could meet victims' needs for shelter, support and counseling were few. The criminal justice system failed to include victims in the justice process – commonly excluding them from courtrooms and denying them the chance to speak at sentencing. Crime victim compensation programs were not consistently available; victims were on their own when it came to recovery.

In the early 1980s, the country made dramatic progress toward securing legal rights, protections and services for crime victims. In 1982, President Ronald Reagan established the President's Task Force on Victims of

Crime, which held hearings nationwide and gathered testimony. In its final report, the task force made more than 65 recommendations – among them that Congress enact legislation to provide federal funding to assist state compensation programs, establish a federal resource office and provide federal funding to assist in the operation of federal, state, local and nonprofit victim assistance agencies that provide comprehensive services.

The final report from the President's Task Force on Victims of Crime was the impetus for Congress's 1984 passage of the Fair Standards for the Treatment of Crime Victims and Witnesses Act – as well as the creation of the federal Office for Victims of Crime. Equally important, federal lawmakers in 1984 enacted the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) – which created a matching grant program to encourage states to create victim compensation programs and local programs to assist crime victims.

In 1980 – years before the creation of VOCA, the Lone Star State established the Texas Compensation to Victims of Crime Fund. Funded by fees imposed on offenders, the Texas CVC Fund provides financial assistance to innocent victims for certain crime-related expenses that cannot be reim-

bursed by insurance and other sources.

Since the creation of the CVC Fund in 1980, the Texas CVC Program has made more than \$1.3 billion in payments to or on behalf of victims and their families. And in addition to compensating victims for crime-related expenses, the Office of the Attorney General's Crime Victim Services Division also reimburses law enforcement agencies for sexual assault medical forensic exams, administers the Address Confidentiality Program, and awards grants to nonprofits that serve victims of violent crime.

Texas was also one of the first states to pass legislation to pay for forensic sexual assault exams. In 1979, the Texas Legislature created the Texas Crime Victims' Compensation Program to oversee the Texas CVC Fund. Since 1991, the Office of the Attorney General's Crime Victim Services Division has had administrative authority of the Texas CVC Program.

Over the past 35 years, the Texas CVC Fund has ensured that crime victims and their families do not bear the cost of violent crimes. But there is still a lot of work to be done. As we move forward, we are expanding our reach to a wider range of crime victims – including children exposed

to violence, victims of elder abuse, and labor and sex trafficking victims. For example, the Texas Legislature recently enacted state laws to make human trafficking survivors eligible to receive reimbursement for relocation expenses under the Texas CVC Act and make human trafficking victims eligible participants in the Address Confidentiality Program.

Over three decades, services for victims and survivors have become more inclusive, recognizing that we all have a part to play in victims' recovery – from the crime victim liaison in the local law enforcement office to the victim coordinator in the prosecutor's office. As quickly as possible, law enforcement officers and others who serve and protect crime victims will do everything in our power to deliver whatever help we are able to provide.

National Crime Victims' Rights Week will be held April 6-12 in communities statewide. At the Office of the Attorney General, we look forward to collaborating with dedicated crime victim advocates and law enforcement authorities across the state to serve victims of crime and meet the challenges of the coming decades.

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