

Sample Opinion/Editorial Column

Victims' Rights: Right for America, and Right for Our Community

Nearly everyone in our community has been touched, either directly or indirectly, by crime. When one person is hurt by crime -- a family member or friend, neighbor or co-worker - - we all feel a collective pain. That's why today, as never before, victims' rights are *right for America*, and *right for (name of your city/county/state)*.

Over two decades after the genesis of America's victims' rights discipline, victims' voices are being heard loud and clear as never before. This chorus of concern about access to justice, input into decisions affecting their lives in the aftermath of crime, increased offender accountability and rehabilitation services, and the need for safer communities resounds across our nation, shedding a beacon of hope, and help, for those most affected by crime.

The cost of crime to people in the United States is staggering. The U.S. Department of Justice tells us that victimizations generate \$105 billion annually in property and productivity losses and outlays for medical expenses. This amounts to an annual "crime tax" of roughly \$425.00 per man, woman and child in the United States. When the values of pain, long-term emotional trauma, disability, and risk of death are put in dollar terms, the costs rise to \$450 billion annually (or \$1,800.00 per person).

Crime victims and those who serve them know these losses more than most. They can tell you about the child who is afraid to sleep in her bed following a burglary of her home. They can share the excruciating fear and trauma that a rape victim feels after being violated and degraded. They can describe the hopelessness and helplessness that thousands of battered women and children endure on a daily basis across our nation. They can highlight the isolation and shock that elderly victims feel, the pain and frustration of persons who are victimized solely because of the color of their skin, or their religion or gender. And they can shed light on the utter devastation that survivors of homicide and drunk driving crashes endure, often for a lifetime.

Nearly one out of seven people who live in the United States is victimized *each year*. What do these innocent victims of crime need that we, as concerned citizens, friends and neighbors, can provide? First and foremost, we can say we're sorry, and not blame or judge victims because someone made a willful choice to harm them. Next, we can promote increased

rights and services, including information, input, restitution, protection, counseling, and support. Finally, we can *change the face of justice as we know it today* by working to ensure a baseline of consistent victims' rights nationwide. To this end, an effort to amend our federal constitution to secure victims' rights has begun. A proposed federal constitutional amendment is currently pending in the United States Congress, with bi-partisan support.

To date, 29 states (note ["including *your state*"] if you have passed an amendment) have passed state-level constitutional amendments that articulate victims' rights, but there is no similar recognition of victims in the federal constitution. President Clinton eloquently articulated his support for constitutional rights for victims, urging that victims "should be at the center of the criminal justice process, not on the outside looking in."

Here in our (community or state), victims have many needs that can be met only through the compassion, understanding and time of our community members. Volunteering for victims is one of the most worthwhile and rewarding experiences one can achieve -- it can change lives, and take our (city/county) to *not only* new heights of compassion, but *improved community safety* as well.

The rights and needs of crime victims equate to basic human rights and dignity that we *all* expect and deserve. It's time to make "liberty and justice for all" a reality for everyone. It's time that our national concern about crime translates into a national concern about crime victims' rights and needs. It's time that we recognize that victims' rights are, indeed, *right for America*, and *right for (name of your city/county/state)*.

Provide a two-to-three sentence description of the author's title, agency and relevant role at the end of this opinion/editorial column.