

2012 National Crime Victims' Rights Week: Wisconsin Advocates Extending the Vision, Reaching Every Victim?

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Madison—April 22, 2012, begins National Crime Victims' Rights Week, a time to honor crime victims and our nation's progress in advancing their rights. This year's theme—Extending the Vision: Reaching Every Victim—celebrates the vision behind that progress and the ideal of serving all victims of crime. The vision that launched the victims' rights movement emerged more than 30 years ago and continues to this day.

Wisconsin has a prominent place in the history of crime victim rights. It was the first state to pass a Crime Victim Bill of Rights in 1980, and Wisconsin is the only state to have a Crime Victim Rights Board that is empowered to enforce crime victim rights.

Wisconsin will mark another achievement in the advancement of crime victim rights during the week. The Crime Victim Rights Preservation Act, recently signed into law, will officially take effect April 27. The act gives the Crime Victim Rights Board the ability to take action when victims are not treated with "fairness, dignity and respect for their privacy." These rights are spelled out in the Wisconsin State Constitution. The legislation also allows victims to ask a judge to enforce their rights when violations are ongoing.

"This year's Crime Victim Rights Week is especially meaningful because we in Wisconsin have recently taken a tangible step to extend the vision of the crime victim rights movement," said Patti Seger, executive director of the Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence (WCADV). "The state has been fortunate to have many advocates, officials and victims who have carried the effort forward throughout the years."

Although Wisconsin is a leader in the movement, it is not alone. Every state has enacted victims' rights laws, and 32 states have constitutional victims' rights amendments. All states have victim compensation funds, and more than 10,000 victim service agencies have been established throughout the country.

Yet there is more to do. Only a fraction of victims receive crime victim compensation, which is usually limited to victims of violent crime. More than 50 percent of crimes are not reported, and fewer than 20 percent of victims receive needed services.

"Looking at just domestic violence victim services, we know there is a significant unmet need," said Seger. "Wisconsin domestic violence victim advocates have had 50 percent more contacts with clients over the last two years, all at a time when funding and resources are increasing scarce. Last year, on one day alone, there were 270 requests for services that went unfulfilled."

Seger concluded, "This week is about taking stock of how far we have come and strengthening our resolve to meet the current challenges, so that we do reach every victim."

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