

OFFICE OF THE VICTIM ADVOCATE

At a Glance

MICHELLE S. CRUZ, J.D. *State Victim Advocate*

Established – 1999

Statutory authority – CGS Sec. 46a-13b et seq.

*Central office – 505 Hudson Street, 5th Floor,
Hartford, CT 06106*

Website address – www.ova.state.ct.us

Email address – Michelle.Cruz@ct.gov

Number of employees – 3.5

Recurring operating expenses - \$336,593

Organizational structure – Independent Division of the Office of Governmental Accountability, for administrative purposes only.

Mission

The Office of the Victim Advocate (OVA), an independent Division of the Office of Governmental Accountability, advocates for the protection and promotion of the State Constitutional and statutory rights of crime victims throughout the state of Connecticut. The OVA monitors and evaluates the delivery of services to crime victims and works to advance the laws and policies throughout the state to promote the fair and just treatment of crime victims throughout the criminal justice process. The existence of the OVA provides oversight and advocacy when the criminal justice system fails crime victims. The OVA remains committed to ensuring that the voices of crime victims play a central role in Connecticut's response to violence and to those victimized by crime. Further, the OVA has a firm dedication to promoting awareness to Connecticut citizens as to the services available to crime victims through outreach, education and public service events.

Statutory Responsibility

The OVA monitors and evaluates the delivery of services to crime victims by state agencies and other entities that make up the victim service delivery system in the state. In fulfilling its mandate, the OVA accepts complaints from crime victims and/or others on behalf of the crime victim, who believe their rights have been or are being violated or who believe that the services available to them as crime victims in the state are being unfairly denied or inadequately provided. OVA may also receive complaints from agencies, other institutions or individuals on behalf of crime victims. The OVA may, when appropriate, initiate an inquiry into such complaints or conduct an investigation.

As an attorney, the State Victim Advocate may file a special limited appearance in any court proceeding throughout the state to advocate for crime victims who believe their Constitutional rights have been violated. The OVA monitors the services provided by the State's Witness Protection Program and ensure a centralized location for victim services information. The OVA conducts programs of public education as well as recommends changes in legislation and/or policy to improve the delivery of services to crime victims.

Public Service

The OVA constantly strives to appropriately address the concerns brought to the attention of the OVA by crime victims and those on behalf of crime victims. The OVA frequently meets with crime victims, state agencies who provide services to crime victims and other entities to discuss the handling of particular matters that may require action by the OVA. The OVA engages in regular contact with these individuals to obtain feedback regarding the effectiveness of the OVA's assistance on behalf of crime victims throughout the state. This feedback is invaluable in guiding the OVA to the best manner in which the OVA can continue to carry out its statutory mandates, always with an eye towards improving the quality of services available and providing a voice to crime victims. The OVA continues to provide education, outreach and training to enhance the delivery of services to crime victims in Connecticut.

Improvements/Achievements 2011 - 12

During its fourteenth year of operation, the Office of the Victim Advocate (OVA) continued to operate as a fully functional independent state agency committed to effectively and efficiently carrying out its statutory mandates. The following specific achievements in this regard are noted:

- The OVA regularly receives complaints from crime victims throughout the state alleging one or more violations of their legal rights as crime victims and/or some problem in the provision of services and the OVA continues to take appropriate action to effectively resolve the complaint or problem.
- The OVA currently has three full-time positions and one part-time position which include the State Victim Advocate, a Complaint Officer, a Staff Attorney and an Office Assistant. Additionally, the OVA utilizes interns, externs and volunteers to assist in several projects at the agency.
- The State Victim Advocate and the staff Attorney intervened in numerous court proceedings to effectively advocate for the enforcement of crime victim rights.
- The Office of the Victim Advocate, during the 2011 legislative session sought legislation to create a Model Policy for Law Enforcements' Response to Domestic Violence. As a result a Task Force was created, which the OVA was a member, and worked on the first Model Policy for Law Enforcement's Response to Family Violence in CT.
- The Office of the Victim Advocate worked in partnership with the Speakers' Task Force on Domestic Violence and as a result new legislation was enacted to improve the state's response to domestic violence, including extending the restraining order period from six months to a year and permitting Bail Commissioner to take into account victims' safety when determining bail.

- The Victim Advocate co-sponsored the 16th Annual *Melanie Rieger Conference Against Violence*. The Victim Advocate presented the Crime Victim Assistance Awards to State Police Detective Joe Bukowski for his dedication to crime victims and specifically for his investigation into the disappearance of Mary Badaracco.
- The Victim Advocate is consistently adding information to the OVA website in order to better inform crime victims of their rights and the services available. This past reporting period the OVA was successful in creation of a Facebook page for the OVA, which will assist in reaching more crime victims and alerting them to information about their rights.
- The Victim Advocate met with the Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection (DESPP) to discuss concerns of missing persons, including the need to have a centralized Missing Persons' Unit. As a result the DESPP has re-established its Missing Persons' Unit.
- The Victim Advocate advocated for funding to be appropriated to the Office of the Chief State's Attorney (OCSA), Cold Case Unit after learning the funding was being diverted to other services in the CSAO. As a result funding was appropriated for specifically for the Cold Case Unit.
- The Victim Advocate and OVA staff made numerous public appearances throughout the state to publicize the existence and function of the OVA, in addition to informing citizens about victim rights in Connecticut.
- The State Victim Advocate was selected to present at the Ending Domestic & Sexual Violence: Innovations in Practice and Research Conference, a Violence Against Women Act sponsored event, which was held at the New Hampshire School of Law on the work of the OVA in the field of domestic violence.
- The State Victim Advocate and OVA staff participate in numerous committees and commissions for the improvement of services to crime victims.
- The Office of the Victim Advocate hosted the 2nd Annual "Speakers' Bureau" 2011 for crime victims throughout the state of Connecticut to assist the OVA in presentations and outreach.
- The Victim Advocate worked in partnership with the Department of Administrative Services to update the State's Workplace Violence Policy to include the rights of crime victims and the services available in the state.
- The Victim Advocate created a Crime Victims' Summit to bring forth the experiences and concerns of various crime victims' populations. The work of the Crime Victims' Summit resulted in a Report with recommendations targeted to improve the state's responsiveness to crime victims.

Information Reported as Required by State Statute

The OVA has complied with all of the requirements of all federal and state requirements regarding affirmative action and equal opportunity.