

Sample Opinion/Editorial Column

“Victims’ Voices: Silent No More”

Once upon a time in America, to be a crime victim was to be a nameless, faceless entity. Victims were seldom informed of the status of their offenders or cases. They were often excluded from judicial processes affecting their lives unless they were witnesses. They seldom had input into the outcome of their cases, or into holding their offenders accountable.

Fast forward to 1999, a time where crime victims *not only* have names and faces. They *also* have a powerful voice. It is the voice of the victim that helps solve criminal cases. It is the voice of the victim that offers insights into the human suffering resulting from crime. It is the voice of the victim that contributes to safety in our homes, our schools, and our neighborhoods. And it is the voice of victims that helps youthful and criminal offenders understand the impact their offenses have on their victims, their communities, their own families, and themselves.

“Victims’ Voices: Silent No More.” The theme for the 19th nationwide commemoration of National Crime Victims’ Rights Week — April 25 to May 1, 1999 — emphasizes that the historical silence and shame surrounding victimization are a thing of the past. It recognizes that victims’ voices have *much* to contribute to individual and community safety, as well as justice for *all*.

Today in America, there are nearly 30,000 federal and state statutes that define and protect victims’ rights. Thirty-two states have elevated the protection of victims’ rights through state-level constitutional amendments (including [your state], if applicable). Ten thousand victim assistance programs in our communities, as well as in our criminal and juvenile justice systems, offer greatly needed support and services to victims and witnesses of crime. All of these accomplishments have amplified victims’ voices into a mighty roar for justice.

Consider for a moment what victims’ voices offer. When victims report crimes, the likelihood of criminal activity decreases. Victims who come forward as witnesses in criminal and juvenile justice cases provide vital and valuable testimony that helps resolve cases. When victims are given a voice at sentencing and parole release hearings, they provide our justice system with insights into the short- and long-term effects of crime on victims, their loved ones, and our community as a whole. When victims have the opportunity to *define the harm* that crime causes,

crime rightfully becomes personal. It becomes an offense that hurts a *real person* with a name, a face, a family, a job, a home.

The voices of victims tell us of the terror and trauma that child sexual assault victims endure, often at the hands of a loved one. They offer insights into the cycle of violence that traps countless women and children in homes filled with battering and brutality. Victims' voices shed light on the often hidden crime of elder abuse, which tarnishes what should be the "golden years" for many senior citizens. Victims speaking out remind us that far too many people in America -- victims of homicide and drunk driving crashes -- can no longer speak up for their own rights.

Victims' voices have had a marked impact on community justice as well. Victims helping victims -- a core tenet of America's victim service discipline -- results in mutual support groups and peer counseling that help other victims reconstruct their lives in the aftermath of a crime. Through victim awareness classes and victim impact panels, myriad audiences -- including criminal and juvenile offenders, students and youth groups, justice professionals, and community groups -- are provided with a better understanding of the "domino effects" of crime that hurt *not only* individual victims, but *communities* and *society as a whole* as well. Victims' voices also have a profound impact on public policy that affects community safety, resulting in responsible laws that balance the rights of the accused with those of people hurt by crime.

(Insert a paragraph about the impact of victims' voices on your community and state, including policies, programs and services).

This is National Crime Victims' Rights Week. Here in (community) and across America, thousands of individuals and communities are joining together to celebrate the voices of victims, all that they have contributed to making our nation a better place to live, and all that they offer for a future that is fair, and a society that is safer. We invite each and every person in (community) to not only listen to the voice of victims, but to join us in a collective chorus of justice. Let your voice be heard by volunteering for victims, by lending a helping hand to a family member or friend who has been hurt by crime, and by supporting crime prevention and community safety initiatives.

Half a century ago, Winston Churchill said: "The right to speak must be earned by having something to say." Clearly, what victims have to say is vital and valuable to promoting both individual and community safety. When we listen and learn from victims, each of us can also earn the right to speak out for victims, and speak out for justice.

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