

VICTIM'S ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

Victim's assistance programs and services are resources available to assist individuals physically, emotionally, financially, medically, and legally when the individual is abused or neglected or a victim of a crime. Individuals may access many resources available through victim's assistance programs even if they do not intend to file criminal charges or proceed within the criminal justice system.

- Victims have the right to access victim's assistance programs and services at any time. Individual Support Plan (ISP) team members should offer victim's assistance directly to the individual. Direct assistance means that the victim is present when options are discussed and offered. Victimization should not be taken lightly as any type of incident can cause emotional, psychological, physical, financial and behavioral consequences for individuals. Signs of trauma from an incident may or may not be present immediately after an event. Victim's assistance should be offered more than once to ensure that individuals have the full opportunity to process an event and decide the support(s) they wish to access.
- In Pennsylvania, there is a strong network of victim's assistance programs, sometimes called "victim/witness units" that can provide help to victims after abuse, neglect, financial exploitation, domestic violence, sexual assault, simple and aggravated assault, harassment, theft, and homicide. Some programs are based in the criminal/juvenile justice system and aid victims as their cases move through those systems. Other programs are provided by community-based nonprofits, including domestic violence shelters and rape crisis centers, which offer services regardless of whether a victim pursues charges or if the case moves forward for prosecution. All victim's assistance services are free.
- Many of the supports available to victims of abuse, neglect or a crime include an advocate. Victim's assistance programs employ specialized advocates to carry out the functions related to their organization. A victim may work with multiple advocates depending on identified needs.
- Victims have the right to effective communication through supports such as interpreter services, language line, sign language interpreters, and TTY capabilities.
- The most common providers of victim's assistance are local rape crisis centers, domestic violence centers and the Office of Victim's Services.

Community-Based Victim's Services

Community-based agencies, such as domestic violence shelters and rape crisis centers, can provide services regardless of whether the victim decides to press charges or if the crime goes through the criminal justice system. Every county in Pennsylvania is covered by domestic violence and rape crisis programs. Some counties also have a general, nonprofit agency that provides services to all crime victims.

Services Offered by Domestic Violence Shelters

- **Confidential Hotlines**
 - Available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year
 - Provide counseling, crisis intervention, support, information and referrals
- **Shelter**
 - 24-hour emergency shelter
 - Safe homes
 - Transitional housing
- **Counseling**
 - Empowerment counseling
 - Options counseling (*identifies victim choices, assesses risks and benefits*)
 - Safety planning (*assessment of risk and danger, strategies for enhancing safety, identification of potential resources*)
 - Support groups
- **Advocacy**
 - Legal advocacy (*legal options, preparation and assistance with Protection From Abuse (PFA) forms and filings*)
 - Medical advocacy (*based in hospitals, clinics*)
 - Children's advocacy (*counseling, therapeutic art, music, and play for children in shelters*)
 - Accompaniment (*legal services, court proceedings, other service providers*)
- **Economic Support**
 - Aid in obtaining cash assistance and employment training
 - Help with securing safe, affordable, permanent housing
 - Job training and identification of employment opportunities

Services Offered by Rape Crisis Centers

- Free and confidential crisis counseling, 24 hours a day
- Prevention education programs for schools, organizations, and other public groups
- Services for the victim's family, friends, partner, or spouse
- Information and referrals to other services in the victim's area
- Advocates that are available to accompany victims of sexual violence, rape or incest to medical facilities, the police station, and court
- Advocates that can intervene or act on behalf of the victim's wishes or needs and assist in navigating the processes within the medical, police, and court systems

System-Based Victim Service Agencies (Victim/Witness Programs, Office of Victim's Services)

Each county in Pennsylvania has a program that provides services to victims of crime if the case proceeds through the criminal justice system. These programs are usually located in the county's District Attorney's Office or the Juvenile Probation Office. Once charges are filed, someone from the county program that provides services to victims of crime will usually be in contact with the victim to initiate services. Information provided to the victim may include the following:

- The victim's rights as a crime victim

- How to register for an offender release notification
- How to receive notification of the right to provide input regarding any release of the alleged perpetrator
- The victim's right to receive compensation
- How to find an advocate
- How to obtain counseling or therapy
- How the legal process works
- How to register for court notifications
- How to receive notification of the alleged perpetrator's escape, recapture, or any custody change
- How to arrange for court accompaniment
- Assistance with victim impact statements
- An explanation of post-sentencing/dispositions
- How to obtain medical advocacy and accompaniment
- How to receive notification of execution

Resources

THE NATIONAL DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HOTLINE
1-800-799-SAFE (7233)
TTY: 1-800-787-3224

PENNSYLVANIA COALITION AGAINST DOMESTIC VIOLENCE
1-800-932-4632
TTY: 1-800-553-2508
www.pcadv.org

NATIONAL SEXUAL ABUSE HOTLINE
1-800-656-HOPE (4673)

PENNSYLVANIA COALITION AGAINST RAPE
1-800-692-7445
www.pcar.org

To see a listing of programs by county, visit the Pennsylvania Office of Victim's Services website:
<http://pcv.pccd.pa.gov>