

Testimony of
Judith Rex

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"The Victims of Crime Act: 25 Years of Protecting and Supporting Victims"

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Good Morning. I want to thank Chairman Leahy and Ranking Member Specter for giving me this opportunity to speak before the Senate Judiciary Committee. It is an honor for me to appear here today as we celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Victims of Crime Act.

I have worked on behalf of victims of crime for over 25 years, and I remember what it was like before the Victims of Crime Act was enacted. In Vermont there were very few services and supports for crime victims. In the early 80's, Vermont had four domestic violence shelters and two rape crisis programs. The entire state appropriation for these programs was \$50,000 and the state allocation for the domestic violence shelter where I worked was \$5,000 per year.

The passage of the Victims of Crime Act in 1984 has had a tremendous impact on how crime victim services have evolved and expanded in this country -- and certainly in Vermont. When the Victims of Crime Act passed, then Governor Kunin earmarked the funding to establish rape crisis programs in every county in Vermont. As a result of the VOCA funding, Vermont was able to establish ten additional programs, ensuring that every victim of sexual assault in Vermont could access a 24-hour hotline and advocacy services.

In 1986, it was the Victims of Crime Act funding that helped Vermont established its Victim Assistance Program. These prosecutor-based Victim Advocates ensured that crime victims received information, notification of court hearings, and a variety of support services throughout the criminal justice process. This program has played a critical role in ensuring that Vermont's crime victims receive restitution for their crime-related losses, and, even more importantly, in empowering crime victims to address the court at sentencing to share the impact of the crime on their lives.

In 1990, Vermont finally established its Victims Compensation Program, and it was the federal VOCA match that convinced the Vermont legislature to fund this initiative. In 2000, when there was an increase to the VOCA cap, Vermont was able to establish a Victim Services Program within the Department of Corrections that is now fully funded with state funds. These advocates provide an array of services to crime victims to help prepare them for an offender's release from incarceration. Services for underserved populations were also established at this time. One example is our Deaf Victim Advocacy program, comprised of three Deaf victim advocates who provide education and advocacy services to the Deaf and hard of hearing communities throughout Vermont.

The most recent impact of VOCA was the inclusion of \$100 million for crime victims in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. In January, I was faced with making cuts of up to 20% to victim services programs in Vermont due to declining state revenues. The impact of these cuts would have been significant for the small domestic violence programs, child advocacy centers, and supervised visitation programs operating in the most rural areas of Vermont. Some of these programs would have closed. But, as a result of the Recovery Act funding, I was able to level-fund all direct service programs serving crime victims in the 2010 state budget. This infusion of funding could not have happened at a more critical time, since we know that crime rates often increase during hard economic times.

Despite all of these accomplishments, there is still much more to be done. In 2003, the Center for Crime Victim Services engaged in a lengthy strategic planning process. A number of gaps in services were identified, including the need for victim advocates in police departments, specialized services for people with disabilities who are victimized, and services for the elderly, a growing population that is particularly vulnerable to financial fraud and exploitation. However, because Vermont has not seen any significant increase in our VOCA allocation for the past eight years, little has been accomplished in these areas. In fact, in some years we have seen our allocation reduced, even though the number of crime victims needing services continues to grow.

I know that other states are also struggling with this same dilemma. I would urge this Committee to consider raising the VOCA cap to \$705 million in the 2010 budget, so that we can begin to address some of these gaps in services. One important lesson we have learned over the last 25 years is that the sooner we are able to respond to a crime victim's trauma with supports and services, the sooner they are able to recover. As a society, we cannot afford to delay services to crime victims. The cost is too great.

In closing, I want to thank the Judiciary Committee, and especially Chairman Leahy, for all of the support you have given the victim service community over the last 25 years. I look forward to another 25 years of progress.