

Statement of
The Honorable Patrick Leahy

United States Senator
Vermont
April 28, 2009

Statement Of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.),
Chairman, Senate Committee On The Judiciary,
"The Victims Of Crime Act: 25 Years Of Protecting And Supporting Victims"
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This past Sunday marked the start of National Crime Victims' Rights Week. Since 1981, here in Washington and in communities across the Nation, people have observed this week with candlelight vigils and public rallies to renew our commitment to crime victims and their families. It is vitally important that we recognize the needs of crime victims and their family members, and work together to promote victims' rights and services.

This year we also celebrate the 25th anniversary of the enactment of the Victims of Crime Act. I was honored to support the passage of the Victims of Crime Act of 1984 (VOCA), which has been the principal means by which the Federal Government has supported essential services for crime victims and their families. The Victims of Crime Act provides grants for direct services to victims, such as state crime victim compensation programs, emergency shelters, crisis intervention, counseling, and assistance in participating in the criminal justice system. All these services and our Federal contribution to state crime victim compensation programs do not cost Federal taxpayers one dime. These services are all funded from a reserve fund created from the fines and penalties paid by Federal criminal offenders.

A number of us have worked hard over the years to protect the Crime Victims Fund. State victim compensation and assistance programs serve nearly four million crime victims each year, including victims of violent crime, domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse, elder abuse, and drunk driving. The Crime Victims Fund makes these programs possible and has helped hundreds of thousands of victims of violent crime.

Several years ago, I worked to make sure that the Crime Victims Fund would be there in good times, and in bad. We made sure it had a "rainy day" capacity so that in lean years, victims and their advocates would not have to worry that the Crime Victims Fund would run out of money and they would be left stranded. More recently, an annual cap has been set on the level of funding to be spent from the fund in a given year. When this cap was established, and when President Bush then sought to empty the Crime Victims Fund of unexpended funds, I joined with Senator Crapo and others from both political parties to make sure that the Crime Victims Fund was preserved. These resources are appropriately set aside to assist victims of crime and their families. We have had to work hard to protect the Crime Victims Fund, and I have consistently supported raising the spending cap.

This hearing is particularly timely, because now more than ever it is important to protect the Fund and ensure that crime victims and victim service professionals have the resources they need. Crime typically rises during tough economic times. Crisis centers and hotlines are reporting an alarming increase in victimization nationwide. The rising unemployment rate means victims are less likely to have insurance to cover their crime-related expenses. The economic downturn has also resulted in limits on state government funding and significant decreases in private giving. The Crime Victims Fund is more important than ever. Working with Senators on both sides of the aisle, I hope that we are able to raise the cap this coming year in order to devote more than \$700 million from the Crime Victims Fund to crime victims across the nation.

I want to commend Senator Mikulski, the Chairwoman of the Commerce, Justice, and Science Appropriations Subcommittee, and Senator Shelby, the Ranking Member, for working with the President to provide \$100 million in the economic recovery package for crime victims. That additional funding is sorely needed right now until we can raise the cap for the coming year. I look forward to working with Senator Mikulski, Senator Crapo, and many other interested Senators on this initiative to provide increased funding for crime victims and their families in the years ahead. Again, I emphasize that it does not cost a dime of taxpayer funds but will come exclusively from Federal criminal fines and penalties.

Now is the time honor the spirit of National Crime Victims' Rights Week by raising the cap to support the most vulnerable Americans who need our help today. We should not allow those already victimized by crime to also become victims of our struggling economy.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses, who bring important perspectives and experience on this subject. Two of our witnesses join us from Vermont. I want to welcome Susan Russell who travelled to Washington from Vermont to share her incredible story. Her courage and strength is an inspiration to us all. Also, Judy Rex, whom I have known for many years, is a leader for crime victims' rights in Vermont. I also want to welcome back to the Committee Mary Lou Leary, from the National Center for Victims of Crime, Steve Derene from the National Association of VOCA Assistance Administrators, and R. Keith Perkins from the Never Again Foundation.

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