Civil Justice for Victims of Crime in Florida

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I. Purpose of This Booklet

Every crime victim has the right to file a civil lawsuit seeking financial compensation from the perpetrator or from other parties whose unreasonable conduct gave rise to conditions which allowed the crime to occur. The purpose of this handbook is to provide victims and service providers with a basic understanding of the civil justice system so that victims might consider this important option and know where to turn for help.

II. Victims’ Financial Losses and Potential Sources of Compensation

More than twenty-three million Americans are victimized by crime each year. The consequences of crime frequently extend far beyond the criminal act. All too often, victims are left with expenses for medical procedures, physical rehabilitation, counseling, lost wages, and property damage. It has been estimated that crime costs society $450 billion annually.

Restitution

Restitution is the money a judge orders the offender to pay to the victims to compensate for direct and indirect out-of-pocket expenses caused by the offender’s crime. Restitution is part of the offender’s sentence and can be ordered in both adult and juvenile cases following a conviction or plea of guilty. The amount of restitution ordered by the judge depends on the victims’ expenses which may include medical and dental bills, counseling, transportation, lost wages due to injury, and stolen or damaged property. A criminal court cannot order restitution payments for physical pain, suffering, and emotional trauma. Victims who seek financial compensation for these types of losses must have an attorney pursue a civil lawsuit against the perpetrator or other responsible parties as described in this booklet.

Florida law provides that a court may require an offender to pay all restitution to the victim before paying other fines. However, a court order does not guarantee payment of restitution by the offender.

State Crime Victim Compensation

Compensation may also be available to victims through the Crimes Compensation Trust Fund. The Fund is designed to reimburse victims for certain losses and expenses resulting from crime, such as funeral expenses, medical bills, counseling fees, lost wages, and other out-of-pocket costs. A compensation award may be reduced by the amount of money that a victim received from insurance or other sources. No award will be made if the crime was reported more than seventy-two hours after its occurrence unless the department finds the delay to have been justified. A claim must be filed within 1 year of the date of the crime, but exceptions can be made for good cause or for child victims. For claims filed on or after September 23, 2015, the category caps include the following: wage loss $15,000; loss of support $25,000; disability $25,000; catastrophic injury $50,000; medical/mental treatment for adults $10,000; mental inpatient crisis stabilization $10,000; mental health injury for adult $5,000 ($5,000 also for minor witnesses); mental health injury for minor $10,000; funeral expenses $7,500; property loss $500; and domestic violence/sexual assault relation one-time amount of $1,500. There are also restrictions on eligibility for victim compensation. For more information, contact the Florida Crime Victim Compensation Program at 1-800-266-6667. Further information can be found here http://myfloridalegal.com/webfiles.nsf/WF/MRAY-8CVP5T/$file/BVCVictimCompensationBrochure.pdf.

Civil Actions May Help Where Restitution and State Compensation Cannot

Restitution and compensation often do not cover a victim’s full economic losses, and neither source pays anything for hard to quantify damages such as pain and suffering. A civil lawsuit may provide more complete compensation to a victim. Victims do not have to choose between restitution, compensation, and filing a civil lawsuit. Victims may receive funds from all three sources, although there are checks and balances in each system to ensure that no victim is compensated for the same loss more than once. Victims may decide to pursue all three financial options at the same time to have the best chance of receiving just compensation from the appropriate source as soon as possible.

III. Why File a Civil Suit

Some of the benefits of civil actions may include:

- Control of the Case - Victims have greater control in a civil suit than in a criminal case because they are a party to the civil case, cannot be excluded from the courtroom, and have final approval of settlement proposals.
**Compensation** - Civil actions can provide compensation for victims for the monetary damages they suffered, such as medical expenses or lost income. Civil actions can also compensate victims for the emotional damage they have suffered.

**Justice and Accountability** - Civil suits can hold offenders directly accountable to victims. These suits give victims their “day in court,” regardless of whether there was a criminal conviction or any prosecution at all.

**Crime Prevention** - In addition to suing perpetrators, victims can often sue other responsible parties. Civil actions provide economic incentives for crime prevention. Businesses such as hotels, apartments, and shopping centers sometimes fail to enact proper security measures because they view such expenses as unnecessary. When businesses are held accountable for safety lapses, proper security becomes cheaper than the cost of defending lawsuits. Crime victims’ civil suits have resulted in increased security protection in public places, better oversight and supervision of daycare facilities, and countless other improvements.

### IV. Comparing Civil and Criminal Justice

Both the civil and criminal justice systems have important roles in securing justice for victims of crime. These systems are not mutually exclusive, so victims do not have to choose one system over the other. Many victims choose to go through both systems. Because the criminal and civil justice systems were designed to address different needs, victims are best served when these systems work together. A significant difference between the criminal and civil court systems is that in a civil case, the victim controls essential decisions shaping the case. It is the victim who decides whether to sue, accept a settlement offer, or go to trial.

**The Criminal Justice System**

The criminal justice process begins after a crime has been committed and reported to law enforcement. If an arrest has been made and charges have been filed, the offender may be prosecuted. In a criminal prosecution, the crime is considered “a crime against the State.” The victim’s role is primarily defined as a witness for the prosecution. Although the prosecuting attorney may be very helpful to the victim and the victim's family, the prosecutor's primary responsibility is to represent the interests of the State, not the victim.

The criminal justice process judges the guilt or innocence of accused offenders, and when offenders are found guilty, attempts to punish or rehabilitate them.

**The Civil Justice System**

The civil justice system does not attempt to determine the innocence or guilt of an offender. Offenders are also not put in prison. Rather, civil courts attempt to determine whether an offender or a third party is liable for the injuries sustained as a result of the crime.

A civil court’s finding of liability usually means that the defendant must pay the victim, or the victim’s family, monetary damages. The civil justice system can provide victims with monetary resources necessary to rebuild their lives.

While the criminal justice system holds defendants accountable for their “crimes against the State,” the civil justice system holds defendants who are found liable directly accountable to their victims.

**Burden of Proof**

In the civil justice system, liability must be proven by a fair preponderance of the evidence, which simply means that one side’s evidence is more persuasive than the other’s. In other words, the plaintiff must prove there is a fifty-one percent or greater chance that the defendant committed all the elements of the particular wrong. This standard is lower than the “proof beyond a reasonable doubt” required for a conviction in the criminal justice system. Therefore, it is sometimes possible to find the defendant liable in a civil case even though a verdict of “not guilty” was rendered in the criminal case. (A civil case can also be successful even if the offender was never prosecuted.)

A good example of this principle is the O.J. Simpson case. Simpson was prosecuted for the murder of his former wife, Nicole Brown, and Ronald Goldman. The jury in the criminal case found Simpson “not guilty” of the murders. Despite Simpson’s acquittal, the victims’ families filed and won a civil wrongful death lawsuit against Simpson. The jury in the civil case awarded the victims’ families monetary damages. While a criminal conviction may increase the chances of a perpetrator being held civilly liable, it is not a requirement for bringing a civil action.
V. Parties in a Civil Suit

Plaintiffs
The main parties in a civil suit are called plaintiffs and defendants. Plaintiffs are the individuals who file the suit. They control the action, are entitled to all information relating to the case, and make decisions, such as whether to accept a settlement. The plaintiff in a civil suit can be the victim, survivors of the victim, or persons responsible for the victim.

Family Members
Family members who might bring a civil suit include the parents, spouse, children, or siblings of the victim.

Defendants
The defendants are the parties against whom a civil action is brought. The defendants in a civil suit can be the perpetrators, individuals who have assisted the perpetrators, or individuals or organizations whose negligence has in some way contributed to the commission of the crime known as “third parties.”

Offenders
The offenders are the individuals who committed the original offense, whether or not they were found guilty by a criminal court.

Third Parties
In some civil cases, a “third-party” defendant may be held liable. Third-party defendants are not the persons who
seven years after the victim turns eighteen, or within four years of the reasonable discovery of the harm suffered, and that the harm is shown to be the result of sexual abuse. (Fla. Stat. §95.11(7)). Many survivors of childhood sexual abuse are aware of what happened to them, but may not realize that the act constituted abuse or may not consider it harmful. Often victims are well into adulthood before the impact of abuse is manifested in conditions such as depression, addictions, and eating disorders. When the victim seeks treatment for those conditions, they are often found to have been caused by the sexual abuse. In a civil lawsuit it is often a disputed issue as to when a victim reasonably discovered or should have discovered the connection between the abuse and the harm suffered. An attorney should always be consulted about questions regarding a statute of limitations.

VII. Types of Civil Lawsuits

There are numerous claims under which civil actions may be brought. They include wrongful death, assault and battery, intentional or negligent infliction of emotional distress, and negligence. Some of these claims are described below.

In civil cases, the crime or wrongful act is referred to as a tort. For most criminal offenses, there is a corresponding tort for which a crime victim may bring a civil suit. Some examples of these claims are described below.

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VI. Statutes of Limitations

The law sets time limits for filing civil suits, called statutes of limitation. Any suit filed after the expiration of the statute of limitations is “time-barred” and cannot proceed. In Florida, a civil suit based on wrongful death arising out of murder, aggravated manslaughter, or manslaughter may be filed against an individual person at any time. (Fla. Stat. §95.11(10)). It is not a requirement that the defendant was arrested, criminally charged or convicted in order to file a lawsuit against the defendant. A civil suit for wrongful death must be filed no more than two years after the date of death. (Fla. Stat. §95.11(4) (d)). A lawsuit claiming personal injury or property damage must be filed within four years of the injury. (Fla. Stat. §95.11(3)).

In Florida, a child who was the victim of a sexual battery before their sixteenth birthday, may file a civil law suit related to that sexual battery at any time as long as the previous statute of limitation had not expired before July 1, 2010. (Fla. Stat. §95.11(9)). A victim of sexual abuse who was abused between the ages of 16 and 18, can file a civil action against the perpetrator of the abuse within
IX. Filing a Civil Lawsuit

A victim begins the civil case by filing a document that in Florida is called the complaint. This document sets out the facts of the case and the legal claims being made. Defendants then have a certain amount of time to file a document called the answer. In this, defendants set forth their version of the facts and any defenses which apply. As a part of the process of the case, either side can request information from the other side. (For more information, see “Discovery.”) In addition, either party can file motions asking the court to throw out certain claims or defenses or dismiss the entire case.

X. Discovery

In a lawsuit, each side can ask the other side for information and documents relating to the case. This process is called discovery. Civil discovery involves investigations of the facts and circumstances of the case, interviewing witnesses, obtaining relevant documents, and questioning parties and other witnesses under oath. The investigation may include a review of police records, informal interviews of eye witnesses, and photographing the location of the crime.

Request for Production of Documents

Document requests are a formal procedure by which one side can ask the other side to produce documents and other materials relevant to the case. Requests for production of documents must be answered in a specified amount of time.

Interrogatories

Interrogatories are a list of questions sent to the opposing party. They are usually limited in number by the court rules of the jurisdiction in which the case has been filed. Both requests for production of documents and interrogatories must be answered in a specified amount of time.

Depositions

A deposition is a proceeding in which a party’s attorney has the opportunity to question opposing parties and potential witnesses under oath. Deposition testimony is transcribed. The transcripts may be used at trial for various reasons, including if the witnesses are no longer available or if the witnesses offer trial testimony which conflicts with the deposition.

After documents have been produced, interrogatories
have been answered, and depositions have been completed, each side should know much more about the other side’s case. At this point, the parties sometimes engage in negotiations which lead to settlement of the case.

**XI. Trial**

If a settlement is not reached, the case proceeds to trial. A plaintiff wins at trial if the plaintiff has met his or her burden of proof and the defendant has not successfully asserted a defense to the claim. If the plaintiff wins, the judge or jury awards damages and the matter is over unless the defendant appeals. A defendant wins at trial if the plaintiff has not met the burden of proof or the defendant has successfully asserted a defense. If the defendant wins, the case is finished unless the plaintiff appeals.

**XII. Damages**

Judges and juries have the power to decide how much money to award as damages if the plaintiff wins. There are two main types of damages, compensatory and punitive. The goal of compensatory damages is to “pay back” the injured party for losses suffered as a result of the crime. The primary purpose of punitive damages is to punish and deter criminals or third parties. In Florida, for most injury cases, the amount of punitive damages is capped to three times the amount of compensatory damages or $500,000, whichever is greater. (Fla. Stat.§768.73).

**XIII. Judgment and Enforcement**

A victim contemplating a civil lawsuit should understand that obtaining a civil judgment is only half the battle. In many cases, it may be difficult to collect the money awarded by the court. Some defendants do not or cannot pay judgments entered against them. However, there are potential sources of payment, such as insurance or various types of income that should always be considered.

**XIV. When a Perpetrator Sues a Victim**

Occasionally, offenders may sue or counter-sue victims. Defendants may take this step in order to harass or intimidate victims into dropping charges or withdrawing their civil suits.

Sometimes these suits are filed in response to the victim’s civil complaint, along with answers to the complaint. Sometimes perpetrators file them in response to a criminal charge. Victims need to know that truth is an absolute defense to defamation and slander, which are the most common civil claims filed by perpetrators.

**XV. About Lawyers**

**Finding a Lawyer**

The National Center for Victims of Crime established the National Crime Victim Bar Association (NCVBA) to facilitate civil suits by crime victims. The NCVBA offers victims free referrals to attorneys for consultation.

The NCVBA ARS has registered with the Florida State Bar as a public interest attorney referral service and has submitted its quarterly and annual report(s) and annual report(s). NCVBA members have agreed to donate to the NCVBA 20% of any legal fees they receive from cases referred to them through this service.

Victims seeking more information or attorney referrals should call the NCVBA attorney referral line at 202-467-8716 or 1 (844) LAW-HELP.

**Selection Considerations**

More attorneys than ever are representing crime victims in civil lawsuits, though relatively few specifically list themselves as “crime victim” attorneys. Typically, these attorneys can be found handling premises liability, personal injury, wrongful death, or professional malpractice claims on behalf of plaintiffs. Finding qualified attorneys to represent victims in civil lawsuits often requires diligence.

A productive attorney-client relationship is based on the ability of both sides to communicate fully and effectively with each other. Although relating sensitive details can be difficult for crime victims, they should feel as comfortable as possible in fully disclosing all details and information to their attorneys. Attorneys should be able to effectively explain all aspects of legal proceedings to victims, and they should be responsive to victims’ needs and requests.

Victims should fully understand all the details of any retainer agreement (contract to hire the attorney) prior to signing it. If victims have questions, they should feel comfortable discussing them with their attorneys. If
questions persist, local bar association personnel may be able to explain laws, regulations, and common practices pertaining to contracts with attorneys.

Victims should be clear about what they wish their attorneys to do, and attorneys should be clear about what services they are providing. Understanding each other’s expectations—as well as avoiding unrealistic expectations—can minimize the possibility of disappointment and frustration.

Victims should feel free to consult with several lawyers before selecting one. Lawyers are professionals, and it is good consumer practice to obtain a second opinion in selecting professional legal counsel.

Victims should cooperate, as fully as possible, with their attorneys. Such cooperation is necessary for successful representation of their interests. By the same token, victims have the right to expect their attorneys to be understanding, respectful, and responsive to their needs. Attorneys have the right to expect their clients to be honest and willing to participate in building their own cases.

**Information Your Attorney May Need**

When crime victims consult with an attorney, they should be prepared to answer detailed questions about the case that will allow the attorney to conduct a proper evaluation. Attorneys might request information such as the following:

*About the Criminal Event:*  
- Date and time of criminal occurrence  
- Location of events, addresses, and description of premises  
- How the perpetrator gained access to the victim  
- Identification of witnesses to any stage of the occurrence  
- Identification of known physical evidence  
- Whether a police report was filed, and if so, identification of: the police department where the complaint was filed, the detective or officer assigned to the case, the complaint or report number, and statements taken as part of an investigation  
- Whether there was or is a criminal case, and if so, identification of: the prosecutor, current stage of criminal case, and description of the case investigation conducted

*About the Perpetrator:*  
- If the perpetrator is known to the victim: nature of relationship with victim, perpetrator’s name and aliases, address, date of birth and Social Security Number, employment information, and any information known about the perpetrator’s assets and insurance coverage  
- If the perpetrator is not known to the victim: physical description of the perpetrator, identifying features

*About Damages Sustained by the Victim:*  
- Medical information: degree of physical, emotional, and psychological injuries sustained, and extent and cost of anticipated treatment  
- Identification of hospital, physician services  
- Identification of property damage  
- Lost amount of victim’s or victim’s spouse’s time from work, lost wages, money recouped from workers’ compensation, or state or private disability insurance  
- Source of funds to cover damages or losses such as insurance (policy number), crime victims’ compensation, Medicare, and restitution

**Fees and Retainers**

Usually, the types of civil cases brought by victims of crime are billed by attorneys on a contingency fee basis. This means the attorney is only paid if the victim is awarded a monetary settlement or judgment. Attorneys will be paid a predetermined percentage of the total award.

There are also costs, such as filing fees, deposition fees, and service of process fees the victim might be responsible to pay before a suit is filed or during the course of the suit. Some attorneys require that plaintiffs pay a retainer fee. A retainer is money paid to an attorney, but kept in a special account from which the above-mentioned costs can be paid. Money not used in the retainer may be returned to the client at the conclusion of the suit.
XVI. Conclusion

The civil justice system offers victims of crime another opportunity to secure what they seek most—justice. Regardless of whether there was a successful criminal prosecution or any prosecution at all, victims can bring their claims before the court and ask to have the responsible parties held accountable. While money awarded in civil lawsuits can never fully compensate victims for the trauma of their victimizations or the loss of loved ones, it can provide valuable resources for crime victims to help rebuild their lives.