The Next Revolution in Crime Victims’ Rights:  
A System of Parallel Justice

During the past 20 years, a sea change occurred in the involvement of crime victims in the criminal justice system.

The far-reaching recommendations of the 1982 Final Report of the President’s Task Force on Victims of Crime set the stage for nothing less than a revolution in establishing crime victims’ rights to participate in the criminal justice system. At the time this report was released, only the state of California provided constitutional protection to crime victims’ rights. Furthermore, very few states gave victims what we now consider to be the most basic of rights, including the right to be present in the court room, the right to be notified about and provide input into crucial developments in the criminal justice process, and the right to restitution.

Since 1982, we have seen measurable progress. Currently, every state in this country gives victims of crime the rights to be notified, present and heard during legal proceedings, and more than half guarantee those rights in their state constitutions. The cloak of invisibility has been shattered and victims are now more widely viewed as legitimate participants in the criminal justice system.

And, yet, something critically important is still missing for victims of crime. The criminal justice system was set up, after all, to apprehend, prosecute, punish, and rehabilitate offenders. As a society, we have spent billions of dollars on dealing primarily with the perpetrators of crime. Tragically, however, far too many of the 25 million Americans who become victims of crime each year are left isolated in crime’s wake—fending for themselves and struggling alone with the enormous emotional, financial, and physical consequences of crime.

It’s time to look to the next 20 years and further revolutionize the way we think about and support those who are harmed by crime. It’s time to create a system of parallel justice, a system
that tells each crime victim, “what happened to you was wrong and we will help you rebuild your life.”

What would parallel justice look like? A system of parallel justice would run parallel to the criminal justice system. Parallel justice would involve both a governmental and a community response. For every reported crime, our society spends enormous resources responding to the incident and trying to apprehend and prosecute the offender. With parallel justice, there would always be a second—parallel—set of responses that would be designed to help ensure a victim’s safety; to help a victim recover from the trauma of the crime; and to provide resources to help a victim get his or her life back on track.

It would be a system that compensates victims of all crime (violent and non-violent) for all their losses, including pain and suffering—not just immediate out-of-pocket losses as done sparingly in the current system. It would be a system that provides all victims who seek it with emergency, transitional, and ongoing services, including counseling, relocation assistance, and support groups. When crime victims need to relocate for their safety, they would have priority access to housing assistance. Victimization increases substance abuse, so, under parallel justice, crime victims would have priority access to treatment programs. Parallel justice would offer safety planning for all victims to prevent repeat victimization.

Within the criminal justice system, parallel justice would manifest through consistently fair and respectful treatment of crime victims. It would mean victims’ rights are respected and enforced, and when these rights are denied that meaningful recourse is available. It would also mean that when convicted offenders are ordered to pay restitution to victims for harm done, those orders would be enforced.

Within our communities, a system of parallel justice would foster a greater awareness of the impact of crime on its victims and encourage a more compassionate response. For example, businesses would demonstrate concern for their employees’ security by rearranging schedules, if necessary, or by helping to provide different means of transportation to and from work. Universities would assist students who are raped or stalked with transferring to a different school or by allowing time off from classes without being penalized academically. Accountants and financial planners would volunteer their services to help homicide survivors pay bills, attend to financial affairs, and settle estates. Neighbors would help crime victims by running errands, cooking meals, performing household repairs, or babysitting children. There are endless opportunities for our communities to help victims of crime.

Certainly, many jurisdictions across the United States have programs to assist crime victims. But, in most places, these programs and services are inadequate, under-funded, and of
only minimal scope. To address shortcomings in the current system and to ensure that victims of crime receive the assistance and support they need to rebuild their lives, communities should be encouraged to draw inspiration from the example of this country’s September 11 response. Our generous altruistic spirit need not lie dormant until a major calamity strikes. It can be exercised daily on behalf of the anonymous, powerless, aggrieved, and often suffering victims of everyday crime.

This is National Crime Victims' Rights Week, an opportunity for us to dream big and envision a more comprehensive and compassionate response to victims. Let’s, once again, revolutionize our response to victims of crime by taking the path of parallel justice.

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