

Address Confidentiality Programs Aim to Keep Victims Safe

*By Carol Lavery**

Stalking victims often struggle to stay safe. They may have to switch jobs, move to other towns or states, or even change their names. And yet, stalkers may still find them.

In response to the vulnerability of stalking, sexual assault, and other victims, 32 states have launched Address Confidentiality Programs (ACPs), which give victims substitute, government-managed addresses (often a post office box) to use in place of their physical address. All the victim's first-class mail is routed to the substitute address and then forwarded to the victim's actual address, decreasing the victim's vulnerability to stalkers and other offenders who attempt to locate them.

ACPs, which began in Washington in 1991, reduce the risk that offenders can use public information to gain access to their victims. Offenders often use public data, such voter or drivers' license registries, to find a victim's address. Yet victims can't falsify their addresses on public documents—even to protect themselves—without facing criminal penalties. ACP laws bridge this gap by allowing victims to use the alternate ACP address when submitting information to public agencies.

Laws governing ACP eligibility vary from state to state. Most states require that the applicant be a victim (or a parent or guardian of a minor victim) of the specified crime, a state resident, and have recently relocated to an address unknown to the perpetrator. While every program accepts domestic violence victims, many also accept victims of sexual assault, and stalking; some consider different circumstances. Often, trained or certified advocates determine eligibility and may also help victims complete their applications, perhaps at local domestic violence or rape crisis centers. Advocates may also help victims develop an overall safety plan, in which the ACP plays a crucial part. Victims then submit their applications to the state agency that administers the program.

ACP programs offer government agencies, local victim service providers, law enforcement and the business community an opportunity to collaborate. Government agencies must cooperate to keep the victim's location confidential. ACPs rely on local victim service providers for referrals, counseling, safety planning, and occasional application assistance to victims. Private businesses may contribute by accepting the ACP substitute address when doing business with or employing ACP participants.

Usually, the fewer people who know a victim's location, the safer he or she will be. ACP can work only if the perpetrator does not know where the victim lives, and when used in conjunction with other safety strategies. Yet ACPs offer both victims and government a promising and useful public safety tool.

To learn more about the services of the ACP operating in your state, contact them directly. Information on existing state address confidentiality programs can be found on the Stalking Resource Center Web site, www.ncvc.org/src.

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