

REMARKS
AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY

OF

THE HONORABLE KAROL V. MASON
ASSISTANT ATTORNEY GENERAL
OFFICE OF JUSTICE PROGRAMS

AT THE

2016 VOCA NATIONAL TRAINING CONFERENCE

ON

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ALBUQUERQUE, NM

Thank you, Joye [Frost]. I'm very pleased to be here, and delighted to join Governor Martinez. Thank you, Governor, for welcoming us to your state and for your support of crime victims and those who serve them.

I also want to thank the National Association of VOCA Assistance Administrators, the National Association of Crime Victim Compensation Boards, and the New Mexico Crime Victim Reparations Commission for their work in organizing this conference and for all they do to support victims and victim service providers. We value our partnership with your organizations and consider your work vital to our mission at the Office of Justice Programs. A special thanks to Michael, Cletus, Steve, and Dan for their leadership and for faithfully and tirelessly representing the interests of state VOCA administrators and crime victims.

And of course, thanks to Joye and the terrific staff of our Office for Victims of Crime. Their commitment to crime victims is second to none.

Could the timing of this conference be any better? As I'm sure you're all very well aware, yesterday the final rule for the VOCA Formula Victim Assistance Grant Program – the product of many years of hard work – finally went into effect.

A federal rule may not seem like the kind of thing you'd get terribly excited about, but trust me – this is different. This is one of those landmark events that only happen every few years in the victims field, and it happened because so many people – many in this room – worked so hard to bring it to pass. The National Association of VOCA Assistance Administrators was one of the real forces behind the rule, as were many state administrators. We applaud your perseverance and are grateful for your help keeping the process moving.

And I'm especially proud of the role that Joye and her team played, leading it on its march through the often convoluted and protracted rule-making process. It really was an exercise in patience and a true labor of love.

So why is this new rule, which takes up a few pages in the Federal Register, so very important? What does it do that we should be so happy about? We should be pleased because this new rule gives states both greater clarity and greater flexibility in the types of services they can support, and so it has the potential to vastly expand the body of services available to victims.

Specifically, it opens up funding opportunities for services that extend beyond the traditional roll call of victim assistance programs – the shelters and support groups we're accustomed to supporting. This new rule gives the nod to comprehensive legal assistance to help enforce victims' rights and provide civil legal assistance to victims. It makes it clear that transitional housing and relocation can be covered.

Forensic interviewing and some medical expenses are allowable under the rule. Volunteer training and restorative justice programs can benefit from VOCA support.

And programs that serve victims of elder abuse, human trafficking, and financial fraud are eligible for funding.

The rule also removes prohibitions on services to victims in detention and correctional facilities. This is a particularly enlightened provision of the rule, and one that I think has important implications for victim assistance. Not only does it envision services for people victimized while they are in jail or prison – for example, victims of prison sexual assault – it takes into account those whose victimization pre-dates their incarceration.

We know that many people who are incarcerated were crime victims long before they became involved with the justice system. Research shows that trauma, particularly when it happens at young ages, is associated with later criminal behavior. While those who commit offenses should be held accountable for their actions, if we expect them to make amends and become productive citizens, we have to give them the support they need to overcome this earlier trauma.

And one final important point about the rule: it broadly defines “victim of child abuse” to encompass children who witness violence and those who are victims of pornography, among other types of harm. This is consistent with the work we’ve done under our Defending Childhood Initiative to counter the effects of trauma on children who are not only direct targets of victimization but exposed in other, more indirect ways. The effects of this exposure, even when it doesn’t involve physical or sexual abuse, can be devastating. The rule gives us an opportunity to make sure we’re reaching this vulnerable population.

So in spite of its somewhat bureaucratic and legalistic trappings, this really is an important policy document, one that I think will make a big difference in the way we reach crime victims.

It also comes at a propitious time. Early in the Administration, Joye and her staff – working with many partners in the field – made a concerted move to promote evidence-based practices in victim services. When they launched Vision 21 in 2010, their goal was, and remains, to get services to every victim in need.

We’ve still got a long way to go to reach that goal, but we’ve made real progress, thanks to a strong commitment from this Administration and from Congress. We’re expanding the universe of victim assistance to encompass previously underserved groups of victims, from urban young men of color to tribal members living in isolated areas of Indian country, and from people physically and sexually exploited by human traffickers to online fraud victims. This new rule will help us continue extending our reach.

And in another very happy coincidence, this rule comes as states plan to manage unprecedented resources. Funding for victim assistance programs has effectively quadrupled in recent years. For programs that are used to operating at subsistence levels, these increases amount to a windfall.

There's no question that this has been great news, but we also know it presents a daunting prospect for those of you involved in state-level planning. I think the rule will help. It should open up new avenues and ideas for funding, and it widens the pool of possible services that states can consider. This is an excellent opportunity to build new partnerships.

Of course, the additional funding invites greater scrutiny, and it will be our collective responsibility to make sure we're spending those funds wisely and transparently. That's why Congress built in extra resources for the Inspector General's office. I think this is a good thing. The Office of Justice Programs has worked closely with the Inspector General in the recent past, and we've found the experience to be very positive. OIG staff are able to flag concerns that we otherwise might not be aware of and they help us take corrective action before serious problems arise. They play a very important role, and one we should all embrace.

And finally, the new VOCA rule comes at the right time because our country has come to understand, through trial and tragedy, the value of victim services. Although crime rates nationally remain at historic lows, many of our citizens are hurting, and many others are feeling vulnerable. No one knows better than a victim advocate that violence and loss can strike at any time and any place, whether it's at a church, a movie theater, a road race, an elementary school, or a night club. It's become far too common in our country to see innocent lives taken so abruptly in places where people should expect to find peace and refuge.

We need to continue fighting to keep these horrible tragedies from occurring, but we also need to be prepared when they happen. No one has been more alert and nimble and compassionate than our nation's victim service providers – and I'm glad that our Office for Victims of Crime has consistently been part of the response.

The resources now available to us can bolster our approach to mass violence, and I hope that you will all use this moment in time to strengthen our infrastructure and expand our capabilities so that we're fully equipped to give victims in these cases the immediate support they need.

Victim assistance and victim compensation are part of the backbone of public safety in America. Our country is only as secure as its crime victims are valued and protected. There is no justice unless there's justice for victims.

I'm thankful for all the work that each and every one of you is doing on behalf of victims, and I look forward – with you – to the day when all victims have a place to go for the help and healing they deserve.

Thank you.

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