

OFFICE OF VICTIM WITNESS ADVOCACY **(VICTIM WITNESS UNIT)**

The purpose of the Burlington County Office of Victim Witness Advocacy (The Victim Witness Unit) is to ensure that the rights of crime victims and witnesses are protected and that their needs receive full attention. The staff is comprised of one coordinator, five victim advocates, and one secretary, who all serve as liaisons between the victim and the criminal justice system. The advocates work closely with assistant prosecutors and the law enforcement community to help victims understand the vital role they play in the criminal justice process.

We are committed to serving the needs of crime victims and witnesses. Our primary goal is to provide victims with services and support to help them cope with the aftermath of victimization, while trying to make their participation in the criminal justice system less difficult and burdensome.

Our services respond to a diversity of needs, providing answers and explanations about a system that victims and witnesses often find confusing. In 2017, the Victim Witness Unit reached out to over 4,500 new crime victims, while providing services on more than 25,000 different occasions to each new victim and to victims and witnesses whose cases began prior to 2017.

The range of referrals that our program provides extends to the non-profit sector, law enforcement, and state and federal government. A significant amount of written correspondence is mailed out daily by the Unit secretary and the advocates. In 2017, approximately 45,000 case status letters were mailed out to victims and witnesses of crime. The VINE system, along with assistance from victim advocates, ensured that over 1,250 notifications were mailed to victims advising them about the parole status or release of a violent offender from the New Jersey Department of Corrections or the Burlington County Jail.

Advocates frequently escort victims and their families to court, offering support and a caring ear for case status hearings and trials. The staff is also actively involved with any homicide investigation that occurs within Burlington County. The Victim Witness Unit works closely with the BCPO Major Crimes Unit to provide immediate service to the families of homicide victims. In order to provide these services, an advocate is contacted at the time of the crime and will respond to the local police department or hospital to aid surviving family members. In those circumstances where immediate outreach is problematic, the assigned advocate will contact the family within 24 hours after the homicide. This enables the advocate to start a working relationship with the family while offering services from the Victims of Crime Compensation Office and other agencies.

On a daily basis, the advocates also bear witness to the great strength and perseverance that crime victims and victim survivors display as they navigate through the criminal justice system. In recognition of this journey, our Office annually sponsors two National

Crime Victims' Rights Week events. During the week of April 8th - April 15th, 2017 the Victim Witness Unit Staff and others from the BCPO joined our state and the nation in recognizing the struggles and triumphs of the Crime Victims' Rights Movement. The theme for 2017, "Expand the Circle; Reach All Victims" reflects the goals the Victim Witness Unit strive each day to achieve while interacting with crime victims and their families as they are thrust into a system that they never chose to become a part of.

Our well-attended Annual Crime Victims' Rights Week breakfast was held on April 13, 2017 at the Westin Hotel in Mount Laurel. Local politicians, members of the law enforcement community, victims and their families all came together to honor the journey of crime victims.

Our speaker, Rich Pompelio, Esquire is a victim advocate and founder of the New Jersey Crime Victims Law Center. He created the Center after his son Tony was murdered, and there were no resources for him and his family and other crime victims as the case moved through the Criminal Justice System. He was an amazing speaker, and the audience of 100 took in every word and were inspired and rejuvenated by what he shared.

On Sunday, April 15, 2017 at the Historic Smithville Park and Mansion in Eastampton we held our Annual Candlelight Vigil. The brief, yet powerful, vigil gives all in attendance the opportunity to light a candle in memory and reverence to the loss of their loved ones and experience fellowship with other concerned individuals. About 100 people attended, and it is a valuable tradition to all of us, and the families we serve.

The mission of the Victim Witness Unit involves serving victims from the very start, until the very end of the court process and beyond; while helping to build their trust in the law enforcement community by our actions, and restoring hope for their future of healing.

The Victim Witness Unit remains dedicated to victims and witnesses of crime. We acknowledge the struggles of crime victims and we strive to continue to help reduce the impact of crime by empowering victims and advocating for their rights. We look forward to continuing to provide these services to victims and the community.