



An employee publication of the
Texas Department of Criminal Justice

March/April 2012

Volume 19 Issue 4

Board Bulletin



Janice Harris Lord, Member

Crime Victims' Rights Week, April 22-28

*By Janice Harris Lord, Member, and Susan McHenry,
Executive Assistant to the Chairman*

You turn to the news and what do you hear or read - stories of crime, bank robberies, home invasions, muggings, sexual assaults, kidnapping and murder. According to Bureau of Justice statistics, U.S. residents over the age of 12 experienced an estimated 18.7 million violent and property crime victimizations during 2010. Considering that only about 50 percent of all violent victimizations and nearly 40 percent of property crimes were reported to the police, the actual number of victims impacted by these crimes is much higher. In addition, there are numerous secondary victims, such as affected family members, friends, neighbors and co-workers.

To promote awareness of victims' rights and services, a victims' rights movement emerged about 30 years ago. At that time, like today, victims endured physical and emotional wounds, costly financial burdens, as well as the challenge of dealing with the criminal justice system. Victims also faced

negative public perception, were excluded from courtrooms, and were afforded few rights. The organized victims' rights movement began to confront these challenges and to promote fair, compassionate, and respectful responses to victims of crime. To the founders of the movement, justice meant that all victims, regardless of their location, demographics or financial status, would have the rights and services they needed in the aftermath of a crime.

Since the 1980s, the movement has made dramatic progress in securing rights, protections and services for victims across the nation. Every state has enacted victims' rights laws and 32 states have constitutional victims' right's amendments. All states have victim compensation laws, and more than 10,000 victim services agencies have been established throughout the country. Within TDCJ, victim services have had an established presence since the early 1990s. In its early form, victim services relied upon the

limited communications technology of the day to notify crime victims, whose offenders were incarcerated in our state's prison system, of certain changes in an offender's status. Today, that role is greatly expanded.

The TDCJ Victim Services Division is dedicated to providing assistance and services to ensure crime victims in Texas are given the opportunity to participate in the criminal justice process. This is done through programs such as the confidential Victim Notification System, which can provide victims with written notification at more than 80 different points in the incarceration and parole review process. Certain information regarding offenders is also currently available 24 hours a day through a toll-free automated system known as Victim Information and Notification Everyday (VINE). Victim Offender Mediation/Dialogue and the Texas Crime Victim Clearinghouse, which serves as a central source of information for crime victims, victim advocates and criminal jus-

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tice professionals, are among additional programs and services now available to victims of crime.

Although much progress has been made in Texas and across the nation, victims' rights are not universal and often not enforced. There are also multiple, complex challenges in reaching out to victims, in addition to new emerging types of crimes resulting from changing technology, globalization and demographics.

To honor countless crime victims and the nation's progress in advancing their rights, and to continue to heighten awareness regarding the needs of victims, National

Crime Victims' Rights Week was established. This year, National Crime Victims' Rights Week will begin April 22, 2012.

This year's theme, Extending the Vision: Reaching Every Victim, celebrates the vision behind the nation's progress in advancing victims' rights and the vision to serve every victim of crime. The observation of this week will help increase the understanding of the realities of crime victimization and the importance of supporting crime victims' rights and services.

National Crime Victims' Rights Week is celebrated with vigor across the nation, and this year's theme will renew the movement's

commitment to reach each and every victim in need. Communities and organizations alike will be holding special events such as memorial services, rallies, walks and runs, candlelight vigils, youth events and informational fairs. Public awareness and understanding will be heightened with the hopes of generating volunteers to help crime victims within the community.

During National Crime Victims' Rights Week and throughout the year, we encourage every TDCJ employee and citizen of Texas to consider the impact of crime and to recognize and honor the importance of victims' rights and services. ●

