

Providing Services to Crime Victims with Dedication and Compassion

Angie McCown, Director of Victim Services Division

Dedication and compassion are words that come to mind when I think about the individuals who work at the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, Victim Services Division (TDCJ VSD). Each day I come to work and I am energized by these individuals arriving at our office ready to face the challenges of the day. As I listen to their conversations, I hear TDCJ VSD staff discussing:

- How to make publications more user friendly for victims.
- How to not only inform victims of their rights but to assist them in exercising those rights if they choose to do so.
- How to provide information to victims about participating the criminal justice system, while respecting the victims' right to self-determination.
- How to allow the voices of victims and legislative mandates to guide the division's services.
- How to educate criminal justice professionals so that they might be more victim sensitive in their work.
- How to educate victim services professionals so that they all have a basic knowledge base from which to operate, whether they reside in a large metropolitan area or a rural area.
- How to provide information to crime victims that is often difficult to hear in a way that conveys understanding and compassion.
- How to allow adequate time for every victim who calls or visits needing information and/or a listening ear.
- How to think creatively so that our programs and services are always improving and expanding.
- How to listen with compassion and understanding.
- How to allow space in conversations, without becoming overwhelmed, for sadness, anger, disappointment, confusion, despair, rage, loss, devastation, fear, loneliness and /or any other emotion victims may have.
- How to support one another when the work becomes painful.
- How to recognize the strengths of staff and the victims they serve.



Not everyone has the opportunity to work with individuals who are this passionate about serving others, or to witness dedicated and compassionate individuals making positive differences in people's lives every day. In this season of thanks, I would like to recognize these individuals for their dedication to and compassion for the victims we serve: Jennifer, Christina, Cielito, Kimberly, Lauren, Christina, Yesenia, Chris, Emily, Jeri, Carol, Brooke, Loree, Dan, Jack, Libby, Lynn, Alana, Gabriella, Vickie, Dee, Michelle, Mark, Julia, Janice, Sheri, Molly, Shania, Tammy, Kerry and Rose. THANK YOU!

HOPE FOR THE HOLIDAYS: Survival Tips for Homicide Survivors

by Janice Harris Lord

You are facing the holidays, and someone you love will be missing from your holiday table because they were killed. As you think about their empty chair throughout the holiday season, you may feel overwhelmed. Following are some suggestions to help you cope.

1. Change traditions.

If you have always had your holiday meals at one place, have them at someone else's home this year. The more you try to make it the same as it was before, the more poignant your loved one's absence will feel.

2. Balance solitude with sociability.

Solitude can renew strength. Being with people who love you can help you feel less lonely. Plan to attend some holiday gatherings even if you don't think you want to. You can leave early if you choose. You may surprise yourself by having a good time.

3. Relive the happy memories.

Pick three special memories of past holidays with your loved one.

Think of them often and allow yourself to smile. It's good to feel both happiness and sorrow.

4. Set aside "letting go" time.

Schedule times in your planner or calendar for grieving. When you know you have set aside these times, listening to music, journaling, or visiting the cemetery, it will be easier to postpone unwanted spasms of grief in public or at work.

5. Counter the conspiracy of silence.

Family and friends don't know what to do, so they sometimes conspire to not mention your loved one for fear of upsetting you. They may not realize that you are already thinking about the death many times a day. Break the ice by mentioning your loved one first. If they seem surprised, gently inform them that it is important to you to talk about your loved one during the holidays.

6. Find a creative outlet.

Write a memorial poem, song, or

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice Victim Services Division is proud to provide you with an email notification service. Email notifications may be retrieved directly from your computer, mobile device, or wherever internet access is available. Email notifications are time sensitive and notify you of changes in an offender's status. Being a current Victim Notification System registrant will not automatically register you for this email service. To register, contact the Victim Services Division at 800-848-4284 or visit our website at www.tdcj.texas.gov and complete the victim email notification form. You continue to have the option to receive notifications by letter, email, or both. We would like to encourage all victim service providers who utilize the Victim Notification System to elect to receive email notifications only whenever possible.

Ms. Janice Harris Lord will present a webinar on December 4, 2014 from 9:30 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. on **Grief and the Holidays**. To register, visit: <https://www1.gotomeeting.com/register/435852041>

Please refer to page six for information on how to access recordings of previously held webinars hosted by the Texas Crime Victim Clearinghouse staff.

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Hope for the Holidays (cont.)

story about your loved one and share it. Use the money you would have spent on your loved one for holiday gifts to donate to a charity he or she supported. Consider volunteering.

7. Don't forget the rest of the family.

Even if it takes energy you think you don't have, try to have a good holiday season for the children. If you need help preparing your home or buying gifts, ask a trusted friend to help. Christmas tree ornaments carry so many emotionally-laden memories that many families choose to buy different ornaments for a few years until they can face unpacking the old ones. Put the tree in a different room or space this year.

8. Utilize available resources.

If you are a person of faith, participate in church or synagogue services or go to the mosque more often for prayer. Many veterans of the faith have a serenity about them, a special kind of healing wisdom that can be very comforting. Seek out a support group that is meeting specifically to help people through the holidays. Many funeral homes, non-profits, and faith communities offer them. Or start your own small group of others who have experienced something similar.

It is tempting to conclude that life is "awful" during the holidays. Yes, you will have some difficult times, but you can also experience some joy.

Having pleasurable moments does not mean that you have forgotten your loved one or that you loved him or her any less. Let yourself feel both grief and joy. Above all, remember that you cannot change the past. You can, however, live fully in this moment. Total recovery may never come, but what you kindle from the ashes of your tragedy is largely up to you. ★

*The article is excerpted from a chapter in *No Time for Goodbyes: Coping with Sorrow, Anger, and Injustice After a Tragic Death*, which is also available in Spanish. Ms. Janice Harris Lord grants permission for victim advocates to copy this article.*

TREE OF ANGELS

by Carol Tompkins

The Tree of Angels is a meaningful Christmas program specifically held in memory and support of victims of violent crime. The Tree of Angels allows your community to recognize that the holiday season is a difficult time for families and friends who have suffered the crushing impact of a violent crime.

This special event honors and supports surviving victims and victims' families by making it possible for loved ones to bring an angel ornament to place on a Christmas tree. The first program was implemented in December 1991 by People Against Violent Crime (PAVC) in Austin. Over the past 23 years the Tree of Angels has become a memorable tradition observed in many communities, providing comfort, hope, support, and healing.

For a list of Tree of Angels ceremonies, please visit the website: www.treeofangels.org.

If you have any questions, contact Carol Tompkins at 512-837-PAVC or e-mail carol@peopleagainstviolentcrime.org.



Victim Notification System (VNS) & Victim Information Notification Everyday (VINE): An Explanation of Notification Services

*By Kerry Strand, Program Specialist
TDCJ Victim Services Division*

Notifications concerning court proceedings, parole proceedings and an offender's release are rights granted to crime victims in the Texas Code of Criminal Procedures, Chapter 56. In order to keep crime victims informed of offender status changes, notification services have been established at various stages throughout the criminal justice system to assist in this process. Notifications are available to crime victims for offenders: in county custody (county jail); on community supervision (probation); in Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) custody (adult prison and parole); being supervised by the Texas Juvenile Justice Department; in federal custody; and who have Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) detainers. *(Please refer to the chart on page five for contact information for these departments/agencies.)*

This article will focus on the following two sources of notification services: Victim Information and Notification Everyday (VINE) and the TDCJ Victim Services Division (VSD) Victim Notification System (VNS).

Determining which notification service to register with depends largely on the location and status of the offender.

There is a misconception that the VNS and VINE services are one in the same and victims only need to register once through VINE in order to receive notifications. However,

this is not the case and in fact, this misconception could potentially be detrimental to a victim, as shown in the following scenarios:

A victim registers with VINE during the trial for the offender. The victim receives notifications throughout the trial process. The offender is convicted and sentenced to the TDCJ - Correctional Institutions Division (adult prison). The victim does not register with the VNS. The victim will not be notified when the offender begins the parole review process. The victim will not be informed of when and how to participate in the parole review process by protesting the offender's possible release or requesting to meet with the Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles. When the offender is released, the victim will not be notified.

In an alternate scenario, a victim registers with the VNS for an offender who is in TDCJ custody. The offender is bench warranted to a county jail on appeal of the offender's TDCJ conviction. The victim receives notification from the VNS that the offender will be bench warranted, but does not follow through on the suggestion in the bench warrant notification to register with VINE. The offender is subsequently released from the county jail on bond. Because the victim was not registered with VINE while the offender was in county jail, the victim will not be notified of the offender's release on bond from the county jail.

To receive notifications for an offender in county jail, registration should be made through VINE, which is a notification service provided by Appriss. Currently, VINE is available in 153 county jails as well as 124 court systems in Texas. In order to determine if a county jail or court is partnered with VINE, navigate to www.vinelink.com and select the state of Texas. From there, you can click on the Texas Statewide link, then the Search & Register tab and select Offender for county jail or VINE Courts for county court. Notification services through VINE are open to all members of the public. Types of notifications available through VINE include when an offender is being released from county jail, transferred to another facility, escapes from county jail and is recaptured, offender death while in custody in a county jail, and county court events. Notifications differ amongst each county jail and court system.

To register to receive notifications for custody status changes on the county level, call the toll free number at 877-894-8463, go online to VINELink (www.vinelink.com) or download the app, VINEMobile. A registrant will choose a four-digit PIN which will be used to confirm telephone notifications. Registrants can receive telephone, email, text message and TTY (teletypewriter) notifications. Because VINE does not store offender records after 90 days post-offender release, a person

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Notification (cont.)

could potentially need to register each time the offender is arrested in order to receive notifications. To receive notifications for an offender in TDCJ custody, registration should be made through the TDCJ VSD.

The VSD maintains the confidential VNS where registrant contact information and notification preferences are stored. The VSD provides notifications to all registrants on the VNS with current contact information. Notification services are provided through VNS to victims of crime; however, criminal justice professionals and concerned citizens who have a vested interest in the custody status of a TDCJ offender may also register on the VNS.

Types of notifications available through the VNS include (but are not limited to) automated notifications to registrants regarding the parole process such as when an offender begins the parole review process, when a decision by the Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles is made, warrant actions, bench warrants, termination of electronic monitoring and discharges/releases. Additional manually generated notifications are also provided by the VSD to VNS registrants. Notifications sent by the VNS are all post-conviction.

To register to receive notifications for an offender in TDCJ custody, call the VSD toll-free at 800-848-4284 or email victim.svc@tdcj.texas.gov. Additionally, if a Victim Impact Statement (VIS) is received by the VSD indicating that the person completing the VIS would like to be

notified when the offender is being considered for parole or release, the person who completed the VIS would be added to the VNS to receive notifications. An eight-digit PIN will be assigned to each registrant.

Registrants can elect to receive notifications via email, letter, telephone and text message. Other methods of notifications are also offered by the VSD. Registration to receive an automated telephone call when an offender is being processed for release will need to be specifically requested and will require the registrant to provide a valid telephone number. This phone notification is automated and the eight-digit PIN will be needed to confirm receipt of the phone call. Text messages are only available by request to statutory victims on warrant actions at this time. Statutory victims have the right to meet with the Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles during the parole review process. In order to do so, a VNS registrant must specifically request the meeting through the VSD and must meet statutory requirements. To request these other methods and services, please call or email the VSD.

Once registered on the VNS, registrants will remain on the system. Even if the offender is discharged from the TDCJ and subsequently returns to the TDCJ on a new charge, VNS registrants will only need to ensure contact information is current in order to continue to receive notifications. If an offender is on parole supervision and ends up in a county jail, the victim will need to

Notification Systems:

Victim Information and Notification Everyday (VINE) (County Custody/Trial Information):

877-894-8463

www.vinelink.com

VINEMobile app

TDCJ Vicim Services Division
Victim Notification System (VNS)
(Adult Prison System/Parole
Supervision):

800-848-4284

victim.svc@tdcj.texas.gov

www.tdcj.texas.gov

Community Supervision and
Corrections Department (Adult
Probation):

CSCD Departments

Texas Juvenile Justice Department
(Juvenile System):

888-850-7369

tjjd@tjjd.texas.gov

www.tjjd.texas.gov

Federal Victim/Witness Notification
System:

866-365-4968

www.notify.usdoj.gov

Immigration Customs Enforcement
(ICE)

866-872-4973

www.ice.gov/victim-notification

reregister on VINE at the county level to receive notifications if the offender has been out of county custody more than 90 days.

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Notification (cont.)

Communication between VINE and the VNS is limited. When registering with VINE for offenders in county custody, registrants have the option to elect to receive notifications from the VNS if the offender is transferred to the TDCJ custody. Even if a VINE registrant elects to receive notifications when the offender is transferred to the TDCJ, there is a chance the information may not be relayed to the VNS due to the differences in booking systems from county to county. Some counties have the ability to enter a transfer code when the offender is being transferred to the TDCJ, and a small percentage of others do not. Only the registrants in the counties with the ability to enter a transfer code will be entered into the VNS. The other registrants, even though they elected to receive notifications upon

transfer to a TDCJ facility, will not be registered on the VNS because the county lacks the ability to enter a transfer code. Contacting the VSD to verify registration is recommended.

It is important to note that registering for notifications does not ensure safety. It is vitally important that victims and victim service professionals understand that contact information must be kept up to date in order to receive notifications.

Victims and concerned citizens may contact the VSD at 800-848-4284 Monday through Friday from 8am to 5pm to update contact information and preferences, and to receive offender status information.

Ms. Kerry Strand presented a webinar on November 18, 2014 on **VNS and VINE: An Explanation of Notification Services.**

Please see section below for information on how to access recordings of previously held webinars.

Notification services are vitally important for crime victims. We as professionals can assist victims by explaining that registration with both systems is needed to ensure receipt of notifications at all levels. ★

A chart is provided on the following page to assist victim services professionals when providing an explanation of VINE and VNS.

Texas Crime Victim Clearinghouse Training Opportunities

Live Trainings:

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) Victim Services Division (VSD) Texas Crime Victim Clearinghouse (TxCVC) staff provides training on a variety of topics, which can be tailored to the needs of the requestor. If you would like to host a training in your community, contact the TxCVC at tdcj.clearinghouse@tdcj.texas.gov or 512-406-5931.

Webinars:

The TDCJ VSD TxCVC recently began providing a webinar series. Recent webinars provided information on Victim Services from a Victim's Perspective, Victim Impact Statements (VIS), VIS Activity Reports, Compassion Fatigue Vicarious Trauma, VNS and VINE and Grief in the Holidays.

Webinar descriptions and registration information, as well as recordings and related documents for past webinars may be accessed on the TDCJ VSD website: http://tdcj.texas.gov/divisions/vs/victim_webinars.html

TVAT Online:

Texas Victim Assistance Training

(TVAT) Online is a state-wide online victim assistance training focused on victim-centered service delivery and professional development that enables new advocates to acquire baseline professional skills and competence. To register or obtain more information, visit: <https://www.tdcj.texas.gov/php/tvatonline/>★

Texas Victim Assistance Training Online

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CALENDAR

The Texas Crime Victim Clearinghouse wishes to remind our readers that a calendar feature has been added for the Texas Victim Assistance Training (TVAT) Online.

Criminal justice and victim services professionals can [view](#), [search](#), and [submit](#) victim-related trainings and events on the TVAT Calendar webpage.

www.tdcj.state.tx.us/php/vscalendar/

Explanation of the Victim Information Notification Everyday (VINE) and the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) Victim Services Division (VSD) Victim Notification System (VNS)

	Victim Information and Notification Everyday (VINE)	TDCJ VSD Victim Notification System (VNS)
At What Stage in the Criminal Justice System is Notification Provided?	<p>Provides notifications regarding offenders who are in county custody (county jail) and/or involved in a trial.</p> <p>*VINE is not available in all Texas counties.</p>	<p>Provides post-conviction notifications regarding offenders who are incarcerated in TDCJ (adult prison system) and offenders on parole/mandatory supervision.</p>
Will Crime Victims Need to Request Notification Services?	Yes	Yes
How Does an Individual Request Notification Services?	<p>877.894.8463</p> <p>www.vinelink.com</p>	<p>By a completed Victim Impact Statement form, if received by TDCJ</p> <p>800.848.4284</p> <p>victim.svc@tdcj.texas.gov</p>
What Methods of Notification are Available?	<p>Telephone</p> <p>Email</p> <p>Text Message</p> <p>TTY</p>	<p>Letter</p> <p>Email</p> <p>Text Message</p> <p>Automated Telephone Services</p>
What Are Some Examples of Types of Notification Provided?	<p>When an offender is released from county custody</p> <p>When an offender is transferred to another facility</p> <p>When an offender escapes from county jail and is recaptured</p> <p>Of an offender's death while in county jail custody</p> <p>County court events</p> <p>*This is not an exhaustive list. Notifications will vary among each county jail and court system.</p>	<p>When an offender begins the parole review process</p> <p>When a parole decision has been made by the Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles</p> <p>When an offender escapes from TDCJ custody (adult prison system) and is recaptured</p> <p>Of an offender's death while in TDCJ custody or on parole supervision</p> <p>Warrant actions for offenders on parole supervision</p> <p>When an offender is transferred to county or federal custody (bench warrants)</p> <p>Termination of electronic monitoring for offenders on parole supervision</p> <p>When an offender is released from TDCJ</p> <p>When an offender discharges his/her sentence</p> <p>*This is not an exhaustive list.</p>



Children's Advocacy Centers of Texas, Inc.

*by Catherine Bass, Director of Program Services
Children's Advocacy Centers™ of Texas*

Children's Advocacy Centers™ of Texas, Inc. (CACTX) is the statewide membership association representing 68 local children's advocacy centers (CACs) in Texas. The CACs represent a unique collaborative model interweaving the complex and sometimes competing objectives of six disciplines: law enforcement (local police and sheriffs' departments), criminal justice (local district attorneys and prosecutors), Child Protective Services, medical providers (doctors, nurses, and hospital staff), mental health professionals (psychologists, counselors, and psychiatrists), and victim advocates as these dedicated professionals work to address the needs of child victims. The core services of CACTX support this collaborative model with high quality training, technical assistance, programming support, and resources.

In 2012, the CACTX analyzed data that showed that children in Texas who are alleged victims of child abuse and neglect receive medical evaluations at a rate lower than that of children throughout the country. In an effort to better understand the barriers that prevent children in Texas from receiving medical evaluations, the CACTX partnered with the University of Texas School of Social Work in 2013 to conduct a research study that examined child abuse medical evaluation practices in Texas

CACs. As part of the final report, the research team recommended several targeted strategies for addressing these barriers. The CACTX has spent the past year implementing these strategies, which include the following:

- 1) The CACTX worked with the Texas Pediatric Society (TPS) and Children's Hospital Association of Texas (CHAT) to develop **Best Practice Guidelines** for CACs and their multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) to use in determining which children of suspected sexual or physical abuse or neglect would benefit most from a medical evaluation. These guidelines were officially endorsed by TPS and CHAT in February 2014 and released to all CACs soon thereafter.
- 2) The CACTX partnered with Dr. James Lukefahr, Medical Director at the Center for Miracles in San Antonio, and Dr. Jamye Coffman, Medical Director for the CARE Team at Cook Children's Hospital in Ft. Worth, to bring **Regional Medical Evaluation Trainings** to three cities in Texas – Athens, Abilene, and Kerrville. These trainings focused on educating CAC staff and MDT members

about the purposes, processes, and benefits of medical evaluations in child abuse cases. The CACTX is looking forward to bringing this valuable training to three more cities throughout fiscal year 2015.

- 3) The CACTX created a **Medical Evaluation Toolkit**, which includes a comprehensive reference manual for medical evaluations in child abuse cases and accompanying technical assistance documents. The purpose of the toolkit is to increase all multidisciplinary team members' understanding of the processes and benefits associated with medical evaluations, with the ultimate goal of increasing children's access to medical evaluations.
- 4) The CACTX released a series of **Training Videos** that address 1) the medical evaluation process; 2) the benefits of the medical evaluation to the child and case; and 3) best practice guidelines for when to refer a child for a medical evaluation.

If you would like more information about this project, please contact Lindsey Jordan Van Zee at lvanzee@cactx.org. For more information about the CACTX or to find a local CAC, please visit www.cactx.org. ★

THE TEXAS BOARD OF PARDONS AND PAROLES:

Frequently Asked Questions and Policy Explanations



*by David Gutierrez, Board Member
Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles*

The Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles (Board) is here to support victims, victims' family members and concerned citizens with the assistance of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) Victim Services Division (VSD).

What is the role of the Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles?

The primary role of the Board is the discretionary release of eligible offenders sentenced to the TDCJ Correctional Institutions Division to a plan of parole supervision. In addition, the Board is responsible for determining the conditions of release, imposing any special conditions for parole or mandatory supervision offenders on a case-by-case basis, and responding to violations of the conditions of release with sanctions to include revocation and re-incarceration. On September 1, 1996, the Board was also given authority to review and rescind scheduled mandatory supervision releases for offenders with offenses committed on or after September 1, 1996.

Is parole "automatic" when an offender meets the time and program requirements?

No. Offenders will be considered for parole when the statutory time requirements are met and they have served sufficient time to be legally eligible to be released. However, it is up to parole panel members to decide, among other things, whether an offender has properly adjusted in prison, is no longer a threat to society and is ready to accept the

responsibilities of a law-abiding citizen.

Each offender is unique and will be evaluated on an individual basis. There are no compulsory release criteria that must be followed by the parole panel in every case.

How does the parole panel decision-making process work?

Three-member parole panels, consisting of Board members and parole commissioners, typically review offenders for release to parole/mandatory supervision. There are seven panel locations throughout the state. The panel location where a case is considered is generally determined by the unit where the offender is assigned. Please visit the Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles website to determine which units are assigned to each Board Office by clicking here. (http://www.tdcj.state.tx.us/bpp/brd_locations/brd_locations.html).

Who is notified about an offender's parole review and/or release?

When an offender enters the parole review process and prior to an offender's scheduled release, the TDCJ Parole Division notifies the trial officials of the county of conviction (district judge, sheriff, and prosecuting attorney), the police chiefs of the county of conviction, the county in which the offense was committed (in cases with a change of venue), and the county to which the offender is to be released.

Also notified are any victims or concerned citizens who are registered on the TDCJ VSD Victim Notification System (VNS). VNS registrants may be added to the system by completing a Victim Impact Statement form or by contacting the TDCJ VSD directly. VNS registrants are notified in advance of the scheduled parole review with instructions on how to submit materials for the Board's consideration.

All correspondence regarding an offender, whether written in support of or in opposition to parole, will be added to the offender's permanent file and will be available to the parole panel at the time of parole review.

What is a Victim Impact Statement and where can one be obtained?

A Victim Impact Statement (VIS) is a form used by law enforcement agencies, prosecutors and other participants in the criminal justice system to record the impact of a crime on the victim, the guardian of a victim or a close relative of a deceased victim. Contact information requested in the VIS is used to provide notification to the victim throughout the criminal justice process.

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WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU !

OUR GOAL IS TO PRINT NEWS OF INTEREST FOR VICTIMS AND VICTIM ADVOCATES

The Victim's Informer newsletter is published quarterly. Articles, meeting notices, and other submissions should be sent to the TDCJ Victim Services Division, Texas Crime Victim Clearinghouse, 8712 Shoal Creek Blvd, Suite 265, Austin, Texas 78757-6899; faxed to 512-452-0825; or e-mailed to tdcj.clearinghouse@tdcj.texas.gov. For questions or comments, please call us at 800-848-4284 or 512-406-5931.

Please Note:

You may access the publication at the TDCJ VSD Internet website. If you wish, we will notify you via e-mail each time The Victim's Informer becomes available on the TDCJ VSD Internet website and provide an electronic link to The Victim's Informer. Send your e-mail address to:

tdcj.clearinghouse@tdcj.texas.gov

Angie McCown, Director
Texas Department of Criminal Justice
Victim Services Division
victim.svc@tdcj.texas.gov
8712 Shoal Creek Blvd., Suite 265,
Austin, Texas 78757

The Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles (cont.)

Victims may obtain a VIS form from county attorneys, criminal district attorneys and Victim Assistance Coordinators (VAC) throughout the state. The form is also available through the TDCJ VSD website: http://www.tdcj.state.tx.us/publications/pubs_victim_impact_statement.html.

Are my completed Victim Impact Statement and protest materials considered confidential?

The VIS and any additional information submitted are considered privileged and confidential information and not subject to disclosure under the Open Records Act.

Can I meet with board members and parole commissioners before they vote on the offender's case?

Under Government Code Section 508.153, the parole panel is required to meet with crime victims, as defined in Section 508.117, whose offender is currently sentenced for the offense they committed against the crime victim and is being considered for release to parole supervision. This meeting can be conducted either in person or via telephone. The parole panel also has the discretion to contact individuals that do not meet the required criteria and may attempt to contact those individuals before a final decision is made regarding the offender's possible release.

The TDCJ VSD should be contacted initially by the crime victims and concerned citizens who want to meet with the Board. Meeting arrangements shall be made with victim(s) and/or family member(s)

when the Board has received the file and the lead voter has been assigned. The lead voter will also be the interviewing parole panel member.

Can I bring family members, friends, victim advocates with me to an interview?

The interviewing parole panel member decides the number of participants who may be present during an appointment. It is a good idea to ask the voting Board office how many people will be permitted to participate in the interview.

What rights do I have as a victim or victim survivor?

The rights of crime victims within the criminal justice system are described in Chapter 56 of the Texas Code of Criminal Procedure. A brochure listing these rights is available on the TDCJ website: http://www.tdcj.state.tx.us/documents/Tx_Crime_Victims_Rights.pdf.

Thank you for your time and attention, if there are other comments or questions you feel we can address and/or answer, please forward them to our Public Information Office: bpp_pio@tdcj.texas.gov. ★

The Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles toll free number is 1-844-512-0461.

The TDCJ VSD can be contacted at 1-800-848-4284 or victim.svc@tdcj.texas.gov.

Offender Information, including parole information is available on the TDCJ website: <http://offender.tdcj.state.tx.us/OffenderSearch/index.jsp>.