

New York Crime Victims Legal Help

An online portal connecting crime victims to civil legal assistance with Victims of Crime Act funds



Sixty percent of New York State's population lives outside New York City in mostly rural areas.

Yet most civil legal resources are in NYC. The New York Crime Victims Legal Network (CVLN), a partnership of organizations working together to address the civil legal needs of crime victims, aims to fix that with [NY Crime Victims Legal Help](#).¹ Launched in October 2018, this powerful new online gateway leads users to legal resources to make it easier for victims of crime to get the civil legal information and services they need.



The initial funds for a Crime Victims Legal Assistance Network came from the US Department of Justice Office for Victims of Crime (DOJ OVC) grant award to the New York State Office of Victim Services (OVS).² New York's share of federal Victims of Crime Act Victim Assistance Formula funds (VOCA), administered by OVS, supplemented these funds and provides ongoing funding to sustain CVLN and the website.



CVLN incorporates most of the characteristics of "next-generation portals" identified in The Pew Charitable Trusts' fact sheet, [Interactive Online Portals Offer Targeted Legal Resources on Demand: Next-generation technology can provide information, support](#).³

Crime victims have civil legal needs

"One case of victimization may produce myriad legal issues for the victim, including orders of protection, victims' rights enforcement, compensation, employment, housing, home foreclosure, spousal support, and child custody, visitation, and dependency."

[Vision 21: Transforming Victim Services Final Report, U.S. Department of Justice Office for Victims of Crime \(May 2013\)](#)⁴

Most crime victims never report the crime. Shame, embarrassment, risk of retaliation, or concern they won't be believed, or that law enforcement can't or won't help may prevent them from reporting. But whether reported or not, survivors typically confront a wide array of overlapping and complex criminal, civil, and administrative legal issues. In the aftermath of a crime they need a range of supportive services to help them get on with their lives.

Civil justice problems can be especially overwhelming. Experiencing domestic violence can create urgent needs for obtaining a protective order, a divorce, and legal custody of children. A senior whose drug-addicted grandchild charged up her credit cards and drained her bank account needs help with debt collectors and identity theft. Some survivors of sex trafficking want to vacate the records of their prostitution convictions that they committed as a result of being trafficked. Undocumented immigrants, attractive targets for predatory criminals who exploit their fear of deportation, have additional civil needs when they become crime victims.

But services may only be available through a fragmented and uncoordinated patchwork of providers in the crime victims' community, or may not even be available at all. And of the low-income crime victims who do appear in court for civil justice problems, most do not have legal representation⁵ even when their safety, housing, or livelihood is at stake.

US Department of Justice funding enables expanded civil legal services

In May 2013, DOJ OVC published its groundbreaking [Vision 21: Transforming Victim Services Final Report](#)⁶ (TVS). Recognizing the need for a more comprehensive and systemic approach to responding to the nation's crime victims, TVS highlights the urgency to find new ways to deliver crime victims legal services. It includes two takeaways that the OVS Director Elizabeth Cronin took as marching orders:

- ▶ **Use technology.** "Technology can be a powerful tool in expanding victims' access to services. Web-based and mobile technology offer amazing potential for outreach and collaboration and increasingly can be used to bring services directly to victims."⁷
- ▶ **Address civil legal needs.** Chapter two, Meeting the Holistic Legal Needs of Crime Victims, urges every state to "establish wraparound legal networks that will help ensure that crime victims' rights are enforced and that victims of crime receive the broad range of legal services needed to help rebuild their lives in the aftermath of a crime."⁸

To advance TVS's findings, DOJ OVC released a competitive solicitation for the [Wraparound Victim Legal Assistance Network Demonstration Project](#)⁹ to support network models that provide comprehensive legal services at no cost to crime victims. Ms. Cronin's successful application launched the needs assessment and implementation planning phase of the NY OVS' Partnership Project for a Crime Victims Legal Assistance Network in fall of 2015.

Then [two important developments](#)¹⁰ enabled other interested states to consider this approach:

- ▶ **2016 Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) Victim Assistance Formula federal rule clarifies states can use funds for legal assistance.** Passed in 1984, VOCA authorized the nation's primary funding source to help victims of all types of crime. VOCA's state-administered Victim Assistance Formula grants provide funding to groups and direct services for victims. As the federal administrator for all VOCA-authorized grant programs, DOJ OVC published a federal rule regarding state use of these funds in 2016, which clarified that state administrators can use funds for a broad array of civil legal needs arising directly from a criminal victimization.
- ▶ **Increased funds.** Beginning in 2015, Congress significantly increased the funding available to states for all VOCA-authorized grant programs. [The amount more than tripled](#)¹¹ and Congress has so far [continued funding](#)¹² at elevated levels.

New York's approach in three phases

Beginning in 2015, OVS received a series of grants totaling \$1.5 million from the DOJ OVC to partner with the [Empire Justice Center](#),¹³ [Pro Bono Net](#),¹⁴ and the [University of Albany's Center for Human Services Research](#)¹⁵ to develop a new resource to assist crime victims outside NY City where civil legal resources were scarce or difficult to access, especially in rural communities. NY's VOCA Victim Assistance Formula Funds picked up where the DOJ OVC grant left off providing ongoing support for the CVNL and its Legal Help website.

Phase I: create Advisory Committee; assess civil legal needs of crime victims in NY state through surveys, focus groups, and individual interviews; assess utility of online resource to assist crime victims; and develop a plan to implement a network to promote the provision of wholistic legal services to crime victims



Phase II: focus groups test the site; Pro Bono Net's team train and supervise law student volunteers to staff [LiveHelp](#);¹⁶ pilot phase launch in three contiguous counties selected based on several factors including a robust legal community, high crime, and urban, rural, and suburban services areas; incorporate feedback from user interaction and prepared for statewide rollout



Phase III: OVS issues a Request For Application and includes a requirement that all [61 OVS Attorney Services](#)¹⁷ legal aid grantees become "Referral Partners," helping crime victims referred through the website; expand to all 57 counties in New York State outside of New York City; [National Crime Victims Law Institute](#)¹⁸ trainings for all OVS-funded legal staff; refine and add legal content and technological features; and conduct ongoing evaluation

"In the months since the New York Crime Victims Legal Help resource has gone online, it has proven to be a guidepost for individuals who are struggling to piece their lives back together after they've been victimized. With the continued expansion of this service, more victims will be able to learn about their rights and access local legal resources to help them navigate civil matters involving housing, immigration, family court, social services, and more."
*OVS Director Elizabeth Cronin (June 2019)*¹⁹



2016
 Completed assessment of civil legal needs of crime victims



2017
 Pilot launch in Erie, Niagara, and Genesee counties



2018
 Use Pilot Evaluation to determine strategies to be used in expansion



2019
 Statewide rollout of NY Crime Victims Legal Help (outside NYC)

The Needs Assessment confirmed the importance of a technology-centered strategy:

- "[It] can play an important role in helping victims understand their legal rights and access a spectrum of solutions available to assist them, ranging from self-advocacy tools to direct services."
- "[M]any of the tools and resources that crime victims find beneficial can also support the work of legal and non-legal services providers assisting them."
- "[W]ith appropriate attention to accessibility, plain language and other victim-centered design principles... [technology] can help to bridge current gaps in equitable access to information, geographic hurdles, transportation challenges and other barriers that victims, particularly in rural and isolated communities, currently face in accessing legal assistance."

New York Crime Victims Legal Network Final Report, Submitted January 2020, p. 5

Top Tech Innovations

Crime victims, their advocates, and service providers in the 57 NY counties outside NYC now have:



User-friendly triage screening tool, which has users answer several questions to identify crime victims' legal needs and then directs them to specific resources that can help.²⁰



Searchable legal service help directory with filters enables users to isolate organizations that can assist with specific issues.²¹



Know Your Rights library informs people of their rights and helps users understand their options. It includes Do-It-Yourself forms that may help crime victims take the next steps to resolve their legal issues.²²



LiveHelp function allows users to get help finding information on the website in real time.²³



Warm referral mechanisms connect crime victims to legal aid Referral Partners within two business days.²⁴



Network Partner Advocate Gateway allows advocates to access additional resources through a secure portal for professionals serving crime victims.²⁵

OVS Director Elizabeth Cronin's top tips and lessons learned:

- ▶ **Right partners.** Most critical for a successful project is selecting the right partners. Every CVLN partner brought a unique level of experience and expertise that made a comprehensive approach possible. CVLN's Advisory Committee includes representatives from prosecutor offices, legal aid and disability rights organizations, law enforcement, victim service providers, and the courts.²⁶
- ▶ **Determine who you will serve.** It was clear that outside of New York City and especially in rural areas, victims often faced even more challenges with a lack of adequate housing, transportation, as well as legal and advocacy services.
- ▶ **Needs assessment.** Find out what people really need – and adjust your project accordingly.
- ▶ **Match user needs to web usability.** Make sure that your web tool covers a myriad of options. Some folks are just looking for information or forms. Others need legal help. Make it comprehensive and easy to use.
- ▶ **Make sure you can do what you say you can do.** If you offer a warm referral, make sure that can happen. Have enough attorneys and clinics available to provide needed legal services. Connecting our civil legal service grant to this project made all the difference in ensuring sufficient coverage.
- ▶ **Sustainability.** That was one of our most important tasks. How do we keep this running once the original OVC grant ran out? To that end, Empire Justice Center – the lead partner – successfully applied for a three-year OVS grant to continue the work.

Other examples of VOCA Victim Assistance Formula supported technology project

- Victims of Crime Portal²⁷ at Illinois Legal Aid Online
- Online interviews to develop court-approved Petition for Order of Protection Forms²⁸ in South Carolina
- Massachusetts Civil Legal Aid for Victims of Crime website²⁹ includes ability to connect crime victims by zip code to legal aid programs, legal rights and information by topic, and funds enabled a videoconferencing system in all CLAVC legal aid programs to deliver top quality training to all CLAVC staff in every part of the state

Endnotes

1. <https://crimevictimshelpny.org/>
2. DOJ OVC offered Vision 21 Legal Assistance Network grants in 2012 and 2014. NY state was one of ten sites selected to create a victim legal assistance network of services. <https://ovs.ny.gov/>
3. The Pew Charitable Trusts, "Interactive Online Portals Offer Targeted Legal Resources on Demand: Next-generation technology can provide information, support" (2019), https://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/assets/2019/improving_access_to_legal_resources_online_factsheet.pdf
4. U.S. Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs, Office for Victims of Crime, "Vision 21: Transforming Victim Services Final Report" (May 2013), https://ovc.ncjrs.gov/vision21/pdfs/Vision21_Report.pdf
5. <https://www.lsc.gov/media-center/publications/2017-justice-gap-report>
6. Supra note 4.
7. Supra note 4 at vi-vii.
8. Supra note 4 at 9.
9. Based on Vision 21's preliminary findings, OVC released a FY 2012 version of the Legal Assistance Network Demonstration Project grant, and then in FY 2014 issued another solicitation inviting additional applications. NY received a grant in the second round. https://www.ovc.gov/grants/pdfxt/FY14_V21_VictimLegalAssistance.pdf
10. The Justice in Government Project, "FAQs About Legal Aid & VOCA" (last updated May 26, 2020), <https://www.american.edu/spa/jpo/toolkit/upload/faqs-about-voca-1-7-19.pdf>
11. U.S. Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs, Office for Victims of Crime, "Office for Victims of Crime Reports on 2015-2016 Programs and Services" (2017), https://www.ovc.gov/pubs/reporttonation2017/pdfxt/2017_RT_N_Fast_Facts-508.pdf
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