



# Strengthening Healing and Safety: Policy Recommendations to Better Support Crime Victims in Pennsylvania

## Executive Summary

Communities that have experienced the most harm from crime and violence are also the least helped by public safety and justice systems. These crime victims are key safety stakeholders whose voices and insights can shape policy that prioritizes prevention, safety, and healing for all. Informed by the nearly 8,000 members of Crime Survivors for Safety and Justice in Pennsylvania, this policy agenda presents nine key priorities that advance safety and healing in the Commonwealth.

### Fund help for survivors

- **Provide an ongoing appropriation to stabilize funding for the Victim Compensation and Assistance Program (VCAP).** Victim compensation gets survivors urgent help to cover crime-related expenses after violence. But the program is funded at the state level largely by unstable fines and fees levied on low-income people in the criminal justice system, which has put it at risk of insolvency. This instability has also prevented the state from adopting critical changes that would provide more survivors the help they need. The legislature must invest general fund revenue in this program immediately and ongoing, and commit to fully funding the program with stable sources of revenue in the long term.
- **Strengthen VCAP so that more survivors can get help.** The program is in many ways a national leader, and the state has made strides to address some of the legal barriers in the program. But laws remain that create unnecessary hurdles for survivors, and the Commonwealth has the opportunity to adopt model changes that reduce red tape and expand access to help. These include allowing VCAP to accept alternative documentation to a police report to verify the victimization, removing restrictions that require scrutinizing a victim's behavior as part of eligibility screens, prohibiting predatory debt collection while a claim is pending, raising expense caps, and streamlining access to emergency help.

- **Grow the network of Trauma Recovery Centers (TRCs).** Most survivors of violence, especially repeat violence, experience symptoms of trauma. To provide care in the wake of violence, fifty-two TRCs nationwide deliver a transformational model of care for survivors. This innovative and evidence-based model includes assertive outreach, clinical case management, and evidence-based mental healthcare. But Pennsylvania only has one TRC, located in Harrisburg. All survivors in the Commonwealth deserve to get help, and Pennsylvania must provide funding to scale up access to TRCs.
- **Support survivor-led, survivor-serving organizations.** People turn to trusted community-based local support services in times of crisis. Yet, these programs struggle to stay open and meet the needs for services. Community-serving programs, rooted in neighborhoods that experience concentrated violence, must be supported with multiyear flexible funding. Pennsylvania has already developed strong approaches to make funding more accessible to frontline community-based violence intervention organizations, and should expand these approaches to fund victim services across the state. And, the state must act now to fill gaps in funding for victim services given current cuts in federal grants for victim services.

## Expand victim rights

- **Increase legal protections to ensure safe and stable jobs and housing for survivors.** Pennsylvania lacks basic protections that a majority of states have to ensure survivors remain safely housed in the wake of violence, and to protect survivors in the workplace. The Commonwealth must adopt protections so that survivors can end a lease early to move if they need to without facing lasting financial consequences, and are not evicted as a result of the victimization if they feel safe staying in their homes. Survivors who need to take time off work to access critical services or get to safety must have access to legal accommodations so that they can do so without risking their livelihoods.
- **Protect survivors charged or sentenced in the criminal justice system.** Experiences of trauma can lead to contact with the justice system. Many states are adopting and expanding protections to ensure courts can consider evidence about abuse or violence when relevant at different stages in a criminal case. These include opportunities for diversion from prosecution, the ability for survivors to raise their experiences as a defense when the offense was directly related to victimization, sentencing structures that allow courts to take prior trauma into account, and record relief for survivors with records resulting from their victimization.

## Prevent violence and promote rehabilitation

- **Promote community-level violence prevention, rehabilitation, and reentry initiatives.** Survivors overwhelmingly support violence prevention and community-based services to keep harm from happening in the first place, and also support prioritizing rehabilitation over punishment to break cycles of crime. Pennsylvania can advance these safety goals by funding local infrastructure for prevention and care, providing rehabilitative opportunities for people in prison or on supervision that are paired with incentives for early release or termination, and strengthening reentry supports for people coming home.
- **Provide more pathways for people with old records to get them cleared.** Old criminal records can create significant barriers to employment, stable housing, access to health care, and people's ability to care for their families, all of which reduce the chances that they will return to the criminal justice system in the future. Pennsylvania's Clean Slate policy pioneered a pathway to address the barriers of a prior criminal record, and the Commonwealth can build on this strong foundation to expand record relief.

Victims of crime in Pennsylvania deserve access to safety and healing, and are calling for public safety policies that stop cycles of crime and make communities safer. This report shows the way forward.