

Ontario government institutes annual victims of crime day

Solicitor General and Minister of Correctional Services Robert Runciman, Attorney General Charles Harnick, and the Minister Responsible for Women's Issues Dianne Cunningham, have united to honor the first Annual Day of Commemoration for Victims of Crime.

Ontario's 1996 Victims' Bill of Rights provided for designating June 11 as the Annual Day of Commemoration for Victims of Crime and established the Victims' Justice Fund to improve and expand victims' services.

In 1996/97, \$10.2 million was allocated from the fund to create new, and expand on, existing services for victims.

In Toronto, Runciman announced that Ontario's Victim Crisis Assistance and Referral Service (VCARS), an immediate, on-site service to victims of crime, will expand to 20 locations, with the addition of eight new sites across the province.

"Last June our government made a commitment to rebalance the justice system in favor of victims rather than criminals," said Runciman.

"Expanding the VCARS program reflects our commitment to enhancing the victim's role in the justice system. It further guarantees that services will be available, when needed, to victims in their own communities."

In Ottawa, Harnick, author of Ontario's Victims' Bill of Rights, illustrated his further commitment to victims of crime by doubling the services available to victims in Ontario's courts and opening two domestic court-pilot projects in Toronto and North York.

In addition, Harnick outlined the government's attempts to recognize the rights of victims and provide services and support to victims of crime, as highlighted in a recent annual report.

"Our historic bill acknowledges and responds to the needs of victims of crime with legislation to support them with timely, respectful and courteous treatment throughout the criminal justice system," said Harnick, after meeting with the Canadian Resource Centre for Victims. "We have taken significant steps forward to support victims of crime."

"I applaud the Ontario government for its support and commitment to victims of crime. I urge the federal government to take similar steps to address victims issues and repeal section 745 of the Criminal Code of Canada, make real changes to the Young Offenders Act, and legislate a similar Victims' Bill of Rights," said Steve Sullivan of the Canadian Resource Centre for Victims.

"Victims of crime are a priority for this government at all times," said Cunningham. "We have made that commitment, but we must do more. We must all continue to seek new ways to better support those who have been victimized by crime."

In 1996, Ontario moved to strengthen victims' rights with new legislation and a series of new initiatives.

Jointly announced by the Ministry of the Attorney General and the Ministry of the Solicitor General and Correctional Services, the province's Victim's Bill of Rights was an important step in the province's efforts to acknowledge and respond to the needs of victims of crime.

The bill legislates a set of principles to support victims of crime. It also simplifies the process for victims to sue their assailants in civil actions for damages and provides better support for children who must testify in court.

Responding to the many important issues raised for review by victims of crime, the Government of Ontario is making changes to its own legislation and regulations and calling for changes in related federal legislation. Some of those changes include the following:

Bill 102 proposes amendments to existing legislation in two areas to protect the public from high-risk offenders.

Several changes have been implemented to Ontario's parole system. The Board can no longer grant parole to serious offenders if

such information as police occurrence reports is not available for review. More changes are under way. The Victim Support Line is the first

service of its kind in Canada; dial 1-888-579-2888 for toll-free access to a variety of services for victims of crime. A toll-free information line with two

services options for victims of crime was launched in November, 1996; a third service was added in January, 1997. By calling 1-888-579-2888, (or

416-314-2447 in the Toronto area), 24 hours a day, from anywhere in Ontario, anyone in the province affected by crime can get assistance.



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