

FOCUS ON

Victim Witness Program: Supporting crime victims, witnesses, and their families

– December 1, 2014



Victim Witness Program staff support victims and witnesses at all stages in the criminal justice process, from the first report of crime to the final disposition of the case.

If you've ever been the victim of a crime, or been subpoenaed to testify in court as a witness, you know how upsetting it can be. That's why District Attorney **Danny Porter** set up the Victim Witness Program in his office.

"We can't successfully prosecute criminals without the help of victims and witnesses. We want to make their experience with the court system as pleasant as possible," Porter said.

Gwinnett's Victim Witness Program begins with the first report of a crime and only ends at the final disposition of the case. Director **Candice Pitman** said, "We're here because victims and witnesses deserve to be treated with dignity and compassion, to be protected from intimidation and harm, to be informed about the criminal justice process, and to be notified of parole decisions."

A 1995 state law – the Crime Victims' Bill of Rights – outlines the rights and responsibilities of victims, law enforcement, prosecutors, and custodians involved in certain kinds of criminal cases.

Volunteer interpreters help victims and witnesses by riding with police officers to provide on-scene interpretation and translation in many languages including Spanish, Russian, Arabic, and Chinese.

Other victim services include case status updates, referrals to counseling and support groups, information on restitution and compensation, help getting stolen property back, court escort, parole notification, employer intervention, courtroom orientation, and privacy prior to appearing in court.

The state of Georgia helps compensate victims for crime-related expenses such as lost wages or loss of support as well as medical, mental health, or funeral expenses. Victims who were physically injured are eligible, and victims of violent crimes – assault/battery, homicide, child abuse, sexual assault, domestic/family violence, and DUI crashes – may also be eligible.

Courthouse visitors each December find special trees decorated in memory of those lost to homicide, and the staff holds a special memorial service annually to help families cope with their loss.

An automated computer program called VINE, which stands for Victim Information and Notification Everyday, gives crime victims continuous access to inmate status and automatic notification when the perpetrators of a crime against them are released or transferred.

Witnesses who get a subpoena to testify in Superior Court can also get help, including protection from intimidation and an escort to and from court. Recorded announcements help witnesses deal with constantly changing court schedules.

Victim Witness Program staff and volunteers work closely with many other agencies, including the Partnership Against Domestic Violence, the Department of Family and Children Services, Juvenile and Magistrate Courts, probation units, the County Solicitor, police, and the Gwinnett County Detention Center.

The unit is based in the District Attorney's Office on the second floor of the Gwinnett Justice and Administration Center in Lawrenceville. For more information, call 770.822.8444 or visit www.gwinnettdistrictattorney.com.



Victim Witness Program Director Candice Pitman speaks at the National Crime Victims' Rights Week observance held April 4, 2014, at the Gwinnett Fallen Heroes Memorial.

###