

2015

OFFICE OF THE VICTIM ADVOCATE ANNUAL REPORT FISCAL YEAR 2015



ENFORCING, PROTECTING & PROMOTING
THE CONSTITUTIONAL & STATUTORY
RIGHTS OF CRIME VICTIMS
IN CONNECTICUT

*Submitted, as statutorily mandated, on this
10th day of December, to the Governor of the
State of Connecticut, and to the members of the
Connecticut General Assembly.*



Constitution of the State of Connecticut

Article XXIX

Rights of Victims of Crime

In all criminal prosecutions, a victim, as the General Assembly may define by law, shall have the following rights:

- The right to be treated with fairness and respect throughout the criminal justice process;
- The right to timely disposition of the case following arrest of the accused, provided no right of the accused is abridged;
- The right to be reasonably protected from the accused throughout the criminal justice process;
- The right to notification of court proceedings;
- The right to attend the trial and all other court proceedings the accused has the right to attend, unless such person is to testify and the court determines that such person's testimony would be materially affected if such person hears other testimony;
- The right to communicate with the prosecution;
- The right to object to or support any plea agreement entered into by the accused and the prosecution and to make a statement to the court prior to the acceptance by the court of the plea of guilty or nolo contendere by the accused;
- The right to make a statement to the court at sentencing;
- The right to restitution which shall be enforceable in the same manner as any other cause of action or as otherwise provided by law;
- The right to information about the arrest, conviction, sentence, imprisonment and release of the accused.

The General Assembly shall provide by law for the enforcement of this subsection. Nothing in this subsection or in any law enacted pursuant to this subsection shall be construed as creating a basis for vacating a conviction or ground for appellate relief in any criminal case.

Mission Statement

The Office of the Victim Advocate (OVA) seeks to ensure that the victims of crime become an integral part of the criminal justice system. Through public education of the rights and services available to crime victims, collaboration with law enforcement and service providers, as well as court and legislative advocacy, the OVA believes that the voices of crime victims will become a necessary component of our state.

Overview

The Office of the Victim Advocate (OVA) was statutorily established in 1998 as an independent state agency charged with the promotion and protection of the constitutional and statutory rights of crime victims in Connecticut. Among its many responsibilities, the OVA provides oversight of state and private agencies that provide services to crime victims, and advocacy to crime victims when a violation of their state constitutional and statutory rights are at issue.

In order to fulfill the mandates of the OVA, the State Victim Advocate may:

- Evaluate the delivery of services by state agencies and entities that provide services to victims;
- Coordinate and cooperate with other private and public agencies concerned with the implementation, monitoring and enforcement of the constitutional rights of victims;
- Review procedures established by any state agency or other entity providing services to victims with respect to the constitutional rights of victims;
- Receive and review complaints of persons concerning the actions of any state agency or other entity providing services to crime victims;
- Initiate formal investigations into the circumstances of a complaint so as to remedy the concern in a systemic manner.
- File a limited special appearance in any court proceeding to advocate for any right guaranteed to a crime victim by the State Constitution or any other right provided to a crime victim by general statutes;
- Recommend systemic changes in state policies to ensure the proper treatment and protection of crime victims;
- Conduct programs of public education, undertake legislative advocacy, and make proposals for systemic reform;
- Monitor the provision of protective services to witnesses by the Chief State's Attorney; and
- Ensure a centralized location for victim services information.

The OVA currently operates under the following statute when determining who is a "victim of crime" or "crime victim:"

C.G.S. Sec. 1-1k: *Except as otherwise provided by the general statutes, "victim of crime" or "crime victim" means an individual who suffers direct or threatened physical, emotional or financial harm as a result of a crime and includes immediate family members of a minor, incompetent individual or homicide victim and a person designated by a homicide victim in accordance with section 1-56r.*

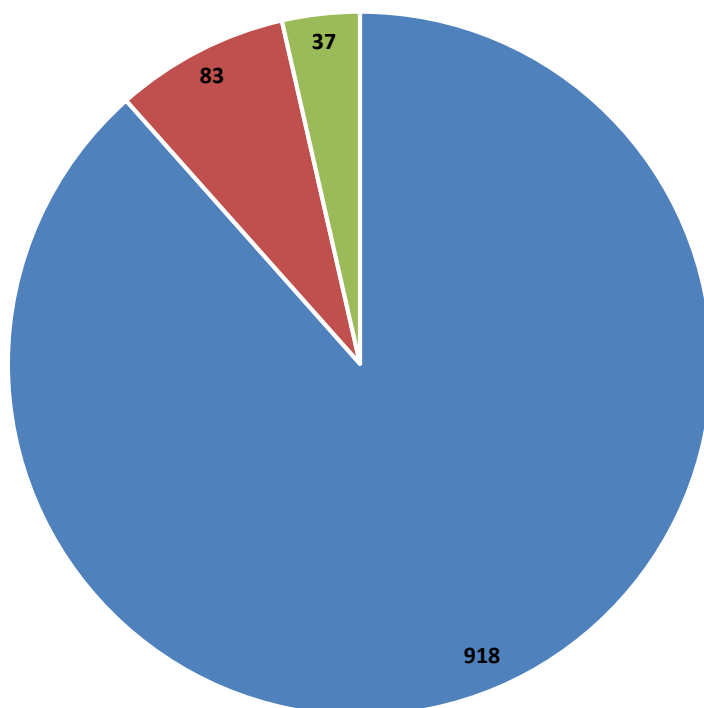
OVA Fiscal Year Review

During the 2015 fiscal year (July 2014-June 2015), the OVA operated as a functional state agency committed to effectively and efficiently carrying out its statutory mandates.

COMPLAINT/INTAKE ACTIVITY ►

The OVA's statutory mandates include receiving complaints or requests for information and assistance from crime victims, agencies and entities on behalf of crime victims. The OVA received 1,038 calls, resulting in 120 open cases during the fiscal year.

**Chart 1: FY 2015
Total calls recieved**



■ Immediate Referrals ■ Cases Closed ■ Cases Opened

Immediate Referrals

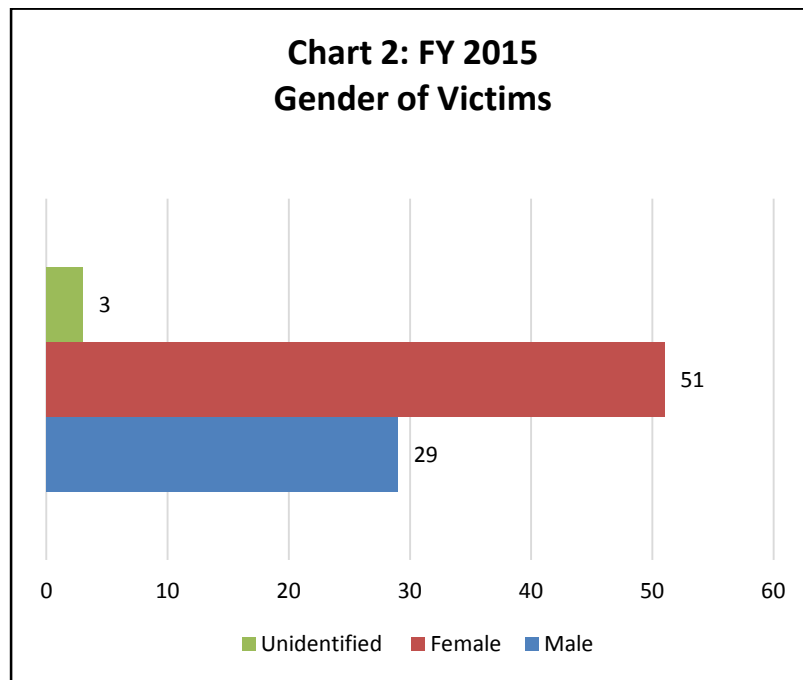
These callers were referred to another agency or service provider. No demographic information was obtained from these calls.

Cases Opened during the fiscal year.

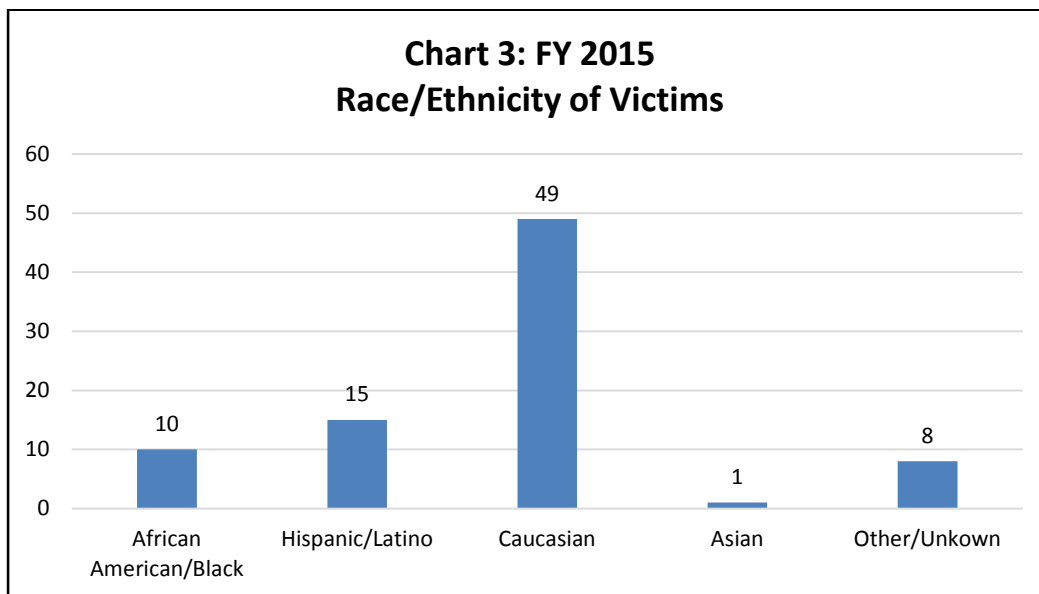
Cases Closed during the fiscal year. These cases may have been opened in a prior fiscal year.

OPEN CASES ►

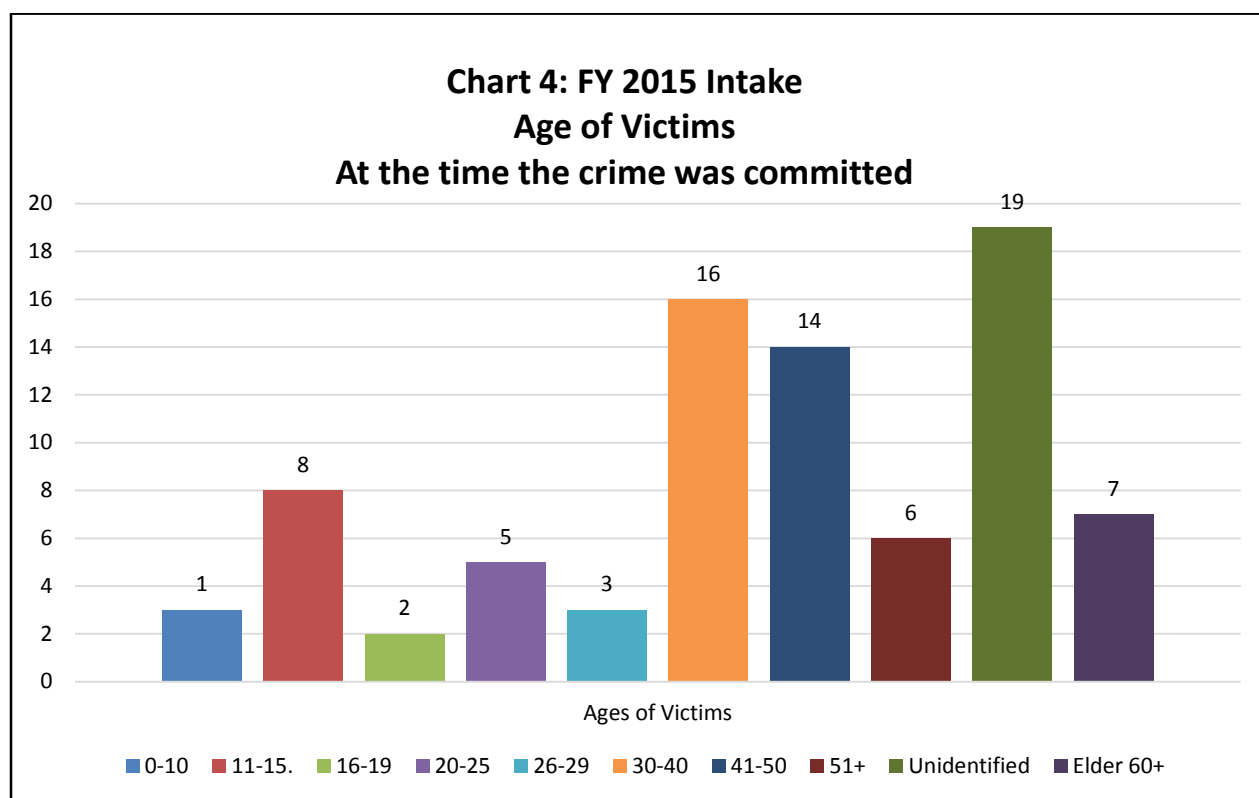
Of the open cases, clients self-reported the demographics included in Charts 2 to 4 below.



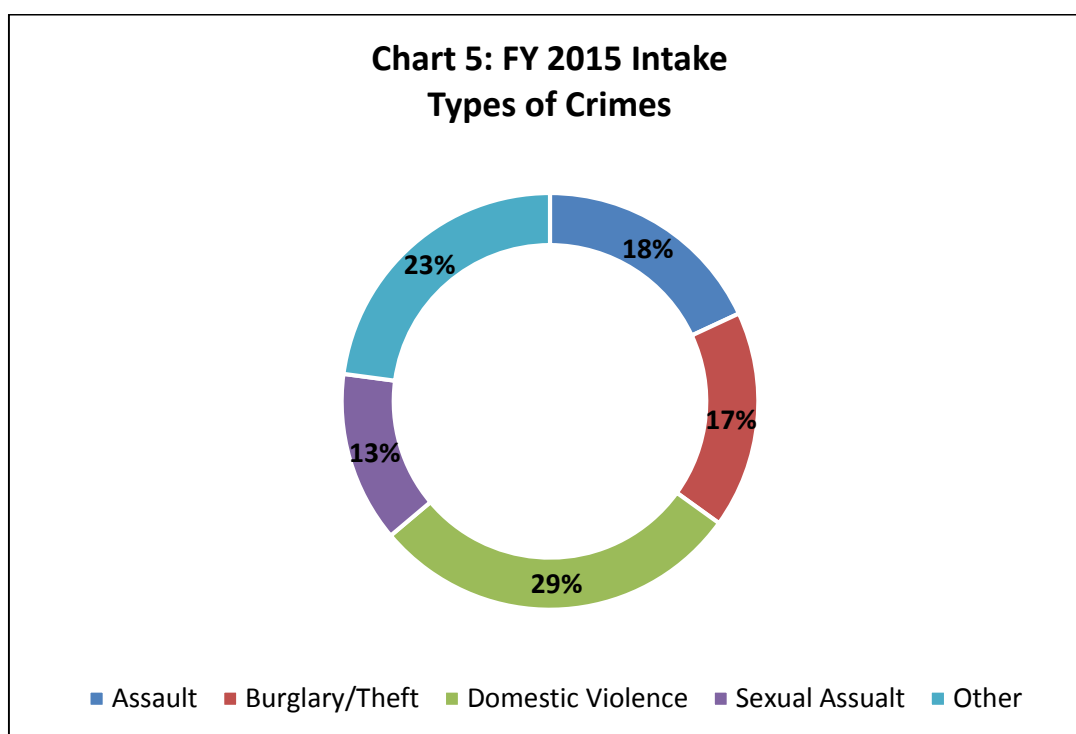
61% female, 35% male and 4% unidentified



59% Caucasian, 18% Hispanic/Latino, 12% African American/Black, 1% Asian and 10% other or unknown



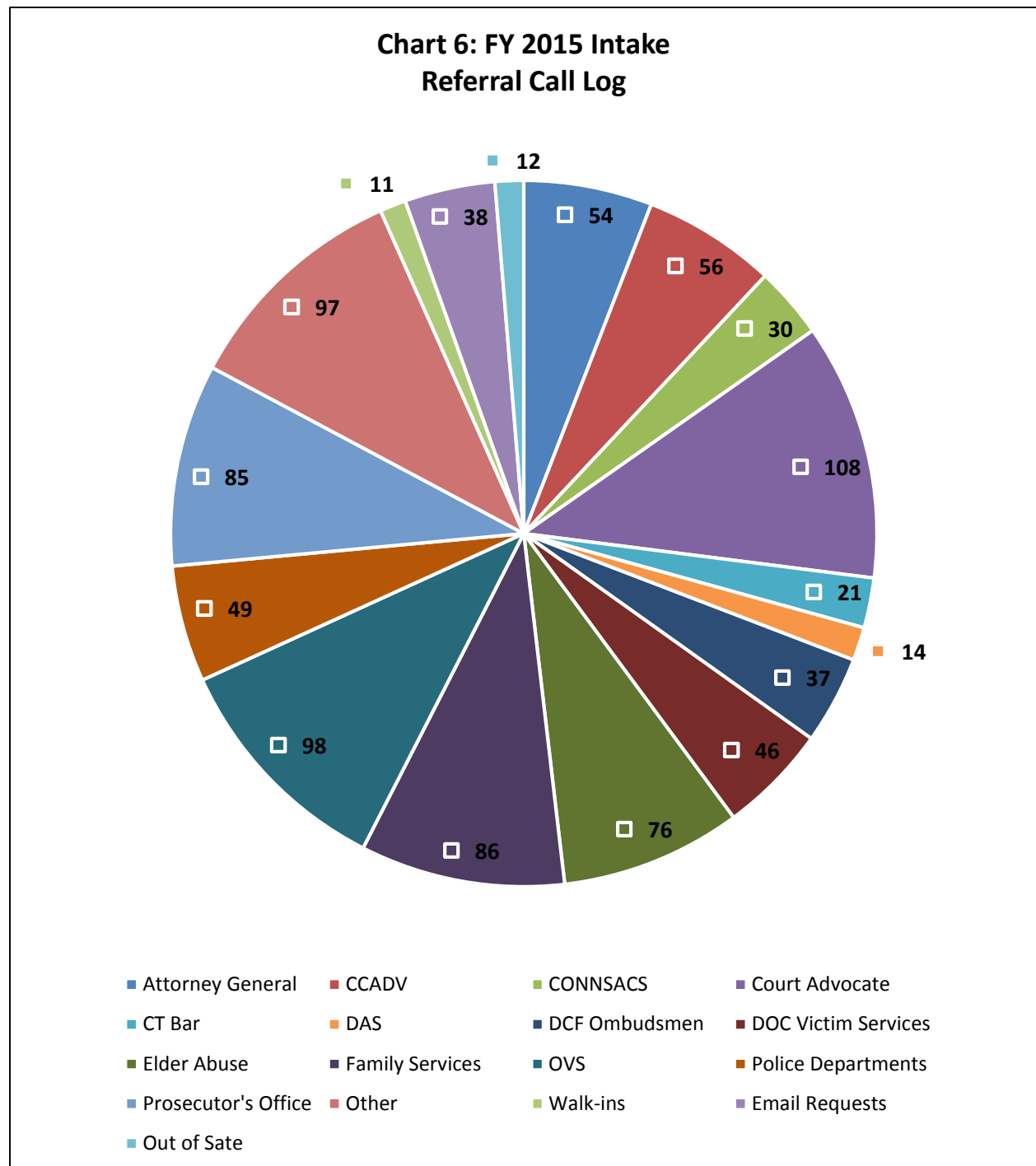
54% adults, 13% minors, 8% senior citizens and 23% unidentified.



Note: Other crimes include one to four cases of bullying, elder abuse, harassment/stalking, home invasion, homicide/murder, identity theft, motor vehicle violations, and post-conviction crimes.

REFERRALS

The OVA received 918 calls that resulted in immediate referrals to service providers or another State agency, as indicated in Chart 6 below:



ADVOCACY ►

The OVA endlessly endeavors to appropriately address the concerns brought forth by crime victims or those on behalf of crime victims. As part of this effort, the agency frequently engages with crime victims, state agencies who provide services to crime victims, and non-profit organizations to discuss the handling of particular matters that may require action by the OVA. The goal of the OVA is to provide the necessary advocacy and education to victims so that they remain knowledgeable and vigilant in their efforts to become survivors instead of victims.

The OVA convened the Governor's Victims' Rights Enforcement Commission (VREAC), which was established on April 7, 2014. VREAC must review the current status of crime victims' rights in the State and report its findings and recommendations to the Governor. In January 2015, OVA submitted a Progress Report, outlining five preliminary recommendations.

OVA staff accompanied 10 victims to court 39 times. In some cases, the OVA filed limited appearances to address matters to the Court on behalf of clients. In other cases, OVA attended for moral support and to educate clients about the criminal justice process. Additionally, OVA monitors Connecticut Supreme Court cases that impact victim's rights. In this capacity, OVA attended the oral arguments in *State v. Anderson*, 319 Conn. 288 (2015) in January 2015.

APPOINTMENTS ►

The State Victim Advocate has been appointed to the following boards or commissions to address the needs and concerns of crime victims: the Connecticut Sentencing Commission, the Criminal Information Sharing System, the Criminal Justice Information System Governing Committee, the Criminal Justice Policy Advisory Commission, the Eye Witness Identification Task Force, the Family Violence Governing Council, the Governmental Accountability Commission, the Governor's Task Force on Justice for Abused Children, the Governor's Youth and Urban Violence Commission, the Racial and Ethnic Disparity Council, the Task Force to Study Service of Restraining Orders, and the Trafficking in Persons Council.



State Victim Advocate Natasha M. Pierre testifying before the Legislature

COLLABORATIONS ►

The OVA cosponsored and volunteered for two annual events that highlight the needs and concerns of crime victims - the Community Renewal Team's "Tee off With Women to End Domestic Violence" Golf Classic, where the State Victim Advocate was an Honorary Chair and keynote speaker; and the 19th Annual Melanie Ilene Reiger Conference Against Violence, where the State Victim Advocate was a panelist. OVA collaborated with the Department of Correction via participation in the VOICES Program at several correctional facilities and "ride-alongs" with the Hartford Police Department.



OVA Staff Merit Lajoie & Vanessa Torres at the Tee off with Women to End Domestic Violence



OVA Staff Laura Stefon & Vanessa Torres at the Big E

LEGISLATION ►

The State Victim Advocate met with legislators and testified before the Legislature on key bills that address crime victim's rights. The OVA monitored 199 bills and submitted testimony on 26 bills before the Aging, Children, Appropriations, Higher Education & Employment Advancement, Insurance & Real Estate, Judiciary, Labor & Public Employees, Public Health, Public Safety & Security, and Transportation Committees. Key issues this legislative session were: ensuring that crime victims' rights are not violated or diminished in several criminal justice reform bills; improving the criminal justice response in family violence matters; mandated reporting of child and elder abuse; sexual assault forensic examinations and timely evidence processing; and freedom of information requirements.



State Victim Advocate Natasha M. Pierre at the bill signing ceremony for a new law concerning evidence collection in sexual assault cases



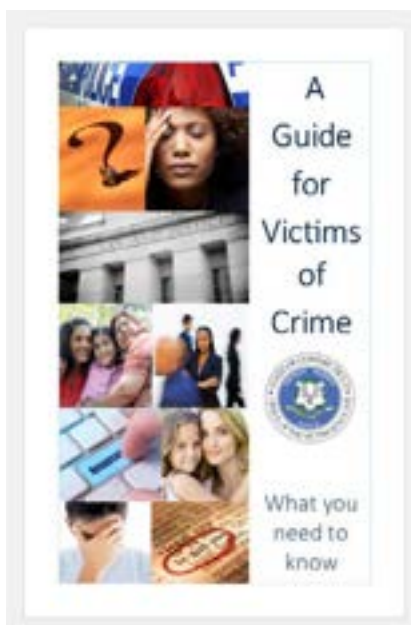
OVA Staff Attorney Hakima Bey-Coon at the bill signing ceremony for a new law to combat minor sex trafficking.

PUBLIC OUTREACH AND EDUCATION ►

The State Victim Advocate met with legislators, victim advocacy groups, state's attorneys, and other public agency officials to provide outreach and education in targeted areas throughout the state.

The OVA held its first annual 5k run/walk during National Crime Victim's Rights Week in April 2015. The race attracted 75 guests, runners, survivors, family members and service providers.

The OVA presented at several events held by universities, police associations, and senior community centers, reaching approximately 1,100 individuals. The OVA continued to maintain print and electronic materials, including the website, Facebook, Twitter, and brochures for distribution to the public, the judicial branch and law enforcement agencies.





OVA Staff

Natasha M. Pierre, Esq., State Victim Advocate – Ms. Pierre was appointed as the State Victim Advocate on November 28, 2014, by Governor Dannel P. Malloy and assumed her responsibilities on December 26, 2014. The Legislature confirmed her appointment in February 2015.

Merit Lajoie, Complaint Officer --- Mrs. Lajoie joined the OVA in May 2000. She advocates for clients during the criminal justice process, conducts public education and outreach, and represents the OVA on boards and commissions.

Hakima Bey-Coon, Esq., Staff Attorney 3 --- Ms. Bey-Coon joined the OVA in March 2006. She provides legal counsel to clients, and represents the OVA on boards and commissions.

Vanessa M. Torres, Secretary II --- Ms. Torres joined the Office of the Victim Advocate in 2011. She conducts intake, manages office and budget administration, and implements social media and public education and outreach strategies.

Laura J. Stefan, Durational Project Manager --- Ms. Stefan joined the OVA in November of 2013. She developed and implemented a public outreach and education program for the OVA (resigned in March 2015).

OVA Interns/Volunteers

The OVA greatly appreciates the contributions made by enthusiastic interns and volunteers. Thank you **Meggie Andrulis, Justine Walsh, and Brittany Wasilewski.**



The Office of the Victim Advocate
505 Hudson Street, Hartford, CT 06106
(860) 550-6632 or 888-771-3126 (toll free within Connecticut),
Email at ova.info@ct.gov
Web: www.ct.gov/ova

