

PROPOSED

2008 Bipartisan Party Platform Language for Victims of Crime

In recent decades, a movement has arisen to bring compassion and justice to people who had been dealt harshly by the criminals among us and then treated with indifference or worse by their agencies of government. The reforms fostered by the crime victims' movement speak to the best that is within us, and to the diversity of our society. Victims of child abuse found their champions, and then a network of specialized agencies to bring their perpetrators to justice and their victims to comfort and safety. Champions of the victims of sexual assault and domestic violence followed suit, and all these groups made common cause with allies in criminal justice who began to welcome victim participation into their work. The victims' movement is forever broadening, responding to the needs of victims of drunk driving, stalking, human trafficking, homicide, terrorism and mass violence, to name a few, while lodging an ever-deepening presence in the professions of social and health services, and calling forth the compassionate services uniquely rendered by America's faith communities.

Their work is far from complete, and they look to their national leaders to sustain the movement for victim justice. There is no better starting point than the Federal government's scheduled re-examination of how victims are being treated in its own justice agencies.

The Government Accountability Office will soon report on the effectiveness of the Crime Victims' Rights Act in securing justice for crime victims in the Federal system. We call on the Federal government to use this report as a springboard to a wider review of the totality of how governments at *all* levels are meeting their duties to treat crime victims with fairness, dignity and respect under the "social contract," the philosophy of what government owes its citizens under our constitutional system. That review must necessarily re-examine the merits of embedding victims' rights where they truly belong -- within our nation's Bill of Rights in the U.S. Constitution.

Under that compact, we hold that basic notification and participation rights are due crime victims involved in the justice system of every American jurisdiction, as is the right to full restitution from convicted offenders. Congress and the next Administration should examine whether these hallmarks of justice, once the birthright of all Americans at our founding, are being observed across the land, and where gaps in the provision of basic victim justice are found, to devise and implement methods of redress from these wrongs.

We also hold that, just as procedural justice is due American crime victims, so too are skilled compassion and care required to tend to the spiritual, physical, emotional, social, and financial wounds that crime inflicts on its prey. While the duty to provide remedial care falls most heavily on crime victims, survivors and their loved ones, and on their communities and states, the Federal government has fostered major improvements in these networks of victim assistance, a role from which it has lately retreated. It is time for our national government to return to a position of leadership in the rehabilitation and restoration of those wounded by criminal acts.

To that end, we are fully committed to providing adequate resources for crime victim services by preserving the Crime Victims Fund, which for more than two decades has used criminal fines and penalties – rather than taxpayer dollars – to support thousands of programs that help millions of crime victims in their recovery. We are also fully committed to providing full funding for all

Violence Against Women's Act (VAWA) and Family Violence Prevention and Services Act programs.

We also believe that, in its wider review of how to serve victims with greater respect and compassion, the government should look beyond the role of criminal and juvenile justice agencies, vital as they are, to *all* other sectors of government with responsibilities to prevent crime and reduce its harm on individuals, families, communities and our Nation as a whole. Agencies of physical and mental health, education, housing, emergency assistance, and faith community coordination, among many others, should cooperate in implementing holistic responses to identify and address crime victims' needs, and in turn, the Federal government should establish an independent National Office for Victims of Crime with the same reach across *all* agencies of government as the current such office now enjoys, in a far-too-limited way, only within the U.S. Department of Justice.