

Pennsylvania Crime Victim Registration Portal



NASCIO 2024 Cross Boundary Collaboration and Partnerships

Project Dates: 8/1/2022 to 4/30/2023
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Executive Summary

Pennsylvania Act 77 of 2022 introduced substantial changes to the Pennsylvania Crime Victims Act to strengthen the rights of crime victims. Notably, it required the Commonwealth to create an interface between the state Office of Victim Advocate (OVA) and each of the 67 county district attorney's (DA) offices to facilitate the electronic submission of victim and survivor information to the OVA.

The OVA is responsible for ensuring that crime victims are afforded their post sentencing rights, including being provided with notification of their offender's release from incarceration. Before Act 77, the crime victim was required to mail their information to the OVA. Because of this inefficient process, there was often confusion, time delays, and errors which resulted in victims not being notified of their rights in a timely manner.

In response to Act 77, the OVA, Department of Corrections (DOC), Office of Administration (OA), and Pennsylvania Justice Network (JNET) collaborated to create a secure application for district attorneys to electronically submit victim and survivor information to the OVA to better ensure the continuum of services for victims of crime as their case moves from the district attorney's office to the OVA.

By leveraging JNET's criminal justice identity services and portal services, the project team was able to create the DA/OVA Victim Registration Portal with intake workflows to permit OVA advocates to manage victim registrations through their existing Victim Advocate Notification System (VANS) application within the DOC Corrections and Parole Total Online Repository (CAPTOR). New security roles were created in JNET to ensure that only district attorneys or their specific designees were authorized to submit sensitive information to OVA. In turn, security roles in CAPTOR and VANS protect the information internally, ensuring that only authorized staff can see the information thereby protecting the confidentiality of the victim information as required legislatively.

In addition to the security enhancements realized through electronic submission via the new portal, information was now being populated electronically and thus minimizing the likelihood of human error in the submission of victim information and increasing the efficiency of the victim registration process.

The DA/OVA Victim Registration Portal was deployed April 19, 2023, to all 67 county district attorney's via JNET. As of March 2024, over 1,900 victim names have been successfully registered through the portal. From 2021, prior to passage of PA Act 77 of 2022, to the end of 2023, OVA has experienced an increase of 20.98% victim registrations, as well as 3.8% increase in legislatively mandated notifications and other notices to clients. The data confirms that the portal is allowing more victims to be engaged with the OVA, ensuring that they are aware of their post sentencing rights. With this new process, individuals negatively impacted by crime are getting a clearer understanding of their rights and the notifications and information they so rightly deserve.

Idea

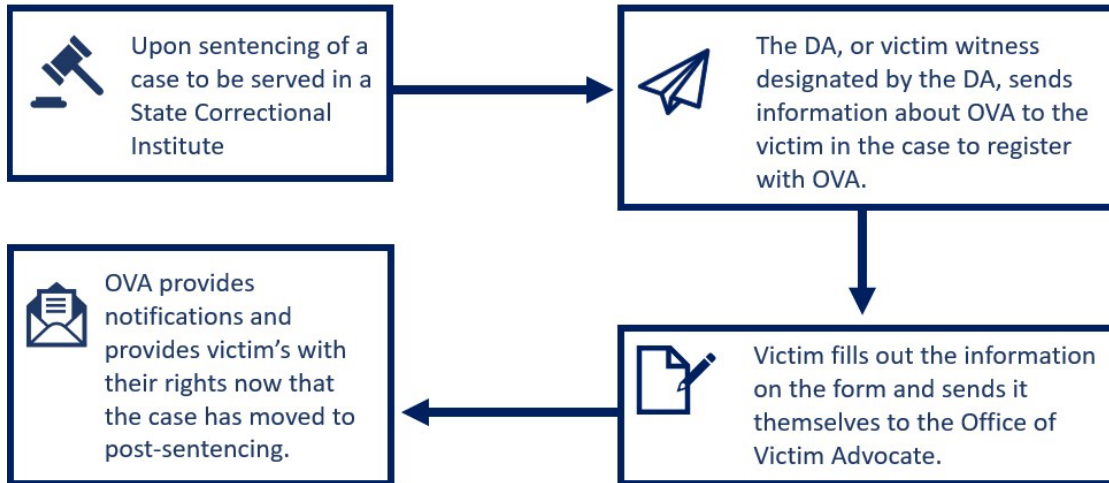
Jane Doe was shopping at the grocery store. Much to her horror, the perpetrator of her attack eight years ago passed right by her in the dairy section. She was stunned, upset, and feared for her safety. She ran home and dug through her old court paperwork to try to understand why she was never told that her attacker was now free. She had paperwork from the preliminary hearing for her case before a local Magisterial District Judge, from her county's Office of Victim Services, from her attorney, from the arraignment hearing in Common Pleas Court, and much, much more. Hands shaking, tears running down her face, Jane found the blank referral form for the state OVA. She read through the OVA material and found the victim assistance phone number.

Jane picked up the phone and dialed. A voice from the OVA answered the call and greeted her warmly. Jane cried, "I don't understand why I didn't know." The kind voice explained to Jane that her information was not in the state system and that she needed to fill out a form that would have been provided to her during the sentencing phase of the trial over seven years ago. Jane dug through her paperwork and saw the form, still blank and incomplete. Resigned and defeated, Jane sighed, "I didn't know. I thought my information just went directly to your office."

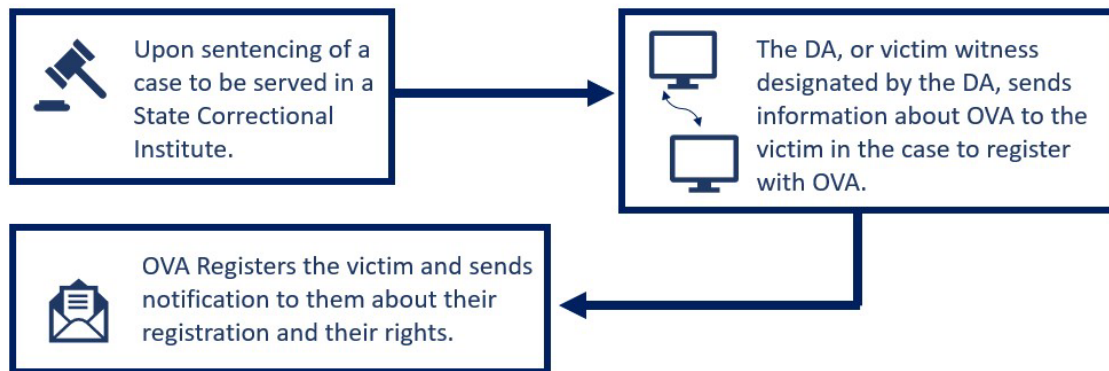
The OVA is the state agency with the authority and duty to advocate for the rights and needs of crime victims. The OVA is responsible for providing individuals who have been harmed with notifications about the status of the individuals incarcerated for the crimes committed against them, and listening to the issues and concerns of victims as they navigate the criminal justice system. In addition, OVA partners with the Pennsylvania State Police (PSP) for cases involving sexually violent predators to provide legislatively mandated notification of status and location, as well as collaborating with the Office of Attorney General (OAG) to provide services and support for cases prior to and after sentencing. The OVA also notifies the registered victim(s) or their next of kin(s) when the offender in their case makes an application for clemency or commutation with the Board of Pardons (BOP). Other restorative justice programs administered by OVA include the Inmate Apology Bank & Victim Offender Dialogue, as well as collaboration, support, and training of local victim services.

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's Crime Victims Act, Chapter 2 of Title 18, legislates the rights of victims. In 2022, Act 77 was passed which significantly enhanced the act. One change in particular updated the requirements to register and notify victims of crime.

Before Act 77



After Act 77



This change allowed for information to be transferred directly from the county DA's office (or DA Designee's office) directly to OVA. In effect, this eradicated the gap in information sharing that led to Jane's harrowing and unexpected encounter in the grocery store.

In response to this legislation, the OVA, DOC, Office of Administration, and Pennsylvania Justice Network (JNET) began to devise methods to replace the paper driven registration process and transform it into a real time, secure, confidential, and automated DA/OVA Victim Registration Portal.

Implementation

Pennsylvania Act 77 of 2022 was signed into law on July 11, 2022. Recognizing the public safety implications of the legislation, the OVA, DOC, OA, and JNET officially kicked off the project to develop a solution in response to the legislation three weeks later on August 1, 2022.

The fundamental challenge facing the team was Pennsylvania's bifurcated criminal justice system. Generally, shorter sentences are prosecuted, disposed, and served at the county level. Sentences that extend beyond two-years of imprisonment are then transferred to the state system to be served at one of 23 State Correctional Institutes. This often results in a case being prosecuted in one county and the offender serving their sentence or being paroled from a State Correctional Institute in another part of the state. Victim services are also provided at both the county and state levels based on various items like the pre-sentencing versus post-sentencing and incarceration location based on length of sentence. Not only can this system be confusing and difficult to navigate as a crime victim, but it can also make information sharing between county and state stakeholders challenging, as well.

The first step the team undertook was to document the processes already in place. Next, the team elicited the requirements necessary to replace the existing paper submission of victim registration information to a secure application portal accessible to county district attorneys. The portal would need to electronically submit victim information directly to the OVA and be accessible within the OVA Victim Advocate Notifications System (VANS), which is an application housed with the larger DOC records management system, commonly referred to as CAPTOR (Corrections and Parole Total Online Repository).

First and foremost, the information had to be readily accessible by OVA staff within the VANS application. As such, the team determined that VANS would be the application interface where the information would be utilized and administered. Rather than creating a new set of directories, rules, and tools to manage external users (DA's are county employees and OVA staff are state agency employees), the team opted to manage users through JNET. As the Commonwealth's primary criminal justice information broker, JNET has long-established identify services rooted in all Pennsylvania county and state justice related agencies. In other words, the DA's already have access to JNET!

Working together, the team designed the DA/OVA Victim Registration Portal as an application available through JNET, accessible to only authorized individuals. Using the existing messaging capabilities between JNET and the DOC, the information entered into DA/OVA Victim Registration Portal would then be submitted into the CAPTOR databases and available to OVA staff through VANS.

Development of the solution began in earnest in October 2022 and was available for user acceptance testing in February 2023. The final portal product was live in production on April 19, 2023, just over 9 months from the initial project kick-off.

Impact

The new DA/OVA Victim Registration Portal allows for victim information to be securely and accurately transferred to the Office of Victim Advocate by the DA's offices at the time of sentencing.

The portal removes the burden on Jane Doe, who is dealing with the trauma of victimization as well as the daunting bureaucracy of multiple county and state agencies involved in her case, to submit her information to the OVA.

The Cumberland County DA's Office describes the portal as "...one more tool to allow us to better serve victims." They describe the portal as a very convenient way to provide a service to someone who is likely going through a very challenging time in their life.

From the OVA's perspective, the integration of the information from the DA/OVA Victim Registration Portal into the VANS system has provided significant efficiencies to a team that is always challenged to provide superior service with limited resources. The OVA relies on only 23 advocates to process registrations, provide victim notifications, facilitate input from both the Pennsylvania Parole Board (PPB) and the Pennsylvania Board of Pardons (BOP), administer five distinct restorative justice programs, respond to questions from victims, families and the public, and offer crisis support and provide trauma informed care every day via the OVA call center. OVA provides training and technical assistance to various entities including but not limited to county organizations, state agencies, and varied stakeholders.

From 2021, prior to passage of PA Act 77 of 2022, to the end of 2023, OVA has experienced a 20.98% increase in victim registrations, as well as 3.8% increase in legislatively mandated notifications and other notices to clients. It is important to note that due to the length of typical state sentences that OVA is responsible for, the volume of notifications is expected to rise significantly in another one to two years as offenders complete their sentences. The data confirms that the portal is allowing more victims to be engaged with the OVA, ensuring that they are aware of their post sentencing rights. With this new process, individuals negatively impacted by crime are getting a clearer understanding of their rights and the notifications and information they so rightly deserve.

The most significant impact of the DA/OVA Victim Registration Portal cannot be quantified. For those victims impacted by crime, the criminal justice system can be one of the most confusing, scary, and life changing challenges they have ever encountered. They no longer have one more step, one more form to fill out, one more thing to remember. The ability to provide a tool to help victims navigate the system is priceless and immeasurable.

Back to our story of Jane Doe. With these processes in place, the burden of completing the referral to the OVA will no longer fall on crime victims like Jane. Staff at her local DA's Office would have recognized that her perpetrator was being sent to an SCI to serve the sentence and used the DA/OVA Victim Registration portal through JNET to submit her case information

quickly and securely to OVA. With that information on hand, OVA would have notified Jane promptly when her offender was released from incarceration. With this information, Jane would not only be aware that her attacker was released but could proactively take steps to prepare herself mentally, socially, and emotionally through victim services and support provided by the OVA.