

Academy Forum

Continuing the Message of the Roper Victim Assistance Academy

The Association Newsletter

Issue #61 - April 2023

Just a Thought

The personal journey of Roberta Roper is one of unfathomable heartbreak and astounding resilience. She reflects back on everything she and her family have been able to accomplish on behalf of victims of crime in the 41 years since her daughter, Stephanie's, murder.

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You never know what resources await you on the world-wide web ...come see what our latest surfing expedition uncovered.

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Find out what trainings and events are just around the corner. It looks like there are lots of ways to keep you busy during the next few months!

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Just a thought...

Reflections on 41 years of Crime Victim Advocacy and Service

My family's personal journey through the criminal justice system began in 1982. There was no way for us to know our journey would forever change the legislative landscape for victims of crime in Maryland in the decades to come. I often refer to that time as the dark ages. Forty-one years ago in Maryland, crime victims had no rights in the criminal justice process - no right to information, no right to attend the trial, no right to be heard at sentencing. If you were fortunate to survive the crime committed against you, your value at best was to serve as witness for the State - often just another piece of evidence to be used and then discarded. There were no victim advocates or community support programs to assist vic-

tims and survivors, no therapists to counsel families of homicide victims.



My family were forced to deal with those conditions in the aftermath of the heinous crimes committed against our daughter, Stephanie. Stephanie, the oldest of our five children was intelligent, a gifted artist, and my best friend. She was preparing for her senior art show and to graduate magna cum laude from Frostburg State University. She came home that day in early April, in her words, "to recharge my batteries." She shared a meal with her family and then went out with

her roommate to enjoy an evening with local friends. She would never return home.

After leaving her friend's home, her car became disabled on a country road in Prince George's County. Two men stopped, supposedly to help her, but instead kidnapped Stephanie at gunpoint. Over the next five hours, they would brutally and repeatedly rape and torture her, and eventually take her to a deserted shack in St. Mary's County, Maryland. This was a time before cell phones, but we would later learn that she used skills she learned in a rape clinic, tried to escape several times, and begged to live. When the two men used their names, she overheard them saying that she would have to be permanently silenced. Stephanie made a last but unsuccessful attempt to flee into the dark unknown woods. Her killers caught her and fractured her skull with a logging chain and shot her to death. They then dragged her body back to the shack, doused it with gasoline, and set it on fire. They would later dismember her body.

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EDITOR'S CORNER

Hello Alumni!

As we celebrate our 20th anniversary of the Roper Victim Assistance Academy, I would like to take some time to say this would never have been possible without the outstanding direction and passion of our leader, Dr. Debra Stanley. It was her vision to create the best academy in the country, and I personally believe she has accomplished that goal, and then some! And though the Academy started small, it has grown into an experience of a lifetime.

Back in 2004, when the very first class took their seats after much behind the scenes work for years to get it started, the excitement was evident. The classes were held at the University of Baltimore and participants were transported back and forth from Johns Hopkins in non air-conditioned busses, where they stayed in dormitories where they shared living quarters and bathrooms. Despite such unconventional accommodations, everyone was excited to participate in this new adventure. Over the next few years, the Academy's location moved a few times, until it finally landed at the beautiful Bon Secours Retreat and Conference Center, where all of the participants have their own private accommodations, and they can explore the beautiful campus anytime they have breaks between the training sessions held onsite. Throughout the week, participants have the opportunity to learn from some of the best instructors in the field that Dr. Stanley has recruited from across the country. All of the trainers have years of experience working in the field and a wealth of knowledge to share. Their trainings are engaging and the participants are often mesmerized. And, if that isn't special enough, the

everyone enjoys amazing food throughout the week that is prepared by the Bon Secours staff. It truly is a remarkable experience!

In 2020, when the pandemic hit, Dr. Stanley and the Academy staff pivoted and created a virtual Academy. While there were some initial concerns whether the participants would connect with one another in the same manner as those who attended the in-person Academy, those fears were quickly set aside. Because of the unique talents of the Academy faculty, staff and trainers, the online Academy thrived and demand to participate grew. So, the Academy made the virtual model a permanent option to allow those living out of state or the country to participate, as well those who are unable to leave their families for the week. As such, the Academy can now accommodate both in-person and virtual classes, and the demand for both continues to grow.

Dr. Stanley has done everything possible to accommodate the needs of those working in the field. She not only has a passion for education, but she is devoted to helping everyone gain the best skills possible to help them do their jobs. We are so blessed to have been a part of her vision. So now, we can do our part to help continue to build the Academy's legacy by promoting it to our colleagues so they can benefit from it in the years to come.

I wish each of you all the best and hope to see you in the near future. Until next time ...

Debbie Bradley, C.A., VASIII

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Only those who dare to fail greatly can ever achieve greatly. ~ John F. Kennedy

WEB LINKS

Although we have a virtual library at our fingertips every time we turn on the computer, we often lose sight of the forest through the trees just trying to navigate the world-wide web. Here are a few sites that relate to this issue's "Just a Thought" ... happy surfing!



Roper Victim Assistance Academy of Maryland

The Academy offers a rare opportunity to live, work, study, and interact with victim service providers from all areas of advocacy, from all over the state. While it is assumed that participants will have had previous training in their area of specialization, the Academy provides a fundamental overview of the entire field of advocacy, including victimology, victim rights, and victim assistance for residents in Maryland. Sessions are led by recognized leaders and practitioners in the field of victimology, criminal justice, and victim rights, and focuses on skill building and best practices. To download an application, go to: <https://www.rvaam.us/academy.html>

Roper Academy Alumni Association (RAAA)

The alumni organization affiliated with the Roper Victim Assistance Academy, RAAA advocates for the professionalization of the field of victim services. In addition to supporting and collaborating with the Academy, RAAA strives to foster opportunities for its members to network with their fellow victim service professionals

from various specializations across the state of Maryland through both professional and social events hosted throughout the year. To learn more, check out the RAAA Facebook page at RAAA Roper, or subscribe to their Twitter account @VSPN2011.

Maryland Crime Victim Resource Center

The Maryland Crime Victim Resource Center (MCVRC) victim advocates and attorneys serve victims of crime in every jurisdiction in the state of Maryland by providing a diversity of services including: information, referral and assistance, direct legal representation, court accompaniment, support groups, community education, criminal justice education, policy advocacy, technical assistance for allied professionals and criminal justice agencies, and faith-based referrals. To learn more about MCVRC, please go to: <http://www.mdcrimevictims.org>

U.S. Department of Justice: Office for Justice Programs, Office for Victims of Crime

The website for the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) provides the most up-to-date news on victims' rights and advocacy, offers resources for victims and victim providers, and provides information and resources to raise public awareness around issues related to victims of crime. To learn more, go to: <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/ovc/>

National Center for Victims of Crime

The National Center for Victims of Crime (NCVC) helps connect victims of crime to a myriad of resources, including current statistics and publications on victims of crime as well as

information about various programs NCVV sponsors. To learn more, go to: <https://victimsofcrime.org>



SAVE THE DATE!

2023 RVAAM Summer Academy

June 12th - 16th, 2023

Share the news with your colleagues and download a copy of the application from www.rvaam.us to give them. Any questions, contact Anne Litecky at alitecky@ubalt.edu



National Crime Victims' Rights Weeknight Candlelight Vigil

National Mall, Washington, D.C.

April 26th, 7:00-8:00pm

This year's theme is *Survivor Voices - Elevate. Engage. Effect Change.* And our own Roberta Roper has been invited to serve as one of the guest speakers!

National Organization of Victim Assistance (NOVA) 49th Annual Conference

New Orleans, Louisiana

July 31st - August 3rd, 2023

Join NOVA for its 49th annual training event in the beautiful city of NOLA! Meet the NOVA staff and other helping professionals from around the globe at the Marriott New Orleans. The conference will include four days of inspiring keynotes and engaging workshops, creating opportunities for registrants to establish connections with other professionals in the field of victim services and crisis response. Even better, registrants can earn up to 19 CEUs! To register for the conference, go to <https://www.trynova.org/nova49/>

2023 V-STEP Trainings

And don't forget to check the Academy's website (www.rvaam.us) periodically over the next few months to find out about upcoming VSTEP trainings. You'll be able to register for any of the workshops right on the website. *Don't forget CEUs are available!*

ALUMNI UPDATES

It seems like only yesterday when we were all together at the Academy. But in a blink of an eye another year has passed us by. Here's just a snapshot of some of the special events and milestones our alums have experienced since we last met...

- **Jennifer Cobleigh (Class of 2011)** - Jenn and her husband Chris are excited to share the news of the birth of their second child, a beautiful daughter!

ter Delany, on December 29th. Everyone is doing well, and their son, Luke is loving being a big brother. Congratulations Jenn and Chris!

- **Tammy Fitzgerald (Class of 2018)** - On March 27th, Tammy became the new lead Victim/Witness Coordinator for the Office of the State's Attorney for Harford County. After 24 years in the Domestic Violence/Special Victims Unit of the office, and almost seven years after graduating from the Academy, Tammy has been awarded the opportunity to move up to the felony division to assist with reviving the Victim/Witness Unit. She is so excited to be applying all of her years of knowledge in her new role - congratulations Tammy! We are so proud of you!



- **Jennifer Foxworthy (Class of 2022, Summer)** - on Saturday, March 11th, Jennifer hosted her Unstoppable You Ministries Conference to a sold-out audience in Dallas-Fort Worth, TX. This was her 26th conference in 10 years and in the 11th state. To boost self-esteem, three lucky participants who are in a drug recovery program were surprised with a fashion makeover. Thank you Jennifer for your continued efforts to help empower and heal lives!
- **Jeff Gray (Class of 2020, Winter)** - Jeff Gray, cold case homicide detective, and Kurt Wolfgang, Executive Director of the MCVRC have been testifying in Annapolis in support of several victim centered bills, and some have passed through committee and are now on their way to the Senate. Thank you Jeff for continuing

to fight for Maryland's victims of crime and lending your voice to those who no longer have one.

CERTIFICATION NEWS

Why aren't you certified in victim services yet? When you pick a doctor or a lawyer to work with you, you almost always certainly base your decision on their credentials, such as the school they've attended and the cases they have worked on. After all, you want to make sure that you choose someone who knows what they are talking about and who has the most experience in the appropriate domain. The same applies to victim services - the right certification not only helps you to bolster your knowledge and skills that you can use when working with victims, but also provides quantifiable evidence of your competence in this challenging and competitive field. So, what are you waiting for? Go to www.rvaam.us to learn more about the certification process and download a copy of the application today!

There are three levels of certification in Maryland, each require a specific set of qualifications and are described in detail below:

- * **Level I (VAS-I)** - a) complete application packet; b) minimum of two years experience (paid or unpaid); c) 40 hours of training (RVAAM, NVAA, or other SVAA); d) interview; e) \$50 application processing fee
- * **Level II (VAS-II)** - a) complete application packet; b) minimum of five

years experience (paid or unpaid); c) 80 hours of training (40 hours RVAAM, NVAA, SVAA and 40 hours advanced training and/or University level coursework in victim services, including and 3 hours of Ethics in Victim Services training); d) written essay on what changes are needed in victim services; e) \$75 application processing fee.

- * **Level III (VAS-III)** - a) complete application packet; b) minimum eleven years experience (paid or unpaid); c) 120 hours of training (40 hours RVAAM, NVAA, SVAA and 80 hours advanced training and/or University level coursework in victim services, including 3 hours of Victims Rights training and 3 hours of Ethics in Victim Services training); d) oral presentation on approved topic in Victim Assistance; e) \$100 application processing fee.



There is also a similarly tiered renewal process in place for those advocates who want to remain current with their certification:

- * **Level I** - a) complete 40 hours of continuing education (completed within the past 3 years) which must include 3 hours of Victim Services Ethics training; and b) complete renewal application packet and pay the \$25 renewal fee.
- * **Level II** - Without an upgrade - same as Level I. To upgrade from Level I to Level II - a) complete 40 hours of continuing education (completed within past 3 years); b) written essay on what changes are needed in victim services; and c) submit renewal application packet and pay \$50 fee.
- * **Level III** - Without an upgrade - same as Level I. To upgrade from Level II to Level III - a) complete 40 hours of continuing education (completed within past 3 years); b) oral presentation on approved topic in

victim assistance; and c) submit renewal application packet and pay \$75 fee.

All application materials are available online at www.rvaam.us (click on the Certification tab at the top of the page). Keep an eye out for upcoming classes on ethics. For more information, or if you have any questions, please contact Debbie Bradley at bradleyd@harfordsheriff.org or by phone at (410) 638-4905.

Congratulations to Our Newest Certified Victim Service Providers!

Dawn Nichol, VASI

Octavia Parker, VASI

Teresa Jeter-Cutting, VASII

"Certification for me helps to enhance recognition, credibility, and mobility in the field. MVACP certification also allows for professional identification with a group who shares a common background in victim services, and adheres to a Professional Code of Ethics. Thus, it enhances both my education and credentials in the field." Yolanda Nelson-Swain

Just a Thought (Continued)

Stephanie would be missing for nine days. My first desperate interaction with police to report her missing ended with the officer complaining about what kids did to their parents and disparaging Stephanie by proclaiming her to be "probably just another runaway." Fortunately, the police officers as-

signed to the case were kind and compassionate and told us that if and when they had any news, they would not just call us, but would come to our home. And in the very early hours of that Easter Monday morning, they arrived and told us what no parent wants to hear Stephanie's body had been found, she had been raped and had died from a gunshot wound to the head. They promised to return with additional information after arresting the second suspect. Before that could happen, we learned the details of our daughter's death on the 6 o'clock news from a reporter who stood at the crime scene. I felt like my heart had been ripped from my body.

Nothing in our lives prepared us for the criminal justice process that would follow. Both men would be charged with kidnapping, multiple rapes, and first-degree felony murder. Both would have separate trials in different jurisdictions. Having never been involved in the criminal justice process, my husband and I wanted to be as prepared as possible. We learned that the Maryland General Assembly had passed a first victims' rights bill, one providing for a victim or survivor to present a victim impact statement to the court at sentencing. We got a copy of the bill, gave it to the prosecutor and trusted it would be honored.

My husband and I were subpoenaed as opening witnesses for the State. We related our family meal with Stephanie, knew nothing regarding the crimes or the men charged, but had a desperate need to know the truth. We expected to learn the truth and to bear witness to the fact that Stephanie had lived, was loved, and her life mattered. The defense used the sequestration rule on witnesses to remove us from the remaining in the courtroom and the judge agreed. So instead, we were



shut out of the trial for the next six weeks. I was determined to remain on vigil outside of the courtroom, attempting to see or hear what was happening. What I heard when strangers emerged during a court recess, were remarks like "what was she doing out at that time of night; what was she wearing; how many drinks had she consumed." I turned to the police officers who stood with me and said that if Stephanie had been a prostitute, if she had been drunk or homeless, no one had the right to violate her. She was none of these. It was an early lesson about criminal defense, creating reasonable doubt and blaming the victim.

When the principal defendant was found guilty, the sentencing phase of the trial began. I asked the prosecutor about the victim impact statement. I did not understand how it was to be used. The prosecutor said that I had to speak because the court knew nothing about

Stephanie or the impact this crime had on our family and our community. The court prohibited any photos of Stephanie to be shown saying that they were inflammatory and prejudicial. While I had nothing prepared, I agreed to speak. Immediately after I took the stand, the defense objected, saying anything I had to say was emotional, prejudicial and probable cause for reversal on appeal. The court agreed and once again, I was silenced. We then heard the convicted killer weep, plead for mercy, and heard from his father, his wife, his jailhouse minister, and his child's teacher, all asking for leniency and mercy - to spare his family lifelong anguish. Yet, no one could speak for Stephanie.

The final blow came when the court imposed two life sentences, plus twenty years, to be served concurrently

rather than consecutively. It was explained to us that with earned good time credits, this carried the possibility of parole in 11.5 years. We came home to face our four surviving children who asked us why their sister's life was given so little value, and why we were shut out of the process. Everything we valued, our confidence in the government, our trust in people, our faith in God was challenged and all but destroyed. We had no answers for them. My husband and I questioned how we could survive as a family, how we could preserve our marriage, or how we could give hope to our children when we had none!

But even as we tried to make sense of unspeakable crimes and injustice, we were enveloped with the caring support of so many people: our friends and neighbors, our church community and from total strangers who said that when the criminal justice system failed Stephanie, it failed them as well. The youth group director from our church came to our home, declaring that he was in charge of the Stephanie Roper Family Assistance Committee. This effort was made to support our family as we prepared for a funeral and the criminal trials that lay ahead for the men charged with our daughter's murder.

After the trials (the second defendant pled guilty to all charges in Ann Arundel county), Vince and I thanked our supporters and explained that we were compelled to do whatever was in our power to improve the criminal justice system's treatment of crime victims. We couldn't change our experiences, but we would work to change the future for other crime victims and survivors. Soon the process of becoming incorporated as the Stephanie Roper Committee and Foundation, Inc. began that autumn of 1982. The continued support was overwhelming! At a time when the rights of crime vic-

tims was not a popular issue, we gained the support and leadership of Senator Thomas V. Miller, and Delegates John Wolfgang, Joseph Vallario, Jr. and William McCaffrey. Public meetings were held that included attorneys and numerous victims of crime, who finally felt their voices could be heard. A third-year law student became our first lobbyist. Our experience with the criminal justice system and the growing testimonies of other families laid the groundwork for our initial proposed legislative agenda for the 1983 Maryland legislative session.



At the same time, we had an abundance of critics who berated our efforts. I was characterized as an emotional mother who simply wanted revenge. One news columnist labeled us as an "ill begotten cause." I was a Navy wife, a mother and an art teacher. What did I know about the law? The most strident of our detractors called us vigilantes, a lynch mob. We did nothing to deserve this condemnation. We did our research and homework, and communicated with as many individuals as possible, behaved with dignity and acted with reason. My deepest wish would be that we didn't need to exist. When we began, my husband and I naively believed that if crime victim assistance was provided and certain policy changes were made, our work would be done. We could never have envisioned the challenges we would face, the victories that would be achieved and the wonderful people who would

be a part of that process and a part of our lives. Despite the tragedy that brought people together, it offered us the opportunity to know and work with the finest people we would ever have met ... except for the murder of our beloved daughter, Stephanie.

However, the past 41 years have been filled with so much to celebrate. Today there are many non-profits with whom we collaborate to improve the treatment of all crime victims. Because of MCVRC's efforts, more than 100 pieces of legislation to improve the treatment of crime victims have become Mary-

land law. For me, two laws stand out as the most significant: the victim impact statement and the State Constitutional Amendment for crime victims' rights, which were passed in 1994 and won with 92.5% voter approval! Today, Maryland crime victims not only have rights to information, a right to be present at criminal justice proceedings, a right to be heard at sentencing and parole hearings, and a right to be informed of those rights. And a constitutional amendment ensures that those rights are to be enforced and that they are treated with dignity and respect. Today, our organization has a dedicated staff of advocates to support and assist victims of all crime victims across Maryland and attorneys who have standing to represent their legal interests.

Additionally, a federal bill, the Justice for All Act was passed in 2004 to solidify the enforcement of victims' rights and providing victims with legal representation for the enforcement of their rights. Collectively, these achievements are Stephanie's legacy.

Over the years, many people have asked how I could do the work of an advocate, that it must be so depressing and challenging. My reply has been how could I *not* do this work if I hoped to survive. Yes, it has been the most challenging work of my life, but it is

far from depressing. It has been the most rewarding work of my life because it has empowered victims and survivors to not only find hope and healing, but to become thriving survivors. It is work inspired by individuals who despite the suffering and injustice they endured, have courageously mustered the strength to live with dignity and have happy and productive lives.



I have kept and treasured a description written years ago by an unknown west coast advocate who simply, yet eloquently defined the advocate and service provider's role. She wrote, "it means that I have to be willing to work on a problem that society would rather not admit to having. It means that I must have the strength to face the worst society has to offer and not despair. It means that I must care enough about total strangers to help them put their lives back together after it has been torn apart, and they sometimes have been rejected by family and friends. Being a service provider and advocate means that I am willing to work to make this world a better place even though the work may go unnoticed by the public."

Many people gave so fully of their time and talents over the years, including the amazing Dr. Debra Stanley who is the Executive Director of the Roper Victim Assistance Academy of Maryland. Under her leadership, the Academy's training and certification of professional service providers has changed the lives of thousands of victims and survivors. As we celebrate the Academy's 20th anniversary and

honor Dr. Stanley, you have the heartfelt gratitude of the Roper family.

Essay contributed by Roberta Roper

NEWS FROM THE FIELD

It's important we all keep abreast of changes to laws and/or policies that have a direct affect on victims of crime. If you hear of a new law or policy being proposed at the local, state, or federal level, be sure to share it with us!

SB 40 - Public Information Act - Inspection of Body-Worn Digital Recording Devices - Police worn body cameras can capture victims at some of their most vulnerable and traumatic times. Sadly, some perpetrators have posted this video online to humiliate and intimidate survivors. This bill strikes a balance between the need for transparency and accountability for law enforcement and the need to protect the privacy and dignity of survivors of sexual assault, domestic violence, and child abuse. The bill maintains access to footage for victims/survivors, those accused of crimes, court cases, and discovery, but prevents public access through the public information act, and importantly, removes discretion from local government officials about which cases deserve privacy protections.



HB 297/SB 292 - Safe Harbor for Minor Victims of Sex Trafficking - This bill seeks to provide a safe harbor for child victims of sex trafficking and prevent their further victimization by redirecting them out of the criminal

justice system and connecting them to services. This bill would prevent prosecution for specified crimes committed as a result of trafficking, including prostitution and other related offenses, and is supported by wide range of advocates, including survivors, survivor advocates, crime victim rights attorneys, prosecutors, and other law enforcement officials. The House Judiciary Committee heard the bill on February 9th, and the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee heard the bill on February 14th.

Best Practices

When Justice is a Bill

For better or worse, though it can be both frustrating and empowering, victim service providers work within "the system." Red tape, bureaucracy, government - however you define it for yourself, our jobs focus on helping victims (and each other) navigate that complex web of law, history, homogeneity, racism, and patriarchy where "justice," in the traditional sense, can be elusive. Making justice a more tangible reality often involves altering the laws and policies that govern us.

"The system" as Roberta and Vince Roper encountered in 1982 is not the same system we work in today. Though the cynicism you might feel on your lowest days insists we still have far to go (which is a valid point), the Roper

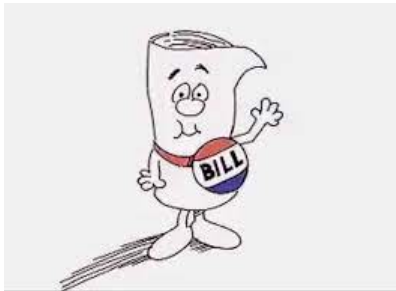
family has helped us bring about so many positive changes to Maryland's legislative and judicial landscape. In fact, the state legislature has passed over 100 bills on victims' rights and services during the 41 years of their advocacy. Assisting victims and families can be the most rewarding part of our jobs, but as the Roper's work has

shown, systemic change is a critical component.

Maryland’s System

Maryland’s legislative systems works differently than Capital Hill. The General Assembly has the same two chambers - the state’s House and Senate - but they are only in session (e.g., actively working) the first 90 days of the year. This is the brief season when our state’s elected representatives are proposing, debating, amending, and voting on new legislation.

If an individual or organization wants to see a specific change in state law or policy, they first need to find a sponsor among the members of the House and Senate. This representative will officially file the bill and help to usher it through the legislative process to hopefully become a law. A few details about this process are important to note, as they inform best practices for change makers.



All bills are first assigned to a legislative committee. A committee specializes in certain types of bills and comprises of elected representatives and policy analysts. For example, a House bill about wastewater management would be heard by the House’s Environment and Transportation Committee. Committees discuss each bill, hear testimony from subject matter experts and constituents, propose amendments, and determine if the bill should be voted on and presented to the full chamber. Bills that don’t make the cut are said to “die in committee,” while bills endorsed by a committee go on to be read, discussed, and voted on by the full legislative body. At this point,

legislators can pass the bill, reject the bill, or even send it back committee for further analysis and/or amendment.

A bill passed in one chamber then moves to the other chamber and goes through the same process, being heard first in committee and then the full chamber. If it is passed by both the House and Senate, the governor can either sign the bill, veto it, or take no action and let the bill passively become law.

While this process may seem convoluted, it provides a host of opportunities for citizens and organizations to advocate for changes they believe in.

Be the Change

Legislation involves politics, and not all victim advocates work at organizations that can or do publicly enter legislative debates. Grant restrictions, nonprofit status, and donor relations can all impact an organization’s ability to take a public stance on an issue. Some organizations may also restrict employees’ public engagement on political issues or request that employees not disclose their employer if they make a public comment on legislation. When in doubt, ask! However, if you or your organization *can* get involved, your voice could be an invaluable contribution toward furthering victims’ rights and services in Maryland.

The General Assembly’s [webpage](#) makes engagement easy. The homepage features links to lists of new bills that have just been introduced, passed, cross filed, and more. Scroll down to the “Live Media” section during working hours and you can stream committee hearings and floor debates live via YouTube. Every bill also gets its own page on the website showing where the bill is in the legislative process and

listing its important dates.

In the upper right side of the website, click or tap on the red MyMGA icon to quickly make a free MyMGA account, which allows you to easily track bills you’re interested in on the website or through email digests. Add a bill to your tracking list by visiting its webpage and clicking or tapping the yellow pushpin icon on the left-hand side of the screen, directly above the bill’s number.

To advocate at the simplest level, when a bill hearing is scheduled in committee, call or email committee members to express your support or opposition. Each committee’s membership is listed on the General Assembly website; for example, access the “Membership” tab to view the Senate’s Judicial Proceedings Committee members. If the committee passes

the bill, it moves to the full chamber, where you can urge your specific district’s representatives to support (or oppose) it.



To find your individual representatives, you can use this [search tool](#) on the General Assembly’s page.

In addition to a legislative sponsor, most bills are also backed by a specific organization working with one or more legislators to promote the bill. It can take a bit of digging to find what local organization is backing a given bill by contacting these organizations and asking them how you or your team can best support the bill. Some advocacy groups, like the [Maryland Legislative Agenda for Women \(MLAW\)](#), even publish lists of bills and their sponsoring organizations for easier reference.

If you can take a sojourn to Annapolis, you can attend a legislative hearing in person, which can help to raise the visibility of the bill. If you're willing to lend your voice, you might consider coordinating with the bill's legislative sponsor and/or lead organization and volunteer to testify about the bill at the hearing. Share how would this bill affect you? Your organization? The victims you serve? Do you have any data to show why it would be effective? Do you have a story that could add a human element to the debate? Keep in mind that if you do opt to speak, witnesses are generally given two minutes to testify and must sign up 24-48 hours in advance.

With so many bills to discuss, committees can't hear oral testimony from everyone, but don't lose hope. Many bill sponsors will ask for written testimony as well. Often, a bill's lead organization will even be able to provide sample verbiage or facts to use in your written testimony. Again, it's best to keep things brief, a single page is ideal, and is generally not excessively time-consuming to create. All submitted testimony is considered public, and is available online, meaning you can easily browse examples written by others. Simply go to the bill's webpage, scroll down to the "Committee Testimony" field, and access the "Witness List" link. Written testimony must be submitted through your MyMGA account. If you have any questions about presenting oral or written testimony, feel free to contact Rebecca Wise at rwise@wlc.md.org for a 'cheat sheet'!

While it may seem a little overwhelming, legislative advocacy is crucial to victim advocacy. We spend our days working within a system, but that system is not monolithic or immutable, it changes incrementally, year by year, bill by bill, but it only does so with the efforts and leadership of dedicated advocates like you. Change is inevitable, but we can shape what it looks like by engaging in the process.

Essay contributed by Rebecca Wise, Legal Advocate, Women' Law Center of Maryland



Alumni SHOWCASE

My Journey with the Roper Victim Assistance Academy

I would like to begin by stating what an honor it was to be a part of the celebration of the Academy's 20th anniversary and Dr. Debra Stanley's accomplishments, as well as meeting Mrs. Roberta Roper during the graduation ceremony for the 2023 Winter Class. I had the privilege of attending the Academy virtually while I was Program Manager for an Intimate Partner/Domestic Violence Program, and the information I learned was invaluable for the position I was in, enabling me to assist my clients more effectively and efficiently. It was amazing to me how easily and quickly all of the presenters and participants were able to bond "on the screen." So, when I had the opportunity to attend the Academy in person this past February, I thought I knew what to expect. Boy, was I wrong! By the time the Academy rolled around, I was no longer employed and was feeling somewhat 'raw.' What I experienced that week was nothing short of magical. We go into this field to help others through trauma, loss, and help them begin

their journey of healing, and this was what I found in my own journey. The entire week was one of compassion, caring, empathy, and education. Each of the presenters were highly qualified, experienced, impactful professionals who skillfully engaged the entire class, and my classmates came from varied and diverse backgrounds who were eager to share their knowledge and experience with their peers. As a licensed social worker, I believe it is my responsibility to make my clients feel comfortable and safe enough to become vulnerable - well, that is exactly what each of the presenters and my classmates did for me. I had no idea how therapeutic this week would be. From the educational classes, to art therapy, to the rhythmic healing circle, it all enabled me to feel, share, and process my feelings in a safe and supportive environment.

There is something so special about Dr. Debra Stanley and her team that goes beyond words, that reaches depths that cannot be described. They are able to create a space where people feel comfortable enough to learn together, cry together, and laugh together. In short, the experience transformed us from a group of individuals into a family. While I know the information that was shared during the week will undoubtedly aid us in our careers and enable us to better assist those in need, I believe it is the connections we made with one another that will provide us the strength to keep doing this work. And for that, I am honored to be a part of the RVAAM family.

Essay contributed by Raziya Karriem, MS.W., L.SW (Class of 2023, Winter).

A Job Well Done

2022 Adopt a Family Campaign

On behalf of the officers of the RAAA Board, we want to send out a heartfelt THANK YOU to the amazing Roper Alumni who made this year's Adopt-a-Family such a huge success! Your generous donations allowed us to help four families have a great Christmas this year, and we could not have done it without you. With the \$900 raised, each family received \$225 in Amazon gift cards. A special shout out to Jessica Foster for organizing this year's campaign and making the holidays brighter for each of the adoptees.



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Watch for the next edition of the Academy Forum in October 2023

Thoughts, Ideas, Suggestions?

Are you looking for more information about a particular issue in the field of victim services? The Editorial Board is always looking for new topics to profile in the newsletter that can assist our Alums both personally and professionally. Please send any suggestions you might have for a future topic to Debbie Bradley at bradleyd@harford-sheriff.org. And remember, we are also happy to share any information you have about job openings and professional trainings you might think your fellow Alums would benefit from!