

Raised House Bill No.5485, An Act Concerning the Office of the Victim Advocate

Judiciary Committee

March 19, 2010

On July 26th 2008 I had the unfortunate experience of falling victim to a drunken driver. At the age of 23 and fresh out of college my life was just beginning. I had plans to pursue a career in non-traditional law enforcement in hopes to someday work as an investigator for the FBI. I was very active and in great physical shape. Up until that moment I had accomplished all that I wanted to accomplish, I received a full ride scholarship to a division one college to play softball, not only was the first in my family to graduate from college but I graduated top of my class making the national dean's list as well as making it into three prestige's honors societies, as well as completing an internship with the Department of Public Safety in Baltimore. My dreams came to an abrupt stop when on my way to a family cookout I was struck on the left side by a drunk driver illegally passing me. I sustained major injuries including 13 broken bones, a lacerated spleen, severed artery and the amputation of my left leg. I was in critical condition and was flown to Hartford Hospital where I stayed for 40 long and painful days.

I spent 6 months in rehab and still to this day am working towards getting my life back. The experience was devastating. Once back on two feet I imagined my trials and stipulations were over but I was wrongfully mistaken. Although I had an education and studied criminal justice for 4 years I felt like I was learning a foreign language I was left in the dark and was left demanding answers. Six months after the accident the defendant was arrested and charged. Although a relief I did not realize the long road that lie ahead. I hired an attorney to help me understand my rights. Once he found out the defendant had no insurance and no assets he proceeded to tell me there was nothing more he could do for me and I later received a bill for his services. I hired another attorney who made promises to get me the money I deserved and help me out of my newly occurred debt.

Once I became more stable I decided I wanted to learn more on my own. I applied to an internship at the OVA knowing nothing more than that I wanted to help crime victims like myself and learn the ways of the system. Little did I know the experience was going to benefit me and change my life.

When I started at the OVA it had been 6 months since the arrest and no prosecutor was assigned to my case. I was worried my case would be pushed to the side and be forgotten about. I wanted to be involved in every decision since his negligence impacted my entire life. After countless continuances I began to become frustrated although I had signed a paper in the mail from the VA stating my rights I did not realize attending the

initial court dates was pointless since no progress would be made that quickly. Once I informed the OVA of my concern they made a call to the courthouse and within a day I was assigned a prosecutor and given an appointment to meet with him and the victim advocate.

While working on several cases I realized that victims were entitled to compensation for their loss of wages and medical expenses. I had applied to compensation through OVS only my claim was denied. Once the OVA looked into the details more in depth and express their concerns with OVS the claim was reopened and OVS compensated me for loss of wages as well as my prosthetic leg. Without the OVA I would have just accepted this denial and counted it as a loss.

After several frustrating meetings with my attorney and no questions answered I began asking more questions at work and learning of rights I never knew I had. With knowledge of these rights I began to question my attorneys actions and the advice I was given. My attorney was convinced that all I had to do was "sit there and look pretty and the judge will love you." I took this offensively I could not believe that in 2010 people were still treating women based off their looks alone as if we weren't intelligent enough to have an opinion of our own. I told him I wanted to be very involved in the case and how I thought the prosecutor, judge and defendant should hear how much this accident has truly impacted my life. Despite my request my attorney took it upon himself to set up a meeting with the defense on his own time without anyone else present. As his secretary told me over the phone his goal is to work towards an agreement that the defendant admits where he was drinking prior to the accident so we could go forward with filing a Dram Shop and in turn we talk to the prosecutor about giving a more lenient sentence. I did not feel comfortable with this meeting nor did I approve of any of it. While I wanted to trust my attorney who I thought had my best interest at heart it was hard for me to do so when he never gave me the chance to even talk or express to him what I wanted to happen. It was not until the OVA accompanied me to an appointment when he learned that I wanted jail time and that the money was not my number one priority rather that he face retribution for his actions. It was sad that it took a meeting with the OVA, people he could not talk legal circles around, in order for him to finally realize that he could no longer do what was in his best interest and that I was serious when I said I wanted to be heard and took this case very seriously.

The OVA went on to handle situations my attorney promised to take care of but failed to complete. They assisted me after my GAP insurance denied the vehicle claim because my extended hospital stay prevented me from making the deadline. The OVA not only contacted the insurance company but they informed me of how to file a complaint against them with the Department of Consumer Protection and Department of Insurance.

The OVA also referred me to MADD where I was able to get help from a Victim Advocate with a lighter case load that could answer day to day questions and concerns I may have about the process. MADD was a blessing, the organization was very supportive and to this day I do not know what I would have done without them.

The OVA also linked me with additional services and empowered me to speak out and make a difference. They informed me of a program with DOC called VOICES which gave inmates a real life picture of how their crimes impact others. I now speak every time the director needs a DUI victim and have found it to be a very therapeutic process.

Once I became more comfortable I went on to speak at events for MADD including Victim Impact Panels, local high schools, as well as an upcoming awards ceremony and charity event.

The OVA did more than just link me to the proper services, they educated me of my rights, enforced my rights when violated, and went above and beyond their requirements of the state by giving me strength and courage to move on with my life and not let victimization become me but rather motivate me to make a difference. I am now finishing my masters in CJ at CCSU. I look back a year and cannot image where I or my case would have ended up with the OVA. I am just one of the many victims they touch on a daily basis. Within the four months interning with the OVA I witnessed more progress being made by the OVA regarding crime victims than ever. I still to this day wonder how they are able to get so much work done while advocating for so many different victims with an office so small. I now work for the state as well as a non-profit organization and have yet to see the kind of organization, team work and desire that go into the work done at the OVA. I feel honored to have had the opportunity to both intern and been helped by them.

With that being said, I feel that no attorney, state agency, non-profit organization, or judicial review board can truly evaluate a service that is designed to protect victims if those exact agencies at times fail to do so themselves. I argue that only crime victims themselves and other professionals such as those who study the effectiveness of victim services can make recommendations on how to better and more effectively service victims because they know the population best and experience the system from an entirely different perspective.

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