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AG Schimel Recognizes Crime Victims' Rights in Capitol Ceremony

MADISON, Wis. – Today, Attorney General Brad Schimel recognized National Crime Victims' Rights Week with a public ceremony at the Wisconsin State Capitol. The ceremony, an annual event co-hosted by the Wisconsin Crime Victims Council and the Department of Justice (DOJ) Office of Crime Victim Services, recognized the importance of the state's crime victim rights enshrined in Wisconsin's constitution and statutes.

"Wisconsin has long been a leader in providing rights to crime victims," said Attorney General Schimel, "Long ago, Wisconsin was the first state to have a local victim/witness services division, and since then we have continued to be a national leader in advancing victims' rights. This ceremony honors and reflects on those statutory and constitutional rights that have already been established, and the work we must continue to do. Without empowered crime victims, our criminal justice system couldn't hold criminals accountable."

"This year's theme for National Crime Victims' Rights Week is Expand the Circle: Reach all Victims. Many survivors of crime face barriers that keep them from accessing the services and crime justice systems that can help them recover," said Michelle Viste, Executive Director of the DOJ Office of Crime Victim Services (OCVS). "Despite dedicated victim service providers working hard every day to meet the needs of crime survivors, there are still too many without meaningful access to rights and services. As a community and a state, this week is our opportunity to renew our commitment to ensuring that ALL survivors of crime – especially those where it is a challenge to reach or serve – are afforded their rights and receive a trauma-informed response."

In addition to remarks from the attorney general and Viste, the ceremony featured testimonial writing by survivors of crime, including Laurel Blackstone, Catherine Cain, and Tiffany (Unnamed), participants in the *Untold Stories* program at the LOTUS Legal Clinic. On display at the ceremony was artwork inspired by the testimonial writing, created by students from the Milwaukee High School of the Arts and the Alliance High School. Singer Liz Potter, accompanied by guitarist Mike Lennon, performed at the ceremony in tribute to victims of crime and all who serve them.

Wisconsin's Victims of Crime Constitutional Amendment, ratified in 1993, gives victims comprehensive rights, such as the right to attend proceedings and to make statements to the court. In 1998, the state legislature passed laws that assigned duties to public agencies to carry out the rights, in recognition of the importance of victims coming forward to report crime. In 2017, the Wisconsin State Legislature passed the first consideration of *Marsy's Law*, an amendment to the state constitution that would strengthen and clarify the rights of victims even further.

DOJ plays a critical role in Wisconsin's treatment of crime victims, and ensuring victims know their rights. The DOJ Victim Resource Center (VRC) assists victims who have questions or concerns about their rights. After a VRC review, victims also have a right to file a formal complaint with the Wisconsin Crime Victims' Rights Board (CVRB) concerning alleged rights violations by public officials, agencies and employees. By law, DOJ provides operational support to the CVRB but decisions of the Board are not subject to review by the attorney general.

DOJ also routinely provides information and trainings to advocates and victim/witness services on victims' rights, crime victim compensation, and the sexual assault forensic exam (SAFE) fund. DOJ has also established, with collaboration from law enforcement, prosecutors, advocates, and victim/witness services, a plan through 2020 that is dedicated to supporting trauma-informed training and technical assistance and encourages innovative approaches to responding to domestic and sexual violence.

In 2017, DOJ provided \$27.4 million to crime victims in all 72 counties in Wisconsin through September 2018. The funding, provided to Wisconsin DOJ by U.S. DOJ, is allocated through the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) victim assistance grant to private and public agencies, including district attorney's offices, to support direct services to victims of crime. Services provided under this program include safety planning, community service referrals, counseling, crisis intervention, and legal advocacy. Victim services funded by DOJ are extended to any crime victim, and to both large and small programs across the state. For example, VOCA funding supports a pilot project from Legal Action of Wisconsin that provides free legal representation for

crime victims whose privacy is threatened during criminal proceedings. A full list of programs that will be supported by VOCA funding from October 2017 through September 2018 is available [here](#).

Victims seeking more information about their rights can call the DOJ Victim Resource Center at 1-800-446-6564. Information about victim services and rights can be found at www.doj.state.wi.us. To learn more about LOTUS Legal Clinic and the Untold Stories writing workshop, go to www.LotusLegal.org.