

Testimony on Senate Bill 91
April 1, 2016
Presented by Anne Seymour
National Crime Victim Advocate

Good afternoon Chairwoman McKinnon and Chairman Kelly and members of the Alaska Senate Finance Committee, and thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of Senate Bill 91. I helped facilitate the outreach to crime victims, survivors and victim service professionals last year in the early stages of the Alaska Criminal Justice Commission's reform initiative, and I'd like to talk briefly today about this process.

I've been a national crime victim advocate for 33 years and, in the 1980s, co-founded what is now the National Center for Victims of Crime. I have worked in all 50 states and at the Federal level to improve victims' rights and services. I currently serve on the Board of Directors of five national organizations that promote pretrial justice; safety and crime prevention on college campuses; victim services in corrections; and international victim assistance. I am also a member of the Victims Committees of all three major national corrections associations, and had the honor of serving on the DC Sentencing Commission for nearly a decade. Over the past two decades, I've worked in Alaska, first to support your state's victims' constitutional amendment and later on behalf of the U.S. Department of Justice on efforts that helped create your Department of Corrections victim services program; and that helped ensure that victim safety and concerns are addressed through sex offender management and policy.

I offer this brief background as a way of showing that I have been quite "deep in the weeds" in criminal justice and corrections reform efforts for my entire career, and this involvement has been to simply assure that victims' voices are heard, and that when we speak often about "public safety," that we also consider the "individual safety" of victims, survivors and members of our communities.

I recall with great frustration and sadness my early days as a victim advocate, when victims had virtually no rights. They were an "afterthought" in justice processes if they were thought about at all – the mother of a murdered child in Texas spoke of the need for victims' rights when she said: "Just about the only right a victim of crime has is to be present at the commission of the crime." We watched from the sidelines as justice reform efforts passed in state after state with little or no consideration of victims' concerns.

I think it's also important to note that in the early 1990s, I was a national leader in my field in the movement to build more prisons and lengthen sentences for violent offenders. This was, again, a time when victims had few rights and their voices remained largely un-heard.

To say "times have changed" is an understatement. To me, the most significant change in justice reform and reinvestment efforts *is the strategic, proactive involvement of crime victims, survivors and those who serve them.*

Over the past five years, I've been involved in justice reinvestment efforts in almost 20 states, and I've learned that the needs of victims vary widely from state-to-state. South Dakota's reinvestment is helping to build a statewide victim notification system. In Pennsylvania, one of the outcomes now provides victim advocates for victims of juvenile offenders. Hawaii's reinvestment overhauled that state's victim restitution program to the point that it is now considered the "standard" for our field. And in Oregon, JRI doubled the

amount of money available in its Domestic and Sexual Violence Services Fund, among other provisions.

Yet what *is* consistent is that states that reduce their prison population have also reduced their crime rates. For example, in the first two states I worked in:

- In 2010, South Carolina reduced its prison population by 20 percent and has seen a reduction in its crime rate of over 12 percent.
- In 2011 in Kentucky, the 1.6 percent reduction in the state's prison population has been accompanied by a 17.1 percent reduction in its crime rate.

Which brings me to the Commission's work here in Alaska and SB 91: I applaud *any* justice reform effort that is bipartisan in nature, and I give "bonus points" when the needs of crime survivors are given the attention they so rightfully deserve.

I want to recognize the Commission's efforts and the fact that it included an amazing victim advocate, Brenda Stanfill, on the Commission itself. The Commission's early and strong commitment to hearing the voices of victims in Alaska is where I came in.

My work in Alaska began last summer, first reviewing a rich body of research in your state that showed that while Alaska has some of the finest victim assistance programs in the Nation, there are still many victims who remain un-served or under-served: victims of child abuse and neglect; the majority of Alaska women who experience at least one incident of intimate partner or sexual violence in their lifetimes; and so many victims whose need for legal assistance far outweighs Alaska's capacity to provide it.

We reached out to over 50 survivors and victim advocates to inform them about the Commission's efforts and to invite them to join discussions to clarify victims' most important needs and concerns.

Over a week in September, I had the opportunity to speak personally with seven crime survivors and finally got to meet Butch and Cindy Moore in person, having learned of and appreciated their efforts to pass Bree's Law from 5000 miles away. I heard from domestic violence survivors for whom "personal safety" is an oxymoron. And I interviewed victim assistance professionals who simply struggle to provide quality services to the many victims in Alaska who need them.

Instead of hosting one Victim/Advocate Roundtable as we do in most states, we held two Roundtables in Alaska last September: in Fairbanks, and in Bethel (where we flew in tribal elders and survivors to ensure that we learned about the needs of victims in Alaska's bush communities). Overall, 29 survivors and victim advocates joined the Roundtable discussions. It's important to note that their input truly informed the Commission's work and the bill you have before you today.

The Roundtables presented 10 priorities to the Commission and, while you can read the Summary Report I wrote (which has been provided under separate cover to the Committee), I'd like to highlight three of them for you:

1. There was strong consensus about the need to strengthen victim assistance services in remote and bush communities to promote justice, healing, wellness and crime prevention.
2. Participants emphasized the need to focus on crime prevention and bystander intervention, with a goal of less crime and fewer victims in Alaska.

3. Finally, there was strong support for evidence-based and culturally-competent programming and supervision for convicted offenders, including batterers' intervention and restorative community service.

I believe that SB 91 offers both a foundation and reinvestment funding that can make the Roundtables' recommendations a reality. In addition, this bill's emphasis on involving victims and providing them with rights to information, notification, input, safety and restitution across the entire criminal justice spectrum – from pre-trial through parole consideration – equates to one of the most victim-centered pieces of legislation I've seen over the past decade.

I have never sought to speak on behalf of victims and survivors because each victim is unique and it's impossible to paint them with a broad brush. Instead, my work over the past three decades and in Alaska over the past eight months is to make sure that the voices of victims and those who serve them are heard, and respected and reflected in public policy that affects their lives.

I believe SB 91 accomplishes this, and I thank each of you and the Alaska Criminal Justice Commission for validating the voices of victims and their advocates through this important bill.

Thank you very much.