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OPINION: It's time to help victims and improve justice in Alaska

By Carol Fraser, KC Hostetler and Ivy Cerdena

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Why are Alaska crime victims still required to carry the most burden, endure the most trauma and experience the most frustration of any participant in Alaska's criminal justice system?

The obvious answer is: They absolutely should not.

And yet, for some unknown reason, under current Alaska law and court rules, victims of felony crimes must testify at criminal grand jury proceedings — reliving what is, most likely, the worst day of their lives. This means that a woman who has been raped will be forced to testify again, in many cases only days or weeks after the rape, even though the information already has been provided to law enforcement, the prosecutor, medical personnel and/or the judge.

Even in property crimes, larceny, car theft and other felonies, the completely unnecessary burden to appear at grand jury proceedings is placed on the victim. Why? The victim didn't do anything wrong! Yet it is the victim who is required to repeat their story multiple times for no purpose. This ridiculous requirement contributes to the court's backlog, delays the process, hurts victims, impedes justice and increases the cost to the state — all while being completely unnecessary.

The entire purpose of the criminal grand jury proceeding is to determine if there is enough evidence to go to trial. That is it — period. It is not a forum for prosecution, it is not to face your accuser, nor does it determine guilt or innocence. The defendant is not present and there is no reason for the victim to be present.

Many states do not have grand jury proceedings at all; the prosecutor simply presents the evidence to a judge, and the judge determines if there is enough evidence to proceed to trial. For states that do have grand jury proceedings, most, including the federal government, do not require victims to be at grand jury proceedings. Alaska's requirement is the worst in the country for victims.

This absolutely must change.

This change is supported by, and a priority for Standing Together Against Rape (STAR), Victims for Justice (VFJ), Alaska Network on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault (ANDVSA), Catholic Social Services, Child Advocacy Centers, Covenant House, MyHouse Mat-Su, and many others.

By making this one public policy change, at no cost to the state — removing the requirement for victims to appear at criminal grand jury proceedings — we can help, and positively impact between 6,000 and 7,000 Alaska victims every year. What is most amazing to us is that this simple change has not been made already.

Please join us and immediately contact all members of the of Alaska Legislature and ask them to make this change before they leave Juneau this year.

This is the right thing to do for victims, for Alaska and for justice. And it is needed right now.

Carol Fraser, KC Hostetler and Ivy Cerdena work in the tourism industry together and also serve on the Trend Alaska Fashion Show Committee. The Trend Alaska Fashion Show partnered with Victims for Justice at its Feb. 17 show to raise funds, awareness and advocacy for victims of violent crime. Carol is the founder of the Trend Alaska Fashion Show and has lived in Alaska for 41 years. KC has lived in Alaska for 22 years; Ivy was born and raised in Alaska and has lived here for 32 years.