Illinois Right to Heal Initiative: Policy Priorities to Support Victims and Survivors

This platform represents Crime Survivors Speak's extensive work over more than a decade to document the experiences and needs of underrepresented crime survivors in Illinois and nationally. Over the years, Crime Survivors Speak has surveyed, interviewed, and convened thousands of crime survivors in Illinois and across the country, and hundreds of local victim-serving organizations. Crime Survivors Speak represents over 20,000 crime survivors in Illinois, and over 200,000 crime survivors nationally.

Together, these recommendations operate as a single coordinated recovery strategy. The goal is straightforward: If you become a victim of violence in Illinois, the state should help ensure that victimization does not also cost you your financial stability, your housing, or your family's future.

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1. Establish a Community-Based Emergency Financial Assistance Grant Program to Provide Urgent Help to Survivors in Crisis

Victims often face immediate costs — relocation, funeral expenses, lost wages, medical bills, car repairs, or meeting basic needs like paying rent or utility bills when in crisis, before a standard victim compensation claim can be processed. Emergency financial assistance funds distributed by trusted community organizations can quickly address these urgent needs caused by victimization. Illinois has started establishing these programs through the Reimagine Public Safety Act for survivors of gun violence,[1] but the scope of coverage and eligibility remain limited.

Illinois has also set aside $20 million a year since FY2023 for a second source of financial assistance: the Violent Crime Witness Protection Program – demonstrating a commitment to reaching survivors in crisis. But despite the tremendous efforts of the administration to revamp and revive this program into one that actually gets help to survivors, fundamental

[1] *See* Illinois Department of Human Services (2024). Final RPSA Emergency Victims Flex Fund Policy. Retrieved from: https://www.dhs.state.il.us/OneNetLibrary/27896/documents/Appendix/Final%20RPSA%20Emergency%20Victims%20Flex%20Fund%20revised%201.21.25_A11Y.docx

issues with the originating statute continue to prevent help from actually reaching victims. In the last four fiscal years, it hasn't gotten a single dollar to a victim or witness.[2] Two structural problems explain why: most survivors don't qualify due to strict eligibility rules that are tied to the history of the originating statute, and the funds can only be distributed through law enforcement agencies rather than local organizations. The result: for SFY27, eligible law enforcement agencies applied for just $1.1 million of the $20 million available, leaving at least $18.9 million meant for victims unspent[3]

Illinois now has two separate pots of money meant to get cash assistance to survivors quickly — one too narrow in scope, the other nearly inaccessible. Rather than patching each one separately, that funding should be combined and redirected into a single program that actually reaches survivors without the red tape.

Recommendation: *Establish a comprehensive, low-barrier financial assistance program for all survivors: a community-based survivor recovery program that channels multi-year, flexible funding to trusted community-based and survivor-led organizations. This would fill the gap that victim compensation leaves open — getting help to survivors when the need is urgent, not months later.*

2. Increase Funding for Trauma Recovery Centers

Trauma Recovery Centers provide wraparound, no-cost mental health and support services to all victims of violent crime who often have nowhere else to turn, and face barriers to traditional victim services. The evidence-based and nationally recognized Trauma Recovery Center (TRC) model helps the hardest-to-reach violent crime victims heal from the effects of trauma, and breaks cycles of crime.

TRCs are designed to help communities that traditional victim services have not reached, particularly groups that often lack adequate support, such as shooting victims, and unhoused individuals. By offering clinical case management; individual, group, and family therapy; legal advocacy and assistance; and guidance in navigating and applying for compensation funds; TRCs serve as a crucial mechanism to interrupt cycles of trauma and enhance public safety. TRCs employ assertive outreach and trauma-informed care to engage individuals typically overlooked, providing counseling and practical assistance without impediments.

Evaluations of TRCs show that compared to traditional models of care, TRC clients are:

[2] *See* Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority (nd). Violent Crime Witness Protection Program Plans, SFY23 and SFY26. Retrieved from https://icjia.illinois.gov/grants/programs/violent-crime-witness-protection-program/
[3] See Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority (nd). Violent Crime Witness Protection Program Plan, SFY27. Retrieved from https://icjia.illinois.gov/grants/programs/violent-crime-witness-protection-program/

- ➔ **More likely to stay employed:** 56% more likely to return to jobs compared to other victims;
- ➔ **More likely to see improvements in health:** Nearly twice as many clients used mental health services, and more showed an improvement in physical and mental health;
- ➔ **More likely to apply for and receive victims compensation:** Clients are nearly three times more likely to file a claim than are crime victims served through other care;
- ➔ **More likely to be ready to help law enforcement solve crimes:** Clients were 44% more likely to work with law enforcement to solve crimes;
- ➔ **More likely to be housed and have more housing security:** More than a third of those served by the first TRC were experiencing homelessness, and other TRCs have had success improving housing security.[4]

TRCs are also cost efficient:

- TRC services cost 34 percent less than traditional fee-for-service victim services.[5]
- TRCs coordinate care across multiple providers and avoid service duplication.

There are currently only four TRCs in Illinois recognized by the National Alliance of Trauma Recovery Centers – too many survivors live in neighborhoods without access to a TRC. TRCs and other community-based survivor support services in Illinois have also faced budget cuts over the last several years because of funding disbursement issues and a lack of clarity on who TRCs are required to serve. We have all heard about the tragic shooting in East St. Louis. East St. Louis and The Metro East do not have a strong victim service infrastructure to support the thousands of people affected by violence each year.

Recommendation: *Increase state funding for Trauma Recovery Centers to expand capacity and geographic reach, especially in communities with the highest rates of violent victimization.*

3. Fully Eliminate Victim Blaming Exclusions in the Victim Compensation Program

Victim compensation should focus on one question: Was this person harmed by a crime? If the answer is yes, the state's priority should be helping survivors and families heal—not searching for reasons to deny support. But in Illinois, the law continues to require the state to scrutinize the victim who was harmed, compounding trauma for victims and delaying or denying critical support.

[4] National Alliance of Trauma Recovery Centers (2020). Trauma Recovery Centers: Addressing the Needs of Underserved Crime Survivors.
[5] Alicia Boccellari and Robert L. Okin. (2005). *Trauma Recovery Center: Transforming Trauma Services in the Public Sector*. Status Report to the State of California Victim Compensation Program.

Legislation in 2021 and 2022 mitigated these barriers for some survivors by ensuring family members of homicide victims remain eligible for critical expenses, and allowing other claims to be either reduced proportionally or denied rather than requiring denial in all cases based on subjective victim-blaming assessments.[6] But victims can still be denied help based on unprosecuted allegations about victim behavior [740 ILCS 45/10.1(d)]. These determinations are difficult to assess, and often the only information is the subjective and immediate opinions of law enforcement noted in a police report, making them susceptible to bias. Indeed, data show that Black victims are denied help significantly more often under these policies[7] – one national analysis found that Black men are nearly 25% more likely than white men to be denied under these policies.[8]

That's why experts recommend fully eliminating these types of restrictions. The Biden Department of Justice was poised to compel states like Illinois that still have these restrictions on the books to eliminate them in 2024, but ran out of time before the Trump administration took over.[9] But Illinois does not have to wait for federal action, and should join the growing number of states eliminating these restrictions.

Hundreds of Illinois victims have been denied help as a result of these restrictions in the last 5 years. These denials make Illinois less safe, and compound trauma for victims and their families, who are given the message that they are not worthy of healing.

Recommendation: *Illinois should continue leading the nation by eliminating victim-blaming eligibility exclusions that prevent victims from accessing victim compensation.*

4. Ensure Safe and Stable Housing for Survivors in the Wake of Violence

In times of crisis, survivors and their loved ones need to be able to count on safety and stability in their homes. Housing and economic stability are keys to individual and community safety. For example, crime victims may need to break a lease to relocate or change their locks to stay safe. Staying in the home may compound a survivor's trauma, or expose the survivor and their family to further violence. In a nationwide survey, more

[6] HB 3653 (2021) and HB 3295 (2022)
[7] Lauer, C. & Catalani, M. (2023, May 17). Every state offers victim compensation. For the Longs and other Black families, it often isn't fair. Associated Press. https://apnews.com/article/crime-victims-compensation-racial-bias-58908169e0ee05d4389c57f975eae49b.; Levine, J.R. (March 26, 2024). Comments on the US Department of Justice Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) Proposed Rule for the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) Victim Compensation Grant Program, 28 CFR Part 94.
[8] Levine, J.R. (March 26, 2024). Comments on the US Department of Justice Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) Proposed Rule for the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) Victim Compensation Grant Program, 28 CFR Part 94.
[9] Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) Victim Compensation Grant Program, 89 Fed Reg 7639 (proposed Feb 5, 2024) (proposed to be codified at 28 CFR Part 94).

than half of violent crime victims reported that they wanted to relocate following a violent crime, yet nearly half (44%) of those were unable to.[10]
Victimization can also increase vulnerability to eviction. More than one in four violent crime survivors report fearing being forced out of their housing or were evicted as a result of their victimization.[11]

But too many survivors lack basic protections in the wake of violence to ensure that they can remain safely housed.

- Existing Lease Termination and Lock Change Protections Only Apply to Some Survivors: Recognizing these issues, Illinois has the Safe Homes Act (765 ILCS 750/10), which allows victims of sexual violence, domestic violence, or stalking to break a lease without penalty in some circumstances, and requires landlords to change a survivor's locks at the survivor's request. But currently, victims of other types of violence do not have these much needed protections.

- Existing Eviction Protections Only Apply to Some Survivors, and Contain Problematic Loopholes: Illinois also has a law providing an affirmative defense to eviction if the eviction is based solely on an incident of or tenant or household member's status as a victim of sexual violence, domestic violence, sexual violence, or stalking (735 ILCS 5/9-106.2). But victims of other forms of violence have no parallel forms of protection. The law also contains a loophole wherein a victim may be evicted if they "allow" a barred abusive person from reentering the premises, regardless of whether that person poses any risk to other tenants. This fails to account for the realities of violence, including shared custody in domestic violence cases.

- More than half (57%) of municipalities in Illinois maintain discriminatory ordinances which force landlords to evict victims and people with records.[12] So-called "crime free and nuisance property ordinances" are widespread, and often force landlords to evict or penalize tenants who make calls for emergency services, who are victimized, or who live with people with arrest or conviction records.[13] Many of these local laws are outright in violation of state and federal civil rights law.

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[10] Alliance for Safety and Justice (2022). Crime Survivors Speak: National Survey of Victims' Views on Safety and Justice. https://allianceforsafetyandjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Alliance-for-Safety-and-Justice-Crime-Survivors-Speak-September-2022.pdf
[11] Alliance for Safety and Justice (2022). Crime Survivors Speak: National Survey of Victims' Views on Safety and Justice. https://allianceforsafetyandjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Alliance-for-Safety-and-Justice-Crime-Survivors-Speak-September-2022.pdf
[12] Campaign Zero, Chicago Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights, Crime Survivors Speak, et. al. (2025). The Discriminatory Enforcement of Illinois' Crime-Free and Nuisance Property Ordinances. https://canos.campaignzero.org/assets/cfno-white-paper.pdf
[13]Campaign Zero, Chicago Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights, Crime Survivors Speak, et. al. (2025). The Discriminatory Enforcement of Illinois' Crime-Free and Nuisance Property Ordinances. https://canos.campaignzero.org/assets/cfno-white-paper.pdf King Peneda, S. (May 13, 2025). *"Under 'Crime-Free Housing' Laws, Families May Be Evicted for Minor Offenses: In some Illinois cities, shoplifting, calling 911 too many times or even being a victim of a crime can get you kicked out of your home."* The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/13/us/illinois-crime-free-housing.html.

Communities are less safe when victims and tenants are afraid to call emergency services for help, or when our most vulnerable community members are denied housing.

Recommendations:

- *Strengthen and expand victim protections to ensure that survivors are able to end a lease early or have their locks changed for safety.*
- *Legislate a statewide bar on harmful local ordinances that violate state and federal laws, and that make communities less safe.*

5. Launch a Statewide Victim Navigator Program

Nationally, just 1 in 12 victims of violent crime report receiving help from a victim services provider.[14] Data from Illinois consistently show that a lack of awareness and lack of help navigating systems is a critical barrier to help. In a 2022 needs assessment from ICJIA , the need to increase accessibility and awareness of victim services was cited as the most common theme among interviewees.[15]

A statewide victim navigator program would embed trained navigators in trusted community organizations and local agencies, to guide survivors through service and compensation access. No survivor should have to navigate multiple agencies and systems alone, when trying to get help following harm.

Recommendation: *Build and fund a statewide victim navigator program, locating navigators in trusted community organizations and local agencies.*

6. Protect Victims who Face Arrest or Convictions as a Result of their Victimization

Experiencing violence and trauma can sometimes lead survivors to subsequent criminalization. Victims who act in self-defense from ongoing violence, are coerced into illegal activity by abusers, or use substances as a part of an abusive dynamic may end up arrested, convicted, and incarcerated as a result of their victimization.[16] Instead of being punished for responses tied to their victimization, victims need pathways to health, safety and stability. Many states are establishing and expanding protections to ensure courts have opportunities to consider evidence about abuse or violence where it is relevant at different stages in a criminal case. These include opportunities for diversion from prosecution for survivors, the ability for survivors to raise their experiences as an affirmative defense where the offense was directly related to victimization, sentencing

[14] Tapp, S.N. and Coen, E.J. (2025). Criminal Victimization, 2024. US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.
[15] Garthe, R. C., Hsieh, W., Guenther, M. E., Watkins, D., Kwon, C., & Welsh, M. (2022). 2022 Victim Needs Assessment. Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority.
[16] Free to Thrive (2023). Trafficked and Arrested.; The Sentencing Project and Survivors Justice Project (2024). Sentencing Reform for Criminalized Survivors.

structures that allow courts to take prior trauma into account in decision making, and record relief eligibility for survivors with records resulting from their victimization. Illinois has established some procedural protections for survivors navigating the criminal justice system after victimization, but more progress is needed.

Recommendations:

- Expand affirmative defense opportunities for survivors. Survivors who are arrested or charged in direct relation to their victimization experience need opportunities to heal from trauma, rather than prosecution or punishment. The ability to assert an affirmative defense during court proceedings gives survivors opportunities to present evidence for courts to consider regarding the connection between their actions and their violent victimization experience. Current Illinois law allows trafficking survivors to raise an affirmative defense, but only when charged with prostitution offenses, not when facing charges for other offenses resulting from their victimization.[17] Illinois' exceedingly narrow compulsion defense fails to account for the experiences of most survivors who are criminalized.[18] Far too many survivors are left behind.
- Clarify and strengthen sentencing mitigation and resentencing structures for survivors. Existing Illinois law lacks specific sentencing guidance for courts if the defendant is a victim and their victimization contributed to a conviction. Law requires courts to generally consider whether the defendant was a domestic violence victim and if that "tended to excuse or justify the defendant's criminal conduct" when sentencing,[19] but offers no alternative sentencing structure to guide courts. Similarly, some survivors in Illinois can petition post-sentencing for a reconsideration of their sentence – but survivors only have a 2-year window to petition, and the court has no guidance on how to rule in these cases. A growing number of states – including most recently New Jersey, Georgia, and Oklahoma – have passed sentencing mitigation and resentencing laws for survivors that create presumptive reduced punishment ranges for survivors when victimization led to their conviction.[20] Illinois should follow suit and establish presumptive lower terms for convicted survivors when victimization contributed to their conviction, authorize a safety valve to depart from mandatory prison sentences in these cases, and improve the ability for survivors to petition for resentencing post-conviction.

7. Pursue Public Safety Policies that Prioritize Rehabilitation

Crime Survivors Speak advocates for policies that prioritize rehabilitation and lower recidivism rates – like sentencing credits in IDOC – because reducing repeat offenses and

[17] 720 ILCS 5/11-14(c-5)
[18] 720 ILCS 5/7-11
[19] 730 ILCS 5/5-5-3.1
[20] New Jersey P.L.2025, c.328; The Georgia Survivor Justice Act (HB 582, Passed 2025); The Oklahoma Survivors Act (SB 1470, Passed 20224).

breaking cycles of violence actually improves long-term community safety. Harsher penalties and extended prison sentences are strictly punitive methods that have failed to improve safety for either communities or victims.[21] Crime survivors support prioritizing rehabilitation over punishment as a strategy to break cycles of harm and prevent future violence. A 2024 national survey of crime survivors found:

- By a three-to-one margin, victims believe that the most effective way to reduce crime is to create more jobs and housing instead of long sentences.
- Three out of five victims (61%) prefer rehabilitation-focused policies that authorize earned credits toward release for people in prison over truth-in-sentencing policies that require everyone to complete 85% of their court-issued sentence in prison.[22]

Recommendation: *Illinois public safety policy should include more focus on rehabilitation, redirecting resources away from approaches that fail to foster community safety and towards solutions that successfully deliver results that make us all safer.*

[21] National Research Council (2014). The Growth of Incarceration in the United States: Causes and Consequences.
[22] Alliance for Safety and Justice and Crime Survivors Speak (2024). A National Survey of Victims' Views on Safety and Justice.