



pennsylvania

OFFICE OF VICTIM ADVOCATE

December 22, 2020

The following report offers a snapshot of work by the Office of Victim Advocate for fiscal year 2019-2020. As experienced across all corners of the globe, how we deliver services to crime victims/survivors in Pennsylvania was greatly impacted by the COVID-19 health crisis. This year brought a “bend don’t break” mentality for every state agency; however, it is with great pride that we are able to show that all OVA programs continued with no breaks in service. OVA offices remained fully operational at all times, even when our work was being triaged in alternate locations.

Our staff quickly pivoted all in-person testimony services for victims to an online platform and worked hand in hand with the PA Parole Board and the PA Board of Pardons to honor victims’ rights in this area. OVA continues to hold monthly meetings in Philadelphia - even virtually - with homicide victim service providers, and is committed to ongoing dialogue across the survivor community.

Prior to the pandemic, a plethora of in-person advocacy work took place, as you will see reflected in this report. We saw bipartisan support of numerous bills to enhance crime victim rights and protections, including human trafficking penalties and enhanced campus sexual assault reporting.

In November 2019, 1.7 million Pennsylvanians voted yes for Marsy’s Law, and OVA continues to advocate for its passage through the court system. Victims/survivors of sexual abuse rallied their cause and affected great change in statute of limitations laws for children and made some progress extending protections to college aged students.

As we reflect on an impactful year of change, let us also look forward to the enhanced services that will continue to be offered to all citizens who may find it difficult to engage personally. Let us continue to build a trauma-informed Commonwealth that cares for the individual and collective needs and rights of all.



RIGHTS

support calls,
registrations,
notifications,
testimony



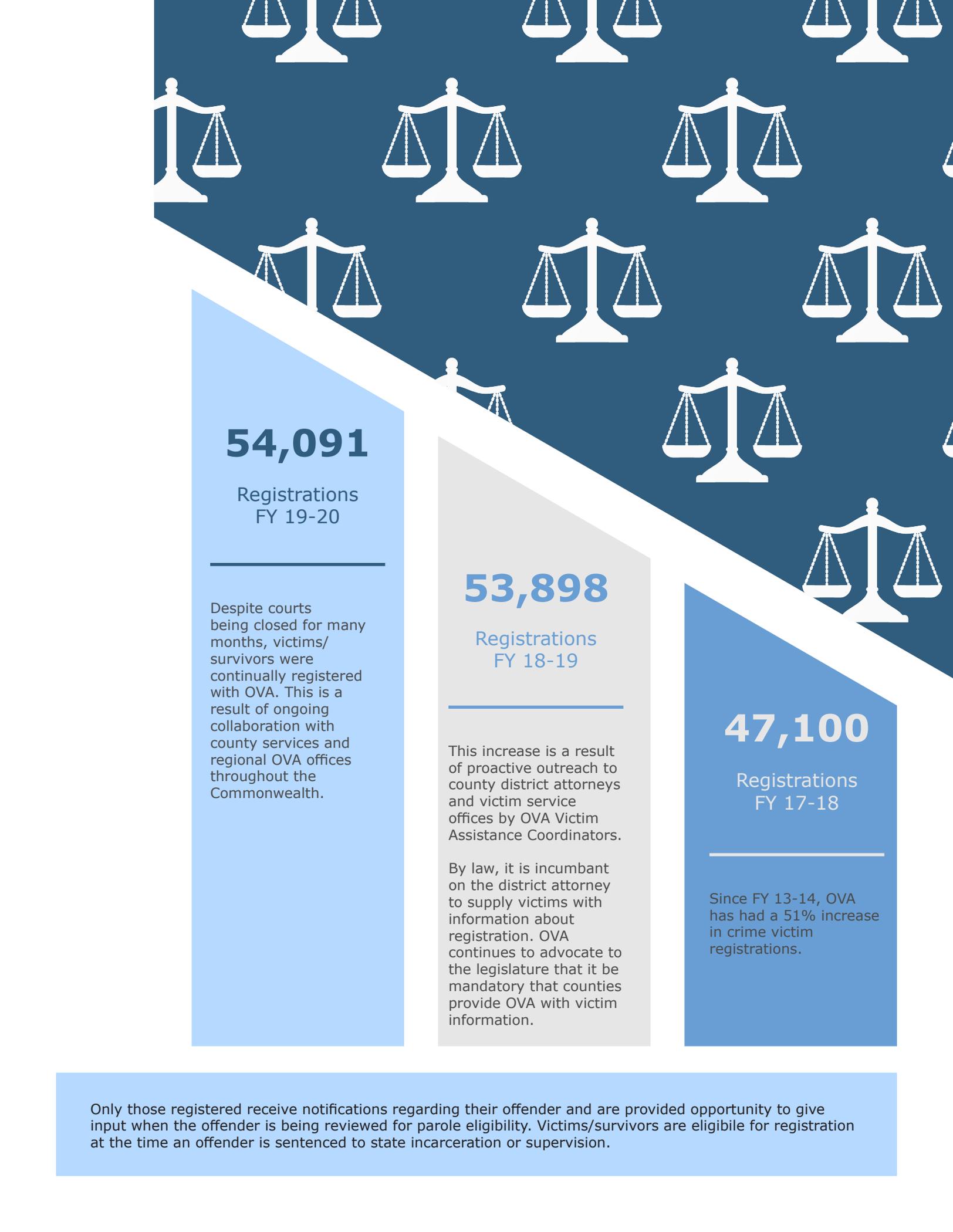
PROGRAMS

apology bank,
address confidentiality,
institutional advocacy,
restitution support



IMPACTS

training, events,
speaking,
partnerships,
legislation



54,091

Registrations
FY 19-20

Despite courts being closed for many months, victims/survivors were continually registered with OVA. This is a result of ongoing collaboration with county services and regional OVA offices throughout the Commonwealth.

53,898

Registrations
FY 18-19

This increase is a result of proactive outreach to county district attorneys and victim service offices by OVA Victim Assistance Coordinators.

By law, it is incumbent on the district attorney to supply victims with information about registration. OVA continues to advocate to the legislature that it be mandatory that counties provide OVA with victim information.

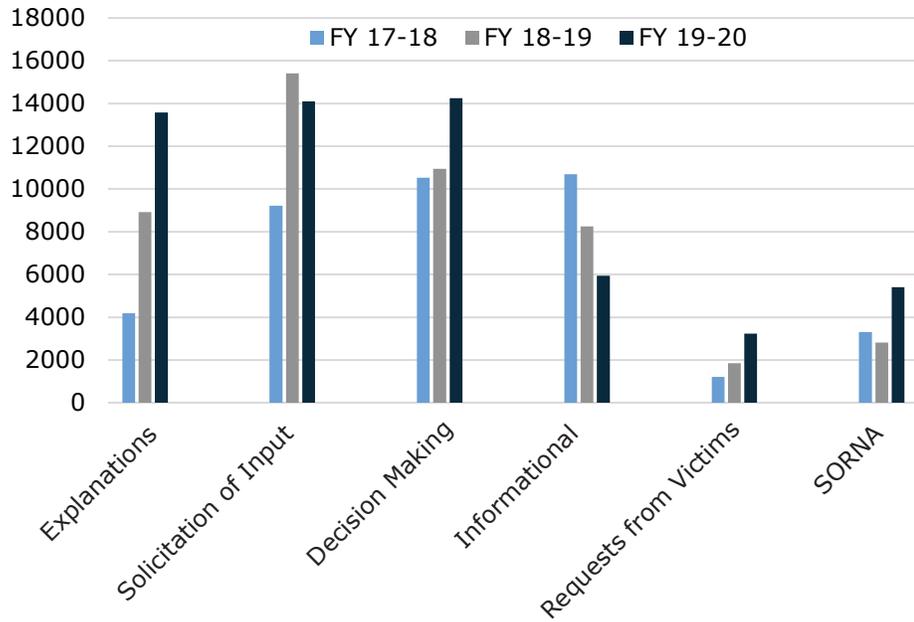
47,100

Registrations
FY 17-18

Since FY 13-14, OVA has had a 51% increase in crime victim registrations.

Only those registered receive notifications regarding their offender and are provided opportunity to give input when the offender is being reviewed for parole eligibility. Victims/survivors are eligible for registration at the time an offender is sentenced to state incarceration or supervision.

Notification by Right



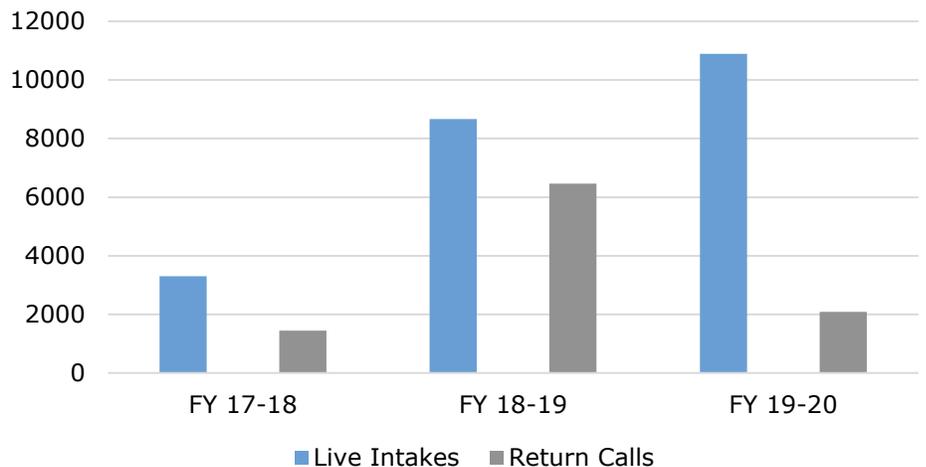
Crime victims/survivors have the right to notifications regarding the movement of their offender throughout the state system, as well as the right to be notified of the opportunity to give input if the offender is considered for parole eligibility.

OVA administers these notifications. Typically, these communications occur via mail, but victims/survivors can opt to be notified in any way that feels comfortable to them: mail, phone call, email.

The Intake Assessment and Referral Unit answers calls from victims/survivors. The IARU serves as a triage center, not only for crisis counseling, but for providing services and referrals. There were 55 average daily calls, and the unit was staffed by 4 team members.

The rise in live calls may be the result of complex trauma triggers (isolation, lack of control, anxiety, depression), as well as survivors inquiring how cases have been impacted as a result of the pandemic.

IARU



Testimony

Victims/survivors have the right to provide input when their offender becomes eligible for parole consideration or pardon review.

In Person Testimony Requests

529

Victims who want to provide input can choose to do so via phone, in writing, or in person with the PA Parole Board. Trained Victim Assistance Coordinators provide support for all testimony types. This number is a decrease from the previous year (628 requests), due to the pandemic.

In Person Testimony Attendees

608

Many in person sessions were held via Zoom this year. This change was facilitated through counseling phone calls and additional preparation. This number is a decrease from the previous year (1103 attendees), due to the pandemic. There were no known exposures due to testimony.

Board of Pardons Letters

2058

There is an increased number of offenders filing for commutation consideration, receiving merit review, and being granted public hearing; therefore an increased need for services for victims. This number is a drastic increase from the previous year (689).



586
**Apology Letters
Delivered to Date**



Victims/survivors of crime may wonder whether their offender has taken responsibility or feels remorse for their actions. Likewise, offenders may be ready to accept responsibility for their actions and acknowledge the harm caused.

All apology letters are carefully reviewed by the program coordinator before notifying a registered victim that one is on file for them. Workshops are also delivered inside the state institutions, providing guidance and support to inmates who wish to engage in the letter process. Writing an apology letter is voluntary and has no effect on parole consideration.



Victims/survivors contact OVA for assistance navigating the restitution process. The Victim Assistance Coordinator works with counties to ensure that victims are receiving the most timely restitution available.

There were 1195 incoming restitution assistance requests. The Victim Assistance Coordinator maintained a 100% response rate.

1195
**Restitution
Support Cases**

6
**Inmates
Represented**



Incarcerated victims/survivors of crime deserve and have a legal right to services just like any other victim, whether their victimization happened prior to incarceration or while serving their sentence. OVA has a dedicated Victim Assistance Coordinator to provide free and confidential services within the state institutions. (These services are also available to staff.)

There were 13 visits to promote this service and 9 total advocacy meetings across 8 institutions.

18
Active VOD Cases



The Victim Offender Dialogue program is an opportunity for the victim/survivor to ask questions about the crime, express to the inmate how it affected their lives, and can empower the victim/survivor to hold the inmate directly accountable. The inmate may also benefit by being able to accept responsibility and recognize the real life impacts.

The VOD program now has 50 trained facilitators, some of whom are pictured above with coordinator Amanda Rohrbaugh and trainer Jon Wilson.



The Address Confidentiality Program is available to victims/survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking, as well as their household members, providing an alternate mailing address to safeguard their home address from public record.

The program entails a level of advocacy that can include speaking with employers, schools, departments of motor vehicles, court systems, other states, etc.

In addition to the 485 enrolled adults, there are 576 children enrolled. This is an increase of 145 from last year.

485
Adults in Address
Confidentiality

Impacts

OVA has curated an array of programs that have community impact, including the Resilient Voices speaker program, and continues to provide trainings across the Commonwealth.

The appointed Victim Advocate is charged, by statute, to represent the voice of the victim/survivor community throughout all levels of government in Pennsylvania. This is accomplished through legislative/policy advocacy, partnerships, events, and representing victims in the media.

Speakers



66

The path to healing is different for everyone. Often, for survivors, healing leads to a desire to speak - to embrace their voice and share their story with others. Members of the Resilient Voices program receive training and are offered opportunities to speak at community events. OVA continued to provide this service throughout the pandemic, adding 16 new speakers to the lineup this year, for a total of 66 available experts.

Trainings



15

OVA was able to continue providing many trainings virtually, although this fiscal year began in-person. Classes offered through the year included:

- Corrections Counselor Training
- Basic Training (State & County)
- Institutional Victim Awareness
- Transitional Housing Unit Victim Awareness
- Address Confidentiality Program
- STOP Domestic Violence Workshop



Keynote | Ending Cycles of Silence with PA Human Relations Commission



Smart Talk | Recovery Month with PA Department of Drug & Alcohol Programs



Monthly Meetings | Homicide Response with Philadelphia Victim Service Providers



Portraits in Pride | Pride Month with PA Human Relations Commission



Documentary | Scandanavian Unit with PA Department of Corrections, SCI Chester

Impacts



OVA supported many legislative action items to further victims' rights and protections. You can read more about OVA's legislative agenda at www.ova.pa.gov.



Creating partnerships with fellow state agencies to further awareness of victims' rights and trauma-informed services has paid dividends to PA citizens.



PCN Interview on Marsy's Law and Statute of Limitations Reform - just one sample of many interviews



Combat Online Predators Act introduced with Senator Pat Toomey and DA Francis Chardo



Improvements on PA Statute of Limitations signed into Law



New Bills signed into Law for PA Campus Sexual Assault Reporting



Press Conference on Needed Reforms to Human Trafficking Laws



Additional Victims' Rights Bills Signed into Law

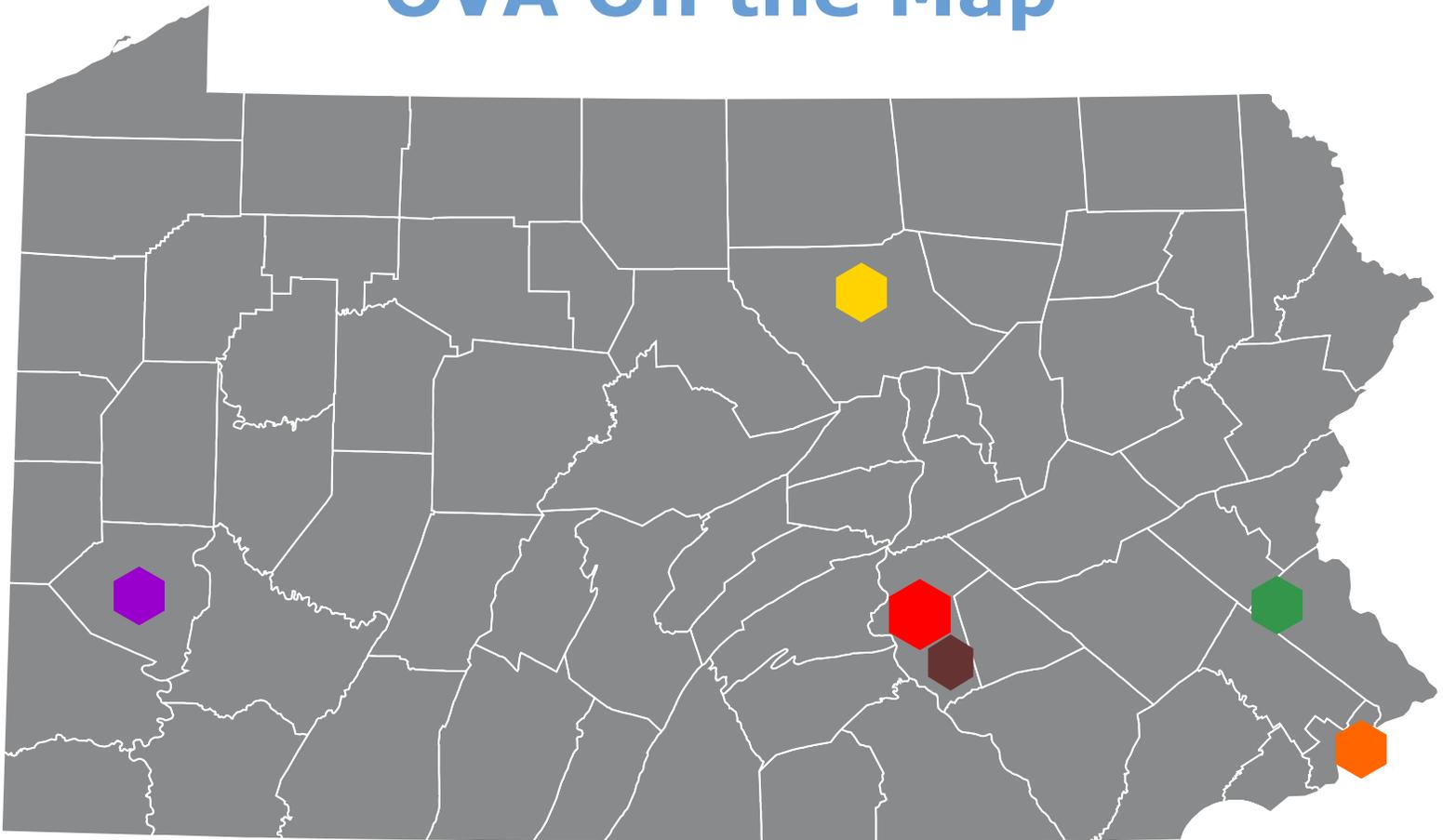


Media interviews bring opportunity to elevate victims' voices in the general public, as well as an occasion to spread education. A plethora of interviews took place in FY 19-20.



Many events were cancelled this year, due to the pandemic. However, OVA continued to participate in many online forums.

OVA On the Map



Harrisburg/Central Office



Attorney General's Office



Pittsburgh Region



Northeast Region



Philadelphia Region



Lehigh Region

During fiscal year 19-20, OVA opened the first satellite office in the Pittsburgh area. Since that time, the statewide impact has expanded to include regional offices in the Northeast and Lehigh Valley areas. At the time this report is issued (Dec 2020), there are 18 Victim Assistance Coordinators located in the Harrisburg/Central office, as well as 2 administrative support staff and 5 executive team members. Each regional location has 1 Victim Assistance Coordinator.