

Introduction of the "Crime Victims Rights Amendment"
Rep. Steve Chabot
Chairman, Subcommittee on the Constitution
Committee on the Judiciary
Statement for the Record
April 10, 2003

I am very pleased to be here today during National Crime Victims' Rights Week with this outstanding coalition to support what I consider to be one of the most important legislative efforts in the 108th Congress — the Crime Victim's Rights Amendment to the United States Constitution.

I'd like to start off by thanking the original cosponsors, some of whom are here. I'd also like to thank Senators Kyl and Feinstein for their leadership in the Senate and Attorney General Ashcroft for his continued support of this much needed amendment. And most importantly, I would like to thank the representatives of the victims groups who will speak shortly. Thank you all for coming today to show your support for the Victims Rights Amendment.

Many of the people here today know all too well that violent criminals damage or destroy the lives of innocent victims. According to the Department of Justice, in the year 2001, there were almost 1.5 million **violent** crimes committed in the United States. On any day, on any street corner, a mother, father, son or daughter can become the next victim of a rapist or murderer. For too many years these victims' voices have been silenced in a criminal justice system that recognizes only the rights of the accused. Thankfully, that is all beginning to change.

Currently, 32 states, including my home state of Ohio, have passed victims rights amendments to their constitutions. We have also enacted federal victims rights statutes. Unfortunately, these laws have not been consistently applied, and many victims still are not treated with dignity and respect.

A constitutional amendment is absolutely needed to help facilitate a balance between the rights of victims and those of defendants. Only through an amendment to the Constitution can victims receive the justice they deserve.

This amendment would empower crime victims by allowing them to confront their assailants in court and at sentence or parole hearings. It would protect victims by requiring that they be notified about the release or escape of the perpetrator from custody and by requiring that the victim's safety be considered in determining a release from custody. Finally, the amendment would restore victims by guaranteeing them the right to seek restitution from their attackers.

These rights, like others guaranteed in our Constitution, would become fundamental, and citizens of every state would be protected.

I want to stress that nothing -- I repeat, nothing -- in this amendment will undermine or weaken the long-established rights of defendants under our Constitution.

For far too long, victims of crime in this country have had to stand on the courtroom steps

with meaningful justice right beyond their reach. Not allowed to view proceedings in person. Not permitted to speak out on behalf of a murdered loved one. Not even notified when a violent abuser is turned loose.

Crime victims deserve to be treated better. They deserve to be treated with dignity in our criminal justice system. In the last Congress, I introduced this amendment in the House. And working with Senators Kyl and Feinstein and Attorney General Ashcroft, I think we made great progress in raising awareness of this critical issue. This year, I believe we can do even better. With the strong support we have received from President Bush, I am hopeful that we can pass this amendment and fortify an important truth: that victims must have their own inalienable rights under our Constitution.