

Governor Phil Murphy

ICYMI: New Division Formed in AG's Office to Prevent Violence by Bringing Together Victim Services and Violence Intervention Strategies

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TRENTON — Acting Attorney General Matthew J. Platkin today announced a new division has been formed in the state Attorney General's Office designed to prevent future violence by better addressing the needs of crime victims and trauma survivors.

Established by a directive from the Attorney General, the new Division of Violence Intervention and Victim Assistance (VIVA) will advance a unified strategy by bringing together victim-related and violence intervention and prevention services currently dispersed throughout the Department of Law and Public Safety. VIVA will also play a lead role with respect to survivors of domestic and sexual violence, centralizing the Department's support for this population and advancing policies on their behalf.

The move marks a transformational step in how law enforcement in New Jersey approaches public safety. Until now, there was no single office focused on policy, training, or coordination and management of victims' services, including victims of domestic and sexual violence (the current office dedicated to victim compensation will become a component of VIVA.) And while the State has invested in innovative violence intervention and prevention strategies, it has yet to create a dedicated team of experienced professionals to develop, guide, and expand these programs.

"I am incredibly proud of the steps that Acting Attorney General Platkin and his office are putting into action to prevent crime in our state and help those who have been affected by it," said **Governor Phil Murphy**. "This new division will address the very serious needs of victims and survivors of violence. Make no mistake, this Administration takes violence of any kind very seriously and will continue to do the necessary work to make New Jersey a stronger, fairer and safer state for all."

"The Acting Attorney General clearly recognizes that all too often victimization spurs further crime, and that too many victims aren't getting the acknowledgement and support they need. The decision to invest resources in tackling those problems in innovative ways shows a clear and comprehensive understanding of the challenges facing our communities," said **Lt. Governor Sheila Oliver**. "I look forward to seeing how this new Division's work plays out and how it impacts violent crime in New Jersey."

"The creation of VIVA is the culmination of the innovative work that has made New Jersey a leader in creative methods of combatting violent crime and disrupting cycles of violence," said **Acting Attorney General Platkin**. "Ensuring that we have a systematic, statewide approach for critical victim services is not only the right thing to do for people who have suffered pain and loss, but it is also a proven strategy for making our communities safer. Today we are making clear that the State's approach to public safety, one done with the support of the Murphy Administration, puts community-based interventions and victim assistance alongside traditional, and essential, prosecution and policing."

The launch of VIVA builds on steps previously taken by the administration of Governor Murphy, which has prioritized combatting sexual violence and providing support for survivors through, for example, signing legislation that expands the rights of sexual assault victims, including a requirement that victims receive a copy of their police report before it is filed with an opportunity to disagree with it, establishing sexual violence liaison officers within the New Jersey State Police and local law enforcement agencies, and mandating training every three years for county prosecutors and assistant prosecutors on investigating and responding to reports of sexual assault.

And it has been a national leader on gun violence, making an unprecedented increase in funding for anti-violence initiatives and for victims, including the largest set of investments in the state's history for the Hospital Violence Intervention Program (HVIP) and the Community-Based Violence Intervention (CBVI) program.

"Thank you to Acting Attorney General Matt Platkin for the creation of this new division," said former **State Senator Loretta Weinberg**. "Issues around domestic violence and sexual abuse have been in the forefront of almost everything I've tried to do in my legislative life. This is such a tremendous step forward. Violence intervention and victim resources brought together in one office with very talented leadership deserves enthusiastic support. I am delighted we have an (Acting) Attorney General with such compassion and understanding."

"We are extremely supportive of this new division as it prioritizes the community in such critical peacekeeping work," said **Rev. Dr. Charles F. Boyer, Founding Director of Salvation and Social Justice**, and pastor of Greater Mt. Zion A.M.E. Church in Trenton. "Salvation and Social Justice and our Trenton Restorative Street Team looks forward to working with the Office of Violence Intervention and Prevention (OVIP)."

"When government invests in its residents to co-produce public safety, communities move toward vibrancy and experience healthier outcomes. We must amplify that people are not inherently violent, and lift up, that a small number of communities don't experience higher rates of violence by happenstance," said **Eric Cumberbatch, Senior Vice President of Policy and Community Engagement at the Center for Policing Equity**. "Healing is at the core. Ensuring that public safety efforts are multidisciplinary and address social determinants of health is the just, equitable, and smart way to achieve our collective public safety goals."

The HVIP program, for example, puts social services at victims' bedside in the aftermath of violence, connecting them to critical aid that prevents retaliation and revictimization. Together, these programs serve eleven towns and cities across the state, many of which are the state's leading centers of gun violence.

All available evidence points to a pervasive crisis that demands an expansive response. The National Institute of Justice, an agency within the Department of Justice, found in a March 2021 report that violent crime victims have been shown to be more likely than others to later engage in violence. This violence too often impacts children: in 2020, more than 5,000 children were shot in the US, and thousands more witnessed shootings. The long-term effects for children are life-altering, eroding their physical health, wellness, and chances for success.

Gun violence also disproportionately impacts communities of color, with Black children and teens more than 14 times more likely than their white counterparts to die by gun homicide. This disparity ruins lives, stymies economic and personal growth, hampers the trust in law enforcement that communities depend on, and deepens patterns of racial and gender injustice and inequity.

Violence is also costly: according to the national research institution, Everytown, gun violence costs New Jersey \$5.3 billion each year, of which \$168.9 million is paid by taxpayers.

"We applaud the Office of the Attorney General for creating this new division, which is especially important for the LGBTQ+ community. LGBTQ+ people have had a troubled history with traditional models of public safety and law enforcement while also being particularly vulnerable to violence – for example, 47 percent of transgender adults have been sexually assaulted," said **Christian Fuscarino, Executive Director, Garden State Equality**. "We know this is just one of many steps the Attorney General is taking towards adopting a model of violence prevention that centers survivors of violence."

"National Stop the Violence Alliance Inc. stands with Acting Attorney General Platkin as he launches this new Division aimed at disrupting the cycle of violence by amplifying trauma-informed responses to violence and victim advocacy," said **Dr. Stephne R. Coney, Founder of the National Stop the Violence Alliance**. "We look forward to working with the N. J. Office of the Attorney General as the new Division moves forward."

"This unique program will strengthen our state's commitment to addressing the pain and suffering caused by the evils of violence. For those of us who have dedicated our careers to fighting violence, it is an encouraging and exciting venture," said **Richard Pompelio, the Executive Director of the New Jersey Crime Victims Law Center** in Sparta. "This program will be a remarkable accomplishment and a major step forward in unifying victims' rights in the state of New Jersey. I am proud to say that New Jersey has attained national recognition for its innovative programs in victim compensation and direct legal services for crime victims."

"We applaud Attorney General Matt Platkin and the NJ Attorney General's Office for establishing a Division of Violence Intervention and Victim Assistance (VIVA) that will help provide much needed services to victims and survivors impacted by gun violence in the Garden State," said **Jordan Costa, Project Manager with the Giffords Center for Violence Intervention**. "This moment offers us a meaningful opportunity to come together and uplift the community-led strategies that we know work to reduce violence, as well as provide New Jerseyans access to meaningful pathways towards greater justice for victims of gun violence."

"This new division announced by the Attorney General's Office is an important step to ensuring that victims of gun violence are well supported," said **Theresa Turner, Volunteer with the New Jersey Chapter of Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America**. "By supporting violence intervention programs and providing critical wrap-around services for survivors of gun violence, New Jersey is showing once again that it will continue to lead the nation in the fight to end gun violence."

With the creation of VIVA, the Attorney General also announced its new leadership. Patricia Teffenhart, currently the senior vice president of strategic initiatives at the NJ Chamber of Commerce, will serve as the executive director of the new division while Steven Campos, currently serving as Community Resource Director at Hudson Partnership CMO, will become the Director of the Office of Violence Intervention and Prevention, an office within VIVA.

"Over the last two decades, I have had the privilege of working with passionate and dedicated community stakeholders and government officials committed to creating trauma-informed, survivor-centered policies and practices. I am thrilled that the state's top law-enforcement officer is institutionalizing this commitment," said **Teffenhart**, of Holmdel, the former executive director of the New Jersey Coalition Against Sexual Assault (NJCASA) from 2013 to 2021. "With the creation of VIVA, New Jersey solidifies its standing as a national leader in both the prevention of, and response to violence, and particularly for survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence. I am honored to be the person selected to lead these efforts. We will work to ensure that our communities are safer and that those impacted by violence and crime are met with a response that affirms their humanity and supports their healing."

"It is inspiring to see Acting Attorney General Platkin take a leading role in innovative efforts to curtail crime by focusing on healing and root causes. I am excited to be part of this groundbreaking project, which I expect to have a far-reaching impact in communities that too often face the ravages of violence and its damaging after-effects," said **Steven Campos**. "I'm looking forward to this opportunity to try a fresh approach, and to utilize new tools to disrupt the cycle of retaliatory violence that continues to expose our youth and communities to trauma. These innovative approaches will include communities as partners, working together to help all of our neighborhoods reach their full potential."

"Patricia and Steven bring a wealth of experience, expertise, and credibility as we begin to build VIVA and execute on its mandate," said **Acting Attorney General Platkin**. "It is critical that this work be led by two individuals with direct experience working with trauma survivors, crime victims, and in violence intervention, and particularly so given their collective focus on youth and domestic and sexual violence."

"The Chamber's loss is the Attorney General's gain," said **Tom Bracken, President and CEO of the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce**. "Patricia has spearheaded our critically important portfolio of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives and we are thankful for the ways her vision and leadership have built a solid foundation upon which we will continue to build. We know that she will be a great asset to the Office of the Attorney General and to the communities she'll be serving in her new position. Her intelligence, tenacity, strategic thinking, and creativity will serve her well and we wish her continued success." Campos, of Lyndhurst, has over 18 years of experience working with families with children who have behavioral and mental health needs in Hudson County. He has served as chair of the Hudson County Children's Inter Agency Coordinating Council, Vice President of the Community Networking Association of New Jersey, and has been an active member of the Youth Services Commission of Hudson County. His work in youth advocacy is centered in the belief that all communities have the potential to address the needs of our most vulnerable populations.

"During his 18 years at Hudson Partnership Care Management Organization, Steven has worked with youth and families who have been directly affected by violence in the community. He has worked tirelessly to lift the voice of community-based programs that strive to not only respond to violence when it occurs, but also do the critical work that is needed to heal the community by connecting individuals to supports and services that address the root causes of violence," said **Robyn Gorman, the CEO of Hudson Partnership CMO**.

Jeannine Frisby-LaRue, 71, a sexual assault survivor and women's advocate in New Jersey says, "Acting Attorney General Platkin's creation of VIVA is a critical step in addressing how domestic and sexual violence is dealt with in the law enforcement arena. While it should always be the goal to apprehend and prosecute domestic violence and sexual assault offenders, the victim is often left physically, emotionally, and spiritually broken. VIVA's focus on policy, training, and coordination of services affecting these victims is simply brilliant and a game-changer. Appointing Patricia Teffenhart to lead this office brings integrity, decades of experience with these issues, and the strategic thinking necessary to get this division up and running on the right foot. I've worked closely with Patricia on several fronts, including the Women's Workgroup on Misogyny, Sexual Harassment and Sexual Assault. She has a long-standing commitment to these issues and has unapologetically fought for legislation, policies, and programs to protect victims in this State."

"We are confident that under the leadership of Patricia Teffenhart and Steven Campos, those most impacted by gun violence, as well as those doing the lifesaving work on the ground, will receive the support that they deserve from VIVA," said **Jordan Costa**, of the Giffords Center.

Teffenhart and Campos will recruit staff with the experience and skill needed to make this vision a reality.

VIVA will house four distinct components.

- OVIP, led by Campos, will oversee the Department's community-based violence intervention programs, driving their development and accountability. It will build an infrastructure for community-based public safety across the state, and will be a catalyst and hub of technical assistance for organizations doing community-based violence intervention work and communities that want to take it up.

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