

Governor Phil Murphy

# Acting Governor Way Signs Bill to Formally Establish Division of Violence Intervention and Victim Assistance

10/17/2023

**TRENTON** – Acting Governor Tahesha Way today signed A-4978, codifying the Division of Violence Intervention and Victim Assistance (VIVA) within the Department of Law and Public Safety.

VIVA was created by the Office of the Attorney General (OAG) in 2022 as a singular division within the Attorney General's Office to advance a unified strategy by bringing together victim-related and violence intervention and prevention services that were dispersed throughout the Department of Law and Public Safety. The Division also plays a lead role with respect to survivors of domestic and sexual violence, centralizing the Department's support for the population and advancing policies on their behalf. This legislation serves not only to ensure the continuity of these programs and services, but to elevate and prioritize the critical interests of preventing violence and assisting victims by making these interests the primary focus of an entire division within the department.

"Since the Division of Violence Intervention and Victim Assistance was created within the Office of the Attorney General, millions of dollars in grants have been awarded to various violence intervention programs in communities across the state, addressing the needs of victims and survivors of violence," **said Acting Governor Way**. "Codifying the division will allow it to see its full potential with dedicated offices focusing on every aspect of violence prevention and victim services. Violence in any form has no place in our state, and our Administration will continue to support Attorney General Platkin and his office as they work to create a safer state for all New Jerseyans."

Today's statutory codification of the framework of VIVA within OAG reflects the Division's organization into four offices: Office of Violence Intervention and Prevention; Office of Victim Support and Assistance; Office of Trial and Criminal Justice Process; and Victims of Crime Compensation Office. The Division operates under the leadership of its appointed Executive Director, Patricia Teffenhart, a nationally recognized survivor advocate who has spent the last 20 years advancing statewide and national policies that respond to the unique needs of those impacted by interpersonal and community violence. Under Teffenhart's leadership, VIVA creates opportunities among law enforcement, within the courts, and throughout communities to infuse survivor-centered, trauma-informed principles into their practices, helping make justice and healing more attainable.

"One year ago, I established the Division of Violence Intervention and Victim Assistance, transforming New Jersey's approach to public safety. Today, the signing of this bill ensures that VIVA will be a permanent part of state government, serving as yet another example of the vision and joint commitment of this Administration and the Legislature in taking enlightened, decisive steps to prevent violence to make our communities safer and to hear and help crime victims throughout the State," **said Attorney General Matthew J. Platkin**. "With the creation of VIVA, New Jersey has solidified its standing as a national leader in both the prevention of, and response to, interpersonal and community violence. Our mission is not only the pursuit of justice; it's also responding to victims' needs, keeping them safe and giving them a voice in the process."

"In our first year, VIVA informed policy, expanded the strategic allocation of resources, and infused a trauma-informed, survivor-centered approach throughout the Department of Law and Public Safety. And we're just getting started," **said Patricia Teffenhart, Executive Director of the Division of Violence Intervention and Victim Assistance**. "Today's bill signing affirms that New Jersey will continue to center victims, survivors, and community-based providers in the work of keeping our communities safe and supporting those who have been harmed. Continuing to build upon the



foundation established in our first year, we look forward to continuing this very important work.”

Through VIVA, and with the support of Governor Murphy, New Jersey is making important investments in innovative public health approaches to preventing and disrupting cycles of violence. Through hospital- and community-based violence intervention programs, VIVA funds local partners in the communities most impacted by gun violence, expanding the public-safety response beyond traditional law enforcement approaches. As a national leader on gun violence, New Jersey has made unprecedented increases in funding for anti-violence initiatives and for victims, including the largest set of investments in the state’s history for the Hospital-based Violence Intervention Program (HVIP), more than \$45 million, and the Community-Based Violence Intervention (CBVI) program, \$40 million.

Within its area of responsibility, VIVA is:

- Promoting a trauma-informed approach to victim assistance and violence intervention services.
- Expanding the scope of populations of crime victims and survivors served by the State.
- Developing an infrastructure for victim assistance and violence intervention and prevention services that is grounded in community.
- Serving as a resource center and hub of innovative policy, technical assistance and training.
- Building partnerships among and supporting initiatives involving law enforcement entities and victim assistance and violence intervention and prevention service providers.
- Providing a structure and outlet for community stakeholders to provide meaningful input to inform and improve services.
- Supporting and recognizing the importance of culturally responsive policies and practices in the State’s victim assistance and violence intervention services.

The launch of VIVA builds on steps previously taken by the Murphy Administration, which has prioritized combatting sexual violence and providing support for survivors through systemic and legislative reforms such as enacting laws that expand the rights of sexual assault victims, 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.

The prime sponsors of this bill are Senator Linda Greenstein and Assemblywoman Shanique Speight, as well as Senator Declan O’Scanlon and Assembly members Gabriela Mosquera and William Spearman.

“Codifying the Division of Violence Intervention and Victim Assistance will help ensure that victims of crimes receive the assistance and support they need and are entitled to. By centralizing the various victims services, violence intervention, and prevention services under one roof, this critically important work can be done more efficiently and more effectively,” **Senator Linda Greenstein.**

“This legislation supports law and order by giving crime victims more access to necessary resources in one location,” **said Senator Declan O’Scanlon.** “Victims of crime deserve to have all of the resources that they need at their disposal so they can obtain justice. This bill would ensure that these programs are coordinated and administered in an organized fashion.”

“As a member of law enforcement, I have seen first-hand that victims of violent crimes often feel unsure of where to turn in their time of need,” **said Assemblywoman Shanique Speight.** “By creating this new, centralized Division of Violence Intervention and Victim Assistance, we are helping to take away that uncertainty and replace it with a singular location where they can find the resources and support they need from the advocates and professionals who are best trained to assist them.”

“Too many people in New Jersey can attest to how quickly violent crimes uproot one’s life and cause severe, lasting consequences. It often takes a long time to overcome the trauma and regain a sense of normalcy, and the healing process is different for everyone,” **said Assemblywoman Gabriela Mosquera.** “In New Jersey, we are committed to supporting victims of violent crimes and bolstering crucial intervention and prevention programs. With this law, we are bringing our victims’ support services together under one division to ensure they are accessible to those in need. I look forward to seeing the Division of Violence Intervention and Victim Assistance empower survivors of violent crimes and support their individual journeys to recovery.”

“With the signing of this bill, we are making a resounding declaration that the protection of our citizens, especially those

who have suffered in silence, is a top priority,” **said Assemblyman William Spearman.** “By creating this new division, we take a significant step towards a safer and more compassionate society, where the voices of victims are heard and where they are empowered in their time of healing.”

## Governor Phil Murphy

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