



**Testimony to the Senate Judicial Proceedings
SB788 Criminal Procedure – Victim Compensation— Alterations**

Keith Wallington

Justice Policy Institute

kwallington@justicepolicy.org

March 9, 2023

The Justice Policy Institute strongly supports Senate Bill 788, which will create an accessible, non-discriminatory victim compensation process to support all victims of crime, or their family members left behind. It will provide prompt and crucial financial support when it is needed most and remove unnecessary and arbitrary denials of financial relief for applicants for expenses incurred as a result of being a victim of crime.

According to a national [study](#) by the Alliance for Safety and Justice, “unaddressed, trauma can contribute to instability, including mental health or addiction issues, challenges returning to work, maintaining housing or caring for loved ones, and can even lead to someone being revictimized.” According to the same report, “youth and young adults between the ages of 18–24 are particularly vulnerable following victimization and can suffer from the long-term impacts of unaddressed trauma, such as difficulty with school, work, relationships and poor physical health. They are also the most at-risk for later becoming involved in criminal activity if their needs go unmet.”

This bill is very personal to me. As a young college student from a low income family with both parents working 40+ hours a week in factory jobs, after my brother was shot to death, my family did not have the means to bring me or my other brother home from college for the funeral, let alone for the funeral expenses. It was years after he was buried that we were finally able to put a headstone on my brother’s grave. But that was just the tip of the iceberg in what was to come. My mother never received the support or therapy that was needed for her to deal with my brother’s death. His death and my mother’s unmet treatment was the catalyst behind a steady decline in her health that eventually lead to her early grave. She never got over my brother’s death. I can only imagine how our lives, particularly my mother’s life would have been different if we were connected to victim compensation support during that horrible time. Not only do I appreciate the need for this legislation from a practical perspective, but I also believe this bill is a about public safety.

Victim Compensation is about public safety. By assisting with the destabilizing expenses that come with the trauma of violent victimization, such as medical care, mental health care, lost wages, funeral and burial expenses, crime scene cleanup and more, compensation helps reduce the risk of future victimization and perpetration of harm, and the long-term costs of violence to the state. The current victim compensation process disproportionately disqualifies and alienates applicants of color and their families from receiving compensation at alarming rates, especially Black men and youth impacted by gun and other forms of community violence. Maryland has one of the lowest grant rates of victim compensation in the country. Over half of all claims were denied victim compensation in Maryland as ineligible or closed without any compensation in FY22 with no victim of domestic violence related crimes awarded compensation.

House Bill 861 removes numerous requirements that bar victims from eligibility for victim compensation, including the requirements that a victim must report a crime to law enforcement within 48 hours and that a victim must “cooperate” with law enforcement. It also helps clarify and expand which relatives are eligible to receive compensation and what types of expenses are eligible for reimbursement to more accurately reflect family structures and the needs of victims. The bill also strikes the concept of the “perfect victim” who may have “contributed” to their own victimization. A large body of evidence and lived experience demonstrates this has not been effective at helping people heal and preventing future

victimization; rather, it has too often exacerbated the trauma victims experience in the aftermath of violent crime. House Bill 861 reconstitutes the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board to include more members with lived experience and those that work directly with victims. The claims process is streamlined in SB 788 to reduce the unacceptable delays victims currently experience if they engage in the victim compensation process. Enhanced program reporting requirements are included to improve transparency and accountability. Finally, SB 788 removes the counterproductive reliance on criminal justice fines and fees to fund these benefits, creating greater program stability.

For the above stated reasons stated above, the Justice Policy Institute ask for a favorable report on SB 788.