

Petition presented to review victims' rights

By Mark PavilonsEditor

Led by Jennifer Neville-Lake, a petition containing thousands of signatures has been submitted to the federal government to review victims' rights. MP for Humber River-Black Creek Judy Sgro presented the petition virtually last week. The petition (e-3319) began in April, and contained more than 4,000 signatures. The petition maintains that the federal Victims Bill of Rights is not being fully implemented and fails to protect victims of crime and their families. The petition is asking for a review and improved measures. The petition notes that the Federal Ombudsman for Victims of Crime, in her 2020 Progress Report: The Canadian Victims Bill of Rights, concluded "the objectives set out in the Act have not been met. The Act falls far short of delivering the real rights it promised." Further, the Department of Justice, in its 2019 report, Final Report on the Review of Canada's Criminal Justice System, found that victims often feel re-victimized and acknowledged major changes are needed to support the rights of victims, survivors and their families. "The Canadian Victims Bill of Rights must be strengthened to prioritize victims and survivors of crime in the criminal justice system," the petition stated. They want the House of Commons to designate or establish a committee of Parliament to review the Canadian Victims Bill of Rights. "I hope we can see a change in the future," Sgro said. Daniel, Harrison and Milly Neville-Lake and their grandfather Gary were victims of a 2015 impaired driving collision. Enacted in July 2015 the federal Victims Bill of Rights outlined the rights of victims of crime in Canada, requiring that those rights be considered during each step of the criminal justice system. Provisions in the act does provide that a committee of Parliament is to be designated or established for the purpose of reviewing the Canadian Victims Bill of Rights. The launch of this review is, therefore, the independent responsibility of Parliament. "The Government of Canada is committed to implementing and strengthening victims' rights and continues to work collaboratively with other governments across the country that share responsibility for addressing and meeting the needs of victims and survivors of crime in the criminal justice system." Neville-Lake said she learned from speaking with many victims of all types of crime from across the country, that unfortunately not all victims of crime are treated equally across the country or have access to the same services. "As a victim of crime I personally have experienced many gaps in the system and have been left to figure out a lot of things on my own. When it was passed in 2015, Parliament said the CVBR had to be reviewed by a Parliamentary Committee 5 years after it became law. Due to the pandemic this has not happened. I am pleasantly surprised to see that the Standing Committee of Justice and Human Rights have started a study about the CVBR. I was able to watch part of the Federal Ombudsman of Crime's witness interview after my petition was presented. In order for any changes to be made, the review has to start. Once a review is started then all the other parts, all the other thoughts and changes folks want to make can start to happen. If it isn't possible to change the mandate of the Ombudsman for Victims of Crime (as by definition that would be hard) then a new advocacy office should be established. Neville-Lake said she would recommend several changes to the Act. First, the Federal Ombudsman for Victims of Crime's office currently can only make suggestions/recommendations to agencies if a victim complains using a complex complaint process. This office's powers need to be enhanced, she said, so that they are able to actually advocate for individual victims, particularly if the victims rights have been infringed upon. There needs to be a clear recourse. The CVBR needs to clearly identify and promote supports for persons with disabilities, particularly supports that go beyond being able to physically access the prison/hearing. For example individuals who may require support with understanding the process (i.e. signing up to receive the offender updates from the Parole Board), what is involved to participate, how to access the information and the development of creating the victim statements used at sentencing/parole. At the very least, Neville-Lake would like to see a cohesive and updated list of what funding is available federally and provincially and ideally, funding for victims to pay for things like counselling. For example, I found out about the Murdered and Missing Child Grant from a bystander at the crash site, several months after my children and my dad were killed. This should not have happened," she explained. Neville-Lake said the committee will hear from a variety of witnesses, possibly including victims.