

State has obligation to crime victims

By Senator Hollis French

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Violent crime continues to rip the social fabric of Alaska. Several recent cases drive this point home. Two months ago, the remains of Bethany Correira, a talented young lady from Talkeetna who had moved to Anchorage shortly before she was murdered, were discovered in the woods along the Parks Highway. Another shocking case concluded when a 20-year-old defendant was sentenced to 99 years in prison for murdering Rachael Peace and, with the help of his teenage accomplices, setting her body on fire on Crow Creek Road in Girdwood. Rachael was also a promising young person who had left her family in Cordova to begin life as an adult in Anchorage. Equally tragic was the murder of Eric Kalenka, who was senselessly killed in the drive-through lane of a local Taco Bell.

These three Alaskans met violent deaths. Less visible than these sensational cases are the multitude of rapes and serious assaults that go by with little notice. Crimes of physical and sexual abuse committed against children are a daily occurrence, and so are the many "ordinary" domestic violence assaults that happen here in Anchorage and across the state. Add these all together, and the scope of the problem begins to emerge. Every day another Alaskan is stabbed, raped or slain. Indeed, according to statistics kept by the state Department of Public Safety, in 2002 there was a rape in our state every 17 hours and 27 minutes, on average.

This year the Legislature passed laws to do more for those who are injured by criminal acts. For example, police officers and prosecutors now have a positive duty to inform victims about the state Office of Victims' Rights and the Violent Crimes Compensation Board. Another new law requires that a fatality review team analyze all domestic violence assaults that result in death to see what improvements can be made to the system. Measures making restitution mandatory and adding arson to the list of crimes compensable by the Violent Crimes Compensation Board were also adopted. Domestic violence restraining orders will now be issued for terms up to one year -- doubling the previous limit of six months.

Unfortunately, these small steps in the right direction were countered by large steps backward. Those in control of the budget process delivered significant cuts to the organizations that provide shelter, aid and sustenance to victims of crime. The Council on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault saw its budget slashed by over \$335,000 from last year's level as fund sources dried up. Those lost dollars translate directly into fewer crisis line call takers and fewer beds for families displaced from their homes by a batterer. Another cut was delivered to the Violent Crimes Compensation Board, which will be forced to meet its obligations with nearly 5 percent less money. And Victims for Justice, an organization that for 20 years has been helping those who have lost a spouse or loved one to a homicide, saw its state funding cut to zero. One legislator was heard to callously remark that "we already do enough for victims."

The fact of the matter is that we do not do nearly enough. We Alaskans passed a victims' rights amendment to our state constitution in 1994, but the promise of that measure is still largely unfulfilled. Part of the problem is systemic. Our system of justice, which for centuries has been focused almost exclusively on the rights of the accused, has been slow to adopt a newer perspective that recognizes that the injured person is no less an important participant in the process.

The victims' rights movement is still in its infancy. This year's budget setbacks will be reversed when more enlightened legislators come to realize that prison cells are only half the equation. For every prisoner inside a cell, there is a victim outside. The state has a crucial role to play not only in putting criminals behind bars but in helping victims put their lives back together again.