

Trauma-Informed Courtroom Support for Survivors

*A practical guide for Pennsylvania advocates to
support survivors in courtroom settings.*



Survivors of sexual violence often describe the courtroom as one of the most intimidating parts of their healing and justice journey.

Advocates play a critical role in ensuring that survivors are informed, supported, and empowered before, during, and after court proceedings.

This guide is designed to help Pennsylvania advocates provide trauma-informed, survivor-centered support throughout the court process. It highlights practical steps, sample language, and resources for accommodations to make the justice system more accessible and less retraumatizing.

Pre-Court Checklist for Advocates

Preparation to help ensure every survivor entering a Pennsylvania courtroom has access to support.



Preparation and Coordination

- ☐ Confirm court date, location, and docket number/Identify assigned judge, prosecutor, and victim/witness coordinator
- ☐ Confirm survivor's rights under the Pennsylvania Crime Victims Act ([18 P.S. § 11.201-11.212](#))
- ☐ Ask the survivor if they want to testify, attend, or submit a victim impact statement
- ☐ Ask District Attorney assigned to the case if family members will be given the opportunity to address the court before sentencing
- ☐ Review transportation and safety plan.
 - Who is driving
 - Where to park
 - Time to arrive
 - What materials to bring
 - Escort to and from the building

Practical Preparation and Emotional Support

In coordination with the District Attorney assigned to the case.

- ☐ Offer a courtroom orientation or courthouse tour (through a DA's victim/witness unit if available)
- ☐ Provide grounding strategies: ex. [the butterfly hug or box breathing](#)

- ☐ Determine an agreed-upon signal for breaks
- ☐ Review possible courtroom triggers and/or activations and tools for response
- ☐ Prepare them for possible defense cross-examination tactics (staying calm, providing brief, factual answers)

Safety and Comfort Logistics

- ☐ Request a separate waiting area or private space for survivors/witnesses
- ☐ Identify entry and exit routes that limit contact with defendants or family
- ☐ Request support person presence during waiting and testimony if allowed
- ☐ Discuss accommodations such as comfort/therapy dog, support person, interpreter, ADA modifications, and remote testimony options.
- ☐ If using a comfort animal, confirm handler, certification (if any), and logistics
- ☐ Bring water, mints, tissues, fidget items if possible.

After-Court Plan

- ☐ Identify a safe place for immediate decompression after testimony
- ☐ Debrief gently: what helped, what felt difficult
- ☐ Review safety plan
- ☐ Connect to hotline, ongoing counseling and/or therapy services

How to Request Trauma-Informed Accommodations in a PA Courtroom



The Pennsylvania Crime Victims Act grants victims' the right to be treated with dignity, fairness, respect, to be accompanied by a support person, and to be heard.

Know the Legal Backbone

The Pennsylvania Crime Victims Act grants victims' the right to be treated with dignity, fairness, respect, to be accompanied by a support person, and to be heard.

Pennsylvania courts have allowed comfort/therapy dogs for witnesses as long as they don't affect a fair trial.

Each county court has an ADA coordinator and a Victim/Witness Unit (under the DA's office) that handles accommodation logistics.

Step-by-Step Accommodation Request Process

- 1 **Identify** the need (functional explanation): “Survivor experiences panic attacks; presence of a trained therapy dog allows them to testify effectively.”
- 2 **Contact** the DA Victim/Witness Coordinator and court clerk 2–3 weeks before the hearing.
- 3 **Send** a written request (email or letter). Attach documentation about the animal/handler if relevant.
- 4 **Confirm** receipt and ask for written acknowledgment.
- 5 **Document** the denial, and if denied, notify your supervisor and ask the prosecutor to raise it with the judge.

Sample Email to DA Victim/Witness Unit



Subject: Request for Court Accommodations - [Survivor Initials or Case Number]

Hello [Name],

I'm an advocate with [Center Name]. I'm requesting the following trauma-informed accommodations for [Survivor Initials] at the hearing on [Date, Time, Courtroom]:

1. A separate victim waiting room and private restroom.
2. Permission for a trained therapy/comfort dog with handler [Name].
3. Short breaks during testimony as needed.
4. A support person seated nearby during testimony.

These accommodations are consistent with the Pennsylvania Crime Victims Act and trauma-informed best practice. Please confirm receipt and advise next steps.

Thank you,
[Name, Title, Phone, Email]

Sample Short Statement for the Record



“Your Honor, the victim requests the presence of a trained therapy dog during testimony to reduce panic symptoms and allow them to provide clear, reliable testimony. The handler will remain out of jury view, and no contact will occur with jurors.”

In-Court Advocate Support Plan and Script

Before Entering the Courtroom

- ☐ Arrive 30–45 minutes early; confirm accommodations are in place.
- ☐ Check in with the Victim/Witness Coordinator and sheriff/security staff about escort routes.
- ☐ Grounding check: “How’s your body feeling right now? Anything you want to adjust before we go in?”
- ☐ Practice a grounding technique together as needed.
- ☐ Review safety signal or cue word.

During Proceedings

- ☐ Stay seated where survivor can see you (if allowed).
- ☐ Keep calm, neutral facial expression; use subtle grounding gestures (hand over heart, slow, deep breaths).
- ☐ If survivor signals distress, quietly alert prosecutor and ask, “Could we request a brief recess?”
- ☐ Maintain focus on the survivor’s safety and sense of agency, not on the case outcome.
- ☐ If comfort animal is present, ensure handler keeps dog in designated location.

After Testimony or Hearing

- ☐ Escort the survivor to a private space immediately.
- ☐ Offer grounding: deep breathing, something to drink.
- ☐ Ask open-ended debrief questions: “What helped you stay grounded?” “What part felt the hardest for you?”
- ☐ Normalize reactions (“That’s a lot to carry. It makes sense your body feels shaky”).
- ☐ Provide written info for follow-up: counseling options, protection orders, and the Office of Victim Advocate (OVA) contact: 800-563-6399.
- ☐ Document accommodations used and any barriers. Share with your supervisor or SART/STOP team to inform systems level improvements.

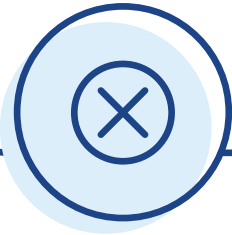


Advocate Grounding Script

“Let’s take one deep breath before we walk in. You’re not alone in that room. I’ll be here the whole time. If you need to pause, use the signal we practiced and step out. Your only job is to tell the truth as best you can. I believe in you.”

”

Reminders and Tips for Advocates



Never promise a certain outcome.



Always debrief and plan for possible triggers and/or activations.



Document every request made to the court.



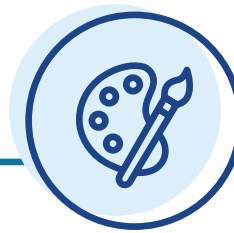
Share successes with other advocates to normalize asking for and receiving trauma-informed courtroom accommodations.



With the survivor's consent, it's best practice for the advocate or other support person to try to sit in between the survivor and the perpetrator, so there is not a direct sight line.



Minimize the potential for experiencing secondary trauma yourself by making time to debrief with colleagues or your supervisor. You deserve support.



Get creative when it comes to how you show support in the courtroom. What is the favorite color of the survivor you are working with? See if it would be helpful to them to have you wear clothing of that color in the courtroom. Brainstorm with them all the possible ways comfort can look and feel.



It is a good idea to always verify insurance and handler background when partnering with volunteer therapy dog programs. Get written confirmation from the handler that the dog meets courthouse behavior standards.



Emotional Support/Therapy Dog Programs in Pennsylvania

Resource	Description	Contact
Courthouse Comfort Canines Program (PA Victim Services)	Many counties (Dauphin, Lancaster, York, Allegheny) partner with trained courthouse dogs. Advocates can coordinate via the Victim/Witness Unit.	Contact your county DA's Victim/Witness Coordinator or PCAR for county list.
Keystone Pet-Enhanced Therapy Services (KPETS)	Volunteers provide therapy dog visits in courts, schools, and hospitals.	www.kpets.org
Alliance of Therapy Dogs (National)	Maintains a PA handler directory.	www.therapydogs.com

Additional Helpful Pennsylvania Resources

Resource	Description	Contact
Pennsylvania Office of Victim Advocate (OVA)	Statewide coordination, victim rights info, post-sentencing services.	www.ova.pa.gov 800-563-6399
County Victim/Witness Assistance Units	Court accompaniment, orientation, and notifications.	www.pacrimevictims.org
Victims Compensation Assistance Program (VCAP)	Financial assistance for court-related costs, therapy, and loss of income.	www.pa.gov/services/pcv/apply-for-victims-compensation 800-233-2339
PA Protection Order Resources	Guidance on SVPO, PFA, and PFI.	https://www.pa.gov/services/pcv/request-a-protection-order-for-crime-victims



Pennsylvania Coalition to
Advance Respect

a division of respect together

 1-888-772-PCAR

 www.pcar.org

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. (n.d.-a). *Crime victims' rights* [website]. <https://www.pa.gov/agencies/ova/crime-victims--rights>

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. (n.d.-b). *Victims' rights* [website]. <https://www.pa.gov/agencies/pccd/programs-and-services/victims-services/victims-rights>

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. (n.d.-c). *Your rights as a victim* [website]. <https://www.pa.gov/agencies/pcv/your-rights-as-a-victim>

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. (n.d.-d). *Submit victim's rights violation* [website]. <https://www.pa.gov/services/ova/submit-victims--rights-violation>

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. (n.d.-e). *Office of victim advocate* [website]. <https://www.pa.gov/agencies/ova>

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