

# ASSEMBLY APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE

## STATEMENT TO

### ASSEMBLY, No. 678

# STATE OF NEW JERSEY

DATED: JUNE 22, 2023

The Assembly Appropriations Committee reports favorably Assembly Bill No. 678.

This bill specifically authorizes the Victims of Crime Compensation Office (VCCO) to pay expenses related to protecting the safety of cooperating witnesses. The bill defines a “cooperating witness” as a witness who testifies for the government to help prosecute a crime, and includes a confidential informant.

The bill also authorizes the Division of Criminal Justice in the Department of Law and Public Safety to award grants from the Victim and Witness Advocacy Fund to public entities and not-for-profit organizations to provide services that protect the safety of cooperating witnesses.

Finally, the bill amends the Crime Victim’s Bill of Rights to expand the rights of cooperating witnesses. The bill gives these witnesses the right to be provided assistance before and during trial to cope with the psychological and practical obstacles of testifying. These witnesses also would be given the right to receive protective measures before, during, and after a hearing or trial and to have established court procedures ensuring their safety while testifying.

According to the sponsor, witnesses who risk their own safety and well-being to aid in the prosecution of crimes, including gang-related violence, often are retaliated against in the form of intimidation, death threats, violence, and murder. This deters other witnesses from testifying in criminal trials. This situation necessitates additional funding to be dedicated to services that provide these witnesses with enhanced protections. The Crime Victim’s Bill of Rights also needs to specifically guarantee the rights of this subgroup of witnesses.

#### FISCAL IMPACT:

The Office of Legislative Services (OLS) finds that the bill may result in additional annual State expenditures of up to \$1 million from the Victim and Witness Advocacy Fund to provide additional services and to ensure existing services are provided to victims and witnesses of crimes. The OLS, however, cannot assess the exact magnitude of the increases given the confidential nature of the information regarding the cooperating witnesses, and bases the estimate on historical account information.

The bill clarifies, and potentially expands, the Victim and Witness Advocacy Fund award reimbursements to include certain services a cooperating witness to a crime may receive and includes reimbursements to certain organizations providing services, and therefore potentially increases payments related to caring for and protecting witnesses of crime.