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EDITORIALS

Now the victim has rights, too

It has become painfully obvious over the years that in its legitimate quest to protect the rights of the accused, the American criminal justice system may have neglected the rights of the victim.

The Texas Legislature may have reversed that trend this year with passage of the Crime Victims Bill of Rights. The legislation went into effect Sept. 1 with little fanfare.

It is an important document, not only in what it does but what it represents. It is an effort by the state to direct some of its energies toward the people who suffer most from crime.

Some of its provisions:

- That the victims of a violent crime have a right to protection during a trial or after parole has been granted.
- That the victim has a right to be informed about all legal proceedings involved in the trial, including plea bargaining.
- That the victim may participate in presentencing deliberations and parole hearings through the filing of a Victim Impact Statement.
- That the victim has the right to be present at all public court proceedings related to the offense, if the presiding judge approves.

The new law requires that counties with populations over 150,000 have a victim-assistance coordinator to help meet the victims' needs. The McLennan County District Attorney's office is one of a few in the state already ahead of the game. It has employed a victim-witness coordinator for over a year. A state grant pays for a full-time social worker to assist victims and their families.

This not only meets a humanitarian need but also a law-enforcement need. Justice Department statistics indicate that from 10 to 50 percent of all violent crimes go unreported. Obviously a lot of victims fear their needs will not be respected. Texas has much work ahead to convince them it cares.