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NEWS RELEASE

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EMBARGOED UNTIL:

4:30 pm Eastern Time, APRIL 23, 2021

United States Attorney General Merrick Garland Awards

Victor Vieth the Victim Rights Legend Award

*Award recognizes child abuse prosecutor and Zero Abuse Chief Program Officer
and 30 years of work dedicated to keeping kids safe*

Washington, DC - Today, Victor Vieth, Chief Program Officer for the Zero Abuse Project, was honored as this year's *Victim Rights Legend* during the NCVRW Service Awards Ceremony in Washington, DC. U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland recognized Vieth's contributions as the country commemorates the National Crime Victims' Rights Week with this year's theme— *Support Victims. Build Trust. Engage Communities.*

Every year in April, the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) at the Department of Justice leads communities throughout the country in their annual observances of National Crime Victims' Rights Week (NCVRW). The event is meant to promote victims' rights and honor crime victims and those who advocate on their behalf.

"I've been blessed to work with gifted child protection professionals throughout my career and, together, we have made a difference in the lives of children throughout the country. Although I'm grateful for this award, my highest honor has been to advocate for children before judges, juries, and policy makers," Vieth said.

Victor Vieth's career protecting children spans 30 years. As a young prosecutor in rural Minnesota, he recognized the limitations of the criminal justice system in prosecuting child abuse cases after a 7-day trial on the termination of parental rights. A key witness was under heavy cross-examination from the defense attorney who insisted that the child protection worker on the stand had violated the law by removing the infant from the home without a court order. The testifying social worker broke down in tears because of the horrible conditions in the home.

Vieth won that case, but looking back, he recognized that no one in that courtroom—neither the judge, defense attorney, social worker, or even he himself as the prosecutor—was properly trained on how to handle a child abuse case. Vieth vowed to change the system.

Vieth advocated for a collaborative, multidisciplinary model. He was working in Cottonwood County, Minnesota, not far from the Iowa border. A county so small that it only had two prosecutors and one of them was part-time. Vieth saw the small community as an ideal place to experiment with the possibility of system change. One study at the time, showed that more than half of the child sexual abuse cases presented to prosecutors nationwide were either not charged or eventually dismissed. He brought together Law enforcement, prosecutors and child protection workers, telling them, “Social services and law enforcement have similar goals. We have to do better and that will require us to work together.”

The new collaborative model encouraged police, prosecutors, and social workers to work together, avoid needless duplication, build stronger cases, and comply with the mandate of the law. After making these changes, the County Attorney's office charged, convicted, and imprisoned twice as many sex offenders five years as it had in the previous twelve years. Of Minnesota's eighty-seven counties, Cottonwood County had the highest rate of determining child physical and sexual abuse per 1,000 children during the years 1994-1996.

Vieth knew that the strategies adopted in his rural county could be scaled to work in larger communities as well. His success led him to work for the National District Attorneys Association to train prosecutors around the country how to effectively handle these cases. Today, with the Zero Abuse Project, he trains thousands of prosecutors and child protection workers across the nation each year.

Vieth's innovations have not been limited to the courtroom. He recognized a proper investigation required the child to speak with a specially trained forensic interviewer who can often identify critical corroborating evidence to bolster the case. He pushed for expanded forensic interview training which, as a result of his efforts, is now primarily taught at the state as opposed to national level. When he saw that child protection workers were entering the field without the education they needed to be successful, he created an experiential college curriculum, Child Advocacy Studies, now offered in 75 colleges and universities throughout the country.

Vieth believes child abuse can be eliminated in three generations if it is made a national priority. “The inspirational work Victor has done has brought the United States closer to realizing that goal,” said Jeffrey Dion, CEO of the Zero Abuse Project. “After more than three decades of this work, and as a devoted father and grandfather, Victor Vieth continues to be guided by the most fundamental question: ‘Is it good for kids?’”