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Funding for crime victims withers

Federal cash may be gone in 2 years

MATTHEW GRUCHOW • MGRUCHOW@ARGUSLEADER.COM • APRIL 8, 2008

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Victims of violent crimes in South Dakota could face longer waiting times and fewer dollars to help pay for counseling, medical costs and other expenses if a federal program continues to run in the red.

The federal Crime Victims Fund, set up to help states support victims of violent crime, has seen more demand and fewer deposits since its inception in 1984. The fund is part of the Victims of Crime Act. One government study warns the money could dry up in as little as two years, which worries victim advocates, who must find a way to make up for the shortfall.

"We don't have any control over the funds that we get from the federal government," said Emily Currey, spokeswoman for the state Department of Social Services.

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That federal money makes up almost 10 percent of the operating budget for the Rape and Domestic Abuse Center in Sioux Falls, according to Tanya Draper-Douthit, executive director of the center.

The center has received about \$2,000 less a year for the past two years, she said.

Any cut affects how much assistance agencies can offer victims.

"It's not something you recover," Draper-Douthit said. "It's not like we can raise the cost of our services."

Should the federal money dry up, the agency would have to find other ways to pay for things such as mental health counseling, Draper-Douthit said. That could stretch the waiting time.

be as flexible in our immediate response to clients," she said.

Other states are facing the same problem, said Krista Heeren-Graber, executive director of the South Dakota Network Against Family Violence and Sexual Assault.

BY THE NUMBERS

Federal money available through the program varied widely for several years, with the federal level.

The following is the amount of money available for the past five federal fiscal years:

- 2004: \$184,000
- 2005: \$44,000
- 2006: \$242,000
- 2007: \$154,000
- 2008: To be determined.

- State Department of Social Services

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"I can tell you overall the demand is increasing and all the funding is either decreasing or not increasing," she said.

The state receives an average of 350 applications for assistance from the fund each year and pays out \$300,000 to \$400,000 a year, Currey said. So far this year, DSS has received 74 applications.

"Those claims can range from as little as a few dollars to well beyond the maximum range," Currey said.

Curry said the crime victims program will not go away, but the state might have to search for other sources of money. Local agencies, however, are trying to be prepared for a continued dropoff in support.

Victim advocates have been working the past few years to retool their budgets and look for additional money to brace for a loss of federal money, Heeren-Graber said.

Draper-Douthit said her agency has been able to manage losses for now.

"What we've been able to do is put a larger emphasis on fundraising and development than before because we learned that this is something we couldn't rely on as a budget item."

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