

Area victim assistance programs face steep aid cuts

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County prosecutors throughout southern New Jersey are preparing for some major cuts to their victim assistance programs, a problem that could result in fewer of the much-needed services for victims of violent crimes.

A deep cut in federal aid, combined with a new funding formula from the state Division of Criminal Justice, leaves the Atlantic County Prosecutor's Office bracing for a 65 percent funding cut to its victim-witness advocacy unit. Cumberland County is facing a 70 percent cut, and Cape May County a 71 percent cut.

The victim-witness offices provide a number of vital services to victims of crime, from changing the locks on the home of a burglary victim to providing counseling for the friends and family of a murder victim.

"You take away counselors, you take away services," Atlantic County Prosecutor Ted Housel said in an interview last week. His office employs six counselors.

Housel met with the Atlantic County Board of Chosen Freeholders last week about the proposed cuts.

"We will remain fully staffed, at least through this fiscal year," Housel said. He said the county likely will help offset budget costs next year if additional cuts go through.

"Right now, we're able to deal with it," Housel said. "I'm real comfortable we'll have it for this fiscal year ... and I'm hopeful for next fiscal year."

Other counties are not so optimistic.

"It's going to have a dramatic effect on the office, and probably result in layoffs," Cape May County Prosecutor Robert L. Taylor said. The Cape May County office currently employs six victim-witness counselors.

Last week, state Attorney General Anne Milgram called on Congress to reverse the federal budget cuts that reduced the grants, charging that funds are being diverted simply to "plug other budget holes."

"The cuts to the Victims of Crime Act funding are shortsighted and will have a devastating impact on programs in New Jersey that provide assistance to victims," Milgram said in a statement. "The human costs of these cuts is immeasurable and completely unnecessary, because there is a surplus of dedicated funding for victim assistance at the federal level."

Due to the cut in VOCA funding, New Jersey's award is expected to decrease from \$10.4 million last year to about \$8 million this year. The state received nearly \$11.3 million in 2006.

"These are the unsung heroes of the criminal justice system," Taylor said. "These (victims) are the most vulnerable people in the system. So, we need to get these funds restored."

The County Prosecutors Association of New Jersey, headed by Cumberland County Prosecutor Ron Casella, is searching for alternative funding sources to keep the needed services for crime victims intact.

One of those ideas is an increase in the Violent Crimes Compensation Board (VCCB) penalty, a fine, usually about \$30, imposed on criminals at their sentencing. Another idea suggested by prosecutors was a mandatory fee for a person to enter the pre-trial intervention (PTI) program, a rehabilitation program offered to first-time offenders.

"Both of these funding sources would not be a burden on the taxpayers," Taylor said. "So we're hoping some of the legislators will take these up."

Casella called the PTI fee an excellent idea. He has already spoken with some state legislators about the alternative funding suggestions.

"That is something that hasn't been tapped before," Casella said. "And there is an incentive (for offenders) to pay that fee."

Casella said his office is unusual. A settlement between the Cumberland County Prosecutor's Office and the Cumberland County Freeholders, reached about three years ago, mandates that staffing numbers remain intact if any programs funded by grants are cut, and that the county pick up the cost.

"So they're protected," Casella said. "But that doesn't keep them from being nervous."

"I think that the issue that we have to keep in mind is that we can't be entirely dependent on grant funds," Casella said. "We need to be prepared to find other sources."

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