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Aid slashed for crime victims

BY LEO STRUPCZEWSKI • COURIER-POST STAFF • MARCH 17, 2008

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CAMDEN — For three weeks in January, Johnie Rogers sat in court with her two sisters, as her nephew's killer stood trial.

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And, for those three weeks, members of victim-witness advocacy unit at the Camden County Prosecutor's Office worked behind the scenes, guiding Rogers and her sisters.

They learned When to enter the courtroom, when to leave, what to expect next.

It was the little things, said Rogers, like those quick instructions and explanations that made a "very emotional" time a bit easier.

"Sometimes, you're just so out of it, you don't know what happened," she said. "Without them, I don't know what we would have did."

Across the state, though, funding to victim-witness advocacy programs may be cut by 68 percent -- a product of proposed federal cutbacks. Officials have said the cuts are so severe, victims' rights may be set back by "20 years" and a number of

jobs are at risk. Locally, Camden and Gloucester counties are facing a 75 percent funding cut.

Burlington County is facing a 56 percent funding cut.

"It's a major problem," said Attorney General Anne Milgram. "I think, you know, one of the most important things we do is that we serve and help victims. It facilitates the criminal justice system working."

This year, Congress reduced the funds which pay for victim-witness assistance programs, the Victims of Crime Act grants, by \$35 million. That left New Jersey, which received \$11.3 million for victim-witness assistance in 2006 and \$10.4 million in 2007, to receive \$8 million.

County prosecutor's offices will absorb the brunt of those cuts.

The state's Office of the Attorney General distributes those funds and recently developed a new formula to do so. Instead of simply requesting what they believe they need, county prosecutor's offices are now awarded money based on their county's population, arrest count and number of victims served the previous year.

That, paired with the federal reduction in funds, means steep cuts.

"I'm at a loss," said Linda Burkett, coordinator of the Camden County Prosecutor's Office for victim-witness advocacy. "It puts me in a very, very difficult position of prioritizing crime victims. How do you do that?"

Since 1985, victim-witness advocacy offices have been in place at county prosecutor's offices throughout the state. Born out of the victim's rights movement, victim-witness advocates provide front-line support to victims and the families of victims.

Programs started small, often one person to an office. Now, though, the numbers have swelled. The Burlington County Prosecutor's Office employs six victim-witness advocates and the Camden and Gloucester

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Victim Advocate Amy Congdon (center) speaks with members of Krista DiFrancesco's family outside of the courtroom during Christopher Kornberger's murder trial in Mount Holly.

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Victim advocate Amy Congdon (center) leads members of Krista DiFrancesco's family out of court during Christopher Kornberger's murder trial in Mount Holly. Family members include cousin Cheryl Puskas (left) and her mother Ple Scheper (right, back).

(AVI

STEINHARDT/Courier-Post)

county prosecutor's offices each employ eight.

What they do ranges in scope from meeting with family members at a murder scene and babysitting children while a parent testifies in court to sending out notification of an upcoming court date and changes in a defendant's status.

On Thursday, members of Krista DiFrancesco's family met at the Burlington County Court Facility. Amy Congdon, a victim-witness advocate, was there to meet them. An hour before the trial started, she explained what the day would entail and walked them to court.

DiFrancesco was found dead outside her Evesham townhome in May 2003 and the man accused of killing her, Christopher Kornberger, has been on trial since Feb. 26.

For a victim-witness advocate, basically anything on a request list is fair game. And if a victim-witness advocate can't do it, he or she will find someone who can.

"Whatever a victim needs, they try to provide," said Gloucester County Prosecutor Sean Dalton.

Said Burlington County Prosecutor Robert Bernardi: "It's not just paperwork."

Last year, county prosecutor's offices were awarded a total of \$7.7 million in funding. This year, they're slated to receive a total of \$2.5 million.

No other group of agencies eligible for VOCA grants were cut.

"The formula is a killer," Burkett said. "I believe the federal government is causing everyone to fight their belts. A lot of money is being skimmed off the top. We understand that. What I don't understand is how the most vulnerable adults and children who have historically been denied access to the courts are going to continue to be denied their right to be treated with fairness and respect."

And because nearly all the funding is used for paying salaries, there are concerns about where the money will come from.

Milgram described the new formula as "fair and equitable" and called on the county prosecutor's offices to work jointly with nonprofit organizations to help victims and witnesses.

"The relationship is really critical," she said, noting she's spoken with President Bush about reinstating the funds. "You can't prosecute unless you're supporting and helping victims. The cuts are problematic. There's no two ways about it."

Dalton said he and other prosecutors are lobbying federal legislators to reinstate the funds. If that fails, he said, he also has been discussing the possibility of state legislation to establish a "steady revenue stream."

"Certainly, layoffs are an option," he said. "But we're looking at that as a last resort."

If that's the case, he said, his office will find ways to continue providing the same services. That may mean pulling a detective to pick up a victim for a court hearing and sitting with that person throughout the course of the day, though.

Acting Camden County Prosecutor Joshua Ottenberg said the situation is equally cloudy for his office.

"We don't know what's going to happen," he said, noting efforts are being made to absorb salaries into the office's budget. "We're trying to be as open with the employees as possible. As the situation unfolds, we're going to keep them up to date."

Bernardi, though, said he fully expects Burlington County's freeholders to make up the shortfall, "as it has in the past."

"If you told me, 'Bob, you're going from six to three (advocates),' I'd throw up my hands in frustration," Bernardi said. "If we're not here for one thing -- and that's taking care of victims -- what the hell is the point of operating?"

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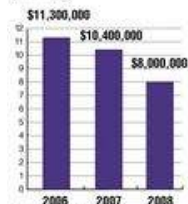
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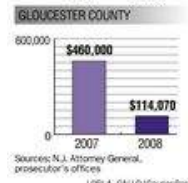
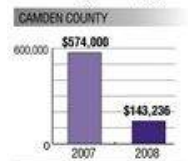
Funds to help crime victims

Over the past three years, New Jersey has seen a decline in funding for front-line victim assistance. The funds are used to staff area victim-witness units and nonprofit organizations. (in millions)



Area victim-witness units

County prosecutor's offices across the state saw funding for victim-witness units drop by an average of 67 percent. In Camden and Gloucester counties, funding for units was cut by 75 percent, the highest in the state.



Sources: N.J. Attorney General, prosecutor's offices
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