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## Preserve programs for victims and witnesses

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State and federal officials must find a way to keep victim-witness services from being severely curtailed.

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Some 20 years ago, at the urging of crime victims and their advocates, state and federal officials finally recognized that defendants were not the only ones who needed representation.

Since 1985, states have provided assistance to crime victims. Yet, with the country battered by an economic downturn, the federal government is pulling back from this commitment to victims. It has serious consequences for victims, as well as the judicial system.

New Jersey is expecting nearly a \$2 million cut in its share of the federal Victims of Crime Act grant -- from \$10.4 million in 2007 to about \$8 million -- which apparently will fall heaviest on county prosecutors' offices that operate victim-witness advocacy programs.

Camden and Gloucester counties will lose 75 percent of the aid for their programs, which could

translate into fewer advocates to offer support to victims and witnesses. Some grieving and shocked family members and witnesses might not get the help they need to understand and come to terms with the trial process.

Once again, victims and witnesses could be sidelined and their needs given short shrift if these services are vastly scaled back.

Unfortunately, the state is in no position to help out, considering it is facing a multibillion deficit and carries more than \$30 billion in debt. As state Attorney General Anne Milgram recently suggested, part of the solution may lie in leveraging the resources of nonprofits that offer similar services. By combining resources and eliminating the duplication of effort, county prosecutors might be able to avoid cutting services as severely as their federal grant monies have been cut.

Still, we urge Milgram to reconsider the aid distribution for victim-witness programs to see whether more money can be made available to county prosecutors for victim assistance. Perhaps a few of the hundreds of jobs in the state AG's office can be eliminated to have money to keep these programs going.

We also urge our congressional delegation to petition Congress to restore some of the funding. Reducing pork-barrel earmarks, for example, probably could free more money for these important programs. Victim-witness advocacy programs provide crucial support for the judicial system, keeping families apprised of developments and court rules, and giving witnesses the support they need to help prosecutors with cases.

The victim-witness advocacy programs are too important to let wither away for lack of funding.

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