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Federal funding cuts force agencies to turn away victims of domestic violence

Drop in government funding is forcing agencies to turn away victims who seek their help

By Megan Twohey | Tribune reporter
March 28, 2008

Nakia Adams said she was gripped by fear and confusion when her ex-boyfriend continued to violate an order of protection she had obtained from a Cook County judge.

It wasn't until she turned to Family Rescue, an agency that serves victims of domestic violence, that she started to feel more in control.

But recent cuts in government funding and other sources of support have forced Family Rescue and other Illinois agencies that assist victims of domestic violence to scale back services and turn people away. At a news conference Thursday in [Rolling Meadows](#), agencies warned that new cuts in federal funding—estimated to be nearly \$4.6 million for Illinois—would result in more reductions in assistance.

Family Rescue, based in Chicago, helped Adams, 27, navigate the court system and provided counseling to her children. When she feared for her life last month, it referred her to a nearby shelter.

"Family Rescue really helped me protect myself," Adams said in an interview this week.

Although the number of domestic-violence homicides has declined nationwide, the need for help is growing, advocates say.

Last year, Illinois courts granted more than 60,000 orders of protection. Each day, 600 requests for help in Illinois go unmet, said the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

Cindy Bischof, a real estate agent from [Arlington Heights](#), was among dozens of women in Cook County to be killed by an intimate partner in recent years.

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"When we have to say to a victim, 'Can you come back tomorrow?' it's very worrisome," said Karen Kuchar, executive director of Family Shelter Service in DuPage County, which has cut its staff and turned away women seeking help. "Any person could be one of the people in a relationship that is very, very dangerous. That could lead to death."

The major form of federal assistance, funded through the Victims of Crimes Act, was cut by Congress to \$550 million this year from \$625 million. Illinois has seen its share shrink to an estimated \$11.6 million in fiscal 2008 from \$16.2 million in fiscal 2006, according to the Illinois Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

"With these budget cuts, there will be even less help for victims," said Jacqueline Ferguson, a director at the coalition. "Domestic violence programs have been hit so hard from so many different directions, financially, that we are all in bunker mode."

Illinois cut funding for domestic violence shelters and services in fiscal 2004 to \$21.3 million from \$22 million. The state increased the amount for fiscal 2008 to \$21.8 million, but that is lower than it was five years ago.

The funding cuts have forced 27 Downstate counties to eliminate courthouse advocates who helped victims apply for protective orders, provided them with transportation to and from court and hospitals and referred them to shelters, Ferguson said. She said victims in those counties now must travel to neighboring counties for help.

Many private foundations and corporate charities have reduced support for agencies that help victims of domestic violence.

The City of Chicago provides agencies with a portion of the Community and Development Block Grants it receives from the federal government. But the annual amount—nearly \$2 million a year—has remained flat for more than five years, and the city's Office of Domestic Violence said recent cuts in the grant program will force it to reduce the amount for agencies starting this summer.

In 2006, Rainbow House closed its shelter on Chicago's South Side.

Mutual Ground in Aurora has been forced to scale back its services in recent years, laying off 13 counselors, cutting financial aid to victims and reducing the number of shelter beds to 30 from 34.

"It feels like we're walking on quicksand," said Linda Healy, the organization's executive director.

Faced with the drop in federal funding, the agencies are gearing up for additional cuts in services. Budgets will probably be sliced by as much as 30 percent starting this summer, said Leslie Landis, director of Mayor [Richard M. Daley's](#) Office on Domestic Violence.

"Women and children have been abandoned in our state," Gretchen Vapnar, executive director of the Community Crisis Center in Elgin, said at the news conference.

Joining advocates at the presentation were relatives of Bischof, who was fatally shot March 7 by her ex-boyfriend in the parking lot of her Elmhurst office.

Bischof's brother, Michael, who is calling for global positioning system tracking of people who violate orders of protection, said more funding is necessary to help prevent other women from meeting a similar fate.

But state Rep. Suzanne Bassi (R-[Palatine](#)) said Illinois can't afford any increases and that responsibility rests with Congress.

"The state doesn't have the ability to fill the gap," she said.

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