

## LOCAL NEWS

# North Texas crime victim advocacy groups become victims of funding cuts

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Jana Barker tries to find humor on one of the darker days at Brighter Tomorrows.

She's slashed her budget at the domestic violence and sexual assault support center in search of ways to keep the doors open.

"I may have to sell my car and go to my skateboard," Mrs. Barker, the agency's executive director, joked last week.

It's a moment of levity in a week she's had to say goodbye to six staff members and close vital services because of congressional cuts to a major funding source.

Budget concerns aren't unique to Brighter Tomorrows. Crime victim advocacy groups across the nation are drawing back programs, cutting staff and scrambling to find alternative funding after Congress reduced the Victims of Crime Act money it distributes yearly.

Congress enacted VOCA in 1984 to filter funds from criminals who pay fines and penalties to provide victim services such as counseling or legal assistance.

At Brighter Tomorrows in Grand Prairie, where Mrs. Barker manages a \$1.8 million budget, any funding cut can be devastating. Mrs. Barker said she relies on state and federal money for about 65 percent of her budget.

Mrs. Barker said she knew to expect less VOCA money, maybe 18 percent less. She didn't expect to go penniless.

"I had no idea we'd lose as much as we did," she said. "We received \$220,000 last year – this year we got nothing."

On Friday, six employees were cut from her staff of 46.

Mrs. Barker also plans to close the shelter's thrift store at MacArthur Boulevard and Shady Grove Road in Irving, cancel Spanish-language counseling and close a parenting class for Grand Prairie



G.J. McCARTHY/DMN  
**Jana Barker**, executive director of Brighter Tomorrows, plans to close the shelter's thrift store in Irving as her agency lost federal funding. 'We received \$220,000 last year - this year we got nothing,' she said.

residents. She said the shelters in DeSoto, Grand Prairie and Irving will remain open.

The funding loss comes at a time when Brighter Tomorrows needs it most, Mrs. Barker said. In July, the agency served more than triple the number of people it served during the same month last year. Donations have been less because of the slumping economy and high energy prices.

Brighter Tomorrows, she said, is teetering on the brink. "If we have to get rid of anybody else, right now with a skeleton crew, we will have to close one of the shelters."

Other agencies in North Texas also are trying to help more people with less money. With the faltering economy, it will get tougher at The Family Place if cuts continue, executive director Paige Flink said.

"What we deal with here is sometimes life and death," said Mrs. Flink, who manages the family violence agency in Dallas. "It's not an optional service – it's a necessity."

Derrelynn Perryman, victim services coordinator for the Arlington Police Department, said she was notified by e-mail that federal funding cuts were imminent. When her department didn't receive any VOCA funds this year, she sought out other grants.

"We're fortunate that we planned ahead for this. A lot of agencies weren't so fortunate," she said. "It's going to have an impact on victims services all over our community, and it's really scary."

If Mrs. Perryman receives alternative grants, she'll be able to keep her 10-member staff that serves 14,000 victims every year in Arlington.

Mothers Against Drunk Driving received 17 percent less in VOCA funding this year, said Karen Housewright, the agency's Texas director. MADD eliminated four staff members around the state, reduced its travel budget and decided to not give merit increases to staff.

Mrs. Housewright said her Irving-based agency will try to train more volunteers.

"We're going to do our best, but clearly with fewer staff people we are going to be challenged to reach as many people as we did last year," she said.

Steve Derene, the executive director for the National Association of VOCA Assistance Administrators, is the voice for state agencies that help distribute assistance funds.

According to Mr. Derene, money for victim assistance programs nationally has dropped from \$396 million in 2006 to \$309 million in 2008. During that same span in Texas, funding has declined from \$28 million to \$21 million.

"Our goal ... is to at least get the victim's assistance portion back to where we got it in '06," he said.

Mrs. Barker said Brighter Tomorrows is facing a budget crunch, but she can't ignore those who need help the most.

"We're certainly not going to turn somebody away," she said. "We're going to do what we can do, but they won't receive everything they need."