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Victims' fund could get cut

By Jennifer Fernandez
Staff Writer

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GREENSBORO — Groups that provide safe havens for battered women and counseling for crime victims are unsure what federal budget cuts to victims assistance programs will mean for local agencies.

Congress just passed a federal budget that cuts \$35 million for programs paid for under the Victims of Crime Act. The budget bill awaits President Bush's signature.

"The amount that's going for direct services is being cut significantly," said Steve Derene, executive director of the National Association of VOCA Assistance Administrators. The Madison, Wis.-based nonprofit lobbied unsuccessfully for increased funding.

The cuts could amount to a loss of \$1.3 million for assistance programs in North Carolina, based on Derene's estimates. Officials with the Governor's Crime Commission, the North Carolina agency that oversees distribution of the federal money, could not be reached Friday.

Local agencies don't know yet how the cuts may affect them. But any cut will hurt, leaders said.

Family Service of the Piedmont receives \$175,000 from that federal fund, President and CEO Thomas Bonney said. His group uses the money to run two shelters, Clara House in Greensboro and Carpenter House in High Point.

A cut in that grant could force the agency to cut its services by reducing the number or hours of employees, Bonney said.

"These are not women who have been abused physically or emotionally one time," Bonney said. "It's usually many, many times before someone decides to leave a situation."

Family Service of the Piedmont provides not just emergency shelter, but also transitional housing, food, job training, counseling and assistance in navigating the court system.

"We depend heavily on grants like this for funding," said Angie Boles, executive director of He lp Incorporated: Center Against Violence, in Wentworth.

The agency serves about 1,500 to 2,000 people through various programs, including a shelter, she said.

Funds from the federal victims grant being cut make up \$81,000 of the center's \$500,000 annual budget, Boles said.

The grant funds come entirely from federal criminal fines, forfeitures and special assessments, not taxpayers. Money collected one year is used to pay for programs the next year. Separate federal victims' funding is due to increase under the budget bill, but it's unclear if that will help offset these cuts.

Attorneys general across the nation last year protested proposed cuts to the fund, which they said provided support for 4,400 local programs that served nearly 4 million victims.

Criminal violence affects one in every four American households, according to the N.C. Department of Crime Control and Public Safety. Each year, that costs the U.S. economy about \$17 billion.

Victims who have more emotional support are more apt to be able to move on and heal themselves, Boles said. Every cut to services takes away some of that support, she said.

"We would not shut our doors," Boles said. "But it would put a dent in the services we're able to offer."

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WHAT IT COVERS

Money distributed under the federal Victims of Crime Act of 1984 helps pay for:

- * Child abuse investigation and prosecution.
- * Federal Criminal Justice System programs, such as a system to notify victims about the status of their case and the offender's custody status or release.
- * Antiterrorism Emergency Reserve, for victims of domestic and international terrorism and mass violence.
- * State programs, including compensation for crime victims and assistance such as counseling, shelters, crisis hotlines and court advocacy.