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Potential cuts could jeopardize area's crime assistance progr

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LANCASTER - Three local crime assistance programs could lose funding this fall if funding of a federal grant is reduced.

The Office of Justice Programs has announced a potential cut of 20 percent to the Victims of Crime Assistance Fund grant for agencies across the country that assist victims of crime.

What's Next

The Office of Justice Programs is week whether they will be making funding for the VOCA grant.

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The Lighthouse, a domestic violence shelter, the New Horizons Youth and Family Center, and the Fairfield County Prosecutor's Office all receive annual funding from the grant in Fairfield County.

The cuts - if initiated - would affect the fiscal year 2009, which will begin in October 2008.

"This is the first time this has happened, and it's

devastating," said Suzanne Pelletier-Walker, executive director of The Lighthouse.

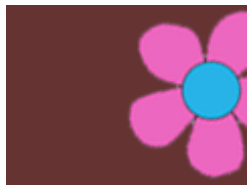
The Lighthouse has received funding since 1987. For fiscal year 2008, they received \$113,000, according to information from the Ohio Attorney General's Office.

Pelletier-Walker said the money her agency gets from the grant has been used in the past to pay for three victim advocates, two full-time house managers and a full-time counselor.

"We don't buy a lot of extras and to not have these personnel positions would make things very difficult," said Pelletier-Walker, who plans to use grants, contributions and fundraisers to replace the funding if necessary.

"We're not looking to eliminate any positions at this point, but we have a lean budget with very little wiggle room."

New Horizons Youth and Family Center also uses the money employees - two therapists who provide counseling services to children who have been



physically or sexually abused, said Tony Motta, chief executive officer for New Horizons Youth and Family Center

And the Fairfield County Prosecutor's Office uses the money to pay for three victim witness advocates and a clerk in that department, said administrative assistant Lynette Barnhart.

The Office of Justice Programs is a federal agency that provides programs to benefit victims of crime. Officials anticipate taking 5.5 percent from the VOCA grant for internal administrative and management purposes, said Ernest Hutchins, VOCA/SVAA manager with the Ohio Attorney General's Office.

Hutchins said the decision about potential cuts could come as early as this week. He sent letters in January informing all the Ohio agencies that receive VOCA funding.

"NAVA (National Association of VOCA Assistance Administrators) is fairly confident that the cut will happen," Hutchins said. "If it does, it would be about 20 percent, which would be monumental for the programs the grant funds."

While this is not the first year the Office of Justice Programs has made funding cuts, it is the biggest cut they have made so far, Hutchins said.

It's also the first time the Office of Justice Programs will be cutting grant funds and using the money for management purposes.

Motta is disappointed the money will be used for Office of Justice Programs. New Horizons received \$34,303 for it's last fiscal year.

"It's really discouraging to me that this money would be used to cover administrative costs in Washington, rather than help provide important services for these kids," Motta said.

Hutchins said he has received several calls inquiring about the extent of the cuts and its effect on agencies.

"I think the biggest question has been, 'What will we do?'" Hutchins said. "I feel bad that they're in that position.' "

STORYCHAT 

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