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Victims' advocacy groups troubled by funding cuts

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By TESA CULLI

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MT. VERNON — After getting a 25 percent cut in funding for the Violence Against Women Act and for the Victims of Crime Act by President George Bush, local victim's advocates are worried about how services to victims will be provided.

"I've worked here 20 years, and this is the worst financial crisis we've faced since I started," said Kathy Donnelly, local domestic violence advocate coordinator for People Against Violent Environments. "This is going to be devastating to domestic violence and sexual assault programs. There won't be enough staff to help the clients which try to access our programs every day."

PAVE, a nonprofit, grant-funded service which provides help to those who are the victims of violence, said people don't realize that VOCA and VAWA funding doesn't come from taxpayers.

"It's funded through fines and penalties collected from convicted criminals," Donnelly explained. "This fund gives much-needed services to victims of violent crimes — and who better to pay for those services than convicted criminals? Abolishing the fund is an injustice to domestic violence victims who suffer at the hands of their intimate partners and pass these attitudes and belief systems to children who witness the abuse."

Bush cut the funding for both the funds by 25 percent and has used the money in other areas of the federal budget.

"That money was earmarked to be spent on victim services programs — that's what so frustrating," Donnelly said.

"Essentially, we've been robbed. Every program that uses VAWA and VOCA funds will be in trouble."

PAVE serves victims in five counties — Jefferson, Marion, Clinton, Fayette and Washington. During the last fiscal year, the organization served as advocates for 811 victims of domestic violence, assisted with 430 orders of protection and answered 5,570 calls through its domestic violence and sexual assault hotline, which is manned 24 hours a day.

"Five counties is a huge, huge geographic area," Donnelly said. "It's very hard to cover now, but with the loss of funding, we'll have to further cut back staff hours because of decreases in pay."

As a grant-funded organization, Donnelly said PAVE is still in the dark about how much will be received from the other grants it relies on to pay salaries, provide services and keep the lights on.

"But the ones that have been cut are the ones which provide advocates — those who provide help and service to the victims of domestic violence," Donnelly said. "The only thing we can do at this point is to prioritize clients. We're going to have to decrease staff hours, but all of us already rotate a 24-hour shift to man the crisis lines. We're all very committed people."

In addition, Donnelly is already voluntarily donating one day of pay every week back to the organization to help pay for another staff member at PAVE.

Raising awareness and the need in communities it serves is difficult, Donnelly said.

"Until [domestic violence] touches home and affects yourself or someone you know, people tend to ignore it and pretend it isn't happening," Donnelly said. "For the first time in many, many years, we're asking the communities we serve to look at helping us — maybe doing fundraisers or individuals donate money. Somehow, somewhere, we are going to have to come up with the funding from the communities we serve, or victims will go unserved."

Anyone who would like additional information on PAVE, its needs and the work it does in the community may call the main office at 533-7233.

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