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BREAKING NEWS:

LAST UPDATED: Tuesday, August 12, 2008 2:26 PM

EDT
SUNBURY - An elderly city woman died in a fire just after midnight today. Police said Barbara Kunkle, 70, was killed in the blaze on Fourth Street. A state police fire marshal was at the scene overnight. More details in Wednesday's edition.

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Possible cap on VOCA funds will impact victim-service providers

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Advocates across the nation are battling to keep funding paid by convicted criminals for the purpose of helping their victims.

Susquehanna Valley Women in Transition (SVWIT), one of thousands of victim-service providers in the U.S., is partially funded through the Crime Victims Fund — a fund some say is threatened by the Bush administration's proposed budget.

The fiscal year 2009 budget would cap the distribution of money from the Crime Victims Fund at \$590 million, and take away the fund's \$2.03 billion balance.

Local and state victim services experts say the funding level falls millions short of what's needed, and continues a trend of declining federal money. Also, they say removal of the fund balance is unwarranted.

Twenty-one percent of the funding for SVWIT comes from the Crime Victims Fund, which was set up as a result of the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA). Should the cuts be imposed, direct service-provider jobs will be lost and victim advocacy will decrease exponentially, said DiAnn Baxley, CEO of SVWIT.

"This is a big problem," said Baxley. "We are the only ones in the area that are providing these services."

SVWIT is a crisis center that provides advocacy, empowerment and education to victims, survivors, families and communities in Northumberland, Union and Snyder counties in an effort to end patterns of violence and abuse.

4 million served

The Crime Victims Fund provides assistance for domestic violence victims and their children; rape victims; victims of child sexual abuse, incest and rape; victims of stalking and elder abuse; survivors of terrorism, those affected by drunk driving accidents; and parents of murdered children. It also supports victim-witness assistance programs.

Victims receive funding for medical expenses, medication, recovery, counseling and relocation.



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It uses money collected from various federal criminal fines, forfeitures, assessments and penalties, but not from taxes. Some 4,400 agencies utilize VOCA funds, and 4 million crime victims are served through VOCA.

"The fines were to be paid to the victims and their families; that is what it was set up to do," said Jill Morris, director of communications for Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape (PCAR). "The administration does not support victims of crime," she charged.

PCAR reports show that rural areas, like Northumberland County, would be hit especially hard by the change in funding. Satellite offices may be closed and clients will have to travel three to four hours to receive services.

Morris said PCAR, along with many victim service programs, have been lobbying state legislatures to stop the administration's plan.

With funding cuts already imposed in Pennsylvania, 20 percent of programs have waiting lists, 16.5 percent have discontinued programs, 22 percent have imposed hiring freezes, 31 percent have decreased or eliminated staff and 13.7 percent have implemented layoffs, according to PCAR.

The National Network to End Domestic Violence found that 7,707 of 60,910 requests for services on a single day went unmet.

According to Baxley, if jobs for crime-victim advocates are lost, victims will be more likely to return to their abusers without a system of support.

Increases in rent, insurance, utilities and health insurance have already caused a huge strain on victims services, she added.

Moving money

For the fourth year in a row, Bush proposes to move the balance of the fund from the Crime Victims Fund and into the general treasury, something Morris said is illegal.

"Each time Bush proposed the moving of the funds, Congress shut it down, on both sides," she said. Still, groups such as PCAR don't want to leave anything to chance this time.

If the budget is passed by Congress as proposed, no funding for victims or services would be available through VOCA starting in 2010. The money would instead be allocated through the U.S. Treasury.

Corrine Hirsch, press secretary for the Office of Management and Budget, a White House office responsible for devising and submitting the president's annual budget proposal to Congress, described the balance roll over from year to year as a "gimmick" and a "never-ending budget offset."

"A more straightforward approach is to rescind and permanently cancel the balances so that they do not roll over and promote additional spending the next year," Hirsch said last week in explaining the administration's position.

While Morris said the lack of funds would make it more difficult to obtain funding for crime-victim services, Hirsch said criminal fines still would provide the funds after 2009.

"So long as recipients each year are sufficient to cover program expenses, there would be no cost to the taxpayer," she said.

Congressional concern

Local advocates seem to have support from both the House and Senate Appropriations committees.

"The committee has been deeply troubled by the president's budget proposal to reduce federal resources to fight, and to help state and local communities fight violent crime," reads a report released by the Senate committee on June 23.



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U.S. Rep. Christopher Carney, D-10, has sent a letter to the appropriations committee asking that a sufficient amount of funds be released to restore funding to 2006 levels.

"This is clearly an issue he feels strongly about, and he will work to reinstate funding," Rebecca Gale, a Carney spokeswoman, said last week.

Steve Derene, executive director for the National Association of VOCA Assistance Administrators (NAVAA), said the full Congress has not yet had any floor votes on either of the committee bills for the 2009 budget.

"It would be extraordinary if the full Congress overrode the two appropriations' committees bills on this issue," he said. "In fact, there have not been any votes in either house of the Congress in favor of rescinding the fund balance since the idea was first proposed by the administration four years ago."

Lift the cap

According to a report by NAVAA, in 2000, Congress started delaying or "capping" a portion of the fund to ensure stable funds for victims services. By law, amounts not spent are kept in the fund for future years.

For 2008, the cap was set at \$590 million, \$35 million less than the \$625 million cap for 2007.

The proposed allowance of that money for 2009 is \$650 million from the House and \$635 million from the Senate.

Still, "With the state of the economy, this allowance is very low," Morris said.

To provide the same level of service from 2006, the cap would need to be at \$660 million, Derene said.

Also, the figure does not include increases for higher crime rates, services to more crime victims, services to victims of "new" crimes (identity theft, human trafficking and others) and higher operating costs, he added.

Also, Morris said the Department of Justice (DOJ) is now permitted to take part of the funding — \$34.2 million of the proposed \$590 million for 2009, according to the administration proposal — to compensate for its role in distributing the money. The Senate has proposed giving \$36.8 million, while the House proposes giving nothing from the Crime Victims Fund distribution to DOJ.

In addition, according to NAVAA, under the 2009 administration's request, \$50 million would be taken from the amount distributed to be used for Antiterrorism Emergency Reserve.

All told, the cuts in the proposed budget equal \$159 million, or 40 percent, since 2006, the association reports.

Plea for help

Morris said those concerned about victim-advocate services should communicate with their U.S. representatives and senators and ask them to deny the president's request to rescind the balance.

She suggests asking that the VOCA funding cap to be increased to \$1 billion, and noted it won't increase taxes.

"Times are tough, but think about how much tougher they are for a victim of crime," she said.

On the Net: www.Congress.org.

Helping victims

- In 2006, nearly 1.5 million men, women and children were victims of violent crime, according to U.S. Crime Rates, compiled by the Department of Justice.

• In 2007, domestic violence programs in Pennsylvania provided 484,989 hours of free counseling and advocacy, 209,936 days of free emergency shelter for victims and 19,840 free community education programs, according to statistics compiled by the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape.

VOCA(L) supporters

Organizations Supporting the Crime Victims Fund (provided by the National Association VOCA Assistance Administrators).

American Bar Association Criminal Justice Section, American Correctional Association (ACA), American Probation and Parole Association (APPA), American Society of Victimology, Break the Cycle, CASA of New Jersey

International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), International Organization for Victim Assistance (IOVA), Jewish Women International, Justice Solutions, Inc., Legal Momentum, Maryland Crime Victims Resource Center, Inc., Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, National Alliance to End Sexual Violence, National Association of Crime Victim Compensation Boards (NACVCB), National Association of Victim Service Professionals in Corrections (NAVSPIC)

National Association of VOCA Assistance Administrators (NAVAA), National Center for Victims of Crime (NCVC), National Children's Alliance, National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV), National Coalition of Victims in Action (NCVIA), National Council of Jewish Women, National Crime Victim Law Institute (NCVLI)

National Crime Victim Research and Treatment Center, National Criminal Justice Association (NCJA), National District Attorneys' Association (NDAA), National Grange, National Judicial College, National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV)

National Organization for Victim Assistance (NOVA), National Organization of Parents of Murdered Children (POMC), National Sheriffs' Association, Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape (PCAR), Rape Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN), Rene Olubunmi Rondeau Peace Foundation, Inc., Safe Now Project

Security on Campus, Inc., Sheila Wellstone Institute, Stop Family Violence, Texas CASA, Victims' Assistance Legal Organization (VALOR), YWCA USA

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