

The Register-Guard: *Editorials*Letters: *Commentary*

Guest Viewpoint HHHH

Money for women victims of crime goes missing

By Cheryl O'Neill

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In the news lately, there have been a couple of high-profile cases in which women have gone “missing.”

Lance Cpl. Maria Lauterbach, a pregnant Marine from Camp Lejeune near Jacksonville, N.C., went missing in the middle of last December. She disappeared just days after her meeting with a group of military prosecutors to talk about her allegation that Marine Cpl. Cesar Armando Laurean had raped her.

Charred remains of a woman and unborn child were found in Laurean's backyard on Jan. 11. The woman was identified as Maria Lauterbach.

On the same day that Lauterbach was found dead, Leta Lynn Cordes, from Orange County, Calif., went missing on the Caribbean island of St. Maarten. The story of her disappearance is still confused, and she has not yet been found.

These stories are tragic and frightening — but sadly, they are commonplace. In fact, the Department of Justice tells us that because of domestic violence alone, about three American women each and every day are murdered. In other words, they go “missing.” Pregnant women are not protected from this level of violence. In fact, homicide is a leading cause of traumatic death for pregnant and postpartum women in the United States, accounting for 31 percent of maternal injury deaths.

The story you may not have heard, however, is about the \$1 million that has gone missing in Oregon this year. This is money that should have provided support to victims of crime and helped to end domestic and sexual violence. But money for the Victim of Crime Act has been cut back across the nation. These cutbacks translate to a potential loss of more than \$100,000 in Lane County alone.

Even at current funding rates, the National Network to End Domestic Violence reported that, on the single day of the network's One Day Shelter Count for 2007, nearly 8,000 adults and children had to be turned away because of a lack of adequate resources. In Oregon, the report tells us that there were 212 unmet requests for service that day due to lack of resources. Programs in Oregon reported a critical shortage of funds and staff to assist victims in need.

The tragedy of this is that the missing money should have come from the Victim of Crime Act's crime victims' fund, a fund that has been created through fining criminals specifically to support victims of crime. No taxpayer dollars are needed to maintain stable funding for victim support, but political maneuvering is threatening that stability. This is money that should simply not be up for grabs.

Next year looks even worse. In the budget that has been proposed by the executive branch for 2009, even more money will go missing — a devastating amount of money. The cap on allocations from the law's crime victims' fund will be the lowest in six years.

Even more shocking, the \$2 billion reserve in the crime victims' fund will, essentially, be stolen from the victims it was intended to protect. The White House also is recommending a \$120 million cut in Violence Against Women Act. or VAWA, funding, reducing it by nearly a third.

Over the past 20 years, VOCA and VAWA money has been a major factor in the significant drop we have seen in domestic violence deaths across this nation. When this money goes missing, domestic violence shelters go missing, sexual assault hot lines go missing, access to protective orders goes missing, investigation and prosecution of crimes go missing, prevention programs go missing — and more importantly, women go missing.

Don't let your voice go missing as well. Speak out in defense of victims of crime. Share this information with a friend or neighbor. Let people in your church or service club know what is happening to our services for crime victims. Take a minute to e-mail or call your representatives and ask them to support full funding for VOCA and VAWA.

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