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Funding for crime victims is slashed

County prosecutors label federal cuts 'catastrophic'

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New Jersey prosecutors are facing deep funding cuts for victim assistance programs that could result in fewer services for crime victims, more work for beleaguered investigators and the breakdown of a support system that has taken 25 years to build.

Last month, county prosecutors were told their annual grants for victim's assistance are being slashed by 68 percent due to a substantial cut in federal aid and a new funding formula devised by the state Division of Criminal Justice. In some high-crime counties, the cuts are even deeper, reaching 73 percent in Union and Passaic counties and 75 percent in Camden County.

The cuts will directly impact the prosecutors' victim-witness advocacy units, which provide an array of support services ranging from accompanying victims to trial to assisting with restitution claims. They also inform victims when an arrest has been made, coordinate victim support groups and respond to immediate safety needs, like installing new locks on a burglary victim's door.

With much of the federal funding going directly to victim advocate salaries, prosecutors are now grasping for ways to keep their victim assistance programs intact.

"I would describe this as a catastrophe," said Union County Prosecutor Theodore Romankow, whose eight-person unit serves roughly 250 new victims each month.

Richard Pompelio, executive director of the New Jersey Crime Victims Law Center and former chairman of the state Victims of Crime Compensation Board, takes that sentiment a step further.

"This is literally the worst thing that has happened to victims' rights in the history of New Jersey," he said.

A product of the victims' rights movement of the early 1980s, New Jersey's victim-witness advocacy units were created by the Legislature in 1985 to administer the support and outreach services that too often fell by the wayside during the investigation and prosecution of crimes. The units are funded by grants from the federal Crime Victims Fund, which gets its money from criminal fines, forfeited bail bonds and penalty fees.

In the beginning, New Jersey's units were little more than a "desk, an office and an empty filing cabinet," Pompelio said, with scarcely any staff trained specifically in victim advocacy. But over the past two decades, the 21 county units have become the backbone of the state's victim support system, delivering 27 state-mandated services as well as a laundry list of additional services, like flying the bodies of immigrant murder victims back home for burial.

"They've literally taken these offices and developed them, developed them, developed them by being the trenches every day, seeing victims and dealing with their needs," Pompelio said. "One of the greatest assets the victims' rights community has in New Jersey are these amazing, talented people who manage these offices."

Essex County Prosecutor Paula Dow said these services not only comfort victims coping with sudden tragedy, but also make it more likely they will cooperate with the prosecutors and investigators working their cases.

"The victim witness services help us in holding intact victims and witnesses who otherwise would fall by the wayside and would not come forward," said Dow, whose victim-witness unit served more than 10,000 victims last year. "This office provides immediate needs for them at the time when they are most vulnerable and by bringing them into the law enforcement family ... it ultimately helps our prosecutions."

The state Division of Criminal Justice, which administers the federal grant, blames Washington for cutting New Jersey's victim assistance grant by 22 percent, from 10.4 million last year to \$8 million this year. However, of all the victims' assistance programs funded by the federal grant -- including programs run by

the attorney general and local nonprofits -- the county victim-witness units are the only ones seeing substantial cuts.

Attorney General Anne Milgram said the brunt of the cut was passed on to the counties because of a new funding formula that awards money based on county population, crime statistics and the volume of victims. With federal funding in decline for the second straight year, Milgram said it was important to create a formula that quantified each office's actual needs.

Milgram said she recently met with President George W. Bush and U.S. Attorney General Michael Mukasey to ask for the cuts to be restored, and pledged to continue petitioning the federal government for full funding.

"The federal cuts are devastating. You won't hear me or anyone else in my office say the cuts are acceptable because they're not," Milgram said. "We need this program and I made that pitch very hard. I hope they heard us."

Milgram said the cuts will not prevent the county units from fulfilling their mandated duties, but prosecutors say that's exactly what will happen.

Romankow said if the cuts go through, his victim-witness unit will go from eight employees to three. Dow said she may have to eliminate successful new initiatives involving child abuse victims, and domestic violence victims going through municipal court.

Elaine O'Neal has been Union County's victim-witness coordinator for 13 years and knows the job's demands as well as anyone. On a given day, O'Neal might spend the day in court with an assault victim, and the evening leading a support group for the families of murder victims. In between, she can be found watching victims' children while they attend a hearing, or handing out McDonald's coupons to a family trapped all day in court. If a victim walks in off the street to inquire about their case, O'Neal likely handles that as well.

"If somebody was robbed and they don't have food we can give them money for food or set up a food bank service for them. We can provide transportation for court proceedings; we offer baby-sitting in our office," O'Neal explained. "These are just the little things that you wouldn't normally think of -- that no one would think of -- that we do because they're big things for someone else."

Alan Meltzer knows the value of those services firsthand. A 64-year-old limousine driver from Clark, Meltzer's son Joshua was killed in 2003 when a wanted man shot him in the head after a car accident in Elizabeth.

"I was a mess back then," Meltzer said. "I never knew anyone who'd been murdered."

Meltzer came to court every day during the trial, but it wasn't until he joined the victims' support group moderated by O'Neal that he met others who understood the magnitude of his loss.

More than four years after his son's death, Meltzer still attends the Monday night meetings and says it would be an "injustice" to eliminate such services.

"People can say 'I know how you feel,' but you don't know how I feel unless it's happened to you," Meltzer said. "The group makes it go easier. It's helping me."

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