



The Times

A hand to hold while weathering life's storms

Proposed federal budget cuts would affect victim assistance program in Mercer County

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BY LINDA STEIN

When Carmen Marin's son, Juan, was shot and killed during a 2002 robbery, it was the worst thing that ever happened to her.

The trial for the man accused of shooting him, Edwin Lebron, was an emotional roller coaster that often left the 53-year-old Trenton woman in tears. But she leaned on Paula Pulgar, a Mercer County Victim Advocate, for support.

Because an Appellate Court overturned Lebron's conviction, Marin will have to endure another trial. Marin is counting on that support again, but with proposed funding cuts to the Victims of Crime Act, she may find herself alone and unmoored.

"You need somebody there," Marin said. "She's an angel. When I feel bad about it she is always there for me. We need that. We need somebody there for us, the victims.

"It's not fair to the victims," Marin said about the proposed cuts. "We have enough hard times from somebody taking our loved one."

The cuts in the federal fiscal 2009 budget would remove \$2.3 million from New Jersey victim's assistance grants, according to Attorney General Anne Milgram, who called on Congress and President Bush to restore the funding.

Milgram called the cuts "shortsighted."

"The human cost of these cuts is immeasurable and completely unnecessary because there is a surplus of dedicated funding for victim assistance at the federal level," Milgram said. The administration is asking Congress to override the Victims of Violent Crime Act so the funds can be diverted to other areas, Milgram said.

Mercer County would see its victim assistance program cut about 75 percent from \$475,000 to \$112,000, according to Prosecutor Joseph Bocchini Jr.

"With the help of our congressional delegation, hopefully we'll be able to avoid layoffs," Bocchini said. The prosecutor's office employs eight victim advocates who deal with 2,000 new victims a year.

"The bottom line is, the victim-witness units are going to take the brunt of the decrease," Bocchini said.

In addition to sitting with victims in court, the advocates notify them of court dates, explain the often arcane proceedings and act as a conduit for their concerns to the assistant prosecutors handling the case.

The advocates assist not only homicide survivors, but victims of rape, domestic violence, robberies, burglaries and assaults.

"We rely on the services of our victim witness advocates to provide assistance to the survivors and family members," Bocchini said. He noted it was cheaper to pay the advocates than assistant prosecutors and detectives to perform the same function.

Deb Marut, 41, a Hopewell Township woman whose mother-in-law was murdered in 1999, said the cuts in victim services would be devastating.

"The victim's advocate is not someone who just mails out notices," said Marut, who founded Survivors Advocating for Victim Rights. "For so many years, they worked so hard to get the victim's program where it is. President Ronald Reagan said the way we treat victims is a national disgrace. Do we want to go back 20 years?"

Marut noted that inmates receive many services and suggested some of those be cut instead. Or, she said,

an additional fine could be imposed on defendants to pay for victim services.

"Detectives and police officers are not in court to hold a victim's hand," Marut said. "Prosecutors must prosecute. You don't know what all the terms mean, what a status conference is ... This is going to make things much worse. Every victim that comes through the system is going to be re-victimized."

Marin added, "These people are the greatest and I mean it from my heart. Without their support I don't know what I'd do. They were there from me for day one. They gave me a lot of courage. I don't have any family here."

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