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Federal budget to redirect VOCA money

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President Bush's proposed budget for the 2008-09 fiscal year could take billions of dollars in non-tax money out of the hands of those working to eliminate domestic violence and add it to the general budget.

The result would be the loss of services, jobs and possibly the end of domestic violence services in local counties.

Domestic violence and sexual assault agencies recently learned that the proposed budget would redirect Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) money to the general budget instead of directing it to state agencies, local programs and state agencies that use it to provide services for victims of crime. VOCA was created in 1984 under the direction of former President Ronald Reagan and Congress for crime victims. VOCA money is taken from various federal criminal fines, assessments and penalties. No tax money is used.

The proposed plan would eliminate all VOCA money used to reimburse state agencies, local programs, and crime victims in 2010, which would total about \$2 billion and is distributed to all states and territories in the country.

Locally, Citizen's Against Physical Sexual and Emotional Abuse (CAPSEA) in Elk and Cameron counties, the Crossroad Project in Clearfield and Jefferson counties, Prevention and Service for Sexual Assault Through Guidance, Empowerment and Support (PASSAGES) Inc. in Clearfield, Jefferson and Clarion counties and Helping Victim's in Need (HAVIN) in Armstrong County all rely heavily on VOCA money to provide services for victims and pay their staff.

"It will cripple us. We are really struggling and I don't know how we can keep our doors open," JoEllen Bowman, executive director of HAVIN, said. "I don't understand. It's not tax dollars and for us to worry about losing this is awful."

There have been few increases in funding in recent years. In fact, HAVIN has seen its budget cut by \$85,000 in five years.

"We can't take another hit like this. I don't have any place else I can cut," Bowman said.

CAPSEA would see a loss of \$33,000 from its budget. Billie Jo Weyant, executive director of CAPSEA, said if this happens, there would be no choice but to reduce staff, which would mean eliminating people who have been in their positions for more than 10 years or changing them from full-time to part-time workers. In addition to salaries, the money is needed to provide free counseling to victims, free medical and legal advocacy and prevention education.

"Everything we do revolves around VOCA dollars," Weyant said.

Those relying on VOCA money have not been given a good explanation of why it would be cut, she said.

Weyant has been with CAPSEA for 18 years, and when she started, there wasn't any money for domestic violence programs. In the 1990s, they saw increases, but in the last eight years, both state and federal cuts have been the norm. "We have to fight for every penny and we've been losing," she said.

In the last five years, CAPSEA has lost \$45,620.

PASSAGES would see an \$82,323 loss, which is 26 percent of its total budget, Diane Kuntz, executive director, said. "That is just devastating to us," she said.

She said the VOCA money is used for direct services such as counseling and legal advocacy in Clearfield, Jefferson and Clarion counties.

"If we lose this money we will lose services in addition to staff," Kuntz said. As it stands, PASSAGES has just eight employees to cover three counties.

The unique thing about VOCA money is it is one of the few available funds that can be used for salaries. There are grant programs out there, but most run for three years for a specific project and then the agency must find another way to pay for it.

In the 2006-07 fiscal year, PASSAGES served 546 people, provided more than 2,700 direct service hours and provided preventative education to nearly every school district in the three counties.

"The thing we dread most is ultimately we may have to close our doors," Kuntz said.

If VOCA is eliminated, PASSAGES will have to reduce the amount of services provided.

If people don't get the services they need it will become a community problem. Without these services there is an increase in mental health and drug and alcohol issues, Bowman said.

"Why put victims in a position where they will require other services," Bowman said.

Crossroads Project would lose about 19 percent of its total budget, Director Susan McLaughlin said.

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VOCA dollars are used for about 80 percent of the domestic violence and legal advocacy services the office provides in Clearfield and Jefferson counties.

About 49 percent of the victims served by Crossroads use the legal advocacy that is provided free of charge.

"The priority for the last six years has been service stability. VOCA cuts will make stability a virtual impossibility," McLaughlin said. "Looking toward fiscal year 08/09 we are faced with the inability to consistently staff even our most essential services."

The Pennsylvania Coalition of Domestic Violence uses both state and federal dollars and disburses them to area programs like Crossroads, PASSAGES and CAPSEA. Funds distributed through PCADV account for about 76 percent of the total funding for Crossroads. These have been cut or at level funding since 2002 while operational costs such as insurance, benefit rates, utilities and other costs have gradually eroded the amount of actual service that can be provided, McLaughlin said. The proposed cuts on the federal level will undoubtedly impact the allocation received through PCADV. The agencies are asking that everyone contact their local representatives to let them know how critical the services are that VOCA funds provide. They can be contacted through the Capitol switchboard at 202-224-3121.

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