



Crime story

By [JULIE DELCOUR Associate Editor](#)

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How the Crime Victims Fund survived Bushwhackers

As crime stories go this one's hardly a whodunit.

Three times in as many years the Bush administration has shamelessly tried to raid the \$1.3 billion federal Crime Victims Fund, diverting money either into the treasury or to anti-terrorism programs.

In Oklahoma last year, 72,731 victims and 96 agencies received Victims of Crime Act help. Nationally, 4,400 agencies and nearly four million victims were helped.

The Bush administration's actions have provoked outrage, and justifiably so. All 50 attorneys general, many governors, thousands of victim agencies and almost every member of Congress, including U.S. Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., have consistently opposed removal of money from a fund intended for victims and victims only.

The fund aided Oklahoma City bombing survivors and, on a much larger scale, provided similar help to victims and rescue workers of the 9/11 tragedy. More recently the fund aided those affected by the Virginia Tech massacre.

Victims of Crime Act money provides for services, programs and direct compensation courtesy of the very people -- criminals -- who perpetrated harm. Fund monies come from fines, fees, forfeitures and other penalties assessed against federal offenders. Several years ago, Congress imposed a cap on the amount of VOCA money that could be distributed each fiscal year to states. The cap was to ensure that a stable level of funding remain available for these programs. In leaner years, the fund could draw on reserves. In windfall years surplus

funds could be held in reserve.

No pot of money goes unnoticed in Washington and the Crime Victims Fund eventually caught the eye of bean counters at the Office of Management and Budget. Three years ago, the administration proposed taking the fund reserves, applying them toward anti-terrorism measures and toward reducing deficits. The capped amount would have been paid from U.S. Treasury's general fund. This is not what the law intended.

What's ironic is that in 1984, even as his administration racked up record deficits, President Ronald Reagan persuaded Congress to pass the Victims of Crime Act, creating a fund where criminals compensate crime victims and provide for support services.

A quarter of a century later, with his own deficit problems, George Bush is trying to raid the fund and undercut its mission.

Victim agencies operate on shoestring budgets. Because the capped amount has not grown in several years they've actually lost ground financially.

In Oklahoma agencies basically are doing everything but cutting personnel to stay afloat. Suzanne Breedlove is director of victim services at the Oklahoma District Attorneys Council, which oversees VOCA grants to participating agencies. She has worked in the field for almost a quarter century and worries constantly about this erosion in funding. She is not alone.

Because of increases in other Victims of Crime Act programs state grants will decrease by \$34.2 million. To return to the funding level of fiscal year 2006, Congress would need to set this year's cap at \$661 million. As a step in that direction the House recently voted to adopt the Poe/Costa/Moore amendment to an appropriations bill. The amendment would raise the VOCA cap from \$625 million to \$635 million. Funding at that level would at least keep FY 2008 VOCA aid grants at their FY 2007 level. But more money could be used and the cap should be raised to \$661 million.

Last year, Oklahoma received \$4.45 million in VOCA grant money for victim services such as the Parent Child Center's child therapy program in Tulsa. Another \$2 million is paid in direct compensation to victims.

VOCA funds helped 3,911 child victims of physical abuse; 3,626 child victims of sexual abuse; 35,969 domestic abuse victims, 660 DUI victims, 801 elder abuse victims, 2,064 family members of homicide victims, 3,757 sexual assault victims; 1,784 adults molested as children, 5,187 assault victims, 1,104 robbery victims, and 9,222 victims of other crimes.

VOCA funds are crucial to local programs; without them many of these agencies would close or limit services. State Crime Victims Compensation programs (supported in part by fines and penalties from state offenders) would no longer be able to adequately compensate victims of crime for out-of-pocket expenses such as funerals, wage loss, medical expenses, counseling and loss of support. Federal VOCA funds represent 60 percent of funding for many state victim compensation programs.

At a hearing 18 months ago, Sen. Coburn wisely warned against raiding the fund. "Unlike almost every other government program, the Crime Victims Fund is self-funding, meaning we don't have to ask the taxpayers to pay for it," he said.

"I have no problem with the administration making good faith efforts to shrink government,

identify programs that are inefficient, failing or duplicative -- to make the case that these programs should be permanently terminated . . . However, that case isn't being made here. (This) . . . is, after all, the ideal type program we want -- the people who create the problems addressed by the program are the same ones who pay for it."

For now the fund is safe. If states are lucky Congress will raise the VOCA cap, and should be urged to do so.

But the Bushwhackers undoubtedly will stage another raid next year -- trying again to victimize a program and a mission that so many hold sacred.

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