



FROM THE WIP

April 9, 2008

Abuse Survivors Face Systemic Struggles as Resources for Help Dwindle



by Michelle Chen

- USA -

Tanya McLeod's marriage was hurting, but her husband thought he could make it up to her when he brought her a cute dog as a family stayed together and the dog grew up alongside her children—until the day her husband decided to destroy the animal with

At that point, McLeod says, "I knew that he was capable of killing me."

McLeod recalls in an interview how the storm of violence began building soon after they were married. Her life was comfortable on the surface: a decent apartment, a solid job with a media company that supported the household as he bounced from job to job. But her husband's grip kept tightening—from isolating her in their home to controlling her bank account—to slapping, kicking, choking, pushing his knees into her pregnant belly.

But when McLeod finally decided to leave, she says, she plunged into another barrage of trauma that would last for over two years: unresponsive counselors who turned her away when she sought emergency shelter; working through the police and court systems to prosecute her abuser; dealing with child-welfare agents investigating whether her three young sons were safe with her; and the loss of her job amid the overwhelming stress.

"My whole world was turned upside down," she says. "It was like I was being punished for his actions." She has since joined the New York-based activist group [Voices of Women Organizing Project](#), advocating for policy changes in a social-service system that often leaves survivors to fend for themselves.

More than a decade after Congress passed the landmark Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), abuse survivors face devastating While the needs for legal protection, shelter and other social supports swell in communities across the country, public resources crisis lag far behind.

Last year, Congress slashed millions of dollars from key programs dealing with domestic violence, including civil legal assistance community-education programs. The White House is now [pushing even deeper cuts](#) in its budget proposal for fiscal year 2009.

As grants trickle down to organizations in the coming months, service providers are bracing for deep funding shortfalls. Allison R for the [National Network to End Domestic Violence \(NNEDV\)](#), a Washington, D.C.-based advocacy organization, says, "We're going into crisis, for everything from basic services—making sure that, at two in the morning if you're in danger, you have a place to go—to really getting out there trying to take the *next* steps to end domestic and sexual violence."

Growing Gaps

Despite fiscal tightening, VAWA's passage in the mid-1990s seems to have marked a turning point. According to federal data, the intimate-partner violence against women [fell by about 60 percent](#) from 1993 to 2005, with parallel declines in related homicides consistently under-funded the law's programs, and also restrained related funding streams under the Victims of Crime Act Fund Prevention and Services Act. VAWA's funding pool remains [hundreds of millions of dollars short](#) of what Congress authorized when it passed the act in 1994.



• Tanya McLeod is now a member of the [Women Organizing Project](#), which she founded with her husband. Photo by [unreadable]

Though some new domestic-violence initiatives, such as services for youth, got funding boosts last year, core programs for law enforcement assistance lost several million dollars. Congress also cut \$35 million from the spending allowance for the Victims of Crime Act for prosecution-related fees and fines to support the work of thousands of victim-service agencies nationwide. The White House [now shrink](#) VAWA's main funding pool, tied to the Justice Department appropriations, from roughly \$400 million in fiscal 2008 to \$28

The declining numbers translate into stark human consequences.

In Ohio, threadbare funding has pushed some service groups toward collapse. Nancy Neylon, executive director of the advocacy [Violence Network](#), says some shelters cannot afford to stay fully staffed 24 hours a day, and one recently shut down after a local state's minimum wage made it impossible to maintain its staff.

"By 2010," she predicts, "there may well be a number of shelters that are just not able to survive any longer."

In the courts, Neylon adds, a lack of free legal aid could foreclose a woman's chances of fighting for child custody, obtaining court orders against her abuser—or, in the case of [an undocumented immigrant survivor](#), petitioning the government for legal status.

"Almost every single step that a victim takes," Neylon says, "if there's not somebody to help them, explain the options, go through anybody's guess as to what's going to happen."

Legal Abuse

Sometimes an abuser may deal the cruelest blow in a courtroom.

Years ago, D.G., a 51 year old New York resident, broke off her relationship with her abusive boyfriend, but he insisted on sharing custody of their daughter, Debbie (name has been changed). His harassment and aggression continued during his visits, she recalls, so she went to court for custody. Her hopes of formally sorting out her custody rights.

Represented by a private attorney (as a manager at a local company, she wasn't poor enough to qualify for free legal aid), D.G. argued that Debbie was unsafe in her father's care. She cited his past treatment of her, his routine neglect of tasks like diaper changing and feeding, and that Debbie had been molested by his girlfriend's older son. The child welfare agency reports that an investigation had shown D.G. to be credible and was, incredibly, provided to the judge before he determined custody. But somehow the father, backed by his lawyer, won the judge to let the little girl live with him.

Now, she gets to see her nine-year-old daughter on Wednesdays and weekends.

D.G., who is also active with Voices of Women—though she requested her identity be concealed for this story—says gaps in the legal system leave many survivors like her defenseless in court. Throughout the process, she recalls, no one ever stepped in to help her manage the case with the judge.

"I was abused by the court system, and so was my daughter," she says. Today, she continues, with tens of thousands of dollars in legal fees and top emotional exhaustion, "I don't have any money to go to family court. I have to keep my house going, so my daughter has a

"How many other mothers go through this?" she asks.

Impossible Choices

The answer is as unsettling as the question. According to the NNEDV's [nationwide survey of social-service providers](#), within a 24-hour period, 53,000 adults and children received services like shelter and legal counseling—but more than 7,700 requests for help went unmet. For emergency services, the survey found that many survivors are shut out of supportive housing programs, which help families transition to self-sufficiency. In one day, transitional housing facilities turned away about 1,750 requests due to lack of space.



Advocates warn that each closed door leads a survivor into deeper trouble: a job, another trip to the emergency room, another night spent with her abuser. Often, the only other option is sleeping in a car.



• Many survivors resort to sleeping in their cars when faced with no housing resources, putting them at further risk. Photograph by Don Hankins. •

prioritize survivors in immediate physical danger or those with limited English proficiency. Those who must simply wait. Shelters may have to scale back counseling services to keep...

In Washtenaw County, Michigan, [SafeHouse Center](#), a service agency for a survivors, has seen its annual client population of several thousand grow by 2003—but Executive Director Barbara Niess says that too often, the center is only where survivors come forward only after a brutal crisis has triggered police intervention.

Niess traces a hypothetical timeline of domestic abuse from the first strike to the final one. “We go 75 percent of the way down,” she says, “that’s where we come in.”

At the same time, she notes SafeHouse’s funding from both public and private grants has declined by about 40 percent in recent years, leaving the organization increasingly hard-pressed to be anything but a last resort.

The organization has avoided completely eliminating programs, Niess says, but has instead had to limit the time spent with each survivor. In a shelter, a survivor may find herself on her own coping with longer-term needs, which could range from psychotherapy for children to securing a job in the weakening local economy.

“We’re purely a crisis intervention,” she says. “We do what we can to get her on her feet. We’re not able to work on the long haul that we currently have.”

At [Safe Horizon](#), a New York City-based social service agency that handles thousands of domestic violence cases each year, the agency has seen its VAWA budget decline by about \$200,000 in the current grant cycle, from 2007 to 2009. Jean Norton, senior director of funding issues, says that such funding issues are nothing new for the organization, and the staff generally manages to work within its financial constraints.

Still, although clients are still receiving essential services, thinning budgets impose a subtle but broad obstacle to the organization’s ability to provide simply never enough resources to cover all of the crosscutting needs in each case, or in the communities Safe Horizon serves, which include low-income and immigrant populations.

An attorney may, for example, be able to help a woman obtain a protection order to keep her batterer away, but may not have the resources to help her against a landlord threatening eviction because her partner isn’t around to pay the rent.

Funding limitations could also hinder outreach efforts. In the past, many survivors have made initial contact with Safe Horizon attorneys at public intake sessions outside of local courtrooms. But with overstretched attorneys now have less time and energy to devote to reaching people who remain outside the system.

While the staff keeps doing its job, Norton says, it just becomes harder, with attorneys absorbing the impact of funding shortfalls through “the amount of stress they feel, the amount of hours they’re working, the vicarious trauma—because they’re expected to do more with less. And we try to make it so that our clients don’t feel the pain.”

Throughout the social service infrastructure, advocates say budget strains not only hurt service providers and families, but undermine a critical synergy that drives comprehensive intervention: legal services work more effectively when clients receive basic social support and counseling. And the faster survivors work through their overlapping obstacles, from the court process to finding an apartment, the faster they stabilize and move out of the shelter system. That in turn frees up room for new survivors.

“Victims need every door in order to access service,” says Marivic Mabanag, executive director of the [California Partnership to End](#)

For an individual survivor, the impact of federal budget cuts is hard to measure in dollars. It may come down to how she weighs the cost of staying in a shelter against the risk of escaping against a familiar nightmare.

“We are increasing the level of risk and danger to the victim,” Mabanag says. “In situations like that—where they have no other emergency shelter to go to—they’re forced to stay with their batterer.”



• Many survivors find themselves in a state of financial crisis. Photo by Don Hankins.

About the Author

Michelle Chen works and plays in New York City. Formerly on staff at the independent, now-defunct, news publication, *The New York Times*, her recent occupations include living in Shanghai as a Fulbright research fellow, freelance writing and dish-washing. Her work has appeared in *Legal Affairs*, *City Limits* and *Alternet*, along with her self-published zine, *cain*.

(1) COMMENTS | RECOMMEND THIS! | [more from POLITICS](#) | [more from THE WIP](#)

COMMENTS (1)

Nancy Vining Van Ness:

Thanks to Michelle and the editors for making this violence to women and their children visible.

These stories are painful to read, but refusing to look at the issue only makes things worse.

I always like to do something about problems, so I may make a contribution to one of the agencies that help domestic abuse victims, but that is even sufficient funding for these agencies is not the total solution. We need to address the general level of violence in our world and the devaluation of women and children.

I think about what Sarah reported on her Talk post about Riane Eisler saying at the conference to value our own caring and gentle qualities as part of making a change. I am committing to do that by telling men I know who are gentle, caring, and constructive what I see them do, affirming their qualities.

This may not be much, but it is what I can do today.

Posted by [Nancy Vining Van Ness](#) | [Add Comment](#)

quality news, unique perspectives. | [The Women's International Perspective](#)

Copyright © 2007 The Women's International Perspective