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Cuts May Hit Victims Advocate

BY BRENDA DORSEY, Staff Writer

When budgets tighten as a result of nationwide United States Department of Defense cutbacks, it does affect Wetzel County. That was the news at Wetzel County Commission on June 3 as Wetzel Prosecutor Tim Haught and Administrative Assistant Charlotte Smith presented information about a possible cut in federal funding for the Victims Of Crime Act (VOCA) program in Wetzel County.

The VOCA funds administered through the Division of Criminal Justice enable the existence of the victims of crime advocate position held by Terry Long.

Smith said that already statewide 11 programs which were previously funded by the defense department budget have been “zeroed-out”. The VOCA program, initiated in West Virginia as part of the national program that was made into law in 1984, represents the rights and interests of crime victims.

In order for the necessary funds to be granted to West Virginia’s VOCA program, the defense department needs to settle a budget dispute and transfer funds—that may not happen before the new fiscal year begins on July 1. Last year the VOCA grant supplied \$16,380 in funding for Long’s position and other crime victims’ services, an amount to which the commission adds a four percent match.

Haught said he was willing to do without some of the other services the grant money had been used for, such as the Finding Words training seminars to school advocates in how best to interview child victims of crimes and travel for training. He said these were “not necessities.” But he said he simply does not want Long’s job to be in jeopardy. “If I have to choose, I choose the victims’ advocate,” said Haught.

“It’s important to me,” Haught said, listing Long’s credentials which he felt could not easily be matched, “He’s been a dispatcher, a deputy sheriff—so he has training as a law enforcement officer. Now he works in my office. . . If he weren’t there, it would be a big hole to fill. He works at getting restitution for victims, he talks with victims, and he interviews children who are victims of crimes. . .He does an awful lot.”

Long has been a victim’s advocate since February 2004, but the position has been in existence in Wetzel County through the prosecutor’s office since 2001. Between 2004 and 2007 Long assisted 340 clients. Long makes a special effort, Smith said, to explain complicated court proceedings to victims so that they may understand what lies ahead.

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Haught said he wasn't sure when or if the VOCA money would be available. "I'm asking the Commission to encumber funds—to buy us some time," he said, adding that even if the VOCA funds are approved later in the year, they may not be retroactive for expenses incurred since July 1. Either way, Haught said he would have to make budget adjustments.

"I have never used all my budget. I have always tried to work within my budget so there is something left over. Now I'm asking you to encumber what's left of my budget to pay for Terry's salary."

Commission Vice President Don Mason said, "We all understand the problems you're facing. You have always tried to save money whenever you could. We appreciate that."

No definite timetable was presented for notification of the VOCA funding. Haught concluded, "I'm pessimistic about prospects of seeing money soon."



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