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Wise Options director concerned about potential drop in federal funding

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Federal budget cuts proposed for the approaching fiscal year could put the YWCA's Wise Options program in jeopardy.

"If this goes through and we don't get the cap on our victim money raised, we could potentially lose a minimum of 27 percent of our funding," said Deb Shivetts, Wise Options director. "It could also go up to 40-plus percent."

Federal funding through the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) is administered in Pennsylvania through the state Commission on Crime and Delinquency.

It is Wise Options' "third big funding source," Shivetts said.

Congress enacted VOCA funding in 1984 because "the government started to realize there were a lot of victims of crime that weren't taken care of," she said.

The money from federal criminal fines, forfeitures, assessments and penalties is used to "restore the victims (of crime) to as normal a life as possible."

Counseling, transportation costs and "a myriad of different costs to the victim" can be repaid through federal victims compensation.

Because the amount of money collected for VOCA changes each year, a cap on how much to spend was set and the extra income was placed in a reserve for years with less income.

Now, proposed federal budget cuts will eliminate the \$2 billion VOCA reserve balance and put the funds into the general treasury.

Also, Shivetts said, the president's anti-terrorism act removed funds from "under the cap."

"So if our cap was \$600 million and he took another 50 out, we were left with \$550 million so the distribution to the (victims') service centers was less," she said.

The 2008 cap on total Crime Victims Fund spending was set at \$590 million, which is the lowest in six years, according to the National Association of VOCA Assistance Administrators.

In the state, enough money was reserved to cover victims' compensation costs for the 2008-09 fiscal year.

"If we don't have the funding, Wise Options will probably have to eliminate two job positions," Shivetts said. "It could possibly create a waiting list for victims. If I have a victim that needs counseling, it may be two or three weeks until we can get her in. I'm working with a skeleton staff now."

According to U.S. Rep. Chris Carney, D-Dimock, the president had called for "drastic cuts in the Violence Against Women Acts program and VOCA."

Without VOCA funding, "potential hardships" could be created, Carney said.

"We might have to close rape crisis centers, reduce the number of folks available for counseling. It's important to have the fund fully vested and to have the resources available to protect the women," he said.

U.S. Rep. John E. Peterson, R-Pleasantville, also is concerned about the longevity of VOCA funds, according to his communications director, Patrick Creighton.

"We would like to see funds appropriated to maintain the sustainability over the long term," Creighton said.



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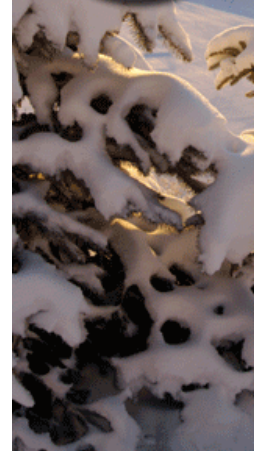
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"We do understand that there are some folks who would like to see it bumped up," he said of the funding cap.

In 2006, "much more" was spent in VOCA funds than what was raised, Creighton said.

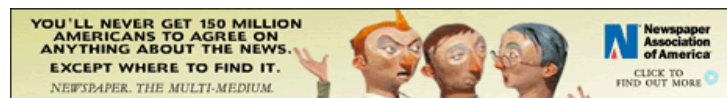
"We wouldn't want to spend that much and not see it last long term," he added. "The congressman will fund this at a level that he sees fit to maintain the sustainability of VOCA in the long term."

Creighton said Peterson is unsure if he will accept the funding cut.

Republican U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter and Democratic U.S. Sen. Robert P. Casey could not be reached for comment.

In 2006 through 2007, state VOCA funding provided 484,989 hours of free counseling and advocacy, 209,936 days of emergency shelter for victims and 19,840 community education programs, according to the state Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

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