

# Local News

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## Victims advocates could fall victim to funding shortfalls

By Adam D. Young | AVALANCHE-JOURNAL  
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An 8 year-old girl was molested and the house she lived in burned down by her father, who went to jail for the crimes, recalled victim advocate Pam Alexander.

Several years later on her birthday, the then teenaged girl received a birthday card.

But this birthday card from her father was an unwelcome and cruel reminder of the horrible abuse she suffered. It was also a illegal for the convicted father to communicate with his daughter, said Alexander, executive director of Lubbock Victim Assistance Services.



"Who can she call? The DA's office, the police department? They're all through with the case," she said. "She didn't have a clue what to do."

Alexander said the girl's mother came to her organization, which called the warden of the prison where the father was serving his sentence. The father's mailing rights were taken away.

Now, Lubbock Victims Assistance Services is one of several Lubbock area victims advocates worried about becoming victim to reduced funding.

"We're having to pick and choose victims now because we don't have the funding," she said.

Lubbock Victims Assistance Services is one of eight South Plains victims advocates that requested federal money from programs such as the Victims of Crime Act, a process that requires they go through the South Plains Association of Governments to get the funds allocated to the State of Texas.

Tim Pierce, SPAG executive director, said SPAG does not directly fund the victims advocates, but ranks those that request funding through its 17-member Criminal Justice Advisory Committee.

The committee made its final ranking decision for the 2009-2010 fiscal year on March 10, and the rankings will be submitted to the state by SPAG's executive board, he said.

Lubbock Victims Assistance Services, which requested about \$88,000 this year, was ranked seventh of the eight organizations to apply for funding, Alexander said. Now she said she does not expect her organization, which covers five South Plains counties, to receive the federal money for the second year in a row.

Garza County Victims Assistance Program ranked first, Lubbock Women's Protective Services ranked second, the Crisis Center of the Plains in Plainview ranked third and

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Children's Advocacy Center of Lubbock ranked fourth.

Though Pierce said the amount of funding has not been set by the state for this fiscal year, the top four advocates' grant requests were fully funded for the 2008-2009 fiscal year.

But Pierce said the root of the problem goes beyond the rankings and lies in the decreased amount of federal money designated for victims services on the South Plains.

The state awarded South Plains victims advocates \$1.2 million 10 years ago, he said, but cutbacks and redistribution of available money to other, more populated parts of the state dropped that number to about \$320,000 for the current year.

"We wish there was enough money to fund all of them," Pierce said. "They're all good agencies."

The Lubbock Rape Crisis Center, which ranked sixth, requested \$50,268 for 2009-2010 after receiving about \$27,000 of the \$49,717 it requested for 2008-2009, said Kim Stark, the center's executive director.

With its new ranking lower than last year, Stark said, she is not certain how the center will be able to continue serving victims of sexual assault in the future.

"The fact that our funding is jeopardized is really scary to us," she said.

Stark said the center served 862 sexual assault victims and their families last year, with an average cost of about \$25 per victim without charging the victims for services. The center has five full-time employees and 31/2 part-time positions and does receive funding from sources such as the Texas Office of the Attorney General, United Way and private donors.

"The whole point of this is there needs to be more money for victims services," she said "... I can't say that nobody else deserves it as much as us."

And the effects of reduced funding are not limited to the victims advocates, said Alexander.

Fewer victims are being notified about crime victims' compensation through the Texas Crime Victims Compensation Fund, which Alexander said is adding up to a potential \$500,000 a year in money that Lubbock-area victims aren't applying for.

She said her organization submits requests to the state on behalf of the victim so the victim can receive compensation for clean-up, medical bills, relocation and other expenses victims of violent crime may encounter.

Fewer victims are learning about the compensation fund, Alexander said, simply because they're not being told about them by a victims advocate.

Alexander said her organization typically provided services for about 4,500 to 5,000 victims from the city per year - about 60 percent of the 8,000 recommendations they receive from Lubbock police alone. But now, she said, Lubbock Victim Assistance Services is only able to service about half that number.

Alexander said her organization also receives funding from the Texas Attorney General's Office and private donations, but described the VOCA funding as her organization's "meat and bread."

Roy Rios, community education and development coordinator with Women's Protective Services, which ranked second, said he was not sure why his organization received the higher ranking, but regrets there is not enough money to provide grants to all eight South Plains victim advocates who "all provide essential services.

"It creates an unfair competition, and unfortunately Women's Protective Services has to fight tooth and nail for funding," he said.

Though Pierce said he did not know the amount of federal money the state would provide for 2009-2010, he's heard suggestions from the governor's office that additional funding - possibly from federal stimulus money - could make its way to South Plains victims advocates.

For now, Alexander said, her organization has been able to stay afloat, in part, because of one-time, emergency funding from a non-profit organization she chose not to disclose, but emphasized that the non-profit would not be able to support her organization again.

"If we're not funded for two years, it's going to be hard," she said.

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